

Chapter 5

Aisthetic Theology

Sensory Knowing and Believing

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1. Introduction

In the sense we use this term in this volume, aesthetic theology deals with the senses, with the knowledge of God and religious experience derived from sensory perception in the encounter with the arts, with the beautiful.¹ However, over the intellectual history of the West, in particular in consequence of the Enlightenment focus on rationality, both philosophical and theological reflections on aesthetics have lost the original focus on the sensory and material quality of the experience of art and its relevance for knowledge and faith and, instead, they have tended to intellectualize the aesthetic experience.² However, as we argue throughout this volume, attention to the embodied, material dimension of the encounter between art and viewer is fundamental in order to understand how the aesthetic can become an occasion for the transcendent to irrupt into the immanent. In this chapter, I will tease out in

1 Gesa E. Thiessen, General Introduction, in: Gesa E. Thiessen (ed.), *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2005, 1–7, here 1.

2 See for example Grace Jantzen, *Beauty for Ashes: Notes on the Displacement of Beauty*, *Literature & Theology* 16.4 (2002), 427–449. David Freedberg points out art historians' reluctance to acknowledge the sensory, sensual impact of art, as if bodily reactions to work of arts, in particular sexual excitement, were not worthy of study; David Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989, 316.

more detail what we mean by ›material dimension‹ and how it shapes both aesthetic theology and the aesthetic-religious experience.³ The Greek root of ›aesthetic‹ – *aisthesis*, ›to perceive with one's senses‹ – will guide my reflections, following Bettina Papenburg and Marta Zarzycka's argument »for an understanding of aesthetics as *aisthesis*, that is, as perception, sensibility or sensation, emphasising the cultural formation of the senses«.⁴ I begin with a brief outline of the development of the system of the five senses familiar to the Western tradition, underlining the cultural constructedness of the senses and their moral and religious evaluation. Turning to the theological discussion of the senses and especially the notion of the spiritual senses, I will focus on the role of the senses as a means of perceiving God in the theological tradition. The sensory encounter with a particular work of art, *Self Growth* (2002) by the British artist Tracey Emin, together with the analysis of the role of embodiment in the artist's work more in general, will help trace the contours of an aesthetic theology that remains connected to the senses as the foundation of the encounter with the transcendent in art. I will conclude with a brief reflection on the role of the senses in theology and faith.

2. Worlds of Senses

Although all human beings are sensory beings by nature, this does not mean that sensations are perceived and understood in the same way across individuals and cultures. Senses and sensory perceptions are both culturally constructed and construct culture, at the same time as individual reliance on different senses varies due to diverse capacities and preferences (which, of course, might again be culturally shaped). In the Western context, we are used to organize sensory perceptions into the five categories of vision, hear-

- 3 Over the past three or so decades, the aesthetics of religion has developed as an approach in the field of religious studies which addresses similar questions related to the role of body and senses in religion and religious experience that I develop here from a theological perspective; see for example Alexandra Grieser/Jay Johnston, *What Is an Aesthetics of Religion? From the Senses to Meaning and Back Again*, in: Alexandra Grieser/Jay Johnston (eds.), *Aesthetics of Religion: A Connective Concept*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017, 1–49.
- 4 Bettina Papenburg/Marta Zarzycka, Introduction, in: Bettina Papenburg/Marta Zarzycka (eds.), *Carnal Aesthetics: Transgressive Imagery and Feminist Politics*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2013, 1–18, here 3.

ing, smell, taste, and touch (missing the senses of proprioception and equilibrioception).⁵ Because of the connection of these sensations to the visible sense organs, this division appears ›natural‹ but other cultures have widely different sensory systems, including, for example, senses that can perceive a ghost or the moral character of a person.⁶ And even within Western culture, the number, organization, and hierarchy of the senses, how they function, and what their tasks are, have been conceptualized in many different ways over time. Thus, a history of the senses is always also the history of a culture and a society.

In the West, the systematization of the five senses has been accompanied by a hierarchization of sense perceptions with regard to their perceived epistemic reliability and their moral and economic value with profound influence on all spheres of human life, up to the point that insurance companies pay more in case of loss of sight than hearing.⁷ Traditionally, the senses have been differentiated into the superior, more objective senses of distance (vision and hearing) and the inferior, more subjective senses of proximity (touch and taste). Smell takes on a middle position because it allows a sensory perception at a certain distance but is still more ›bodily‹ than the distant senses. Thus Kant understands smell as a sense of taste ›at a distance‹ and groups it with the subjective senses (the senses of pleasure, as he defines them).⁸ The distant senses are generally perceived to be superior because they are less immediately physical, more intellectual and more objective, while the senses of proximity are taken to be inferior, because bodily, subjective, more ›primitive‹, and even potentially dangerous because inducing overwhelming passions. This systematization of perceptions in superior and inferior ones reflects and reinforces the Western distinction between bodily-subjective and rational-intellectual, apparently objective, universal forms of knowledge, with a clear preference for the latter. Consequently, greater emphasis is placed on

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- 5 Waltraud Naumann-Beyer, *Anatomie der Sinne im Spiegel von Philosophie, Ästhetik, Literatur*, Köln: Böhlau, 2003, 11–13.
 - 6 See for example Donald F. Tuzin, *Base Notes: Odor, Breath and Moral Contagion*, in: Jim Drobnick (ed.), *The Smell Culture Reader*, Oxford: Berg, 2006, 59–67, here 62.
 - 7 Susan Stewart, *Remembering the Senses*, in: David Howes (ed.), *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, Oxford: Berg, 2005, 59–69, here 62.
 - 8 Immanuel Kant, *Objective and Subjective Senses: The Sense of Taste*, in: Carolyn Korsmeyer (ed.), *The Taste Culture Reader: Experiencing Food and Drink*, Oxford: Berg, 2005, 209–214, here 211.

the senses that contribute to these forms of knowledge at a distance (seeing and hearing) in the sciences, the arts, and everyday life. As Yi-Fu Tuan notes, aesthetic experience is often described as requiring the distance permitted by hearing and seeing so that the subject will not be too overwhelmed by their perceptions and capable of impartial value judgements.⁹ The fact that in many languages, terms taken from the sphere of taste (›good taste‹) are used to evaluate an aesthetic experience with ethical undertones, however, shows that the sensory system and its hierarchy is not altogether coherent, perhaps in recognition of the fact that aesthetic experience is fundamentally an embodied and synesthetic experience.¹⁰

While this hierarchy of the senses is relatively uncontroversial within the tradition, their moral evaluation from a religious perspective is much more ambiguous. All senses can be source and evidence of both salvation and damnation. An unpleasant odor, for example, is imagined to permeate the sulfurous underworld,¹¹ but the tree of life in paradise is also distinguished by its scent, this one being particularly sweet, according to Jacob Böhme.¹² A sweet smell emanating from a person might indicate their sainthood,¹³ but if somebody is surrounded by a pungent odor, this cannot simply be taken as a sign that they are sinners; instead, it could also be an olfactory indication of their ascetic enthusiasm which led to the neglect of personal hygiene. However, when the sweet smells of paradise are recreated in perfumes with names such as *Obsession*, *Deseo* or, quite simply, *Sexy*, they clearly become the devil's instruments. Further problems arise from the association of sensory perception with sexuality already hinted at in the names of perfumes: the softness of touch, the enthralling sound of a voice, or sweet scents are not innocent pleasures but have the potential to excite passion and desire, and thus they mean trouble – on the spiritual as well as social level. The ›gates‹

9 Yi-Fu Tuan, *Pleasures of the Proximate Senses: Eating, Taste, and Culture*, in: Carolyn Korsmeyer (ed.), *The Taste Culture Reader: Experiencing Food and Drink*, Oxford: Berg, 2005, 226–235, here 226.

10 Vivian Sobchack, *Embodying Transcendence: On the Literal, the Material, and the Cinematic Sublime*, *Material Religion* 4.2 (2008), 194–203.

11 William I. Miller, *Darwin's Disgust*, in: David Howes (ed.), *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, Oxford: Berg, 2005, 335–354, here 349.

12 Constance Classen, *The Breath of God: Sacred Histories of Scent*, in: Jim Drobnick (ed.), *The Smell Culture Reader*, Oxford: Berg, 2006, 375–390, here 387.

13 Classen, *The Breath of God*, 381.

of the senses, as they were described traditionally, are open to both good and evil; there is a very slippery slope from innocently pleasant sensations to social and moral corruption, and, consequently, sensory perceptions have to be well-guarded and controlled. This moral ambiguity of sensoriality is beautifully expressed in a 15th-century woodcut in which the five senses are positioned between the ten commandments and the seven deadly sins, showing that their influence on the individual could be both good and evil.¹⁴

In this hierarchization and evaluation of the senses, gender plays an important role. In the past, the superior, intellectual, objective, and distant senses with their associated rational forms of reasoning were usually linked with masculinity, while the inferior, bodily, subjective senses and more intuitive, emotional forms of knowing were understood to be feminine, an association that reaffirmed the judgement of the proximate senses as dangerous, in particular because of their role in sexual seduction.¹⁵ Yet given the bodily nature of all senses and the moral risk they equally represent, the limited connection of just the proximate senses with women was abolished over time, and all five senses became associated with femininity. This gendering of the senses has permeated culture as a whole as is reflected in their visual representations.¹⁶ From the 16th century onwards, the senses are predominantly represented as women, as in the famous tapestries of *The Lady and the Unicorn* (15th/16th century) or in Hans Markart's paintings of the five senses (1872–1879).

This brief overview of the systematization and hierarchization of the senses shows that sensory perceptions are not simply a natural given, the consequence of biological evolution, but also subject to cultural construction through the evaluation of their moral and epistemological functions. On their part, they also contribute to the project of cultural construction of identity, for example by their association with gender which, in a circular movement, affirms the devaluation of both femininity (too sensorial) and the senses (too feminine). Thus, how we perceive, how we interpret our

14 Carl Nordenfalk, *The Five Senses in Late Medieval and Renaissance Art*, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 48 (1985), 1–22, here 4.

15 Constance Classen, *The Witch's Senses: Sensory Ideologies and Transgressive Femininities from the Renaissance to Modernity*, in: David Howes (ed.), *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, Oxford: Berg, 2005, 70–84, here 70–71.

16 Nordenfalk, *The Five Senses*, 7.

perceptions, and the value we give them does not result in a neutral knowledge of the world, but through the attribution of symbolic meaning to our perceptions, social and/or religious orders are established and individuals are organized as cooperative parts of a community. The senses are not simply open gates through which the world enters and makes itself known, but they themselves create worlds.¹⁷

3. Theologies of the Senses

The theological engagement with the senses is marked by an ambivalent attitude, torn between intellectualization, and thus exclusion of the sensory, and its integration into forms of theological knowing and encounter with God. In the Bible, the language of sense perceptions is employed frequently to describe how the transcendent can become known in immanence, and thus the scriptures develop their own analogical *aisthesis* of knowing God sensorially.¹⁸ God reveals God's name out of the burning bush, addressing both hearing and vision (Ex 3,1–6). The commandments are described as sweet like honey (Ps 19,10), and the faithful are called to taste and see God's goodness (Ps 34,8). In the story of Jacob's fight with God, the encounter with God is described as intensely tactile, a struggle that leaves Jacob limping (Gen 31,22–31). It is not only the faithful who perceive God through all their senses, but God also relates to the world and human beings sensorially. The God of the Bible is a God who listens and looks, who is moved by the sweet scent of incense offerings, but when disappointed, is repulsed by their smell (Am 5,21). The most uniquely sensory and sensual text in the Hebrew Bible is – unsurprisingly – the Song of Songs, whose opening verses introduce hearing, touch, taste, and smell as the means to experience and express attraction: »Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine, your anointing oils are fragrant, your name is perfume poured out; therefore the maidens love you. Draw me after you, let us

17 S.B. Plate, *The Skin of Religion: Aesthetic Mediations of the Sacred*, *CrossCurrents* 62.2 (2012), 162–180, here 167.

18 Paul L. Gavrilyuk/Sarah Coakley, Introduction, in: Paul L. Gavrilyuk/Sarah Coakley (eds.), *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 1–19, here 1.

make haste. The king has brought me into his chambers. We will exult and rejoice in you; we will extol your love more than wine; rightly do they love you» (Song 1,1–4). In the rest of the book, nearly every verse refers to one of the senses, and all of them, inferior and superior, subjective and objective, distant and proximate are equally appreciated.

The sensory dimension of the encounter between God and humans is further reinforced in the incarnation of God in Jesus in the New Testament. The healing and redeeming relationship with Jesus Christ is clearly a sensory, embodied relationship.¹⁹ God is encountered in the touch of Jesus' hands, the mud made from his spit that opens the eyes of the blind man (John 9,6), the taste of the wine at Cana (John 2,1–10), the scent of the oil of the woman at Bethany (Mark 14,3–8), the glow of the transfiguration (Mark 9,2–8). However, the aesthetics developed in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament is far from uncomplicated. Sensory perceptions are possibilities to see, taste, and feel God but in a way that does not restrict the transcendent to the immanence of the human-divine encounter. This is equally expressed when God passes in front of Moses (Ex 33–34) or when Thomas asks to touch Jesus' wound (John 20,27–29). Any attempt at empirical ›proof‹ of God via vision or touch remains unsatisfied: Moses sees only God's back, and we are not told if Thomas actually touches Jesus and what he feels; his affirmation that this is indeed the risen Christ comes without tactile proof.

Even after Christ's resurrection and ascension, when an immediate, material encounter with the divine in the person of Jesus appears impossible for the generations to come, God continues to be present in the Holy Spirit who is smelled as a sweet scent, felt as a storm, or seen as fiery tongues. The sacraments, as signs and instruments of God's grace, also directly engage the senses so that they and their perception become the space of community with God in the scented oil of confirmation or the taste and texture of the eucharistic bread, the smell and taste of the wine, the vision of its red color, or the sounds of the communal prayers and songs of the liturgy.²⁰

19 The strong sensoriality of the New Testament stories of Jesus' life has also inspired an iconographical tradition which associates each sense with a story/stories from Jesus' life, such as hearing with the annunciation, touch with the deposition or sight with the healing of the blind man; see Nordenfalk, *The Five Senses*, 21 (see also his note 105).

20 Gesa E. Thiessen, *The Early Church: Introduction*, in: Gesa E. Thiessen (ed.), *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2005, 9–13, here 10–11.

The further theological development of the biblical foundations of the senses as a space of encounter with God is shaped by broader philosophical and social influences, in particular the shift from the more holistic Hebrew understanding of the human person to the more dualistic (neo-)Platonic anthropology with its emphasis on the mind and rationality as both the center of identity and the path to true knowledge. Tertullian can be seen as a representative of the holistic view of the human being which reflects in his theory of the senses developed in the tract *De anima*.²¹ In his view, the soul is the seat of both intellect and senses. A body without soul cannot ›sense‹, and without sensory perceptions it is impossible to form opinions (17,5). Arguing against those who would like to separate intellect and senses, he underlines instead their mutual connection: »For is it not true, that to employ the senses is to use the intellect? And to employ the intellect amounts to a use of the senses?« (18,7). Tertullian emphasizes that the senses are not deceptive, as Plato and others would sustain; instead, their sensations are necessary for human beings to fully develop their existence (17,11). Thus, one should not doubt the senses, »lest we should even in Christ Himself, bring doubt upon the truth of their sensation; lest perchance it should be said that [...] He did *not* really hear the Father's voice testifying of Himself; or that He was deceived in touching Peter's wife's mother« (17,13; original emphasis). For Tertullian, the senses are an indispensable part of the testimony of the Christ event and of the tradition of the church and its faith (17,14). If Tertullian was so concerned about the proper discipline of the body and its senses (with a tendency towards a perhaps exaggerated rigor), this was precisely because he was convinced of their necessary importance for the spiritual development of the person and not out of a dualistic negation of the body.²²

Beginning with Origen, the theory of the spiritual senses as sensorium for the perception of God becomes the main context for future theological reflections on the senses, characterized by an ambivalent attitude towards the

21 Tertullian, *A Treatise on the Soul*, translated by Peter Holmes, [http://www.documenta catholicaomnia.eu/03d/0160-0220,_Tertullianus,_De_Anima_\[Schaff\],_EN.pdf](http://www.documenta catholicaomnia.eu/03d/0160-0220,_Tertullianus,_De_Anima_[Schaff],_EN.pdf) [accessed 2 October 2025].

22 Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1988, 76.

body.²³ Paul Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley summarize the varied understandings of the relationship between bodily and spiritual senses, seen as »operating in tandem or separately, or, alternatively, as two states of the same five-fold sensorium directed at different aspects of the same object, or perhaps at different objects altogether.«²⁴ One of the most important and influential proponents of the theology of the spiritual senses is probably Bonaventure. He underlines the twofold nature of the human being as constituted of soul and body, which requires a twofold sensorium, a twofold movement (of will and of body), a twofold good (visible and invisible), and so on.²⁵ While distinct from each other, the spiritual senses presuppose the corporeal senses which open the human being to the perception of the world, and through it, of its creator.²⁶ However, it is ultimately through the immaterial, spiritual dimension that human beings can know God, as is also indicated in the title of the main work in which he develops these thoughts, *Itinerarium mentis* [!] *in Deum*.²⁷ Notwithstanding his emphasis on the spiritual, Bonaventure describes the approach to God analogically in terms of physical sensoriality, as Gregory LaNave notes: »there is an immediacy to the knowledge of God in the spiritual senses that is best understood in comparison to the immediacy of corporeal sensation.«²⁸

The human being's progress to God is an ascent in six grades from bottom up, from the material to the immaterial and spiritual. This ascent begins with the sensory perception of physical, temporal objects in the external world which contain traces of the divine, moves on to the consciousness of what is within ourselves, with the mind understood to be the image of God,

23 Gavrilyuk/Coakley, Introduction, 7.

24 Gavrilyuk/Coakley, Introduction, 5.

25 Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, II 11,1. The French translation by Guy Bougerol and Luc Mathieu is available online: http://jesusmarie.free.fr/bonaventure_breviloquium.html [accessed 6 March 2025].

26 Gregory F. LaNave, Bonaventure, in: Paul L. Gavrilyuk/Sarah Coakley (eds.), *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 159–173, here 161. See Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, II 9–11.

27 Bonaventure, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*. The English translation (no translator given) used here is available online: https://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/1221-1274,_Bonaventura,_Itinerarium_Mentis_in_Deum,_EN-.pdf [accessed 6 March 2025]. Further reflections on the senses, both physical and spiritual, and the ascent to God can be found in his *Breviloquium*, in particular in part V,6.

28 LaNave, Bonaventure, 166.

to finally transcend ourselves towards the eternal (Itinerarium 1,2). Sensory perception and its contribution to mental operations reflects, in Bonaventure's view, the qualities of the divine, such as the creativity to form mental images of the world outside or the capacity for abstraction from imperfections that helps to think the perfect and ideal, which is God (Itinerarium 2,7–9). As the human being proceeds upwards and towards God, the interior senses, gifts of God's grace and ›fine-tuned‹ by a life in virtue, are able to perceive distinct aspects of the divine in distinct ways appropriate to each sense: »to sense the Most High Beauty, to hear the Most High Harmony, to smell the Most High Fragrance, to take a taste of the Most High Savor« (Itinerarium 4,3). However, the ultimate step in the progress towards God is beyond both the physical and the spiritual senses and beyond any rational cognition: it is the total abandon of both senses and intellectual reflection in a state of ecstasy (Itinerarium 7,1), an affective experience transmuted in God, a ›total‹ sensing that can no longer be attributed to any individual sense (Itinerarium 7,4).

The example of Bonaventure's conceptualization of the spiritual senses in their relationship to the corporeal ones and their function in a human being's ascent to the divine shows very well the ambiguity of the concept of the spiritual senses: on the one hand, given the sensory language used in the Bible to describe human perception of God and central doctrines such as creation, incarnation, and resurrection, the concept recognizes the close and necessary relationship between senses and reason, between *aisthesis* and *noiesis*, also with regard to knowing God.²⁹ On the other hand, the distinction between bodily and spiritual senses and their co-occurrence on different anthropological planes ultimately leads to the spiritualization of the relation with the divine in which the corporeal senses play a role only in the initial steps in order to be overtaken by the spiritual senses. It was this second perspective of an intellectual, spiritual approach to knowing God which has come to dominate later theological reflections, often even without including the bodily senses as an initial but necessary step. Nevertheless, the former perspective, in which sensory and intellectual knowledge of God are integrated, has survived, in particular in mysticism and in pop-

29 This is also explicitly the case in William of Auxerre's writings; see Boyd T. Coolman, *Knowing God by Experience: The Spiritual Senses in the Theology of William of Auxerre*, Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004.

ular religiosity, even though neither has been fully recognized by the theological mainstream.

In the writings of mystics – predominantly by women, but not only – from the late Middle Ages about their experiences of union with God, the distinction between bodily and spiritual senses is much more blurred than in Bonaventure's theology of the senses. As Bernard McGinn explains, for Hadewijch, »God becomes present to humans in a ›single sensorium‹, that is, as an embodied spirit in which there is a strong continuity between external acts of sensation [...] and interior perceptions directed to realities that, while less physical, have no less direct an effect on the human person.«³⁰ John Milhaven also argues that mystical knowledge of God is embodied knowledge,³¹ achieved particularly through the senses of touch, taste, and smell, senses that otherwise are considered inferior. Their subjectivity and immediacy is not a problem in this perspective but rather that which enables an experience that reaches into the profound depths of a person. In the sensory and sensual relationship with the divine, not only does the mystic sense God (usually as Christ), but Christ derives sensory pleasure from the encounter as well, in a reciprocal relationship.³² Given the close link between the sensory and the sensual mentioned above, the frequent use of nuptial and erotic language inspired by the Song of Songs in mystical texts does not surprise: here, the sensuality and eroticism evoked by the senses are not the consequence of their sinfulness but, rather, the senses become, through the intense desire they evoke, the means to transcend the immanent and achieve union with God in a pleasure that goes beyond any bodily limitations.

While not reducing God to a reality of the world that could be perceived empirically through sense perception alone, the mystical and theological use of sensory language nevertheless points towards the fact that neither is it possible to perceive God without any involvement of the senses insofar as they are a fundamental part of human cognition. Human beings are

30 Bernard McGinn, *Late Medieval Mystics*, in: Paul L. Gavrilyuk/Sarah Coakley (eds.), *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 190–209, here 196.

31 John Giles Milhaven, *Hadewijch and Her Sisters: Other Ways of Loving and Knowing*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993; John Giles Milhaven, *A Medieval Lesson on Bodily Knowing: Women's Experience and Men's Thought*, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 57.2 (1989), 341–372.

32 Milhaven, *Hadewijch and Her Sisters*, 16–21.

caught in the paradoxicality that they are limited to their immanent situation of embodied existence and yet, they draw on the immanent precisely in order to transcend it. The theological reaction to this paradoxical situation cannot be to try to escape the senses in order to focus exclusively on the transcendent, as has happened in the neo-Platonic tradition, but rather to engage with the senses in a more profound way in order to understand how an encounter with the transcendent can be possible in the immanence of the human sensorium. As we argue throughout this volume, one way to return to a more integrated vision of the human being's sensory and spiritual dimensions and their involvement in the relationship with the divine is to consider and highlight the aesthetic, that is, the sensory, dimension of aesthetic experience.

4. The Materiality of *Self Growth*

The artwork *Self Growth* (fig. 1) by Tracey Emin addresses questions of the senses, sensoriality, sensuality, embodiment, and materiality on different levels, and thus it provides an excellent opportunity to explore in more depth the sensory element in the encounter with art and its contribution to aesthetic theology. *Self Growth* is an embroidery on a white bed sheet, showing, sketched in few stark black lines, a nude female body without her head, the torso at the bottom of the sheet and slightly angled, with spread, bent legs, and feet in high heels. Out of her vagina grows an equally sketchy, orange-red flower, with leaves growing close to the body, suggesting the growth of pubic hair, and with a flower high on its stalk, recognizable as a slightly angled female head. The title *Self Growth* – personal development, formation of subjectivity and self-consciousness – may relate to the embroidered face that stands for the person and her personality, the natural development of both a flower and a human person, their growing, flowering, and withering. The self of this woman grows out of her sex and is literally rooted and based in her sexual identity and lived sexuality, in her experiences of pleasure and pain.



Fig. 1: Tracey Emin, *Self Growth* (2002), embroidery on white bed sheet, 174 x 150 cm.
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33 As reproduced in David Ebony/Jane Harris/Frances Richard/Martha Schwendener/Sarah Valdez/Linda Yablonsky (eds.), *Curve: The Female Nude Now*, New York: Universe Publishing, 2003, 90.

For the viewer, the rendering of the image in just a few embroidered lines frees up the space of their imagination in which ambivalent associations may develop, based on personal experiences or those of others, of how a woman's lived sexuality can be a means of furthering, inhibiting, or influencing her growth in various ways. It is a self whose traits are only hinted at. It remains hidden and inaccessible, even though it is shown in its intimacy. The face cannot be identified; the long hair and the title might indicate that the artist refers to herself, as she does in many other works, too. But because of its reduced form, the work is not a simple representation of the elaboration of the artist's personal issues; instead, it remains open to multiple meanings that viewers might develop in their encounter with it.

The vertical axis, emphasized through the flower stalk and the orientation of the lower body, together with the diagonals of the legs, the upper body, and the face, add a sense of dynamic movement, yet also instability, to the representation. With the face growing straight up on the slim – too slim? – stalk, traced in angular but subtle lines, distanced from the body over which it seems to float, this growing self, on the one hand, appears to be dynamic, proud, and self-confident, but, on the other hand, it seems also insecure and precarious. How strong and solid is the connection between the flower and its ground? What does it take to uproot the self? Is the body its base, the ground from which it grows, or something to rise above? How is the relation between body and self to be imagined? What kind of experiences (positive, empowering, and/or negative, painful) have nourished the self? In just a few lines, the ambiguity, instability, and complexity of Emin's work evokes numerous questions and offers plenty of food for thought.³⁴

Tracey Emin (born in 1963) is an artistically and financially³⁵ successful English-Turkish artist as well as a kind of society celebrity in the UK. In her work, she focuses in particular on her/the female body, female sexuality, and the story of her life and love in an intimate, explicit, sometimes offen-

34 Ali Smith, Tracey Emin: ›What You See Is What I Am‹, The Guardian, 7 May 2001, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2011/may/07/tracey-emin-ali-smith-hayward> [accessed 7 March 2025].

35 One of her works, an embroidered blanket, is said to have raised £800.000 at an auction for The Elton John Aids Foundation. Emin has dealt with this aspect of her art in her works, e.g. in the photo *I've Got It All* (2000); see Peter Osbourne, Greedy Kunst, in: Mandy Merck/Chris Townsend (eds.), *The Art of Tracey Emin*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2002, 40–59.

sive, and perhaps also exciting way. She is particularly known for her Turner Prize-nominated installation *My Bed* (1998), which refers to existential moments that are related to this place (sex, sleep, birth, death, depression, passion, etc.), and a tent which she embroidered with the names of all the persons with whom she literally had slept (*Everybody I Have Ever Slept With 1963–1995*, 1995). In her »obsessively confessional oeuvre«, as Simon Wilson describes it,³⁶ the most intimate, personal aspects of her life are made accessible to the public through diverse artistic media. But Emin goes far beyond a narcissistic self-representation in her art, discussing questions, hopes, and fears that are central to human existence.³⁷ With her critique of the distinction between the private and the public or political, her reflections on female subjectivity and sexuality, gender relations, the male-dominated art market, and a history of art that has been literally his-story, Emin is closely related to the feminist movement in British and international art. But her work also challenges feminist ideas, such as her embrace of the sexual. As Rosemary Betterton concludes in her analysis of the feminist aspect in Emin's work: »Emin has developed her own language for dealing with sexual inequalities, which is neither traditionally feminine, nor feminist, but articulates a new kind of independent and iconoclastic femininity in all its complexity and contradictions.«³⁸

The encounter with Emin's art creates a particular sense of »intimacy«, as Jennifer Doyle writes: »[i]t sets the stage for a fantasy encounter – between her, and you, and me. Emin's work invites us to take it personally.«³⁹ This intimate relationship between viewer, work, and artist is in particular due to the fact that the encounter is bodily mediated on several levels: in the mate-

36 Simon Wilson, Tracey Emin, in: The Turner Prize 1999: An Exhibition of Work by the Shortlisted Artists: Tracey Emin Steve McQueen Steven Pippin Jane and Louise Wilson, 20 October 1999–6 February 2000, Tate Gallery, London: Tate Gallery, 1999, n. p.

37 Sarah Kent, Tracey Emin: Flying High, in: Tracey Emin/Neal Brown/Sarah Kent/Matthew Collings, Tracey Emin, London: Jay Jopling, 1998, 31–37, here 35. See also Jennifer Doyle, The Effect of Intimacy: Tracey Emin's Bad-sex Aesthetics, in: Mandy Merck/Chris Townsend (eds.), The Art of Tracey Emin, London: Thames & Hudson, 2002, 102–118, here 112.

38 Rosemary Betterton, »Why Is My Art Not as Good as Me?«: Femininity, Feminism and »Life-drawing« in Tracey Emin's Art, in: Mandy Merck/Chris Townsend (eds.), The Art of Tracey Emin, London: Thames & Hudson, 2002, 23–38, here 38.

39 Doyle, The Effect of Intimacy, 114.

rials and techniques Emin uses, in the represented motifs and themes, and in the reception of her works.

Emin's œuvre develops, as already mentioned, out of her own varied experiences of bodily trauma and passion (such as sexual abuse, rape, pleasure, pain, abortion) and their influence on her development as a person and artist. But more than that, for Emin her body is also a means of gaining knowledge, much like the mystical embodied knowledge discussed above, although expressed in a very different language, for example in her film *Why I Never Became a Dancer* (1995): »I stopped shagging / but I was still flesh / and I still thought with my body«. ⁴⁰ Her works of art can therefore be seen as the result of her thinking and knowing with her body, and thus bodiliness in all its aspects – the shape of a body, its parts, beauty, fluids, experiences – is the most important motif and also medium of her works.

This becomes obvious also in Emin's choice of material and technique: for *Self Growth*, she uses an apparently clean sheet, but, on occasion, she has also worked with used bedlinen, such as in *Picasso* (2001), on which her body inscribed itself in material traces of urine, blood, sweat, and other bodily fluids. Although apparently washed, the white sheet of *Self Growth* also evokes bodily presence, in a different way: a monogram, which is noticeable only upon close scrutiny of the work, identifies it as belonging to the Walpole Bay Hotel. This small marker brings a whole history of wear and tear to Emin's work, of people who slept on the sheet (or not) and thus left traces of themselves, their presence – *en passant*, in the fleetingness of a stay in a hotel – in the material. A sheet is also an article of daily household use, part of the housekeepers' routines in the hotel who make the beds for the guests and take the linen off again after their stay. It is not the kind of material that is dedicated to artistic use only, as it would be a canvas, to be bought in a specialist shop. Only through Emin's embroidery, the sheet becomes a part of the world of art, yet without leaving behind its mundane past which adds its own important contribution to the work in the form of presences, memories, and associations. ⁴¹

40 Excerpt included as Tracey Emin, *Why I Never Became a Dancer*, in: Tracey Emin/Neal Brown/Sarah Kent/Matthew Collings, Tracey Emin, London: Jay Jopling, 1998, 28.

41 This is also the case in the embroidery *Say Goodbye to Mummy* (2002) which deals with her experience of abortion; here, the sheet becomes a kind of shroud for the aborted fetuses.

Embroidery, the technique used to ›paint‹ *Self Growth*, is also an extremely immediate, material, and bodily technique. Like quilting or appliqué, diaries, handwriting – all techniques and genres used by Emin – it is a traditionally feminine activity, (dis)qualified as a craft rather than art. Women stitch traditional, pretty patterns and monograms on the linens of their dowries, a skill that certainly requires patience and ability but normally would not be described as creative or artistic. The male genius, on the other hand, creates original and challenging art, with great gesture and a phallic brush. Emin takes up this feminine craft and the materials of the equally feminine sphere of the household but in an ironic and subversive, shocking and critical way. She uses the time-consumingly small-stitched embroidery in order to sketch her motif in spontaneous, generous lines, seemingly the work of a moment of inspiration. And instead of modest monograms, the embroidery ›paints‹ a female nude body from whose vagina grows a self whose identity remains uncertain and cannot be reduced to two letters. A similarly ironic statement about the world of ›high art‹ is noticeable in Emin's work *Picasso*, showing a woman sitting with spread legs, with the word ›Picaso‹ [sic] underneath, embroidered on a used sheet. In an interview, Emin expresses a critical view of Picasso saying: »I thought that Picasso was this great genius, this great artist and great man, yet he treated women disgustingly«,⁴² and she shows her criticism of Picasso's distorted female bodies, his relations with women, and the mechanisms of the art market and its celebrity cult through her embroidery and the missing S in the name of this ›god‹ of the arts.

With these materials and techniques, the artist involves her body and her self in a concrete, material fashion in the creative process, and underlines the bodiliness and materiality of the work itself. At the same time, the embodied dimension of the process of reception is highlighted, which from the perspective of aisthesis can be recognized as an encounter between the bodies of the viewer, the artist, and the work in their variously realized material

42 Jean Wainwright, Interview with Tracey Emin, in: Mandy Merck/Chris Townsend (eds.), *The Art of Tracey Emin*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2002, 195–209, here 197. In the same interview (200), Emin emphasizes that her spelling mistakes are simply due to the fact that she left school when she was thirteen and never learnt to spell properly; it seems reasonable to assume that in this case, a dose of ironic intentionality was also involved; in any case, the missing S shows a certain unimpressed nonchalance in her dealings with the ›great‹ artist.

presences. Bettina Papenburg and Marta Zarzycka describe reception as an »immersive approach where the viewer is no longer only a viewer, but rather the subject of an embodied encounter.«⁴³ When looking at *Self Growth*, viewers might experience bodily reactions of pleasure, disgust, or revulsion facing the represented body and especially the image of female genitals which are still often considered taboo in art and, if at all, relegated to pornographic images.⁴⁴ Furthermore, in a kind of imaginative mimesis of body posture, recipients might feel the discomfort and tension in the positioning of the woman's body; they might experience in their own body the exposure to the views of others, or perhaps get a sense of the openness for what might grow out of one's body that is expressed in the artwork.

This personal, embodied involvement is required even more because of the reduced representation of the image in a few lines in *Self Growth*. In order to make a meaningful whole of the shapes and lines of the embroidery, it is necessary to take one's time and look closely, to imaginatively fill in the empty spaces, to retrace the gestures and postures of the body in order to feel what they might express, and to experience the long process of creating the work when looking at the stitches of the embroidery. Through this investment of themselves in the form of imagination and bodily presence, the viewers become a part of the work, and the work a part of them in the moment of reception. The work cannot be consumed passively but requires commitment, patience, openness, and attention so that a space opens up in which sense can emerge from the senses, a sense which is not predefined but develops out of the contact between work and recipient. The viewer is thus indirectly included in the relationship between artwork and artist and becomes a participant in the creative process, blurring the boundaries between creation, work, and reception. In this intense, personal encounter with the artwork and with the artist, from body to body, »doors for new thoughts and new

43 Papenburg/Zarzycka, Introduction, 3.

44 Ann-Sophie Lehmann discusses the absence of representations of the vagina over the course of art history, where, with rare exceptions such as Gustave Courbet's *Origin of the World* (1866), female genitalia were not represented or censored (painted over) in art created for public consumption, leaving their visualization to the private sphere of pornography; see Ann-Sophie Lehmann, The Missing Sex: Absence and Presence of a Female Body Part in Visual Arts, in: Barbara Baert (ed.), *Fluid Flesh: The Body, Religion and the Visual Arts*, Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2009, 107–122, here 107 and 112.

experiences«⁴⁵ are opened, as Emin hopes for her art to do, new experiences that may leave a more or less conscious trace in the recipient and their life.

The embodied nature of the creation and reception processes surrounding *Self Growth* as well as of the work itself (and Emin's other works) are further expressed on a different level, namely through the conscious acceptance of the artist's embeddedness in a particular (art) history and culture which influences how she deals with themes such as the female body and female sexuality, and how she draws on or challenges the conventions of their representation. An artwork does not exist in an empty space, nor is it experienced in a vacuum. Its production and reception are at the same time intensely subjective and personal, and shaped by socio-cultural and historical factors, such as motifs and their tradition (e.g. the history of the female nude; cultural associations with high heels); references to the history of art, artists' styles, or particular techniques (Schiele's drawings; embroidery); the logics of the (art) market in which sexuality is always a good subject to raise attention; the social context in which it is (still) not quite acceptable for a woman to explicitly represent (her own) female sexuality – all these are factors that form and deform the aesthetic language of the artist, the materiality of the works, and how they speak to the viewers. On the one hand, the excitement and controversy created by Emin's representations of the female body and its sexuality are deployed in order to achieve success in the art and gallery scene;⁴⁶ but on the other hand, she criticizes this mechanism as well: in *Self Growth*, the woman seems to offer her vagina, placed nearly in the middle of the sheet, to the spectator in a position reminding of pornographic images, apparently reduced to the object of somebody else's pleasure given that she does not have a head. But her vagina is not the source of another person's satisfaction but of her own subjectivity, the foundation of her self. Her genitals are not denied as a nameless place of shame and self-negation but are the ground from which the precarious, yet proud flower of herself grows, out of pain and pleasure. In its sketchiness and through the intimacy

45 Tracey Emin, quoted in Wilson, Tracey Emin, n. p.

46 As a member of the Royal Academy of Arts and as the representative of the UK at the Biennale 2007, Emin is closely connected to the contemporary ›official‹ and ›established‹ art scene in the UK; experiences of social and cultural marginalization because of the artist's origins and biography are however clearly a part of her work which is again and again directed against the social mainstream; see Smith, Tracey Emin.

of material and technique, *Self Growth* is an explicit yet discreet representation of female sexuality and subjectivity which expresses both the possibility of their realization and the permanent threat of their defeat.

5. The Aesthetic in Theology and Faith

Emin's work *Self Growth*, its production, and reception allow us to see more clearly how the senses, and through them, our embodied nature, are the means for human beings to know even beyond what is immediately accessible to the senses in this mutual interaction between *aisthesis* and *noesis* that Tertullian describes, or, as Laura Marks notes from a contemporary phenomenological perspective: the senses operate »between the sensible and the thinkable«. ⁴⁷ Looking at the stitches of the embroidery, I see not simply the lines they trace, but I feel their texture and the process of their creation. Seeing the white sheet on which the woman with her flowery head are embroidered, I do not simply see the white ground of an embroidery, but I am reminded of the more personal use of a bed sheet, and perhaps even feel the presence of those unknown persons who have slept in it during their stay at the Walpole Bay Hotel. The woman that Emin stitched is not necessarily a representation of the artist herself or a literal expression of her formation of self and identity, but posture and metaphors (the flower, high heels) nevertheless allow viewers to see and know development, subjectivity, and a sense of self – perhaps not only in how they understand the artwork as an expression of these experiences but also in the memory of their own – perhaps painful, perhaps pleasurable – embodied, sexual experiences that contributed to making them the persons they are.

These dimensions of the viewer's sensory and intellectual involvement with the work are not clearly distinct or sequential; I do not first look, then feel, then understand, but instead, the encounter with the artwork is a dynamic continuum of sensory experiences and intellectual operations that mutually enable and enrich each other. In the interaction, and even more, integration, of the sensory and the intellectual, the imagination as the capacity

47 Laura U. Marks, *Thinking Multisensory Culture*, in: Bettina Papenburg/Marta Zarzycka (eds.), *Carnal Aesthetics: Transgressive Imagery and Feminist Politics*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2013, 144–157, here 144.

to re-present past memories and imagine new futures plays a particularly important role because it helps to ›translate‹ what is seen (for example, a woman with spread legs) into a feeling (of being open or exposed) and to continue from there in imagining what it might take for a woman to feel at home in her body.

This aesthetic-noetic-imaginary experience of the artwork *Self Growth* contributes to the reflection of the aesthetic in aesthetic theology in two interrelated ways. First, it is an experience of transcendence of what is empirically present in and through sensory perception, and thus it provides the occasion to both experience and understand something that seems paradoxical, not to say impossible: to reach beyond the material in the process of sensing the material. What I experience in the embodied reception of an artwork shows that the distinction between the perceptible and the imperceptible is perhaps not as clear as we were taught to believe in the tradition of Western empiricism. This is not to say that we ›see‹ ghosts or the future or God in the same way as we see our hand in front of our eyes, but instead that human forms of knowing could be thought of as a continuum of sensoriality, cognition, imagination, memory, and intuition integrated with each other in different measures. Taking seriously these multifaceted ways of knowing implies that previously undervalued dimensions of knowing, such as imagination, sensation, or intuition, should be taken into account in order to fully access all the perceptive and epistemological possibilities that humans have. This would also mean that aesthetic experiences of art – the sensory dimension of aesthetic experience – could and should be considered as possibilities for insight – such as the experience of being a situated, sensing body-self and yet at the same time, being able to transcend one's specific situation in reaching out to the work or to its creator.

In addition to this more theoretical, epistemological insight into the continuity of forms of knowing, from the perspective of aesthetic theology, the encounter with *Self Growth* also underlines the importance of embodiment for the human development of self, intersubjective relationships, and the relationship with the transcendent as well as the connection between these three fundamental human relationships. The first thought of a viewer in front of *Self Growth* will quite likely not be of God or the transcendent. But viewers might become aware of their embodied situation and the role of their body in becoming and being who they are. They might relate to the work's body

through their bodies and thus make the experience of intersubjective relationship. Perhaps their insights into who they are as embodied beings and how they see themselves will also make them think about how they want others to see them and relate to them. And in doing so, they already take a step beyond the immanent towards the transcendent of the unknown other person and their unknown future, sensing that in doing so, they need their bodies and their senses, and cannot leave them behind, as Plato would have us do in the ascent to the pure Ideas. Aesthetic theology attends to these sensory dimensions of human being in the world of which we become particularly aware in the intense embodied encounter with the material presence – the body – of an artwork (and its creator), and integrates them as a foundational element into its reflections on art, the encounter with art, and its possible participation in the human relationship with the transcendent. Thus aesthetic theology contributes to the understanding of the conditions for the act of faith, specifically through tracing the integration of senses and knowing.

The theology of the spiritual senses – while not always successful in avoiding the dualism between corporeal and spiritual senses – and the mystical tradition with its more integrated accounts of the experience of the divine »in a corporeo-spiritual totality«⁴⁸ provide reference points for the rediscovery of the senses and of sensory knowing in aesthetic theology. What we see, touch, hear, taste, and smell is not simply the raw material for our higher-level intellectual operations (nor are smell, touch, taste, etc. as clearly distinct as the Western system of the five senses suggests). Instead, our sensory perceptions are shaped by and shape the worlds we live in – and not only the world, but also that which goes beyond the world.

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48 McGinn, *Late Medieval Mystics*, 190.

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