

The 2021 Hermes Award: A Book of the Year in Phenomenological Hermeneutics

Richard Kearney, *Touch: Recovering Our Most Vital Sense* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

Richard Kearney's *Touch: Recovering Our Most Vital Sense* explores our most primordial and most neglected of the senses – touch. The demanding task to “get us back in touch with touch” appears particularly urgent today, not only due to the new challenges to corporeality brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic but also in the midst of our increasingly disembodied manner of being in the world.

Kearney's book comes out at a time when touch is in crisis. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, the growing digitalization of social communication has been making us more and more alienated from the flesh in almost all dimensions of human life: in commerce, dating, politics, medicine and war - to give just a some examples. The digital world, in which we are separated from one another by our screens, allows us to have contact without *tact*. It permits a unilateral, excarnate communication whereby we can see others without being seen, heard or scented, that is, without being exposed in our basic vulnerability. The new pandemic has accelerated this progressive tendency toward excarnation, adding an ethical component of social distancing to protect others from infection. Considering the current challenges, how can we find a way back to the tactile world of living bodies?

Kearney sees in the “twin therapy” of storytelling and touch a way of responding to today's crisis of carnality. His insights into the topic of trauma explore the potential of this double therapy for the working through (*Durcharbeiten*) at the symbolic level of what remains unattainable or intimidating at the level of lived experience. Rethinking the task of healing, he elucidates how touch can operate in trauma therapy, the treatment of depression, and disability aids.

Touch is about more than a response to a current crisis of carnality. It also offers reflections on our vulnerability and relatedness. Considering touch's etymological, literary, religious, mythic, and psychoanalytic interpretations, and entering a productive dialogue with authors as various as Aristotle, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Irigaray, Slimani, Shakespeare, Don DeLillo, and Julia Kristeva,

Kearney argues that touch is the most universal yet most complex of the senses, constituting our basic openness to the world. He also shows how it forms our fundamental exposure in the experience of ‘double sensation’, since to touch is to be touched simultaneously (unlike in the case of the other senses, where I am not necessarily heard by what I hear or seen by what I see). This basic openness and exposure of flesh through touch discloses that flesh is where we most experience our desire, fragility, finitude and fear. Tactility, thus, “is the ability to experience and negotiate the passion of existence, understood etymologically as *pathos/πάσχειν*— suffering, receiving, or undergoing exposure to others who come to us as this or that. To touch and be touched simultaneously is to relate to others in a way that opens us up.” It is a discerning sense which serves as a primal pre-reflective medium for “carnal hermeneutics”.

Kearney invites us to re-think our philosophical prejudices regarding the flesh and to imagine new possibilities of living sensitively and tactfully. He explores the complex and indispensable humanity of touch as an “an embodied manner of being in the world, an existential approach to things that is open and vulnerable, as when skin touches and is touched.” With a lyrical and argumentative power, Kearney allows us to appreciate tactility as the primordial existential mode of being in the world with others.

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