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TIM WATERMAN

TOUCHING BUILDINGS

> Is it enough, then, that the paper on which I write perceives the movement of the pen on the page in order to seem already human?" Mario Perniola (2004: 5).

In a famous but brief passage from *The Eyes of the Skin*, Juhani Pallasmaa recalls a moment during a visit to Greene and Greene's D.L. James House, known as 'Seaward', in Carmel, California (Fig. 1) in which he "felt compelled to kneel and touch the delicately shining white marble threshold of the front door" with his tongue (2012: 63-4). He doesn't elaborate, leaving this moment to stand alone, which it does, but perhaps with more comic results than he might have intended. To ask the reader to imagine a dowdy academic kneeling to lick a floor in earnest erotic appreciation is simply to ask them to picture a humorously exaggerated scene. The same comedic sense is present in the phrase used to describe window-shopping in French: *faire du lèche-vitrines*, which literally translates to 'window-licking'. The desire to possess consumer goods displayed in window dressing might attract close and fervent examination, but to smear one's damp tongue over the cold glass is desire misapplied. Humour is at its best when it is plausible, and the existence of paraphilia (an attraction to unusual objects or practices) and object sexuality (paraphilias specifically directed to objects) are well known and documented: Pallasmaa's description and the act of window-licking are thus both believable and comic. Sexual attraction to cars is even more readily imaginable, given how much they are fetishised by advertising imagery, and has its own name: mechanophilia. The character Alexia in the 2021 film *Titane* (2021) fucks a souped-up Cadillac (Fig.2), and though the plot is far-fetched –Alexia becomes attracted to cars after a head injury in a violent car accident– the scene is believable. Weapons, too, are an unfortunate focus of erotic desires, and the inclusion of or sole focus on guns or knives in sex scenes in films is depressingly common. An elderly egghead orally caressing a stone doorframe is, by comparison, a pretty benign comedy sketch. Pallasmaa's attentions to Seaward's stones do pose serious questions, which this essay probes: do buildings feel and do they return human affection?

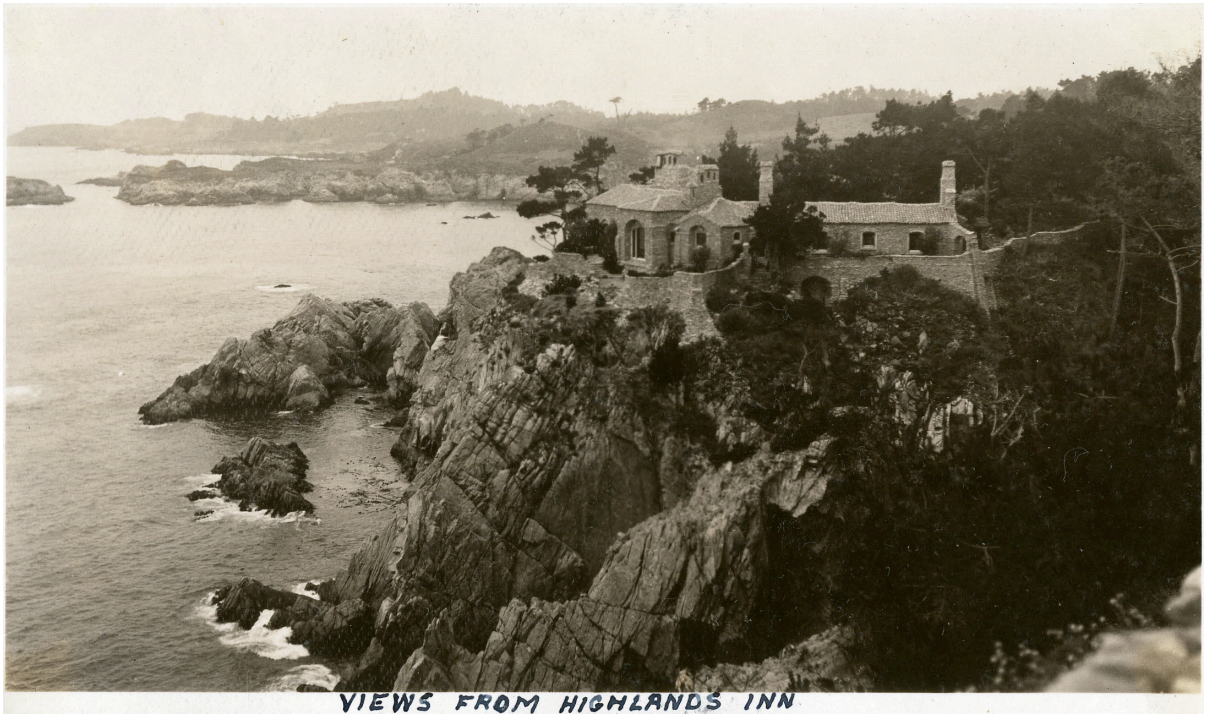

FIGURE 1
The D.L. James House by Greene and Greene, Carmel, California, 1918, an exemplar of American Arts and Crafts.

There are, perhaps, more obviously erotic building details than a threshold, though of course a threshold implies penetration. The 1991 Jeunet and Caro film *Delicatessen* is a dark comedy about cannibalism in a post-apocalyptic setting. The storyline unfolds in an apartment building above a butcher shop. The building itself is a character in the film, much as Monsieur Hulot's apartment building propels the action and serves as a foil for sophisticated slapstick in Jacques Tati's *Mon Oncle* (1958). In one memorable scene in *Delicatessen*, Aurore, melancholic and suicidal, lures Georges to her apartment on the pretext of sex and asks him to "ring hard" on the buzzer (Fig. 3). She has wired the electric doorbell in Rube Golbergian fashion to a sewing machine, which stitches, pulling a strip of pink fabric on which rests a lamp. The lamp teeters above the bathtub in which Aurore sits. The erotic content of the scene is heightened by closeups of Georges' lingering finger on the doorbell button, which looks for all the world like an aroused nipple and its encircling areola. And, inevitably, the scene ends with a climax.

It is clear what is happening in the minds of the directors as they design those scenes, but it is important, too, to examine what is happening in the minds of the viewers. The tension of the finger on the doorbell is powerful and visceral, like putting one's tongue to a nine-volt battery. How does it gain this power? Surely not merely from the visual association between doorbell and nipple. It has everything to do with how the mind and body respond to these stimuli, and how they mirror and simulate the experience shown on the screen. Imagination is not merely made of images: it is embodied. Like human cognition at large, it is composed not merely of logic and reason, but it engages the full sensorium and emotions. It is not possible to think well of thinking without recognising that the brain does not merely comprise the organ itself and its complex connections with the nervous system, but that the mind is also in, and connected with, the world. Mind shares itself with other minds, and mind projects itself into and onto things. Humanity and animacy (and plantness – I'll come to that) both are vivacious in and of themselves, but they are further animated by interconnections of mind and body. Once one is aware of this intangible web, it starts to materialise to the point that it feels like it is possible to

FIGURE 2
Alexia is mechanophilic in Julia Ducournau's Titane (2021)





FIGURE 3
Doorbell touched as nipple in Jean-Pierre Jeunet and Marc Caro's Delicatessen (1991).

twang the strings. When one feels emotion and shares experiences in the mind, it is said that one is 'touched', and this is literally true. A mind has registered sensation from outside and responded. A similar association with things in the world exists. An object is that which is 'thrown before' ('Object' 2025) and 'attention' describes a 'reaching toward' ('Attention' 2025). If objects have agency, this stretching out can be mutual. The paper, as in the epigraph by Mario Perniola above, attends to the pen in a relation with human agency.

The relation between pen, paper, and human illustrates how "objects use human muscles and skills to bring about their own reproduction" (Gosden 2005: 194). Things inhabit worlds that transcend human generations: the pen and the paper are held in assemblages of human habitus, manners, milieu, language, text, translation, and in the material and ecological webs and flows within which these objects are bound. Various strains of posthuman thought provide tools for engaging with these agglomerations: assemblage theory, New Materialism, and pragmatism. Archaeologist Craig Cipolla (2018) writes of "object agency" and "symmetrical archaeologies" in stone piles on Indigenous Mohegan land in the east of what is currently the USA. Though Indigenous people have always been reluctant to explain these practices to Whites, it is thought these "prayers in stone" accumulate as every person who passes must cast a stone, which accumulates memory. These stones, through agricultural practices in settler colonialism, have then bound these memories into lively assemblages of Indigenous forms and stone fences as field boundaries, weaving together material, muscles, and skills over vast time.

In an altogether tinier timescale, in sex between people, at least two imaginations are at work, imagining the internal experience of the other mind and body and coordinating with it. Indeed, emotions and sensations are shared and mirrored by the somatosensory cortex in the brain. This system "is activated when one's own body is touched [and] is also activated when one merely observes another individual being touched." Similarly, facial expressions, when observed, transmit the same emotion, which is si-

multaneously experienced (Goldman 2006: 53). These are modes of simulation which are also experienced when a person watches a pornographic film. The mirroring of sensation is called "tactile empathy." In Keysers et al.'s study of this phenomenon (2004), they

> performed functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) studies of subjects in two different conditions. In the tactile condition, subjects' lower legs were brushed back and forth with a glove. For the visual-stimulation condition, subjects viewed videos of actors having their lower legs brushed. The results of the fMRI indicated that being touched and watching someone being touched produced a similar pattern of activation in the secondary somatosensory cortex (Bach 2010: 59).

This casts significant light on the experience of watching pornography, indicating that the reason the imagery is stimulating is because the viewer is mentally mirroring and simulating the experiences they see on screen: "they recreate (to some degree) the cognitive and affective states that occur when they actually do have sex" (Bach 2010: 57). There are three discrete (and interpenetrating) mental states at work here: belief (such as the belief that the actors on screen are experiencing genuine pleasure), desire (the aesthetic response to an attractive and unclothed body), and supposition or pretence (the imaginary participation in the scenario enacted) (Carruthers 2006: 90).

When we speak about objects such as cars, we generally conceive of them as inanimate objects, but when we name cars (Herbie, KITT, Christine, Lightning McQueen), or have sex with cars, we recruit them, if not into humanity, at least into animacy and sentience. This supposition allows the consideration of reciprocation. If a car or a building is the object of desire, can it return that desire? Psychologist Dorothy Tennov (1998) coined the word 'limerence' to describe the experience of falling in love when reciprocation is uncertain. It is, apparently, a word without etymology: she was riffing on 'amorance' and thought 'limerence' would sound

nice in French (Tréguer n.d.). As flimsy as this sounds, it's useful to have a word for this. I remember sitting, twelve or thirteen years old, in a van on a school trip next to my first crush, my knee pressed to his, and wondering whether his heart was racing too.[1] I was, to use Tennov's term, limerent. It's interesting to note how dependent mind-reading is upon a certain amount of foreknowledge. Had I known the attraction and thrill was shared, the experience would have been more stimulating by half, not just because then anticipation of further encounters might fuel the imagination, but because of the direct experience of sharing an arousing mental state. I find it hard, mentally, to scaffold across from this exhilarating contact between humans to the thrill felt by paraphiles for objects, but if cars and guns and buildings can be vivacious, then it must also be possible to experience *para*limerence (limerence is a silly word, so why not make another silly word?), and suppose that the car or building or gun is mirroring the arousal felt by the person. Because the triangulation between belief, desire, and supposition are incomplete, and the assemblage of objects, actions, and reciprocations incompletely understood, the paraphile in this situation is thus paralimerent: tantalisingly enthralled in a suspended relation.

Take the film made by performance artist Andrea Fraser, "Little Frank and his Carp"(2001) (Fig.4). Fraser is known for art as institutional critique, and in the film she critiques the institution of the Guggenheim Bilbao, and Frank Gehry's celebrated building. Fraser is filmed by hidden cameras. She is expressive, attentive, and attractive as she holds the museum audio guide to her ear. The mellifluous narration of the audioguide is the soundtrack for the film, and it describes the building sensually. The guide directs her to touch the stone of the atrium: "Go right up to it. This pillar is clad in panels of limestone. Run your hand over them. ... Feel how smooth it is." Fraser is enchanted, carried away, rubbing herself against the building and caressing her own body. Other museum-goers look and look quickly away, embarrassed. This is, of course, humorous in the same

1 Reader, he didn't pull away, but I never had the courage to press further. I'll be forever limerent on this one.

way Pallasmaa's erotic encounter with a building is, and it also mocks the adulation of the guide for the building and the architect. And yet there is something genuinely erotic about the film. It's hot. The building, though, gives no outward sign of reciprocation. Is Andrea Fraser experiencing paralimerence? The passersby might certainly be aroused—looking away to avoid the over-engagement of their own somatosensory cortexes. The performance also highlights the way observers are also participants. Like Fraser, who is bound into the object agency of the agglomeration of the museum and the larger art world, through both performance and institutional critique, the inexorable pull of aesthetics and erotics of the building and its plentitude of glamorous objects also binds the passersby. And, of course, Fraser's own allure casts a spell of desire.

Another amusing example is Jordan McKenzie's "Serra Frottage" (Fig. 5), part of the artist's series of impromptu "Minimal Interventions". McKenzie, dressed in jeans and a tee shirt and bearing a paunch, languorously rubs his full body against Richard Serra's sculpture *Fulcrum*, three seventeen metre slabs of Cor-ten steel resting against one another at London's Liverpool Street Station. Again, the passing crowd notices and pretends not to notice this unanticipated engagement. Their accustomed assemblages and settled habituses as they move between commute and work, have also been pulled out of shape by an unusual and unexpected erotic relation to things and place. McKenzie's attentions to a sculpture that might usually be considered inert, if it is considered at all, create a charged atmosphere in which milieu, medium, public, and the personal and intimate are all in suddenly heightened and tangible relation.

Landscapes need attention too, as they are also buildings (as are sculptures such as *Fulcrum*). Even 'wild' landscapes are constructed, not merely physically, but also in the imagination and in representation. They are very much fetishised and commodified as well as, of course, are cars and guns. That landscapes are buildings is a fact that is often obscured. An online image search for 'nature' will turn up many images of leafy roads, bridges over waterways, and spaces which are obviously parks. My Uncle



FIGURE 4
Andrea Fraser caresses the limestone panels in the atrium of Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Bilbao in her film Little Frank and his Carp (2001).

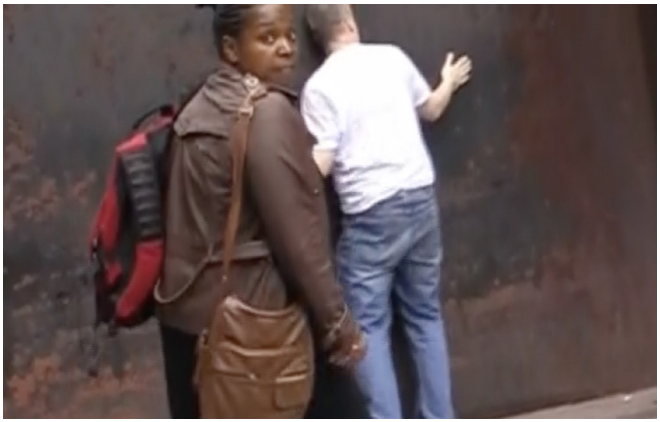

FIGURE 5
Artist Jordan McKenzie rubs every part of his body against Richard Serra's Fulcrum. The film Serra Frottage (2010) is part of Minimal Interventions, "an ongoing series of works that temporarily highjack classic works of Minimal art and aesthetics from the sixties and seventies." In this scene a passing woman notices the camera.

George was a lifelong and passionate golfer, and spoke about how golfing was his way of 'getting out into nature'. Never mind that a golf course is every bit as synthetic as a supermarket car park, and sometimes as formulaic! A golf course certainly qualifies as a landscape, though. It is a building and a set of relations in time and space. Other terms often used to capture the specifics of this spatiotemporal relationship don't quite capture its essence: 'built environment' or simply 'environment' are too vague, and 'public realm' or 'private realm' are too much about culture, society, and economics, and not enough about place. Cities are many things: collective buildings over time, landscapes and collections of landscapes, and a habitat of the human animal. Some landscapes are seen as wilderness but are tended, as are cities, by many hands over great time. Indigenous peoples often know this well. The Indigenous intellectual Ailton Krenak writes of the River Doce landscape in the territory currently known as Brazil that life runs through everything and that humans cannot be separated from nature (2020, 2023). The forest, the landscape, is something they have an inextricable relation with, and they have gardened it and managed it for millennia. Landscape here is a *landship*—a multigenerational relation between people, other species, and place that is mutually constitutive (see Waterman 2021). His people are of the place, and it communicates pain, pleasure, and longing with them. The depredations of mining, industrial agriculture, and logging on Brazil's forests takes on a different cast when these 'environments' are seen not as 'wild nature' but as buildings, landscapes, landships, relationships, and lifeworlds.

The remarkable women in the Himalayan Chipko (hugging) Movement also help to illustrate this deep relation. These activists defended trees from deforestation, and the larger ecology of their watershed, by, at least in part, embracing trees (Badri 2024). These agrarian women, closely tied to the land, would, like the Krenak people, know when they hug a tree that it knows it, feels it, returns it, that they recognise its plantness and their humanity (Fig. 6). "We are interbeings," writes Vandana Shiva, who learned directly with the women of the Chipko movement, embedded in "an interactive, interrelated world." "From the trees we learn uncondi-



FIGURE 6
Chipko Tree Huggers of the Himalayas #4
© Pamela Singh and sepiaEYE

tional love and unconditional giving" (2020: 23). Their love of landscape is built of a long relationship and conversation with the organic and inorganic elements of their lifeworlds, of assemblages and object agency in deep time. This love is requited—not at all limerent. Shiva's reading of this love as unconditional is an understandable error. It seems unconditional because of the effortlessness with which it flows, but it is transmitted precisely through the situated *conditions*: the reciprocal care and attention, responsibility and interdependence that comprise the lifeworlds of interbeings.

These examples may seem too serious to follow the light-hearted tone with which I began, but humour helps to build understanding and critique. Another example which uses absurdist humour to highlight human connectedness with the Earth is that of Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens, who introduce the concept of "ecosexuality" in their Ecosexual Manifesto 2.0 (2015). "We are Ecosexuals," they write, "Fiercely in love, we are permanently grateful for this relationship. To create a more mutual and sustainable union with our lover, we collaborate with nature." Sprinkle and Stephens have made numerous films and performances, including elaborate weddings in which they marry, for example, the soil, Lake Kallavesi in Finland, and even Brine Shrimp. Perhaps the work that most reflects an understanding of landscape as a building and a set of relations, is their film *Goodbye Gauley Mountain: An Ecosexual Love Story* (2013) (Fig. 7). In it they address the legacy of coal mining (a mine is also a building) in West Virginia and Beth Stephens' own personal relationship with the place. In the film they "join locals in extreme tree hugging, sky gazing, rock kissing, and singing to the earth, and the film climaxes with a purple themed wedding to the Appalachian Mountains" (n.d.).

Perhaps this example is too humorous to allow the seriousness in it to be seen. Or perhaps there is simply a tension between the ascetic modes of environmentalism and the ecstatic state of ecosexuality that seem difficult to reconcile (see Ensor 2018: 150-1). Humour and play also involve the sorts of simulation and supposition found in sex

and empathy. When a child asks an adult to answer a banana, that adult will certainly play along with the game and pretend the fruit is a phone. But this play and humour also helps to enact future mental states that are geared toward inhabiting the world and they are catalysts for simulations and scenario-making that can be pitched towards the making of better worlds—and buildings and landscapes and relations. Humour can take us to places that are very serious and necessary, that are practices of finding connection through fumbling around with forms of love. In the process we can escape paralimerence through embodied practices and contacts which are promiscuous "in a way that rhythmically wanders the urban street, the rural field, and spaces in between" (Ibid., 164). So the final question for this odd little essay, with all due gravity and all superfluous levity, must be: "when we touch buildings, do they touch us back?"

Why yes. Yes, they do.



FIGURE 7
Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens perform what might be called 'treelatio' in their film Goodbye Gauley Mountain (2013).

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Figure references

Figure 1: McCarthy, W. M. (1920). The D.L. James House by Greene and Greene, Carmel, California, 1918 [Photograph]. William M. McCarthy Photograph Collection, McCarthy Album 04, Photograph 219. Public domain via Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 2: Film still from Julia Ducournau's Titane (2021). Alexia is mechanophilic [Film Still].

Figure 3: Film still from Jean-Pierre Jeunet and Marc Caro's Delicatessen (1991). Doorbell touched as nipple [Film Still].

Figure 4: Fraser, A. (2001). Little Frank and his Carp [Film Still]. Andrea Fraser caresses the limestone panels in the atrium of Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Bilbao.

Figure 5: McKenzie, J. (2010). Serra Frottage, from Minimal Interventions [Film Still/Performance Documentation]. Jordan McKenzie rubs his body against Richard Serra's Fulcrum.

Figure 6: Singh, P. (1994). Chipko Tree Huggers of the Himalayas #4 [Photograph]. Pamela Singh, Courtesy © Pamela Singh and sepiaEYE

Figure 7: Sprinkle, A. & Stephens, B. (2013). Goodbye Gauley Mountain: An Ecosexual Love Story [Film Still]. Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens perform 'treelatio'.