

Paul van Capelleveen

## **Paul Emmanuel, The Lost Men Project**

Reading is Touching in The Art of Reading, Museum Meermanno, The Hague, The Netherlands, November, 2017.

### **Introduction**

Reading is a truly remarkable activity. As babies we can't do it; but we soon learn to do it at great speed: 250 words a minute. Reading is not just looking, it's also touching, it involves physical action. Several senses read at the same time.

But how does reading work? How unique an activity is leafing through a book? What different kinds of reading can be distinguished? How do you cope, as a reader, with words, sounds and images coming at you at the same time? What does reading mean, when more and more books are appearing online rather than – or as well as – on paper?

We are living in an exciting time, full of experiments. There are technical innovations and artistic interpretations. Industries and artists are transforming books – which implies that reading too is being transformed. We see connections between the printed and virtual worlds. Are artists and engineers devising our future? Are they presenting clear-sighted views of the future, utopian visions, or ingenious inventions?

Reading involves turning pages, touching, seeing, remembering, concentrating, and reacting. This exhibition is timebound. It reflects today's reality, and primarily shows books and objects that have been published in two or more forms: on paper and online. But it all revolves around you, the reader. All the books on display here can be touched.

### **Reading is Touching**

Turning pages prepares us for reading. Touching a book evokes sensory experiences that trigger all kinds of associations in the brain, including sounds and tastes.

Reading is not governed by a single, specialised area of the brain. It's more complex than that. Reading activates several parts of the brain. When we look at movement, we use part of the brain that controls physical movements. The throat, too, is involved in reading, even when we are reading silently. Impulses from the brain reach the larynx and the tongue, which often move along with the words, as do the lips.

Reading stimulates different parts of the body; it involves far more than just your eyes. You touch books, you move the computer mouse around, you swipe or turn pages, embrace or hold the object on which you are reading. So it matters how that object feels, how convenient it is to use, how text and technology reinforce each other.

Your feelings are also activated when you touch a book, newspaper, smartphone or e-reader. Reading something on paper has long been thought a 'natural' activity. These days, however, interacting with a touchscreen, touchpad, or mouse feels almost just as natural. A

book printed on paper strikes us almost as an extension or part of our own body. These days, the smartphone feels like that too. Instead of turning pages we swipe them. With each new technological development readers have to adjust. Every technology is both perfect and imperfect: it has advantages and disadvantages. Technology is artificial, but devising new technologies is a human skill.

### **Paul Emmanuel, The Lost Men Project (2006)**

Touching a book feels different from touching a human body – which is what we have to do to browse through The Lost Men Project. On the artist's body we see letters. Are these words misspelt or unfamiliar? Our brain quickly recognises them as full of meaning and starts associating. We read the names of African war victims, names unknown to us. They have been pressed deep into the artist's skin, with lead letters but without ink. To see the next image, we have to place a hand on the screen. On his skin.