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TEXT

1 Since the 1990s, experimental history, which was developed through experimentation to complement traditional sources such as archival documents, manuscripts, printed materials, and iconographic sources, has emerged as a new research methodology in history and art history. From Victor Davis Hanson's first experiments in wearing hoplite armour to the renowned experimental archaeology project at Guédelon Castle in Yonne and the reconstruction of the commemorative celebrations of the victory at Marignano coordinated by Pascal Brioist,[1] experimentation has increasingly been a fertile ground for exploring new and promising avenues of inquiry, despite a degree of misunderstanding within the academic community. The dialogue established by experimental history with practitioners such as craftspeople and athletes has challenged the traditional hierarchies between different forms of expertise. However, it has also raised further doubts about the scientific status of this methodology, particularly as reconstructions undertaken by enthusiasts primarily as leisure activities have developed alongside scientific experimentation being conducted as part of applied research. Experimental history has suffered considerably reputational damage from this conflation.

2 As early as 1949, Lucien Febvre questioned the possibility of practising history without depending on written sources. He called for an imaginative science that could draw on all available resources to improve our understanding of human societies: "Words, signs, landscapes, titles, the layout of fields, weeds, eclipses of the moon, bridles, analysis of stones by geologists and of metal swords by chemists, in a word, anything which, belonging to man, depends on man, serves him and signifies his presence, activity, tastes and forms of existence."[2] Inspired by Marcel Mauss's work on techniques of

the body [3] and Jean-Claude Schmitt's research on rhythms, [4] and further informed by the practice of experimental archaeology which seeks to recover operational sequences, experimental history has turned its attention to materials and objects, as well as to gestures and bodies. As it has diversified, it has progressively expanded into new fields of research, including the history of the senses, which lies at the intersection of cultural history and historical anthropology. In doing so, it also engages with a substantial body of historiography, particularly in the history of science and technology, which seeks to identify the role of experience, especially physical and sensory experience, in the acquisition of knowledge and skills, both in the early modern and contemporary periods. [5] Thus, the "Knowing by Making" project, initiated by Pamela Smith in 2014 with the aim of developing a material history of science, was later transformed, under the initiative of several of its younger members, into "The Recipe Project", a collaborative undertaking devoted to studying recipes with a particular focus on sensory experiences. This has been achieved by paying close attention to the sensory perceptions that accompany experimentation and the ways in which these perceptions can transform the course and interpretation of experiments.

3 Although sensory experiences are now a well-established subject in historical research thanks to the pioneering work of Alain Corbin and the Centre for Sensory Studies at Concordia University in Canada, treatment of the senses as an area of experimentation is not always straightforward in the humanities and social sciences, particularly in the subject fields of history and art history. Acceptance of Peter Charles Hoffer's hypothesis that experiencing the sensations of the past can enable historians to attain a certain degree of truth proved short-lived. [6] Instead, it is now generally accepted that because perceptions are historically determined, experiencing the stimuli to which people in past societies were exposed does not offer any precise insight or knowledge of how those individuals actually perceived them. However, the question remains whether this acknowledged limitation rules out all experimentation involving sensory experiences and intersensoriality, thereby depriving the humanities and social sciences of an original and complementary tool for approaching the past. This historiographical debate – which appears to have been closed rather hastily – must be reopened, and

the findings of recent experiments must be used to shed light on the following question: to what extent can experimental history contribute to the history of the senses? If it tells us nothing about the sensory perceptions of the past, then what can it tell us?

4 By bringing experimental history into dialogue with the history of the senses, the question of the legitimacy of experimentation arises once again, beginning with its scientific validity, and consequently its methodology. In his reflections on the concept of experimental history and its implications for the humanities and social sciences, Sven Dupré identifies a series of actions beginning with the letter R. These encompass applied approaches, the three main practices being reconstruction, replication, and reenactment (RRR). He supplements them with further practices whose use varies across disciplines, such as reproduction and reworking. While researchers in art history and musicology have been pioneers in this field through their investigations of the techniques employed by artists, experimental history has been a relative latecomer in the history of science and anthropology. According to Dupré, RRR practices involve the following four major methodological dimensions: "(1) Truthfulness and accuracy; (2) "Re"-terminology: process or product; (3) Communication and the public; and (4) Documenting RRR practices and the challenge of ephemerality." [7] This approach highlights the importance of ensuring the scientific rigour of any applied research, while also emphasizing the central role of terminology, the place of experimental practices within society, and their relationship with its members. While Sven Dupré's proposals establish general methodological foundations, they also require adaptations and further development, particularly through continuous engagement with other forms of expertise. These should ideally be brought together through interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches that consider not only academic knowledge, but also the contributions of craft skills and artistic creativity, in order to understand the object of research. [8] "The challenge of ephemerality", addressed by Sven Dupré in his fourth point, also raises the question of how researchers can and should preserve records of their experiments to create an archive. As Jan-Friedrich Missfelder points out, this approach invites us "not only to

make the senses the subject of historical anthropology, but also to relate them to the sensory conditions of historical work itself". [9]

5 This issue of *Théia. Revue d'histoire et d'histoire de l'art* sets out precisely to explore these foundations through an epistemological reflection grounded in history and art history. It aims to explain the importance of establishing a dialogue between experience and the sources of sensory history, to promote understanding of how experimentation is conceived and practised within interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary frameworks, and to outline the specific conditions under which, and purposes for which, this work should be done.

6 Three broad categories of practices in experimental history emerge from the contributions selected for this thematic issue, and these provide a framework for organizing the content into three main sections. Although these contributions share the common aim of introducing an applied and experimental dimension into research, they are distinguished according to their respective objects of study.

7 The first category of practice is closely connected with experiments conducted within the context of the history of the arts (the visual arts, music, theatre, etc.). It involves experimentation aimed either at recovering the specific materials used in the past, or at recreating the gestures that underpinned activities carried out in earlier periods. In both cases, the aim is to fill the gaps left by written sources and recover tacit knowledge. As sensory perception provides knowledge based on material understanding of the world, the senses play a significant role in experimental approaches that seek to recover historical materials. Recognizing the increasing significance of experimentation as a method in the study of the materiality of painting, Mecthilde Airiau analyses the employed methodology, revealing that it is not confined to the demands of conservation and restoration, but also makes valuable contributions to the material history of art. In their study of traditional woodworking practices involving oak, juniper, and pine, Ada Acovitsioti-Hameau and Philippe Hameau worked with craftspeople to recover sensory knowledge to support them in assessing the effectiveness and quality of their work with these materials. The following two articles also bring to light a form of sensory expertise specifically related to olfaction, focusing on

perfumes. Océane Fontaine Cioffi and Charlotte Gaudry each describe an approach involving recreating a perfume from an incomplete recipe, emphasizing how this process can contribute to the history of techniques and the history of the senses. In each of these cases, recovering the sensory knowledge associated with materials is closely connected with the study of the gestures involved in transforming them.

8 The dialogue between experimental practices in history and sensory experiences frequently involves paying attention to the body, forming the second category of experimental endeavours. This is particularly evident in musical practices, whether in the handling of instruments or performance, as demonstrated by Marion Weckerle and Cyril Lachèze in their article on early music. The authors focus not only on gestures, but also on a range of investigations aimed at recreating the sounds of the past as accurately as possible. The perceptions involved in combat gestures, such as distance, force, and speed, are of an entirely different nature; yet they are no less firmly rooted in the body. Marine Haurillon and Lucas Ficheur describe an experiment conducted in collaboration with biomechanical specialists in order to understand the movements of sixteenth-century fighters using bladed weapons. Ju Garry-Combet's research, meanwhile, involves analysing experiments based on military manuals in order to accurately recover the techniques and movements of military fencing in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Although this era was dominated by the use of firearms in historiography, the use of bladed weapons nevertheless continued in the warfare of the time.

9 Finally, a third category of research brings together articles that contextualize these experiments within a historical research approach, as well as the broader processes of research dissemination and public engagement. Experiments involving the senses are becoming increasingly popular with audiences, a trend which may encourage the development of further initiatives that combine historical experimentation with exhibition practices. This is exemplified in the work of Sandra Barré, who recreated the lost scents of artworks previously exhibited as part of the "Mondes sensibles" exhibition at the Musée international de la Parfumerie in 2024. Also intended for presentation in an exhibition space, Élise Petit's research on musical materiality was featured in the exhibition

"Music in the Nazi Camps", which she presented at the Shoah Memorial in 2023. The "Techn'Home" project aims to give audiences access to the full sensory landscape of a neighbourhood in Belfort and trace how it has changed from the nineteenth century to the 1990s. Audrey Colonel-Coquet, Marina Gasnier, and Cyril Lachèze focus particularly on important sensory aspects of the experience's immersive nature: smell and sound. They demonstrate how these sensory dimensions shaped the project's preliminary research and overall design.

NOTES

1 Pascal Brioist, "Marignan reconstitution d'une fête de Cour, 1515-2015", Université François-Rabelais, https://marignan2015.univ-tours.fr/.

2 Lucien Febvre, *A New Kind of History and Other Essays*, New York, Harper & Row, p. 34.

3 Marcel Mauss, *Techniques of the Body*, London, Routledge, 2004 [1936].

4 Jean-Claude Schmitt, Les rythmes au Moyen Âge, Paris, Gallimard, 2016.

5 Pamela H. Smith, Amy R. Meyers, Harold J. Cook (eds), *Ways of Making and Knowing. The Material Culture of Empirical Knowledge*, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 2014; Peter Dear, Lissa Roberts, Simon Schaffer (eds), *The Mindful Hand: Inquiry and Invention from the Late Renaissance to Early Industrialisation*, Amsterdam/Chicago, Edita/The University of Chicago Press, 2007.

6 Peter Charles Hoffer, *Sensory Worlds in Early America*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003.

7 Sven Dupré, Anna Harris, Julia Kursell et al., *Reconstruction, Replication and Re-enactment in the Humanies and Social Sciences*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2020, p. 22, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1b0fvx7.4.

8 A good example can be found in the Nomen classification proposed to distinguish historical olfactory reconstructions based on their methodology and the sources upon which they may have been based: Isabelle Chazot, Érika Wicky, Sophie-Valentine Borloz et al., "NOMEN — A classification of methods used to create odourous compositions with a historical dimension: Re-weighing, adapting, reconstructing, transposing, evoking", *Open Research Europe*, no. 5, 2025

9 Free translation from French. Jan-Friedrich MISSFELDER, “Quand l’histoire passe par le corps. Sens, signification et sensorialité au service d’une anthropologie historique”, Anne-Laure Vignaux (transl.), Trivium, no. 27, 2017, https://doi.org/10.4000/trivium.5617.

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