

Funny feeling –

Introducing a Performance Art Approach towards Visual Literacy

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Abstract. How can one succeed in making the experience of a lecture performance comprehensible to people who were not present? How can it be translated into a text which still gives an idea of what happened? This paper is an experiential attempt to access the underlying complex tactile experience and the *Gleichgewichtssinn* (sense of balance) and translate it into a perceptible interactive experience. A textile ribbon approximately 60 meters in length, on which the whole lecture is printed as a single line, accompanied the experience. The ribbon was set up in the entrance of the lecture room serving as a guide to those who joined the audience. Based on visual imagination of the lecturer, and emphasizing a logic of its own, this concept introduces the example of a reading practice which acknowledges bodily experience, and opens visual literacy beyond usage and design.

Keywords: Body, experience, performance art, reading, sensuous knowledge, tactility

The invitation to the 2016 IVLA conference *Engaging the senses* asked participants to explore the field of visual literacy to its “far borderlands.” The conference sought to revisit an understanding of visual literacy as one which includes an appreciation of the importance of other senses. This resonated with the author as a performative philosopher because she strives to emphasize a (re-)connection of visual perception to basic corporeal experience. By focusing on the process of *molding* knowledge rather than promoting the accumulation of information, a (restoration of) confidence in one’s sensorial perception is encouraged. Building on implicit, “tacit knowledge” (Polanyi, 1966) means including procedures to access pre-reflective self-perception through individual as well as shared activities. The stimulation of a (re)connection of visual perception to basic corporeal experience leads to engaged motivation, both, within self as well as in encounters with others.

Touch and tactility have been a guiding principle in the author’s artistic and academic

activities from the outset. The sensuality of materials and their reference to the body are of central importance to her text presentation, textile objects, performances, drawings and film sequences. In performances by the author, the lines between academic thought and artistic practices are blurred. This results in an interweaving of sensory experience and participatory relationships in knowledge formation. In the use of different elements, the author suggests that there is a collaborative holistic process of learning, discovery and writing that expands beyond a single medium.

In the search for new approaches of reading, the author experimented with displaying written language as a picture. Textile ribbons approximately 60 meters in length (see Figure 1), on which the essay is printed as a single line, were included into the lecture. Set up in the entrance to the lecture room like a guiding system, visitors started moving along the ribbon in order to read and join the lecture (see Figure 2a & 2b). In the use of this long one-line essay, the author looked for overlaps, relations and differences

in visual and textual literacy and for the relevance of this to learning.

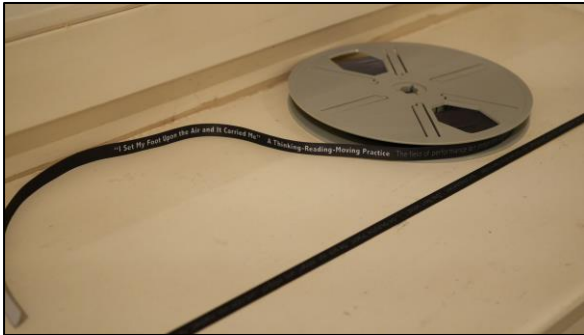


Figure 1. 'Silent Audiotape' with the whole essay printed in a single line. The image shows it wound up before its use in a lecture or an installation.



Figure 2a. The ribbon as a guide.



Figure 2b. Reading the 'Tactile Knowledge'-ribbon.

Because the ribbon is positioned at different levels, the act of reading it requires physical movement. This in turn leads the readers to be aware of subtle differences in alertness and passivity within their own bodies as well as to other people's moving-reading activity. Readers visualize and experience text in relation to surrounding space in different ways. Going back and forth along the ribbon, turning, bending and moving on, they perceive the content of the essay from their own perspective. Initial discomfort changes to interaction with other individuals around them. In sharing their experience, a new vocabulary for this specific, concrete experience is created. I am not suggesting that the method discussed here is a better alternative to the currently accepted and used ones, but that it can be a stimulation for the extended use of the existing ones. The common visual literacy competencies are challenged by the performative visualizations and interventions.

During the lecture performance, the author moves around while talking and every now and then read parts of additional text ribbons before passing them to members of the audience (see Figure 3a). The audience could either listen to author's voice and let the ribbon slide through their fingers while the author continues to talk, or they could attempt to read what is written on the ribbon (see Figure 3b). In addition to the spoken words, minimal performative actions offer "vital pictures." The decision to change the

familiar static lecture setting opens visual literacy to moments of destabilization and uncertainty, and invites the audience to become participants in a shifting, layered, dynamic situation. A person's bodily involvement in the process of making sense of the given visual information is taken into account without judgement. All participants in the lecture are challenged to find their own access to the information offered in visuals as well as in the interpretation of their tactile, audible, atmospheric or kinesthetic perceptions.



Figure 3a. Passing the ribbon to the audience.



Figure 3b. Engaging the audience to read the ribbon.

The ribbons are constantly moving. If a person has not finished their reading, they have to decide whether to let go of the ribbon or to follow the movement by standing up and moving along with it. As the lecture progresses, the participants slowly become a shifting moving crowd.

There is a realization of a changing atmosphere amongst the participants as a result of additional performative actions while the author continuously present her thoughts in the ongoing lecture. In this paradoxical approach the common way of focusing and channeling attention to a "single line" is challenged. Instead it asks for a broader awareness to the parallel activities including moments of unfocused thinking and wondering, which provides access to other layers of consciousness.

These text ribbons are the final solution of a process of experimenting and developing tools to reconnect to a lively felt experience. The underlying nature and complexity of tactile experience and the *Gleichgewichtssinn* (sense of balance) are illuminated from interdisciplinary perspectives and translated into a perceptible interactive event.

In order to overcome the artificial split between visual and corporeal experience, the author invites the audience to accompany her through parts of the experiential lecture performances on sensuous knowledge. The following excerpts are written on the single-line ribbons supplemented by operating instructions.

Additionally, the pictures (see Figure 4, 5 & 6) show aspects of the lecture performed in collaboration with the author's performance network *PAErsche* at Orangerie-Theater Cologne, Germany in 2012 (Mark, 2016). After a traditional start, the spoken lecture broke the mold, expanding its common limitations and opening up to a visual storytelling about distance and closeness in relation to touch and to one another. While listening to me talking about sensuous perception, some members of *PAErsche* started rearranging the room. Not only did the participants become aware of these changes, they also had to move within the room because of them. This prompted the audience to experience visible and physical changes without excluding a sense of unease. The result is an activation of the participant's imagination, which aligns current experience with memories, pre-reflective and pre-expressed thoughts and culminates in a

stimulation of the individual's consciousness of learning in relationship to social interaction and knowledge acquisition (Mark, 2016).



Figure 4. Introducing the cuddly dog at the beginning of the lecture.

Excerpts from the lecture on *Tactile Knowledge*

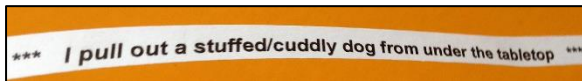


Image 1. A sample of a ribbon text -- "I pull out a stuffed/cuddly dog from under the tabletop."

The model of the five senses has been in use since Antiquity, even though nowadays our sophisticated notions of perception mean that we could quite easily talk about more than ten senses (Grunwald, 2012). Restricting it to five senses may only serve to simplify the communication of personal experiences of perception.

It was only some 150 years ago, in the mid-19th century, that tactile receptors were discovered in the skin, the muscles, the tendons and the joints, and that electrochemical perception and processing in the brain was decoded (Grunwald, 2012). Previously attributed to the 'lower senses', our highly differentiated complex sense of touch started to be acknowledged. This somatosensory system, which excludes the specialized senses of sight, hearing, taste

and smell, is composed of the sensitivity of the body surface, called tactility, the sensor system of the locomotor system, also known as proprioception, and that of the inner organs.

Our skin consists of different layers with embedded receptors which register not only surface perception, but also temperature and pain.



Image 2. A sample of a ribbon text -- "I pull the dog's right arm out of its furry coat."

The superficial layer, the epidermis, contains receptors that react to mechanical impact by opening small channels in their cell membranes with the result that positively charged particles flood in. The resulting electrical signal is transmitted to the brain. The stronger the pressure, the larger the openings and the stronger the signal to the brain; accordingly, when the impact is too small there is no signal and consequently no sense of perception.

The smallest weight that can trigger an electrical signal is approximately 3 mg, which corresponds to the weight of a down feather. By contrast, movement of the skin --- for example, when a mosquito, a creature that weighs only some 2 mg, lands --- is registered by receptors located deeper in the skin, which react to changes completely independent of weight.

These receptors are activated by a movement of as little as 1 μm , which corresponds to around the thickness of one 50th of a mosquito leg. Receptors that react to the acceleration and vibration of a stimulus are located even deeper. These even register the vibrations caused by the beating of a mosquito's wing at a distance of 1 meter.

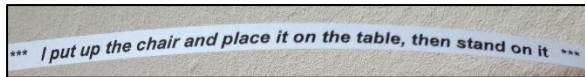


Image 3. A sample of a ribbon text -- "I put up the chair and place it on the table, then stand on it."

The extreme sensitivity of the skin, particularly in the fingertips, allows me to feel the most delicate curves that surface structures permit me to recognize. In addition to this, there is proprioception or kinesthesia, which, in combination with my sense of balance, allows me to perceive the position and movement of my body in space.

Proprioception concentrates sensory impressions that are evoked by stimulating receptors in the muscles, tendons and joints. This form of perception allows me to perceive positions and the movements (kinesthesia) of individual parts of my body and to estimate weights. In combination with tactility, this enables three-dimensional perception of spatial dimensions. Even when visual verification is not possible the author was capable of determining her position in relation to the vertical and horizontal axes in space, front-back, top-bottom, right-left (See Figure 5a, 5b, & 5c).



Figure 5a. Standing on a chair.

This anatomical and functional information tells us little about how the brain assimilates infinitely large pieces of information. It also reveals nothing about learning and the automation of sensorimotor processing. Countless attention-regulating processes and activities in the working memory take place, which are moreover preceded by a large number of comparative and decision-making processes (Grunwald, 2001).

Studies on tactile perception in the past decade were principally devoted to understanding passive stimulus processing and have actually only produced more questions about the understanding of *active* haptic perception. Because of its complexity, cooperative research between different scientific disciplines is essential. Researchers have observed the constant reciprocal effects between motor and sensory actions in information processing, and this has led to the introduction of the phrase 'sensorimotor function'. This function is responsible for the continual, unconscious adaptation of the body to the requirements made of it.

Since the mid-1950s, research has been increasingly focused on the aspect of active movement in the perceptual process (Gibson, 1962; Révész, 1950). This has led to the distinction between the term *haptics* -- as a sense of active touch and feeling --- and that of *tactile perception*, in which the skin is stimulated passively, i.e., without any active movement by the person perceiving. Even today, the definitions of tactility and haptics are in a state of flux, although the term haptics is always associated with active movement. Without contact, bodies and objects remain isolated in space and cannot be felt. Indeed, it is by means of kinesthetic movement that the author makes a haptic perception of her own. This self-reference, the double information of feeling that gives the author both knowledge of the outside world and information about herself, is the crucial difference between man and technological equipment, which cannot create a reference using kinesthesia and haptics. There are also aspects of the unconscious self-touching of our bodies which can influence our ability to act by refocusing

the awareness after distractions or reactivating the working memory (Grunwald, 2012).



Figure 5b. Lying on the floor.

First described by Aristotle as a uniform sense, our sense of touch played a subordinate role from Antiquity until well into the 17th century. Over the centuries, the visual reigned supreme. It was not until the end of the 18th century, in the age of sensualism, that the sense of touch was given preference over seeing (Grunwald, 2001). From the early 20th century, however, with the advent of Gestalt theory, the visual began to dominate again, and the sense of touch as a source of knowledge was downgraded.

In his 1925 theory of perception, Melchior Palágyi (1925) describes active movement as a fundamental component of tactile self-perception. Arnold Gehlen (1993) and Michel Serres (1998) also highlight sensorimotor perception and tactility as fundamental to attaining awareness and acquiring knowledge.

Tactility is increasingly placed in the context of social activities, communication and interaction, since it is not possible to separate physical contact, touching and touch as a double sensation. In his book *Phenomenology of Perception*, French philosopher Merleau-Ponty captures this doubling of perception in the simultaneity of touching and being touched and the associated experience of being both subject and object as a decisive moment of understanding. Diaconu refers to the sense of touch as a dynamic, mobile and fluid cognitive organ connected to a physically active subject that not only extends our visual powers of understanding but that is indeed the basis of it (Diaconu, 2005). She elaborates Merleau-Ponty's deliberations on the relationship between subject and object, between the self and the other, the invisible and visible as a chiasmus following the model of the mutual touching of hands, as a reversible relationship where the clear division of active and passive roles is torn asunder by clear ambiguity (Diaconu, 2005).



Figure 5c. Position on top of a table.

With touch there is no action of fixing as is the case with visual perception. The location-specific, fragmentary quality of touch asks for a continuous synthesis of the items into a transient whole. Touching and feeling involve remaining in motion. Diaconu calls Merleau-Ponty's thinking 'tactile', as a way of thinking which has not yet been consolidated into a

coherent system. Concerning the assumption that tactility relates to surface, Diaconu (2005) remarks further:

If *tactile* thinking has to abandon the metaphysical separation of the being as a core and the phenomenon as a sheath, as the subject always remains on the surface, this tactile thinking opens itself up to a different depth, to a historically layered surface or to a palimpsest (p.77).

According to Diaconu, the new, tactile way of thinking characterizes the relationship of the individual to their opposite number: a relationship that is no longer objective. Merleau-Ponty even introduces “seeing” as a way of touching to which the author will discuss later.

In addition, it important to consider aspects of emotion because it is via our tactile impressions of consistencies, resistances and depths that individuals perceive a wide range of associated feelings from defensive ones to those of the greatest intimacy (see Figure 6a, 6b, & 6c). Accordingly, Hartmut Böhme (1996) suggests the inclusion of not only sensual perception but all emotions as the progeny of the sense of touch.



Figure 6a. Lying positions on the floor.

The reference to tactility also needs to be seen in the context of the radical shift in perception from the humoral body to the organic/neuronal, anatomical body in the late 18th century. In contrast to the old European humoral understanding of the body in which fluid, material life was held and used, porous, uncoded, in permanent contact with the outside world, the modern body is characterized by the maintenance of the boundaries between the inside and the outside, which leads to a greater distancing from the corporeal.

In modern-day medicine it is often the case that examinations no longer represent an interaction between two bodies. Imaging equipment is interposed providing (nowadays not even with a time lapse) results from people’s insides, which are presented on two-dimensional screens. Tactility is no longer an external touch which is conveyed to the insides. Meanwhile, the transformation in data processing continues from ‘the sensory to the sensual to the cognitive function’ (Binczek, 2000).



Figure 6b. Various position with objects on the floor.

Tactility is no longer a guarantee of body-related communication. This experience of loss is concurrent with the development of new dimensions in technology-generated forms of tactility. Virtual haptics and robotics have developed into leading fields of science at a breathtaking speed. Before the author looks at the changes in the sense of touch in the context of digital technologies, she starts by referring briefly to Walter Benjamin’s (1935/36) crucial description of a ‘modern’

tactility which changed the Western theory of perception with its hierarchical perspective. Its radical effects on the ways we 'see' are meanwhile self-evident components of our viewing habits.



Figure 6c. Variations of position among participants.

The new equipment-based view of the world and in particular the development of film has led to completely new texturing of materials by the camera lens (Benjamin, 1935/36). The camera brings the eye closer, so near by means of close-ups, slow-motion and editing, that it almost touches things. Nicolas Pethes (2000) emphasizes the tactile momentum of the media as a structuring penetration of reality, one which also supplants the usual way of looking at surfaces. Cameras create strangeness and distance as result of the extreme proximity they provide. At the point of utmost rapprochement, proximity is transformed into distance. This rapprochement takes place at the expense of objectivity and the viewer has to surrender their position of superiority. Pethes summarizes:

Tactile reception is thus no longer a way of touching conditioned by the intentional interaction of hands or an authentic bodily experience, but instead a loss of the possibility of escaping from one's environment that is approaching by means of the camera lens (p.49).

The way in which the image from a camera lens can influence one's perception of reality was demonstrated to the author a couple of years ago by her son (who was three years old at the time). After watching a game transmitted during the soccer World Cup, the author and her son played soccer together. The son told his mother, the author, that he did not know how to save a ball properly. The author demonstrated how it should be done.

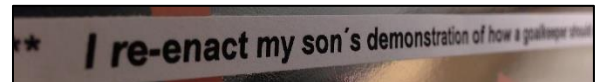


Image 4. A sample of a ribbon text -- "I re-enact my son's demonstration of how a goalkeeper"

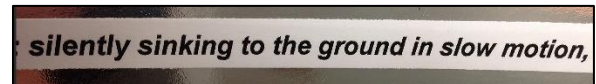


Image 5. A sample of a ribbon text -- "... silently sinking to the ground in slow motion,...."

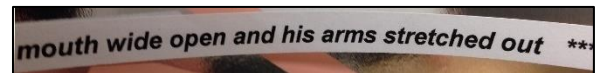


Image 6. A sample of a ribbon text -- "... mouth wide open and his arms stretched out."

In order to make sense of what people perceives, children quickly learn to identify and interpret their initial sensation as parts and certain patterns of perception. Here, the initial confusion of author's son caused by alternating images of extremely large and tiny soccer players, the repetition of goals that were suddenly scored in slow motion disappeared. Instead, the son soon understood and 'saw' them as close-ups, replays, time gaps, cuts and montages of film editing.

In the context of current-day digital technologies, children are capable of far more: they design things themselves, influence them, manage them. Whereas reproducibility was considered a novelty in the mechanical age, today's digital information society promises a creative

power, which makes recreating possible (Heilmann, 2010).

Aspects of digitality derive from the act of counting on individual fingers (from the Latin 'digitus'). Media theorist, Till Heilmann directly relates digitality to feeling and to tools operated with the hands and fingers and refers to it as 'digital tactility'. Objects on a computer screen are controlled by input equipment in the hands of their users. Seeing and feeling are merged, symbolized by a little mouse pointer on the user interface. Today direct contact and control by gesture are used, with touchscreens, smart phones and tablet computers. Numeric keyboards and buttons have disappeared almost entirely (Heilmann, 2011).

The author continues the discussion by using short excerpts from the lecture on *Gleichgewichtssinn* (sense of balance) which is also printed on the ribbon. The pictures (see Figure 7a, 7b, & 7c) give an idea of the additional performative activities during the ongoing lecture called *Vertigo*, performed at the gallery space *for contemporary art bb15* in Linz, Austria in 2013.



Figure 7a. Demonstration of a performative activity during the lecture *Vertigo*

"*Gleichgewichtssinn* is the sense of equilibrium and balance. Together with kinesthesia, this sense of equilibrium or balance allows knowledge about body's positions and movements. In a labyrinth, individuals experience an entanglement of space. They understand how important it is to be able to orientate and to aim the body's movements towards something. Looking for

orientation, individuals are led by external influences in an attempt to maintain control but at the same time to follow the intuitive self.

A labyrinth is a complex system of relations between objects and structures. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz developed a concept called the *relational order*. Space becomes a medium which describes relations and proportions. In space, Individuals find synchrony, overlaps and contrasts that are self-created through movements as helpful orientation. Hartmut Böhme (2007) understands movement as a constituent category of space and time. Concerning a cultural-scientific understanding of space he claims:

Space and three-dimensionality must be experienced to be thought about. This means: The movements that we perform with our body and as bodies in space – also those enabled by technology – develop what we historically, culturally and individually understand as space (p.58).

Spatial seeing has to be learned. It develops through the complex interaction of kinesthetic experiences during movements, touch and prehensile perceptions. Semantic expressions for visual findings are acquired simultaneously.



Figure 7b. Another demonstration of a performative activity.

The inner ear is called a *labyrinth* due to its channel system. It consists of the hearing organ and the vestibular organ which is located on both the right and left side. The vestibular system consists of five components: three determine the direction of rotation and the other two provide a sense of gravity. Gravity is generally understood as a never-ending physical power that describes the reciprocal attraction of material. On earth it causes objects to fall. Humans required a long time to learn how to walk upright. They are unstable when standing still as they have to react to changes in gravitational forces.

The main task for the sense of balance is not to *keep* balance but to constantly renew it claims physicist and judo coach Moshé Feldenkrais (1987), who developed his concept of *Awareness through Movement*. The posture of the human body used to be understood as something static but in fact it is a dynamic balance which works best when it reestablishes balance after each disturbance. To support this idea, Feldenkrais (1987) uses the example of a bottle, which when pushed rotates around its axis before returning to a standstill. He continues:

It is not about the standing nor the falling. When you think about a dynamic balance, the question arises: How strong can be the shock, that a system is able to bear, without losing the control and re-establishing the development (Feldenkrais, 1987, p.74).



Figure 7c. Balancing an object.

His concept opens a new way to develop a feeling for an individual, personal coherence. Feldenkrais' friend and Nobel Prize winner Frédéric Joliot-Curie confirmed that the main aspect of learning is 'to become aware of things' (Feldenkrais, 1987). By not dismissing a certain sound from his research apparatus as a failure of the apparatus, he discovered induced radioactivity.

In order to avoid getting lost in the middle of unforeseeable events, individuals can rely on the sensorium of their bodies. They can supplement their knowledge *about* the body with a fine sense for the processes of perception that makes others become experts for their own bodies.

Finally, the author would like to provide some background information about the underlying philosophy of perception and experience.

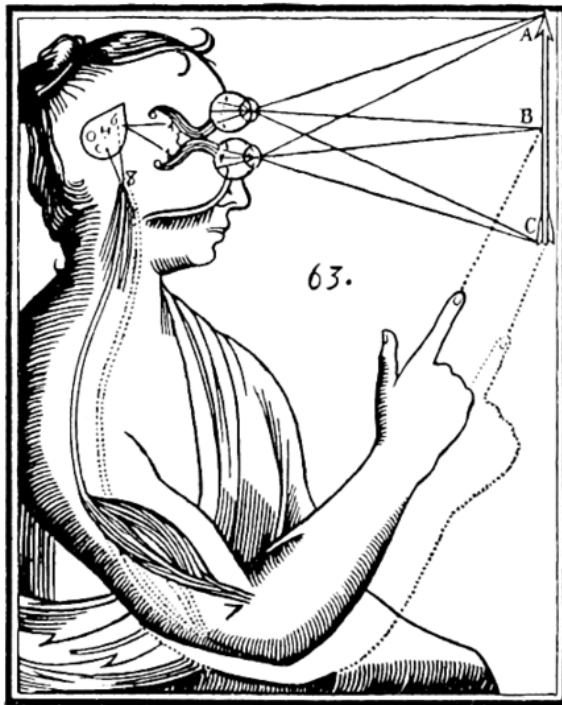


Figure 8. René Descartes' illustration of visual perception and the co-ordination of the senses, late 16th century.

Responsive Phenomenology

In his responsive phenomenology of the alien, German philosopher Bernhard Waldenfels (2011) refers to perception as a process of two parts: *pathos* and response. He believes experience happens to us: when something affects us, stimulates us, astonishes us or appalls us, attracts or repels us, elates us or strains us, we answer. The level of sensation and the answer to what has been perceived merge and initiate a process of transformation. Waldenfels explains this transformation as being at first vague but that it later becomes something by taking form, spreading in fields, entering into horizons and returning under changing circumstances. To put it another way: being touched sets processes in motion that take shape in the answers to them. This is

fundamentally different to an active, deliberate act, as there is no constructivistic, intentional building. Instead, Waldenfels describes an intermediate state, a “process of becoming,” a kind of lingering at the threshold in which experience pre-pares itself and finally emerges as something new. Waldenfels emphasizes that intuition, as an interspersed element in our experience, delays, accelerates and inspires the ‘normal’ course of experience. Thus, things and questions are allowed to emerge that do not correspond to a causal, linear knowledge logic and clear conclusions --- quite the opposite. Within a moment, as we try to pack them in our reasonable terms, they withdraw and dive. An idea that occurs without us summoning it, contains more than we expect, because what comes to us in the experience is too rich and too varied to grasp. An erroneous rationalization begins which equates the premonition with a prior knowledge. This subsequently validates itself as if filling in the initial gaps of experience like the empty fields of a crossword puzzle (Waldenfels, 2012).

Experiencing moments of interweaved tactile and visual perception as well as acknowledging existing gaps is essential to the generation of visual sense (see Figure 8). Articulating what we have perceived asks for a creation and development of a new vocabulary for these processes. Including the corporeal experience into visual literacy leads to an open encounter, which in my understanding exceeds communication.

Conclusion

Learning visual language and gaining knowledge in visual literacy is a fundamental competence today. In becoming visually literate individuals acquire competence in the analysis, understanding, interpretation and creation of visuals.

Based on the author's visual imagination and in emphasizing a logic of its own, the concept of one-line text ribbons is introduced to visual literacy as an example of a reading practice which acknowledges bodily

experience, and opens visual literacy beyond usage and design.

In asking *how* individuals' experience visual literacy, the author presented an invitation to follow the images into the entangled interlaced processes of visual thinking inside each person. The activation of the participants' imagination, which aligns current experience with visual memories, pre-reflective and pre-expressed visual thoughts stimulates the individual's self-learning process and new knowledge acquisition. Performative strategies offer alternative approaches to ambiguous aesthetic experience, which do not avoid conflict with (visual) ideals that persistently strive for perfection and the assimilation of difference. They oppose use-oriented reduction and exploitation of sensuousness that leads to superficial and rudimentary modes of reception (Mark, 2016). Instead, they allow individuals to re-experience the body in its resistance, its difference and its mysterious elusiveness as a foundation for visual and sensorial literacy.

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