

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

Kearney's inspirational *Touch: Recovering Our Most Vital Sense* exquisitely explores our most primordial, and yet, especially recently, most neglected of the senses – touch. This outstandingly demanding task of interrogating the possibilities 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 progressing digitalization was making us more and more alienated from the flesh in almost all dimensions of human life: in dating, politics (war), medicine, to give just a few examples. The digital world, in which we are separated from one another by our screens, allows us to contact without *tact*. It enables 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 only accelerated this progressing excarnation, adding an ethical component to it by social distancing to apparently protect others from infection. Considering the current challenges, how can we find a way back into the tactile world and into our bodies?

Kearney sees in the “twin therapy” of storytelling and touch a true possibility of responding to today's crisis of carnality. His insights into the topic of trauma lead us to appreciate the potential of this twin therapy for the working through (*Durcharbeiten*) at the symbolic level what remains unattainable or intimidating at the level of lived experience. Rethinking the theme of healing, he elucidates how touch can be therapeutic: in trauma therapy (the “tactile” act of dance can help PTSD patients), depression treatment (a deep-tissue massage can stimulate the right neurotransmitters), and disability aids (Braille as word-touch).

Touch is about so much more than a response to a current crisis of carnality. Kearney's reflections on touch are, through and through, also reflections on our vulnerability and relatedness. Considering touch's etymological, literary, religious, mythic, and psychoanalytic interpretations, and entering a productive dialogue with authors such as Aristotle, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Luce Irigaray, Leïla Slimani, Shakespeare, Don DeLillo, and Julia Kristeva, to name but a few, Kearney discloses that touch is the most universal yet complex of the senses, which constitutes our basic openness to the world. It also forms our fundamental exposure, 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 also discloses that flesh is where we most experience our vulnerability, insecurity, 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 also a discerning sense since flesh is also always a medium through which we perceive something as this or that.

Kearney invites us to re-think our philosophical prejudices regarding the flesh and imagine new possibilities to live sensibly and sensitively, thoughtfully, and tactfully. He also uncovers the complexity of touch beyond being merely one of the senses. Indeed, touch is 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,” and thus is also present in “visibility, audibility, and so on.” With a lyrical and argumentative power, Kearney allows us to appreciate tactility as the primordial existential mode of being and relating to another, and pivotal to being a human being.