

Somatosensory Empathy and Material Engagement: Analysing Bodily States in Contemporary Art Practice

Research question: How can somatosensory empathy help analyse material engagement in contemporary art practices concerned with bodily states?

Abstract

This research investigates how somatosensory empathy can be used to analyse material engagement in contemporary art practices concerned with bodily states. It contributes to discourse on embodiment by arguing that vicarious sensorial engagement constitutes a legitimate aesthetic mode of encounter, and that material interaction, particularly when associated with bodily implication, can heighten and distil bodily states within contemporary art practice. Drawing on neuroscience, phenomenology, and the medical humanities, it explores how artworks enable viewers to “feel into” (*Einfühlung*) material forms and actions. In doing so, it seeks to bridge the gap between conceptual interpretation and embodied experience, proposing that somatic activation unfolds within the aesthetic encounter itself and offering a structured way to describe embodied response.

The research is organised into six stages and combines interdisciplinary sources with practice-informed observation. It begins by outlining the structure and function of the somatosensory cortex, establishing the neurological basis for bodily mapping and sensory integration. This is followed by neuroscientific evidence that demonstrates vicarious somatosensory activation through the observation of touch, including activation triggered by contact with inanimate materials. These studies provide empirical grounding for the claim that viewers infer tactile and bodily information from visual cues, drawing on stored sensory memory to anticipate material behaviour and bodily implication.

The project then introduces the multimodal somatosensory system: mechanoreception, proprioception, nociception, and thermoception; and its sub-modalities as an analytical vocabulary. This framework is further contextualised through medical humanities research and podcast commentary that examine how material engagement can externalise internal bodily states and communicate embodied knowledge. Together, these sources establish a methodological foundation for analysing how artworks cue somatic inference.

The multimodal framework is applied to a small selection of contemporary artworks, each examined through a consistent three-part structure: (1) observable material cues, (2) a situated first-person sensory reflection, and (3) somatosensory mapping in which inferred activations are organised across the four modalities. Demonstrating how artistic processes can sharpen somatic attention and clarify how materials operate as somatic surrogates.

Across the case studies, the research shows that artworks do not produce singular or isolated sensations but instead generate layered, often contradictory somatic states. These tensions between comfort and threat, exposure and containment, support and vulnerability, reveal that bodily experience is compound and frequently co-activated. The findings conclude that by refining the definitions we attribute to sensation, we can begin to feel into artworks with greater precision, recognising the subtle interplay of modalities that shape embodied response.

Overall, the project argues that somatosensory empathy offers a rigorous and nuanced framework for analysing material engagement in contemporary art. By foregrounding the minutiae of sensation, it expands sensorial literacy and positions vicarious bodily activation as a

meaningful aesthetic mode of encounter, one that deepens our understanding of how artworks communicate, negotiate, and transform bodily states.

Introduction

This research is driven by a sustained attention to bodily sensation shaped by lived medical experience and neurodivergence. From birth into early adulthood, I underwent recurrent hospitalisation from chronic autoimmune conditions placing an unavoidable and continuous focus on the body, so bodily sensation became a primary means through which I learned to navigate and interpret the world. Alongside this, neurodivergence shaped how I learned and communicated: throughout formal education, my methods were frequently considered incorrect despite correct outcomes, and as a dyslexic late speaker and reader, I was often treated as “special needs”. This dissonance between process and result sharpened my awareness that perception and understanding are not uniform, and that embodied ways of knowing are frequently misread or overlooked.

This embodied orientation underpins both my artistic practice and the research presented here. Rather than approaching the body as a symbolic or representational subject, this study treats it as a site of ongoing sensory negotiation, asking how bodily states are communicated, sensed, and recognised beyond language through material encounters. Central to this investigation is the concept of empathy as *Einfühlung* - “feeling into” - understood as a bodily and sensory attunement to form and material rather than an exclusively emotional response. By returning to this notion of feeling into and attending to the non-verbal processes through which material encounters generate somatic responses, this research establishes a framework for analysing how artworks activate bodily sensation and how such activation operates as an aesthetic mode of encounter.

I have had difficulty explaining tactile empathy to most people I have spoken to. Empathy is commonly understood in emotional terms and is often conflated with sympathy, whereas my emphasis is physical. What I am describing is a bodily feeling or stimulation that is immediate yet strangely hard to name. The more I try to describe it, the more it slips into metaphor. This research takes that difficulty seriously and turns to the somatosensory model as a way to pin down this mode of encounter with greater precision.

Somatosensory Context

The Somatosensory Cortex

The somatosensory cortex is the region of the brain that processes sensory information from the body. These signals are organised into sensory maps. It has two significant sections: the Primary Somatosensory Cortex (S1) - basic touch, body position, texture, shape and size; and the Secondary Somatosensory Cortex (S2) that receives input from both S1 and the [thalamus](#). It is involved in recognizing objects by touch, storing sensory memories, and processing the emotional meaning of sensations. (Guy-Evans, 2025)

Evidence for Vicarious Somatosensory Activation

Neuroscientific research provides strong evidence that somatic sensation can be activated vicariously. Across multiple studies, researchers report significant overlap in somatosensory cortical circuitry when comparing direct first-person tactile experience with the observation of touch occurring to another body, and even to inanimate objects (Keysers et al., 2004; Gallese, 2003; Morrison et al., 2011). While these studies focus on touch, their findings indicate that vicarious activation is not limited to touch alone but has wider implications across the somatosensory system.

This provides an evidence base for somatosensory empathy as an aesthetic mode of encounter, where material cues can be “felt into” without direct physical contact. Crucially, this is not reduced to broad simplified categories such as hard and soft, but to the minutiae of sensation. When we encounter a material, the mind draws on a schematic library of prior tactile experience, rapidly comparing surface qualities and associations to anticipate its interaction with the body and with other foreign objects. Visual information contains a wealth of tactile specificity; for example, concrete’s roughness is vastly different from that of burlap. Each has distinct qualities we can mentally draw upon. Even when a material is unfamiliar, we don’t just register visual form; we infer behaviour and sensation. We do this by “borrowing” from past sensory memory to predict and resolve this unfamiliarity. Within this framework, artworks can activate bodily sensation through the viewer’s pre-conscious reading of material properties and their implied contact.

To make these inferences legible, the somatosensory model is used as a framework for mapping sensory activation in response to material cues.

The Somatosensory Model

To implement somatosensory empathy in visual and material analysis, this research adopts a multimodal somatosensory system as a practical analytical model (Ager, 2020). Rather than generalising sensation, the model differentiates between distinct but related modalities: mechanoreception (pressure, vibration, texture, and stretch), proprioception (position and movement), nociception (pain or threat), and thermoception (temperature). Using these modalities as lenses, the analysis maps material properties and implied actions onto specific forms of bodily activation. This added granularity helps distinguish how different artworks cue distinct sensory responses. These modalities can be further broken down into specialised receptors that register different qualities of stimulus; however, to be concise, this research does not attempt to map exact receptor activation. Instead, it uses these distinctions to describe how artworks cue specific somatic inferences, rather than collapsing sensation into broad categories such as “rough” or “smooth”.

A brief qualification: somatosensory experience also operates in dialogue with other sensory systems. The brain can infer tactile and bodily information from non-tactile cues such as sound and light. While this research focuses on the somatosensory system, it recognises that sensory modalities are interrelated, and that vicarious bodily sensation often emerges through their overlap.

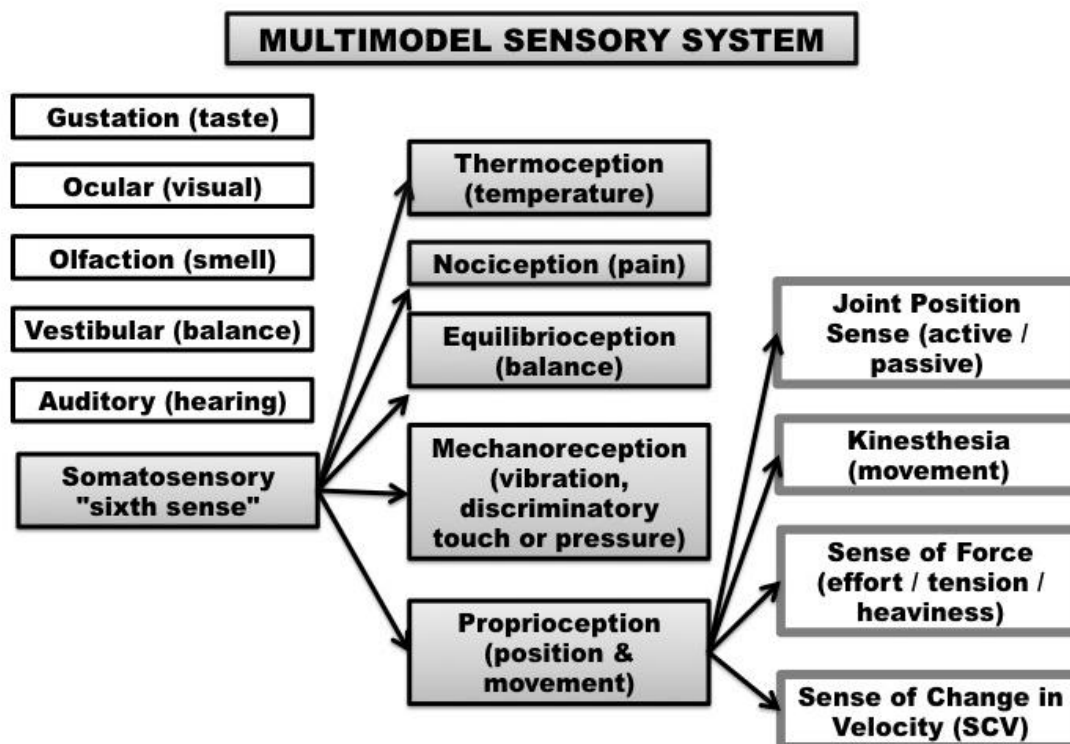


Figure 1 Flowchart of the multimodal sensory system of the central and peripheral nervous system as it pertains to proprioception. (Ager, 2020)

Medical Humanities Context

Corporeal Pedagogies and Materialised Interoception

In a British Medical Journal podcast, Olivia Turner and Sally Waite outline their research establishing an educational methodology of corporeal pedagogies (Turner, 2023). Central to their research is the votive uteri (fig. 2) through which they reflect on its historical role in processing and externalising internal bodily states and how this functioned as a method of sharing embodied knowledge. The object operates as a bridge between the “real” body and the “felt” body. Positioned alongside neuroscientific evidence of vicarious sensation, corporeal pedagogies have been key in providing historical grounding for a process that remains a persistent cultural and artistic impulse, aligning with somatosensory empathy as a framework for feeling into material cues and inferring bodily states beyond what is directly visible.



Figure 2 Example photo. Terracotta votive uteri. Science Museum

Artist Analysis 1

Andreas Senoner

***Fragment* (2020)**

Medium: Walnut.



Figure 3 Andreas Senoner, Fragment (2020), Walnut

1) Observable anchor cues (description-only)

Walnut foot carving presented on a black plinth. Visible wood grain, tool-trace, and abrasions across the surface. Multiple spikes inserted at varied angles; divots visible at entry points.

2) Situated sensory reflection (first-person)

The wood's natural grain holds a pseudo symmetry with skin-print. The abrasions read as hardened, calloused skin: dry, tough. The toothpicks protrude with implied penetration; divots suggesting soft skin giving way to a pointal force. The foot seems immobilised, pinned, even crippled. The pointal aspect holds two readings: a force upon the body, and a sensory extension of it. I imagine being impaled by such spikes, acting as antennae; any touch on the exposed end would carry vibration inward, travelling beyond the skin surface even to the bone. As I focus on these points, pain and impalement are replaced by sensory alertness. The protrusions begin to behave less like foreign bodies and more like a field of receptors: cactus-like hairs that are

sensitive to the smallest changes in air and touch, the space around the foot becoming a larger field of sensorial activation. Immobilisation changes meaning: the work shifts from an action upon the body to a body held in heightened attunement, waiting for stimulation rather than enduring it. The sculpture is hard and inflexible, yet it becomes the vehicle onto which I project bodily materiality: softness, vulnerability, and the edge where touch turns into pain.

3) Somatosensory mapping

Primary: Mechanoreception

Secondary: Nociception; Proprioception

- Spike tips / divots / implied insertion → mechanoreception + nociception
 - Pinpoint pressure, edge-contact, puncture inference, threat register
- Wood grain / tool-trace / abrasions → mechanoreception
 - Drag, resistance, rough texture, contact-trace
- Multiple spikes as contact-field → mechanoreception + proprioception
 - Distributed activation; boundary shift beyond the skin
- Immobilised posture (fixed foot) → proprioception
 - Held limb awareness, tension, restraint cue

Artist Analysis 2

Berlinde De Bruyckere

***The Pillow* (2010)**

Medium: wax, epoxy, iron, wool, and cotton.



Figure 4 Berlinde De Bruyckere, *The Pillow* (2010), wax, epoxy, iron, wool, and cotton



Figure 5 Berlinde De Bruyckere, *The Pillow* (2010), wax, epoxy, iron, wool, and cotton

1) Observable anchor cues (description-only)

Wax cast of the human body embedded into pillow structure, resting on two small wooden steps. anatomy is disjointed and subtly distorted with sections omitted. Pale, gaunt flesh and flushed, blood-like patination.

2) Situated sensory reflection (first-person)

De Bruyckere's work is heavily influenced by Christian iconography and an overarching narrative of suffering and care. Wax encapsulates and augments these bodily associations through its material behaviour and coloured patination. Growing up with heavy Catholic influences and a severe skin condition, the fixation on flesh in such imagery is palpable for me, intensifying memories of injury and tenderness. In my own practice, I became fascinated by wax and its ability to represent discomfort and viscera. Its inherent processes and layered malformations evoke painful associations: peeling skin, fragility, and the rawness of flesh beneath.

The body is foetal and melded into the pillow, supported, but clenched in discomfort. The omission of the head shifts the work away from the individual, allowing the form to become a vessel to feel into. The anatomy is simultaneously extremely detailed and malformed, producing an unsettling effect: my body feels "misread" back to me, as if the map of anatomy is almost correct but not quite. The wax edges imply tears, rupturing, or excessive skin production. The back, incomplete and folded into a cavity, opens the body into an interior depth. The wax reads back as scar tissue, poorly healed, orifice-like, like the socket of a tooth that has just been extracted (Fig. 5). The knee's misalignment intensifies this further, producing a jolt of proprioceptive wrongness and pain, like a joint sitting out of place (Fig. 4).

The figure appears strained, vulnerable, and exposed, contrasted with the pillow's softness: supportive, insulating, domestic. I can feel the pillow give and distribute my weight, the cotton brushing my skin. Thermoceptively, it creates a split sensation, brisk air against the skin's surface and warmer containment where the body is held, intensifying vulnerability and evoking piloerection (goosebumps), where cold registers as both temperature and texture across the skin. The body feels stuck: too comfortable to risk exposure, yet still exposed. Raising feelings of

“I don’t want to move”. I am in pain, but not as much as I would be if I had to leave the comfort of support. Relief becomes inseparable from suffering.

The clean white cotton heightens the flesh-like qualities of the wax through contrast: viscera against an absorbent surface suggests care, but also the possibility of seepage or staining, imagery that was constantly present in my childhood: blood- and pus-stained pillows, clothes, and gloves, as evidence of daily care and suffering. The body cannot be fully separated from what supports it.

3) Somatosensory mapping

Primary: Proprioception

Secondary: Thermoception + mechanoreception via piloerection; nociception; mechanoreception

- Foetal curl / clenched withdrawal → proprioception
 - Body-schema inference: compression, self-protection, held posture
- Near-correct anatomy + distortion / omission → proprioception
 - “Misread” register: almost-right body map producing spatial uncertainty
- Knee misalignment → proprioception + nociception
 - Joint-displacement inference: strain cue, pain response
- Cavity / folded back / scar-orifice depth → proprioception + nociception
 - Interior where it “shouldn’t” be: depth intrusion into body-map
 - Unease through exposure, rupture, incompleteness
- Pillow contact / weight distribution / cotton brush → mechanoreception
 - Sustained pressure: support, indentation, softness giving way
- Brisk air exposure vs insulated underside → thermoception (+ mechanoreception via piloerection)
 - Split sensation: surface chill vs warm containment
 - Goosebumps: cold translated into raised skin texture and heightened surface sensitivity

Artist Analysis 3

Magdalena Abakanowicz

Untitled (2000)

Medium: Burlap, resin, steel.



Figure 6 Magdalena Abakanowicz, *Untitled (2000)*, Burlap, resin, steel.

1) Observable anchor cues

Face impression form made of burlap in resin with a coarse, porous weave. Presented on a steel stand that supports the form at the neck/throat area.

2) Situated sensory reflection (first-person)

The vagueness of the form acts as a canvas to project bodily sensation onto. I can't help but put myself into the material, to breathe through the fabric, to feel condensation build behind the cloth, the stuffiness and slight asphyxiation and panic. My attention is drawn to the pores of my skin; the edges and depth of them feel magnified sensorially. I imagine my fingertips touching the skin of my face: dry and coarse, thick ridges of my fingerprint tugging and ribbing against my cheeks, neck, eyelids I focus on the resistance, then giving way, like plucking each prong of a comb. Behind the burlap the light becomes pointel, beaming through the holes in the fabric

behind my closed eyelids with slight warmth. How it is displayed, held by the throat yet not weighted, produces a very specific sensation: simultaneously restrictive and supported. For me, anything near the throat is threatening; the thought of restricted breathing is my biggest phobia, and even minor implications of constriction feel deeply unsettling.

3) Somatosensory mapping (integrated)

Primary: Mechanoreception

Secondary: Proprioception; Thermoception; Nociception (mild)

- Coarse fibre / friction / abrasion → mechanoreception
 - Scratch, resistance, tug, surface drag
- Held at throat / suspension / constriction-support cue → proprioception + nociception
 - Breath/posture awareness, constriction threat
- Implied condensation / stuffiness behind cloth → thermoception
 - Heat/humidity association, damp warmth
- Light through weave behind eyelids → thermoception + nociception (mild)
 - Warmth + sensitivity/discomfort

Conclusion

I set out with the premise that material engagement can activate bodily sensation through inference: viewers do not only see contact, pressure, insulation, abrasion, or threat, but internally simulate it. Mapping sensation through the multimodal system helped organise sensorial focus with greater precision, differentiating what kinds of bodily activation are being inferred by shifting lenses and context. The artworks analysed stage sensory contradictions and intersections, where comfort and threat, care and injury, exposure and containment coexist. British Medical Journal's podcast tagline for their interdisciplinary podcast is "because life is on the intersection," something that inherently resonated with me. Somatic states are compound and often co-activated rather than isolated; they arise as paired or layered activations. Foetal isn't just proprioceptive: it carries mechanoreceptive connotations. Dislocation is proprioceptive and nociceptive; penetrated skin is nociceptive and mechanoreceptive.

This has made it evident that the language we use to summarise sensation is often reductionist, leaving us blinkered to the minutiae and interconnected triggers through which bodily experience is actually formed. By recognising dominant sensory cues, we can begin to unpick our own lived experience and use it as a conveyor of bodily knowledge, broadening our sensorial literacy. This supports the broader claim of the project: that vicarious sensorial engagement is not secondary to meaning-making, but can operate as an aesthetic mode of encounter in its own right.

Practice reflection

I have found that different artworks carry different weightings and primary somatic triggers, producing split or layered activations rather than a single inferred sensation. My attention doesn't remain fixed on individual cues; it shifts across the work, builds, and accumulates.

This framework has sharpened how I understand material choice as a form of sensorial direction. It reinforces materials as somatic surrogates that don't just "represent" the body: they cue qualities aligned with lived experience through sensory inference, so material metaphor becomes something the viewer can physically feel into. The research also clarified how bodily

contradiction can be intentionally composed. The encounters analysed are defined by tensions rather than singular sensations.

This has influenced how I think about the body not as a stable form, but as an ongoing negotiation between sensation, memory, and threshold. Moving forward, my practice will continue to explore how material decisions can imply unstable or extended bodily boundaries, and how tactile inference can be activated through association.

Future development

While this study focuses on visual cues in sculptural works, future development could expand to audio as a sensory starting point, as well as broadening the case studies across other mediums. Influences such as ASMR demonstrate how sound can make material properties feel legible, suggesting that somatosensory empathy may be activated through sonic cues as well as visual ones.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Key Terms and Concepts

Body schema / body-map

The brain's internal sense of the body's position, proportion, and boundaries.

Einfühlung

Directly translates as “feeling into” or “in feeling.” Coined in Robert Vischer's doctoral thesis *On the Optical Sense of Form* (1873), and later adapted into the term *empathy* through Edward B. Titchener's translation (1908–09).

Interoception

Sensation related to internal bodily states.

Materialised interoception

The externalising of internal bodily states through objects or forms, allowing internal sensation to become communicable through material.

Mechanoreception

Somatosensory detection of touch, pressure, vibration, and surface deformation.

Nociception

Somatosensory detection of pain, threat, or potential tissue damage.

Piloerection (goosebumps)

A bodily response often linked to cold or arousal, producing raised hair follicles and heightened surface sensitivity.

Proprioception

Sense of body position, movement, velocity, tension, and weight.

Sensory field

A perceived zone of distributed bodily activation across multiple points (e.g., a “field” of implied contact).

Somatic

Of the body.

Somatosensory cortex (S1 / S2)

Brain regions involved in processing bodily sensation. S1 is associated with initial mapping of touch and body location; S2 contributes to integration, recognition, and higher-order sensory meaning.

Somatosensory empathy

A form of vicarious sensation in which viewing materials or implied contact produces internal bodily simulation—“feeling into.”

Somatosensory modalities

The main sensory categories used in this essay: mechanoreception, proprioception, nociception, and thermoception.

Somatosensory sub-modalities

More specific sensory qualities within a modality (e.g., mechanoreception involving pressure, vibration, stretch), used to refine analysis.

Somatic surrogate

A material or form that stands in for bodily experience by cueing tactile inference.

Tacit / embodied knowing

Knowledge that is sensed or understood through the body rather than verbally articulated or conceptually reasoned.

Thermoception

Somatosensory detection of temperature sensation (cold, warmth, heat).

Vicarious sensation

A bodily feeling triggered through observation rather than direct contact.

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Appendix 3: AI Declaration

WHY I used generative AI

Due to my dyslexia, I struggle with grammar, flow of text and reading text back to myself. I also struggle to verbalise my thoughts accurately into writing. I therefore used generative AI to support proofreading sections for grammar, coherence and dictation, assisting me in mapping my structure for the essay.

WHAT it was used for

Generative AI was used to:

- proofread existing text for flow, readability, and provided feedback for academic clarity
- highlighted repetition to maintain word count and overall flow
- help restructure paragraphs to improve transitions between sections
- generate alternative phrasing for my dictated words so I could choose the most accurate version
- refine definitions for a glossary of key terms
- keep track of vocalised/dictated note taking

WHICH AI was used

OpenAI ChatGPT (GPT-5.2 Thinking).

WHERE AI-generated content was used directly (if applicable)

Some AI-assisted rewriting and sentence-level edits were incorporated into the final submission

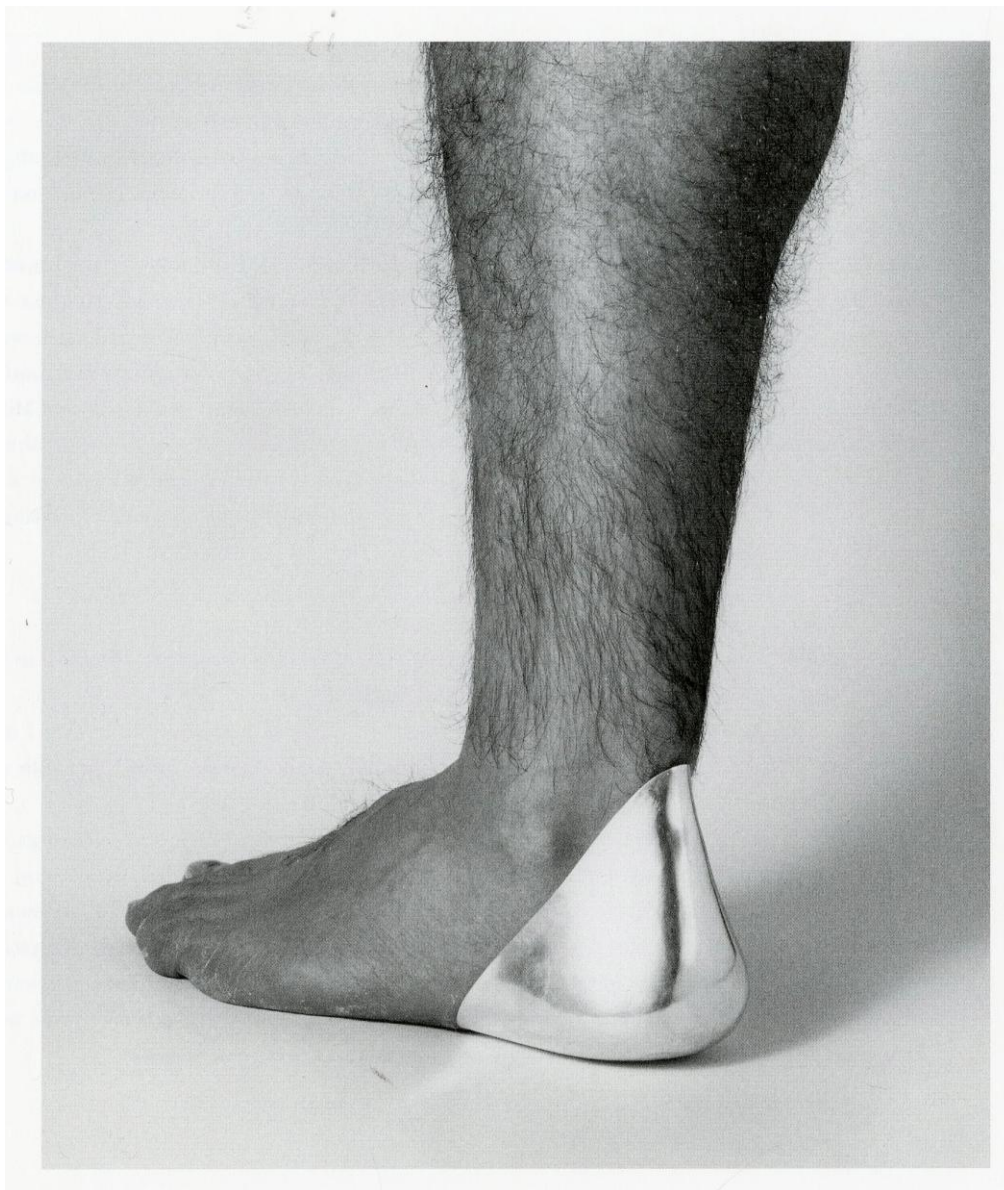
across multiple sections, including the abstract, methodology, somatosensory context, glossary definitions, and parts of the artwork analyses. These edits were used to reduce word count and were revised or rewritten further by me to ensure accuracy, tone, and relevance.

Confirmation of authorship and intellectual ownership

All research, argument development, artwork interpretation, and conclusions are my own. Generative AI functioned as an editorial and structural aid only. I confirm that I retain intellectual ownership of the work and that the final submission reflects my independent thinking, writing decisions, and practice-based insight.

Appendix 4: Supporting material

Below are examples of artists work that influenced the research and were considered for analysis.



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S Figure 2 Khaled Dawwa, Compressé, (2016), bronze



S Figure 3 Sasha Vinci, *The Eternal Wait*, 2006, Plaster, acrylic resin, galvanized iron, wood



S Figure 4 Bill Viola, Acceptance, 2008, Video



Markus Schinwald – Gemini – 2006 – Shoes / scarpe – Courtesy Giò Marconi, Milano

S Figure 5 Markus Schinwald, *Gemini*, 2006, Shoes



S Figure 6 Adam Parker Smith, Untitled (Bottom series), 2012, Foam, Rope, Granite



S Figure 7 Antony Gormley, Resting Place, 2023, Terracotta



S Figure 8 David Altmejd, Untitled 12 (Bodybuilders), 2015, polystyrene, resin, plaster, steel



S Figure 9 Jakob Grosse-Ophoff, humanity, 2024, Wood, Motor, Saw