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On being touched

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Noli Me Tangere, oil on canvas (c.1534) by Antonio Allegri Correggio (c.1489/94–1534). Prado, Madrid, Spain/The Bridgeman Art Library.

Touch binds together the work of art and the work of love in mythology through the myth of Pygmalion, a sculptor, and Galatea, his sculpture with whom he falls in love and who comes to life, a myth repeatedly represented throughout Western art and literature. Pygmalion and Galatea's hands, their interplay, the repeated depiction of their accidental touches, play an important role in the Western (patriarchal) symbolisation and definition of the artist's role as creator – transformation and coming into

being are here intertwined with the sense of touch and the exchange of the gaze. In Ovid's narration, Pygmalion caresses Galatea and his hands feel her transformation: "At his touch the ivory lost its hardness, and grew soft: his fingers made an imprint on the yielding surface [...]. The lover stood, amazed, afraid of being mistaken, his joy tempered with doubt, and again and again stroked the object of his prayers. It was indeed a human body!"²⁵

Contra Christ's demand of '*noli me tangere*' (suggesting the transformation from corporeality to spirituality), touch here is the proof of transformation. In Burne-Jones' painting, Galatea is represented as connoting life, coming to life, gently touching Pygmalion with her hands. In Gérôme's painting this transformative moment (marking and symbolising the coming into being of an artwork as well as of love) is indicated by Pygmalion's caressing embrace of Galatea whilst their hands touch each other. These representations draw heavily on the iconography of physical contact, whilst the newly found lovers are often depicted as gazing at each other.

However, a work of art is not only a produced work (or 'Work' designating the totality and completeness of the art object). Instead, according to Maurice Blanchot, it "unworks itself (*se désœuvre*) even before it has been accomplished; before, in accomplishing itself, it ruins the possibility of accomplishment."²⁶ Here the artwork is "at work but produces no work."²⁷ The artwork's work consists in

infinitely unworking itself. The aims of the work of the artwork are not closure and establishment of meaning, but exactly the opposite, the absencing of meaning which, in turn, evokes an endless production of it, an endless production of fortuitous encounters, as in this *Scrapbook*, where objects and representations of such encounters are brought together to create new, unexpected poetic formations: "the umbrella and the sewing machine will make love."²⁸



Pygmalion and the Image – The Soul Attains, oil on canvas (1878) by Sir Edward Burne-Jones (1833–1898). © Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery.

On Being Touched

An essay by
Patricia Allmer

An essay published to accompany Carson & Miller's artists' book *Scrapbook (the story of things)* and the exhibition *The Story of Things*, (14.09.09 – 29.01.10, Manchester Metropolitan University Special Collections Gallery) curated by Carson & Miller.

Don't touch me

SHE IS SEATED. She looks away from the camera and her face is serious, seemingly impenetrable. Its withholding of emotion is precisely that which invites the reading of this face as sad, at least thoughtful, melancholic perhaps. What is particularly striking about her is the meticulousness with which her garment is folded, the precision of her make-up and of her combed hair – a meticulousness which clearly states that this is a public photograph. However, this representation of a Geisha in Carson & Miller's *Scrapbook (the story of things)* – taken from a Japanese photo album¹ produced around the turn of the last century and being one item amongst many the artists selected from different souvenir albums, scrapbooks, cards, letters, archives and objects – draws me in, is intimate, precisely because of the care of work involved in crafting this public persona. This photograph touches me.

The photograph of this Geisha reminds me of the ones Roland Barthes famously analysed in *Camera Lucida*, where he argued that photographs can work on two different levels – on the level of the *studium*, and on the level of the *punctum*. The *studium* is "a [...] kind of general, enthusiastic commitment [...]" but without special acuity.²² It designates the photographs and images we leaf through, look at and leave behind. They remain objects to be looked at, sometimes exciting, but never capturing us. "The *studium* is that very wide field of unconcerned desire, of various interest, of inconsequential taste: *I like / I don't like*,"²³ according to Barthes. And then there is the *punctum*, a different order of encounter, a different element of a photograph:

The second element will break (or punctuate) the *studium*. This time it is not I who seek it out (as I invest the field of the *studium* with my sovereign consciousness), it is the element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me. A Latin word exists to designate this wound, this prick, this mark made by a pointed instrument: the word suits me all the better in that it also refers to the notion of punctuation, and because the photographs I am speaking of are in effect punctuated, sometimes even speckled with these sensitive points; precisely, these marks, these wounds are so many *points*. This second element which will disturb the *studium* I shall therefore call *punctum*.⁴



Photograph from *Japan: a collection of coloured photographs* [by Tamamura of Yokohama] [n.d.]. From the Book Design Collection at MMU Special Collections. Photography by Tony Richards.

The *punctum* 'pricks', 'pierces', 'marks', and 'touches', according to Barthes – "why does this [...] touch me?"²⁵ he asks, referring to the *punctum*. His references to this different order of visual perception use the vocabulary of the haptic, of touch, suggesting that the *punctum* is the moment where optic transforms into haptic vision. Barthes' description of the visual becomes visceral; a physical experience.

Barthes' description of the *punctum* as a prick, a mark caused by a pointed instrument, echoes Carson & Miller's process of selecting artefacts for *Scrapbook*, a process which was based, according to the artists, on being "drawn to" certain objects. Drawing itself is based on touch, on the contact between pencil and paper, on something touching, marking, inscribing on a material surface. Barthes' description also evokes

Cupid, and his often mischievously mindless, often fatally accidental ("something that falls over me, without my expecting it, without my wanting it, without my taking the least part in it"²⁶) firing of his arrows into people's hearts, explored in a Valentine puzzle in *Scrapbook*. The puzzle consists of popular symbols of love, such as a heart, an arrow and a key. The arrow threads through the ring of the key. The manual of this puzzle reads like a magic ritual, instructing the player: "cut out a heart like the one below in paper. The puzzle is to get the key off without letting the dart pass through the ring."²⁷ The conundrum of the puzzle is a conundrum of love – how can one be in love without being touched, which already implies some form of wounding, piercing, penetrating – "that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is

1. From the Book Design Collection at MMU Special Collections, *Japan: a collection of coloured photographs* [by Tamamura of Yokohama] (Japan: [s.n.], [n.d.]).
2. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, translated by Richard Howard, (London: Flamingo, 1984), p.26.
3. *Ibid.*, p.27.
4. *Ibid.*, p.26–7.
5. *Ibid.*, p.43.
6. Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, translated by Richard Howard, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1979), p.190.
7. From the Sir Harry Page Collection of Scrapbooks, Albums and Commonplace Books at MMU Special Collections, volume 138.
8. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p.27.
9. *Ibid.*
10. From the Laura Seddon Collection of Valentine Cards at MMU Special Collections, volume 20.

11. Mladen Dolar, 'At First Sight', pp.129–153, in Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek (eds) *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), p.133.
12. Valentine Penrose, *Dons des féminines*, (Paris: Librairie Les Pas Perdus, [n.d.]), [n. p.].
13. Jacques Derrida, *On Touching, Jean Luc Nancy*, translated by Christine Irizarry, (Palo Alto, CA: 2005), p.2.
14. Gustave Flaubert, *A Sentimental Education: The Story of a Young Man*, translated by Adrienne J. Tooke, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.7.
15. Racine, *Phèdre*, quoted in Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, p.193.
16. Dolar, p.134.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*
19. Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, p.168.
20. From the Laura Seddon Collection of Valentine Cards at MMU Special Collections, volume 15.

21. André Breton, 'Surrealist Situation of the Object', pp. 255–78, in André Breton *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, translated by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1972), p.275.
22. Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', pp.211–44, in *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn, (London: Fontana Press, 1992), p.213.
23. Benjamin, p.216.
24. Translated from Latin: 'don't touch me'.
25. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, translated by Mary M. Innes, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955), pp.280–89, p.232.
26. Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, translated by Susan Hanson (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press), 1999, p.428.
27. *Ibid.*, p.417.
28. Breton, 'Surrealist Situation of the Object', p.275.



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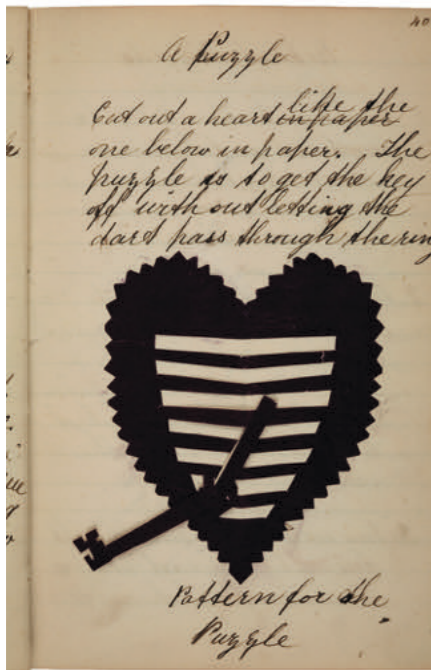
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Page from a notebook [n.d.]. From the Sir Harry Page Collection of Scrapbooks, Albums and Commonplace Books at MMU Special Collections. Photography by Tony Richards.

poignant to me)? “The *studium* is of the order of *liking*, not of *loving*”⁸ says Barthes, without ever explicitly stating, and yet already implying, that the *punctum* belongs to the order of *loving*.

The *punctum* marks, imprints, engraves: “for *punctum* is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole” – it does not seem to be interested in conventional notions of the spotless and untouched as beautiful. Instead it emerges out of the oddly shaped crazings, cracks and cuts, the frazzled ends of paper, ruffled pages, the broken, uneven surfaces – “we were never interested in beauty” state Carson & Miller, explaining further the selection of the objects depicted in *Scrapbook* (itself an object whose pages have been scuffed and rendered uneven by drying glue and its variety of contents) – the moles, scars, lines on a face which draw the eye, which touch and make me want to touch.

Like a crack which runs its course, the *punctum* cannot be contained, pre-planned, controlled – it is accidental, co-incidental; according to Barthes, it also refers to the “cast of the dice” (or the dealing of a hand which sometimes conjures a stroke of luck or strikes unlucky – “Will you be my Valentine and my Queen of Hearts?”¹⁰ asks a collection of Valentine playing cards in *Scrapbook*, mixing the light-hearted ease of a game with the heaviness of a longing lover). The *punctum* emerges out of an accidental moment, evoking Mladen Dolar’s definition of falling in love as “accident of that passing instant”¹¹ which transforms and changes, and which cannot be undone, reversed – it inscribes itself. It is a moment (always just an instant) where the world pauses, it’s the moment where a gaze is returned – the end of the everyday, the end of anonymity (“in the crowd where our eyes make their barren exchanges”¹²), and the begin-

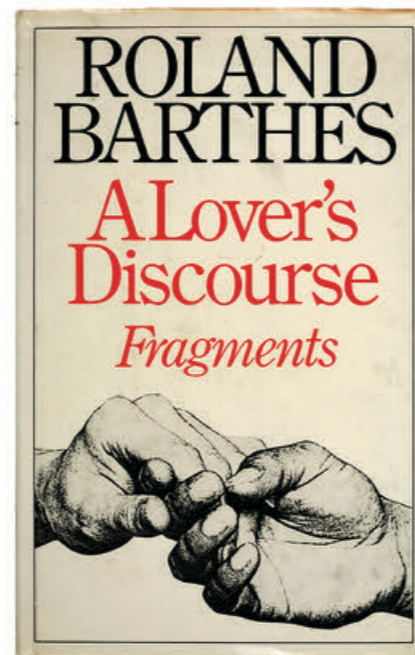
ning of intimacy (“When our eyes touch is it day or is it night?”¹³). It is the moment of falling in love, an accidental encounter – “their eyes met”¹⁴, “I saw him, blushed, turned pale when our eyes met. Confusion ceased my bewildered soul”¹⁵.

This moment, so deeply inscribed and repeated in Western art, is a moment of coming into being, as Mladen Dolar touches on: “there is an exchange of the gaze, the *Real* has returned the gaze [...] for once one saw instead of just looking [...]”¹⁶ – this is the difference between *studium* and *punctum*. The *studium* describes a look which is an imposition of the gaze on an other who remains object. The *punctum* however, corresponds to a moment of seeing, the gaze here is located in an exchange, in its return which is grounded in touching – “[...] Life didn’t ‘make sense’ before but now, suddenly, it does”¹⁷ – it literally ‘makes sense’. This moment of falling in love, a moment of recognition for the first time, is always transformative, changing the object into a subject, producing agency. This returned, haptic gaze seems to be anchored in the most intimate moments between mother and child – for example, in their mutual gazing (vision) during feeding (touch).



World War II Valentine card [1939–1945]. From the Laura Seddon Collection of Valentine Cards at MMU Special Collections.

As in Barthes’ description of the *punctum*, the sense of touch recurs at crucial points in Dolar’s discussion of the gaze: “the contingency that lies at the bottom of this emergence of love is remarkably aligned around the gaze. The evidence is overwhelming, the hand of fate seems to operate primarily by the gaze”¹⁸ – the importance here is that touch ‘the hand of fate’ seems to be ‘operated’ (derived from the Latin word *operare* – ‘to work’) by the gaze. Barthes’ *punctum* is a moment of falling in love, a moment where looking turns into seeing, the optic into the haptic, revealing *Camera Lucida* as an extended discourse on falling in love, continued from the fragments of *A Lover’s Discourse*, the



Front cover of dust jacket to the first edition of Roland Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments* (1979). Dust jacket design by Mon Mohan. Reprinted by permission of The Random House Group Ltd. Photography by Tony Richards.

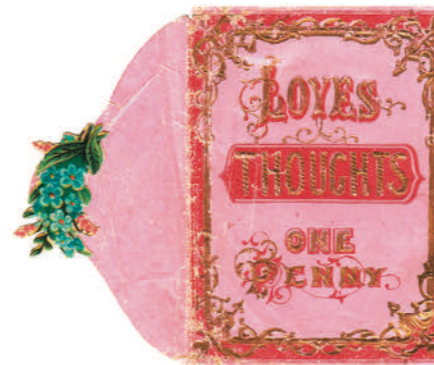
English cover of which depicts two male hands gently touching each other.

The consequences of this most delicious and torturous moment often lead us to the typical babble of a lover’s discourse, or monologue, raising a demand on the loved one, anticipating a response which repeatedly recurs in *Scrapbook*, either openly inscribed in over-ornate letters as ‘Remember me’, or hidden beneath the folds of a card spelling out ‘*Pensez-moi*’. This demand occurs in many languages. It is spelt out as ‘*Denk an mich*’ in ornate icing letters on oversized gingerbread hearts sold at German and Austrian fun-fairs, contrasting the playfulness in which this declaration is presented with the underlying, existential seriousness of the yearning lover; and it is inscribed in a multiplicity of languages in a flower’s name: in French it is called *Ne m’oubliez pas*, in Italian *Non-ti-scordar-di-me*, in Hungarian *Nefejejes*, and in German *Vergissmeinnicht*. Far from the return of the gaze marking the subjectification of the other, this desperate demand makes clear that it marks our own



Movable Valentine greeting card [c.1870]. From the Laura Seddon Collection of Valentine Cards at MMU Special Collections. Photography by Tony Richards.

subjectification by the other; being forgotten means the turning away of the gaze of the other, not being able any longer to return a gaze, making ourselves fade back into objecthood: “the gratifying Mother shows me the Mirror, the Image, and says to me: “That’s you.” But the silent Mother does not tell me what I am: I am no longer established, I drift painfully, without existence.”¹⁹ In the *Scrapbook* a small bundle of these flowers – easily missed, almost forgotten and overlooked – peeps ever so slightly through the fragmentary thoughts of a seemingly light-hearted game of question-and-response called *Loves thoughts one penny*, flowers which insist ‘forget-me-not’.²⁰



Envelope with forget-me-not scrap attached [1860s]. From the Laura Seddon Collection of Valentine Cards at MMU Special Collections.

Handle with care

The *punctum* in the photograph of the Geisha is (for me) the precision with which her hair has been combed. Here touch and work (the manufacture of the self as image) seem to be intimately related to each other. The relation between these two terms threads throughout Carson & Miller’s *Scrapbook*. The element of manufacture in this image is continued at the level of the photograph itself which is a product of an industry of hand-coloured, yet mass produced tourist photographs – these photographs draw together the manual element of hand colouring with the mechanical element of factory production. These relations extend still further. The photograph is part of a pre-manufactured photo album which thematically focuses on traditional Japanese manual work – here women and men are shown at work, making things or drawing carts with plants or people, such as for example a rickshaw driver transporting another Geisha. The authenticity and originality connoted by these representations of traditional, manual work contrast with these scenes’ backgrounds, which are mostly studio settings echoing the disparity of the manual and the mechanical on the different levels of the photograph. Authenticity and originality are also challenged on a further level – these apparent photographs of Geishas did not necessarily use actual Geishas. Instead, women from the streets were invited to pose as Geishas

revealing all these signifiers of manual work, as precisely their opposite, namely signifiers of the cessation, of the absence of this work, celebrating industrial reproduction. Every element of these images is manufactured.



Above: Iron lock from a strongbox or safe door (1600–1699). From the Manchester School of Art Collection at MMU Special Collections. Photography by Tony Richards.

A strange, insistent taxonomy of work ravel in Carson & Miller’s *Scrapbook*, ranging from representations and reproductions of objects manually produced (alluding to the work and craftsmanship of embroiderers, spinners, locksmiths, wood turners) to different forms of mechanical reproduction processes, such as postcards, photographs, and mass produced aprons, which in turn were used as part of women’s manual, domestic labour. Then there is, of course, the work of producing the



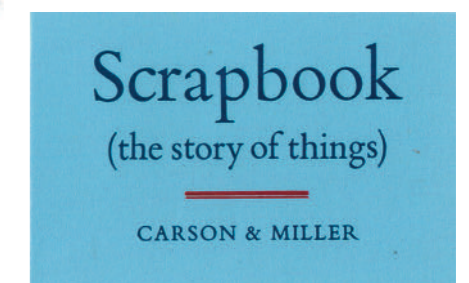
Detail of embroidery from a boxed album (1837). From the Sir Harry Page Collection of Scrapbooks, Albums and Commonplace Books at MMU Special Collections.

scrapbooks from which a lot of these represented objects derive, where often the mass produced empty scrapbook is filled with the products and effects of an individual’s work of ripping, cutting, glueing, writing and drawing. The games in some of these scrapbooks have also involved careful work on behalf of the producer, but also solicit their ‘working out’ by their users. Then there is the work of love, perhaps most strikingly manifest in the production of a love letter which has been encrypted in the form of a rebus – encryption and decipherment (question and response) being the work of the one who loves as well as the one loved.



Detail of a rebus Valentine greeting (1864). From the Laura Seddon Collection of Valentine Cards at MMU Special Collections.

And finally, there is Carson & Miller’s *Scrapbook* itself, which, as a work of art, brings these different manifestations of work and love together to form unexpected dialogues and marvellous encounters following the surrealist call for the “fortuitous meeting of a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table”²¹ – a meeting between produced objects and objects that produce.



Title scrap from *Scrapbook (the story of things)* by Carson & Miller (2009). From the Artists’ Books Collection at MMU Special Collections.

For Walter Benjamin one of the defining features of the ‘work of art’ is its aura, manifest in the artwork’s authenticity and originality – notions which in Benjamin’s definitions evoke and can be located in touching/not touching. The auratic quality of the artwork, in contrast to mechanical reproduction, depends on its manual production, depends on the touch of the artist. Mechanical reproduction in contrast has, according to Benjamin, “freed the hand”²². Whilst the emergence of an artwork’s aura is connected here to the touch of the artist, the artwork itself needs to remain untouchable, untouched by us: “We define the aura [...] as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be.”²³ In order for an artwork to be auratic it needs to maintain a distance, remain unreachable, calling into mind Christ’s command to Mary Magdalene: ‘*noli me tangere*’²⁴.