

**THE HIDDEN SENSE:
SYNAESTHESIA IN ART AND
SCIENCE**

CRETIEN VAN CAMPEN

MIT Press 2007 £19.95 \$29.95
185 pp. Unillustrated
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This slim volume provides a good introduction to the fascinating phenomenon of synaesthesia in art and science. It is too brief an account to dig deeply into this complex area, but it does offer a wide-ranging and summative overview, from the accounts of synaesthetes themselves to the findings of cognitive and neuroscientific research. 'Cases have been reported of synaesthetes who feel coloured pain, hear odours, hear tastes, taste sounds, feel sounds on their skin, hear images, and taste images'.

Van Campen takes a sympathetic view of synaesthesia, indeed he views himself as someone who has learned to perceive synaesthetically. He argues persuasively that, rather than falling simply into two categories, synaesthete and non-synaesthete, our responses are probably more nuanced than this. I agree that synaesthesia is more widespread than we might think; at root, our internal appreciation of something as complex as music is always more than mono-sensory. It is this synthetic view of the hidden sense that constitutes the most original and controversial element of the book.

For neuroscience, synaesthesia is involuntary and constant. Van Campen claims it may be learnt (or detected) and developed. As he says, the experience of synaesthesia is as a sensory experience that operates in an area between the five conventional senses and is not grounded in an external sense organ. Further, he argues that the wide variety of types of reported synaesthesia show a cultural basis (whether low sounds are perceived as dark or light, for instance), and that we can learn to comprehend our sensory world more fully if we appropriately attend to it (this ties in with his report on Scriabin – as a composer, he learnt to pay special attention to the colour effects of different keys). This is a view that emerges from the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, who remarked on his own perception of music: 'When I say that I see a sound, I mean that I echo the vibration of the sound with my whole sensory being'.



The extent to which this remains a metaphorical and imaginative (but no less real) phenomenon is debatable. Van Campen is occasionally in danger of conflating synaesthesia with creativity: the issue of the quality of 'synaesthetically inspired' art works is avoided – the work and aesthetic of Anne Salz, a synaesthetic Dutch artist, and those of Carol Steen, a sculptor and painter based in New York, as evidenced by the work reproduced here, are not comparable with those of Kandinsky and Scriabin. The mere possession of synaesthesia does not create aesthetic significance.

As I said at the outset, the book's scope also means there are depths that are not attended to. I have to disagree with some reviews of this book, mostly by scientists (see, for example, Julian Asher in *Times Higher Education*, 2 November 2007, and Andrew Robinson in *The Lancet*, December 2007) and say I do not regard the discussions of music and art as the strongest elements. Van Campen treads over familiar ground here and tends to conflate a number of issues that require more careful analysis: it is not clear, for example, what 'synaesthetic dissonance' means in this context. This is, however, principally a consequence of brevity – the book provides an overview of its topic and some excellent descriptions of the experience of synaesthesia, and as such is a welcome addition to the growing literature on the subject.

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Coloured letters. The sound of the nonsense word 'troep' painted by synesthetes Dorine Diemer (above) and Pauline Jansen (below). (Collection of Cretien van Campen and Clara Froger, reproduced with permission.) From *The Hidden Sense: Synaesthesia in Art and Science* by Cretien van Campen.

THE IMPRESSIONISTS AT LEISURE

PAMELA TODD

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Impressionism constitutes a familiar field in art history. Numerous books have been written about the artists who changed the approach of traditional painting into a modern perspective of what everyday life looked like at the close of the nineteenth century. On the threshold of a new era, which was characterised by the rise of technology in the big European capitals, Paris was the city that assembled the Impressionists, who created incomparable masterpieces that offer us a sense of the belle époque.

The chief virtue of *The Impressionists at Leisure* is the way Pamela Todd restores the full sense of Parisians' daily routine at the end of the nineteenth century. The book provides the reader with images of Parisian life during that era, through a smart division of the book into chapters that describe how people amused themselves in their leisure hours. Each chapter is devoted to different forms of entertainment and makes us familiar with the way