the senses and the body in african and afro-brazilian art and religion

The “senses,” the “body,” and “aesthetics” have become new buzz words in the study of art and religion. These notions are being launched so as to better grasp those aspects of religious praxis that surpass mere symbolic analysis and come to terms with the affective impact of religious things and the making of religious experience. In the following pages, Henry John Drewal, Peter Probst and Mattijs van de Port discuss the importance and implications of this development – which may be summarized as the “aesthetic turn” – in relation to African and Afro-Brazilian art and religion.

What is it in Yoruba religion and Brazilian candomblé that prompts scholars to pay attention to the senses, the body and aesthetics? What are the merits of developing a notion as “sensiotics,” as suggested by Henry John Drewal, in order to get hold of the particular appeal and affective quality of religious objects? What are future directions and possible limitations of the aesthetic turn? And how does it affect our research and writing?
Material, sensorial religion
the case of mami wata
Henry John Drewal

How do we make sense of our world? . . . with our senses, of course. To me, understanding material and materiality or “stuff” begins with the body, and more specifically, the senses. I am presently exploring something that has intrigued me for a long time—the role of the senses in understandings of African/Diaspora arts, and the arts in general—a trans-disciplinary approach I call sensiotics. Sensiotics argues that we need to acknowledge, analyze, and understand the crucial importance and involvement of multiple senses in artists’ creativity as well as the equally creative responses by audiences.

I began this journey among Yoruba-speaking peoples in West Africa and later their descendants in the Americas, taking as my focus the Yoruba concept of art—ona—defined as “evocative form” that includes but is not limited to such ideas as: the skillful articulation of a medium; embellishment of form; originality/inventiveness; insightful improvisation and serious playfulness; and completeness. I believe that within the expansive terrain of material culture are forms whose evocative, moving qualities define them as “art.” While I use this “Western” term, I believe it is a global human phenomenon called by countless names and defined in a variety of ways. Art is simply a Western term for an illusive, essentially indefinable category of objects and performances that are intensely expressive. They literally and figuratively move us—to tears, or laughter, or anger, or pleasure. Certainly, the recognition of and response to art differs from person to person, from body–mind to body–mind. What is art for one, may not be for another. Yet, we are also social beings who constantly share and exchange perspectives as we shape and are shaped by culture. For the purposes of this conversation, culture could be considered an aesthetic system writ large: the sum of particular ways of being in the world. And crucial to this formation is bodily knowledge (in-body learned behavior)—shaped by the senses.

My earliest encounter with these matters dates to my very first attempt at African art research, my apprenticeships with two Yoruba artists (Drewal 2005). What I learned from those apprenticeships was that the actions of artists teach us as much, if not more, about their ideas about art (like style and aesthetics) as their words (Drewal 1980). I began to gain insights into Yoruba artistic concepts, not only in discussing them with artists and observing them as they emerged from the creative process, but more importantly in attempting to achieve them in my own carving under the tutelage of Yoruba artists. In other words, my own bodily, multisensorial experience was crucial to a more profound understanding of Yoruba art, and the culture and history that shape it. This process of watching, listening, carving, making mistakes, being corrected by example, and trying again was a transformative experience for me. Slowly my body learned to carve as my adze-strokes became more precise and effective and the image in my mind took shape through the actions of my body. Yorubas understand this kind of experience and explain it with a sensory metaphor: “the outsider or uninitiated usually sees through the nose” (imu ni alejo fi i riran) (Abiodun 2005; Ola 2005). This saying has two different yet complementary connotations: that an outsider understands little because he/she confuses sensing organs; and, at the same time, that understanding requires multiple senses.

These are examples of what I call “body–mind work” and what Paul Stoller (1997) evocatively calls “sensuous scholarship.” Here one no longer aspires to achieve an impossible “distanced objectivity” of a so-called participant-observer (where observation was traditionally emphasized). Rather one works as a sensorially engaged participant, opening multiple paths to knowledge and understanding. Recent discoveries in the neuroscience of mirror neurons (that our body–minds actually do what we see being done) confirms the potential of such an approach. Yet, we must also recognize

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DOI: 10.2752/174322009X12448040551729

Material Religion Volume 5 Issue 2
The Case of Mami Wata
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Material Religion volume 5, issue 2, pp. 226–229
that the distinction between insiders/outsiders, actors and observers, will always remain an issue, especially since most of the time we are in-betweeners (see Okediji 2008).

With sensiotics I seek to demonstrate how African artists and audiences use the senses to create and respond to the affective qualities of things called art. For me the senses include the following: seeing, tasting, hearing, speaking, touching, moving, and extrasensory perceiving—all active, ongoing processes. I consider the standard five senses plus two others I believe are distinct and equally important—motion and “extra”-sensory perception. Motion has to do with our relation to gravitational forces and our sense of balance. In a remarkably insightful study of the cultural sensorium of Anglo-Ewe peoples, Kathryn Geurts reveals that a sense of balance (agbagbadodo), when a child first learns to rise up on two feet and not fall over, is “an essential part of what it means to be human” (Geurts 2002: 49–50). The notion of balance/spatial orientation encompasses motion, with its sensing organ, the labyrinth of the inner ear.

The seventh sense, what is often called “the sixth sense,” has to do with “extra”-sensory perception (ESP) or intuition. I would suggest that when we try to understand the concept of trance or altered states of consciousness—a phenomenon that is certainly widespread in the artistic and religious traditions we study in Africa and the Diaspora (and probably a universal human experience)—we are dealing with issues of ESP, and indeterminacy. This seventh sense is in a way related to synaesthesia—the simultaneous body–mind interplay of multiple senses that has a profound effect on how we experience things in this world, and imagine (and manifest) what might be beyond.

Language is one of the ways we represent the world. But before language we began by perceiving, reasoning, theorizing, and understanding through all our senses. In the beginning, there was no word, only sensations. If we want to understand the creativity of artists and the responses of audiences then we must understand how the senses shape and guide us from pre-craddle to grave. We need to explore how things and the arts communicate and evoke by means of their own unique sensorial modes, and to develop a language and method of the senses, an approach I have been feeling, thinking, and working on (and that has been working on me) since my first apprenticeship.

I conclude with two examples of the importance of the senses in Mami Wata material/immaterial culture and religion (see Drewal 2008). The young artist Gratien Adotanou from Cotonou, Benin, creates murals for various Vodun and Mami Wata spirits. Although not a devotee himself, he nonetheless honors and respects these forces and knows that Mami has affected his life in substantial ways, both positively and negatively. A powerful self-portrait of the artist as a Mami-serpent marks the entrance to his compound and studio (Figure 1). Whenever he does a mural in a temple he must first be given spiritual armor by the priest because, as he explains, “these are not simply images . . . some of them are very fearful and I sometimes have great difficulty in creating them . . . As for Mami Wata, it is she who makes what I do beautiful, colorful . . . she loves beauty . . . she pushes me to go deeper . . . but she also makes it difficult for me to live with a woman . . . she is very jealous . . . she loves to possess things . . . and persons” (Adotanou, personal communication, 2004). Adotanou finds that his best artistic inspirations come between midnight and 1:00 a.m., or noon and 2:00 p.m. When he visited a diviner, he was told that these are the hours for his Mami Wata. Once, when he had a woman staying with him, he was visited by an unknown light-skinned woman dressed completely in white whose eyes shocked him. She told him that he had a good job, but he should beware of women. She then disappeared leaving a lingering scent of perfume. Adotanou is sure that he was visited by Mami (Adotanou, personal communication, 2004). As we learn from Adotanou, religious image-making can be a fearful, extrasensory, altered state of being experience—and also that smell, the sweet scent of perfume, signals divine presence.

Sculpted forms, prints, and painted images like those described above, as well as a vast and varied array of commercial goods from every corner of the global marketplace, come together to create extraordinary sacred spaces—altars and shrines—that entice, hold, and work with spiritual forces for human benefit. As you approach the Mami Wata altar of Mannis Pascaline Acrobessi Toyi in Ouidah, Benin, cleanliness, orderliness, and sweetness dominate the pristine space, reflecting Mami’s fastidious personality (Figure 2). The careful arrangement of objects, including porcelain sculptures and vessels, wooden reliefs, framed chromolithographs, cologne, talcum powder, perfumes, incense, and flowers are offerings intended to please her. They sit clustered together on Mami’s “table,” an elaborate seven-tiered construction made especially for Mammis according to her detailed specifications.

Toyi continually adds items to Mami’s table to make it “beautiful” (jolie) and to please the spirits. She added a small plastic guitar because “it is with music that Mami is content . . . if you play the guitar and sing she will be happy . . . she loves music for dancing, not just African
hands with crossroads symbols on the palms flank a mirror at the center. Mamissi explained “that it is not simply a mirror, the spirits pass inside [passent dedans] . . . it is there that the spirits come and go.” A white curtain covers various ritual objects and implements kept out of sight under the table. They protect and empower the priestess and “enthrone the gods” (Toyi, personal communication, 2004). Before beginning any rite, Mamissi sprays the air and all visitors with the scent of sweet cologne to purify the space and welcome Mami Wata.

Fastidious cleanliness, brightly colored, beautiful objects, pleasant scents and sweet music—these are the sensual attractions that bring Mami Wata to Toyi’s sacred table—this altar is a multisensorial spirit magnet. To ignore the importance of the senses in material religion is to miss much of a devotee’s complex emotional and physical experience.

FIG 1
The young artist Gratien Adotanou from Cotonou, Benin painted this powerful portrait of himself transformed into a Mami-serpent spirit. It marks the entrance to his compound and studio. Photograph by Henry John Drewal, 2004.

FIG 2
The pristine seven-tiered Mami Wata altar or “table” of Mamissi Pascaline Acrobessi Toyi in Ouidah, Benin exudes cleanliness, orderliness, and sweetness, reflecting Mami’s fastidious personality. The careful arrangement of objects, including a large mirror, porcelain sculptures and vessels, wooden reliefs, framed chromolithographs, cologne, talcum powder, perfumes, incense, and flowers are offerings intended to please her. Photograph by Henry John Drewal, 2004.
references