



Allie Terry-Fritsch

Somaesthetic Experience and the Viewer in Medicean Florence

Renaissance Art and Political
Persuasion, 1459-1580



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1. Activating the Renaissance Viewer: Art and Somaesthetic Experience

Abstract

Chapter One provides an in-depth introduction to somaesthetics as a methodological practice for Renaissance Art History and outlines the aims and content of the book. The chapter defines somaesthetic inquiry in relation to Medieval and Renaissance scholarship on the body, ritual, performance, and viewership, and advocates for a performative approach to the analysis of Renaissance art. Considering the dynamics of works of art that activate and emplace their viewers, the chapter explores the theoretical implications of considering Renaissance viewers as critical technologies in the rise and sustenance of power in Medicean Florence.

Keywords: somaesthetics, performativity, Renaissance viewer, patronage, political persuasion

On a sweltering July morning, I brought a small group of students to the Uffizi Gallery in Florence for a three-hour seminar on Italian Renaissance painting. As we climbed the grand staircase of the sixteenth-century building, I recounted the political maneuvers of the Medici dynasty that led to its construction and explained the framework for the display of painted artworks in the exhibition halls. After a brief pause to allow the students to control their heavy breathing after the stairs, we entered the first magnificent aula in which monumental altarpieces of Cimabue and Giotto tower over spectators with a dazzling display of gold leaf and angelic wings (Fig. 1). Here we began the seminar proper, which wove together the history of the Italian city-state of Florence with the development of three-dimensional rendering of form during the Renaissance. We slowly wound our way through the subsequent galleries looking at the paintings of Lorenzo Monaco, Gentile da Fabriano, Fra Angelico, Filippo Lippi, Piero della Francesca, and Paolo Uccello and I discussed the artistic personalities of Italian “genius” alongside tales of powerful patrons who financed their creative output. The seminar offered the gold standard



Figure 1. Tourists in the Trecento room of the Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence (Photo: Author)

for any Art History course: the ability for students to see the original works of art, as opposed to reproductions, and use the material cues of the works to engage in formal analysis. The galleries were packed, and it was hot, but we jostled for prime viewing positions in order to fulfill our art-historical goals.

As we stood before Masolino and Masaccio's *Altarpiece of Saint Anne*, one of my students fainted. Although she did not fall hard and revived quickly, the museum policy required that the young woman be brought for immediate medical attention. A dramatic onslaught of museum attendants and paramedics cleared out the gallery and stairwells to make room for her transport to the ambulance waiting in the piazza below. A harrowingly fast ride through the packed streets of the inner city eventually brought us to the *ospedale*, where the young woman was examined, and I acted as her translator. Thankfully, by this point she was feeling fine, only a little embarrassed. After all of the prerequisite questions were satisfactorily answered and it was established that the student was suffering from the triple problem of jet-lag, sweltering heat, and no breakfast but was otherwise in stable condition, the Florentine medical assistant looked up at me with a smile and asked, "What painting was she standing in front of?" I smiled back, nodded my head knowingly, and responded, "Masaccio." The medical assistant's eyes lit up and she uttered just one word: "Stendhal!"

Stendhal, the penname for the nineteenth-century French writer Henri Beyle, had a physical reaction to the artworks of Florence, similar to the one suffered by the young woman inside of the Uffizi, when he visited the city in 1817. Described in his travelogue, *Rome, Naples et Florence en 1817*, Stendhal approached Florence with his heart “leaping wildly within” him.¹ As he progressed closer and closer to the city gates, he found himself “grown incapable of rational thought” and, once inside, he made his way immediately to the church of Santa Croce.² There, standing among the sepulchers of great Florentine men, a “tide of emotion” overwhelmed him and “flowed so deep that it was scarce to be distinguished from religious awe.”³ He then moved into the Niccolini Chapel and, seated with his gaze fixed upward to the ceiling, he described an experience of aesthetic transcendence:

I underwent, through the medium of Volterrano’s *Sibyls*, the profoundest experience of ecstasy that, as far as I am aware, I ever encountered through the painter’s art. My soul, affected by the very notion of being in Florence, and by the proximity of those great men whose tombs I had just beheld, was already in a state of trance. Absorbed in the contemplation of *sublime beauty*, I could perceive its very essence close at hand; I could, as it were, feel the stuff of it beneath my fingertips. I had attained to that supreme degree of sensibility where the *divine intimations* of art merge with the impassioned sensuality of emotion. As I emerged from the porch of Santa Croce, I was seized with a fierce palpitation of the heart (the same symptom which, in Berlin, is referred to as an *attack of nerves*); the well-spring of life was dried up within me, and I walked in constant fear of falling to the ground.⁴

The nervous sensations that Stendhal felt in his body and mind were vestiges of his ecstatic aesthetic experience in Santa Croce, where the blending of sensibility with sensuality allowed for a kind of knowing that was both sublime and dangerous.

That the medical assistant in the hospital was familiar with Stendhal is most likely the result of the publication, in 1989, of Graziella Magherini’s *La sindrome di Stendhal*, a psychoanalytic investigation of extreme tourist reactions to works of art located within the city of Florence.⁵ Magherini documented over 100 contemporary cases of tourists, like Stendhal, who came to the hospital of Santa Maria Nuova due

1 Stendhal, *Rome, Naples et Florence en 1817*. Citations to the text here will draw from the English edition, *Rome, Naples and Florence by Stendhal*.

2 Stendhal, *Rome, Naples and Florence by Stendhal*, 301.

3 *Ibid.*, 301.

4 *Ibid.*, 302. The italics are included in the original text.

5 The first edition was published in Florence in 1989, with subsequent second and third editions published in 1995 and 2003. All references to the text cited here will draw from the third edition; Margherini, *La Sindrome di Stendhal*.

to “an attack of nerves” or other physical ailments in the face of beauty.⁶ Including fainting episodes, panic attacks, and even pathological behavior, the outward signs of “the Stendhal syndrome” are, according to Magherini, psychosomatic indications of a viewer’s inability to control the emotional and psychological impact of cultural contact with artistic genius. The foreignness of the experience—all sufferers of the syndrome are non-Italians—and the overwhelming quantity of artworks at the tourist’s disposition contribute to the feelings of panic, identity confusion, and paranoia that the victims are said to have experienced. While Magherini’s theory is highly controversial, and largely dismissed as an inadequate explanation for tourist duress, the Stendhal syndrome nonetheless has provided fodder for writers and film makers to position works of art in Florentine museums as agents of viewers’ physical and affective transformation.⁷ Just recently, another tourist to the Uffizi had a heart attack—this time in front of Sandro Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus*—and *The Guardian* framed it as “illness by beauty.”⁸

Part of the allure of the Stendhal syndrome is its ability to make tangible the transformative potential of art. Certainly only a small fraction of the robust number of visitors to the Uffizi will claim to have experienced the Stendhal syndrome, yet the narratives that surround those that do (or are framed to have had) reveal a certain preoccupation and fascination with viewers who experience art too bodily. Framed as ill bodies and thus taken to a medical hospital for treatment, these viewers are approached as aberrations of a normative standard that privileges disinterested spectators who are untangled from their senses. Viewers with the Stendhal syndrome, so the story goes, let themselves feel to such an extent that their experiences translate materially in their bodies and minds. The extreme physical and mental responses associated with the Stendhal syndrome are considered, at least in part, as symptomatic of the viewer’s failure to contain the aesthetic experience within culturally-established boundaries, which include limiting the body’s role in aesthetic appreciation.⁹

In contrast, viewers in the Middle Ages and Renaissance were encouraged to forge connections between their physical and affective states when they experienced works of art. They believed that their bodies served a critical function in coming to know and make sense of the world around them, and intimately engaged themselves with works of art and architecture on a daily basis. This book examines how viewers

6 106 such cases were analyzed for psychiatric diagnosis and care between July 1977-March 1986 at Santa Maria Nuova in Florence. For descriptions of these cases, see Margherini, *La Sindrome di Stendhal*, 93-126.

7 For one, rather comical, editorial on the syndrome, see Inturrisi, “Going to Pieces Over Masterpieces.”

8 Jones, “Stendhal Syndrome,”

9 Kant, *Critique*. On the dangers of the disinterested subject, see Jay, “Drifting Into Dangerous Waters,” 3-27.

in Medicean Florence were self-consciously cultivated in *somaesthetic experience*. Somaesthetics—a philosophical term derived from the combination of “soma,” or the active, sentient body, and “aesthetics,” or sensory appreciation—refers to the mindful manipulation of one’s body to enhance sensory appreciation and creative self-fashioning.¹⁰ Mobilized as a technology for the production of knowledge with and through their bodies, viewers contributed to the essential meaning of Renaissance art and, in the process, bound themselves to others. By investigating the framework and practice of somaesthetic viewing in fifteenth and sixteenth century Florence, the book approaches the viewer as a powerful tool that was used by patrons to shape identity and power in the Renaissance.

When Richard Shusterman first proposed “Somaesthetics” as a discipline in 1999, he wanted to recover “the body’s crucial and complex role in aesthetic experience” from what he called aesthetic philosophy’s “sad somatic neglect.”¹¹ By addressing the ways in which creative self-fashioning and the cultivation of the body contributed to aesthetic appreciation, Shusterman wanted to show the “potential utility [of somaesthetics], not its radical novelty,” since the philosophical tradition always has investigated the relationship between the body and the production of knowledge.¹² Indeed, as Shusterman has stressed, somaesthetics builds on extant philosophical texts addressing “bodily perceptions and practices and also of their function in our knowledge and construction of reality” and engages with “traditional ontological and epistemological issues of the body, but also [...] the sort of sociopolitical inquires [Michel] Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu have made central: how the body is both shaped by power and employed as an instrument to maintain it, how bodily norms of health, skill, and beauty, and even the most basic categories of sex and gender, are constructed to reflect and sustain social forces.”¹³ By thinking through aesthetic experience as an active and self-reflective practice, the investigation of somaesthetics draws attention to the dynamic interplay between the self, sensory stimuli, and societal conditions and aspirations.¹⁴

Unlike Shusterman’s perception of the contemporary state of philosophy, however, the study of the body and mind has always been—and continues to be—a central

10 Shusterman, “Somaesthetics,” 299-313; Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, 262-283; Shusterman, *Performing Live*; Shusterman, *Body Consciousness*.

11 Shusterman, “Somaesthetics,” 299.

12 *Ibid.*, 304.

13 Shusterman, *Body Consciousness*, 15-48. Fundamental to Shusterman’s analysis is Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, in *The History of Sexuality*, 39-68.

14 Beyond analytical inquiry, Shusterman also exhorted individuals to implement pragmatic somaesthetics into the care and improvement of the self, as a means to reconnect the body and mind within contemporary living. See Shusterman, “Thinking through the Body,” 1-21; Shusterman, *Performing Live*, 154-181; Shusterman, *Body Consciousness*, 14.

concern within Medieval and Renaissance studies. Generations of scholars, past and present, have investigated the ways in which the historical body reveals information about politics, religion, and economics through its cultural representation in texts and images, as well as in its performance in formal and informal scenarios of everyday life.¹⁵ In a relatively recent post on the Medieval blog, “In the Middle,” the historian Jeffrey Cohen responded to a question of whether he had perceived a renewed interest in the historical body with the quip, “Was there ever a time when people were not interested in bodies? It’s hard to imagine any interest in the body being new.”¹⁶ Indeed, as Caroline Walker Bynum explained in an article now more than twenty years old, the central place of the “body”—as physical matter and as ideological construct—in the discourse communities of the past and present points to its essential role in the cultural construction of subjects; the “fuss about the body” reflects both historical and contemporary desires to negotiate lived experience and anticipate what lies beyond.¹⁷

Art historians have long recognized that Renaissance viewers’ perception of and engagement with art was culturally negotiated. Thus scholars have developed myriad strategies to better understand Renaissance visuality—the social framework and practices of seeing the world and its attendant visual culture.¹⁸ As Hal Foster has described, to understand “visuality” one must “thicken” vision.¹⁹ That is, the scholar must move beyond the facts of the body and instead provide commentary on and interpretation of the cultural context in which the visual encounter occurred so as to acknowledge the physiological and psychic multivalence of vision as well as its social meaning.²⁰ The pivotal scholarship of Michael Baxandall and Ernst Gombrich brought attention to the audience as a constructive participant in the Renaissance work of art. Baxandall’s influential method for reconstructing what he called the

15 The critical scholarship is by far too long to list in any meaningful way here, but my conception of Medieval and Renaissance embodiment has been shaped by my late professor, Michael Camille, whose graduate seminars at the University of Chicago taught us to approach the body as both a cultural object and performative subject; see Boeye, “A Bibliography,” 141-144.

16 “Medieval Bodies.” See Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*; and Cohen and Weiss, eds., *Thinking the Limits of the Body*.

17 Bynum, “Why all the Fuss About the Body?” 1-33. Bynum’s contribution to the body-focus of Medieval studies has been immense; for example, see *Holy Feast, Holy Fast; Fragmentation and Redemption; The Resurrection of the Body; Wonderful Blood; Christian Materiality*.

18 Mitchell, “What is Visual Culture?” 207-217; Herbert, “Visual Culture/Visual Studies,” 452-464; Sturken and Cartwright, *Practices of Looking*. Such an approach advocates for the critical position of the audience in the reception and interpretation of art and culture. For an historical overview of reception theory, see Jauß, “Art. Rezeption, Rezeptionsästhetik,” 996-1004.

19 Foster, “Preface,” ix.

20 *Ibid.*, ix. This is a play on Clifford Geertz’s notion of “thick description,” an explanation of not only the facts of behavior but also its context, which involves the interpretation and commentary of the ethnographer; Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 3-30.

Renaissance “period eye” offered a way of understanding visual culture in light of the specific range of abilities possessed by a Renaissance viewer within particular socio-political, commercial, and religious contexts.²¹ Concerned with the “customer’s participation” in works of art, Baxandall approached Renaissance viewers—largely singing, dancing, mathematically-inclined patrons of painting in the fifteenth century—through the social transaction of patronage, and relied on extant archival documents, including patron-artist contracts, written reactions, and descriptions, to construct his Renaissance subject. Ernst Gombrich’s equally persuasive considerations on “the beholder’s share,” or what the spectator brought to the experience of art, drew attention to the social conditions and psychological framework of viewing that goes beyond documents in the archive.²² This book builds from these traditions of thickening the historical understanding of Renaissance visuality by attending to viewers’ somaesthetic experiences of art and architecture. It connects the significance and meaning of Renaissance art to the tangible performances of viewers, who activated and appreciated the works in full-bodied and mindful ways.

Art-historical methods used to investigate Medieval and Renaissance bodies and embodiment are as varied as the many “turns” that the field has undergone over the last few decades, from the “anthropological turn” to the “pictorial turn” to the “performative turn.”²³ This book attempts to draw attention to some of the ways that a “somaesthetic turn”—a turn that has already begun to take shape in art history—can reveal new insight on the relationship between viewers, art, and the construction of identity and power in the Renaissance. The participatory nature of viewing in the somaesthetic experiences described in this book was a way for individuals to make meaning through their bodies. As an a priori assumption of this study, when Renaissance viewers crafted themselves in relation to works of art and architecture, they were not simply passive recipients of visual content, but rather active co-producers of their experiences. That is to say, somaesthetic beholders were mindful of “doing” while “seeing.” Their combined physical and mental actions were akin to the “saying” in J.L. Austin’s famous dictum “saying is doing,” in which performative utterances both stand in for and actively shape the speaker’s social reality.²⁴ Through participatory performance and somaesthetic

21 Baxandall, *Painting and Experience*. For several excellent compendia of first-hand accounts of works and spaces from the fifteenth and sixteenth century, see Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators*; Gilbert, *Italian Art*. While these sources reveal critical information regarding the values that individuals placed on art, such convenient archival records are relatively rare and, even then, give only a partial understanding of viewers’ experiences.

22 Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 193.

23 See Rampley, “Anthropology at the Origins,” 138-159; Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 11-35; Nichols, “Writing the New Middle Ages,” 422-441.

24 Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*.

engagement, viewers articulated the pragmatic relationships between images, their referents, themselves, and others. In this way, the book argues that the “beholder’s share” in the production of the work of art went beyond mere imaginative faculties to include the self-conscious bodily strategies of the viewer, which initiated a process by which Renaissance art “worked.”²⁵

To explore how varying movements and sensory engagement impact the viewer experience, the book draws on scholarship from the fields of ritual and performance studies to consider embodiment as both “an act of doing” and a “way of knowing.”²⁶ As the performance theorist Diana Taylor has argued, “we learn and transmit knowledge through embodied action, through cultural agency and by making choices. Performance [...] functions as an episteme.”²⁷ This book interrogates how viewers’ participation in the co-production of Renaissance images, objects, and spaces situated them as active agents in the narratives that shaped their social experience. To recover the forms of knowledge that were produced through somaesthetic experiences in Medicean Florence, the following chapters balance consideration of both the archive and the repertoire; that is, they examine “the *archive* of supposedly enduring materials (i.e. texts, documents, buildings, bones) and the so-called ephemeral *repertoire* of embodied practice/knowledge (i.e. spoken language, dance, sports, ritual).”²⁸ The aim is to draw on the extant archive—first and foremost the works themselves, and, where possible, documents—to reconstruct the “scenario” of somaesthetic experience for viewers, and then to theorize the potential ways in which the idealized “repertoire” facilitated modes of constructing or altering viewers’ perceived identities.

Arguably, a wide range of Renaissance viewing practices may be called somaesthetic since viewing throughout the period was not part of a static encounter with a work, but rather was active and invested.²⁹ Renaissance viewers believed that the physical operation of vision connected them to images and objects in ways that went beyond mere opticality, or eyesight alone. In his treatise *Della pittura* (1435), Leon Battista Alberti described how “the images of things impress themselves in

25 On efficacious images that “worked” for Renaissance beholders, see Trexler, *Public Life*; Terry-Fritsch, “Execution by Image,” 191-206.

26 For an excellent overview of recent literature on participatory performance, see Magelssen, *Simming*, esp. 6-9; and Alexander, “Performance and Pedagogy,” 253.

27 Taylor, *Archive*, xvi.

28 Taylor, *Archive*, 19.

29 On Medieval and Renaissance conceptions of vision and viewing, see the excellent overviews provided in Lindberg, *Theories of Vision; Visuality Before and Beyond the Renaissance*; Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*; Hahn, “Vision,” 44-64; Clark, *Vanities of the Eye; Renaissance Theories of Vision*. On religious vision and viewing in the Middle Ages, see especially Miles, “Vision,” 125-142; Hahn, “Seeing and Believing,” 1079-1106; Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary*; Kessler, *Spiritual Seeing*; Caviness, *Visualizing Women*; Denery, *Seeing and Being Seen*; Hamburger, *The Mind’s Eye*; Peers, *Sacred Shock*; Antonova, *Space, Time, and Presence*.

our minds” by “certain rays,” which, “like very subtle threads, are connected very directly” to the eye.³⁰ Certain individuals, following a tradition of intromission theorized by philosophers such as Aristotle, Alhacen, and Avicenna, believed that objects emitted rays to impress their images literally within the bodies of viewers. Such penetration of the image into the physical fabric of an individual spurred Renaissance art theorists, such as Gian Paolo Lomazzo, to claim that images not only took a corporeal presence within the beholder but also had the power to transform the spirit of the viewer as well.³¹ For others who ascribed to extromission theory, as described by Plato and Galen, it was the viewer himself who reached out and touched images with their eyes. This mode of seeing invested the viewer with active agency to not only behold objects and pictures but to physically embrace and shape them as well.³² Whether receiving the image internally within the body or touching the image externally, the viewer was literally conjoined with the object that he or she beheld and this physical understanding of seeing contributed to the powerful affective bonds that were formed through the process.³³

Many works encouraged somaesthetic interaction because of their design—those images, objects, and spaces meant to be handled, manipulated, opened, and explored.³⁴ In recent years, scholarship dedicated to the examination of the material cues of these works of art to instigate a particular kind of viewer interaction has helped to shift art-historical attention toward the user or manipulator of art. Certain images and objects were made visible only through their revelation behind veils or covers; others were displayed after time-based journeys.³⁵ Frescoed chapels and

30 [C]erti raggi [...] per essi i simulacri de le cose s'imprimono nel senso [...] A noi basti, che s'imaginiamo, che raggi a modo d'alcune fila sottilissime, siano drittissimamente legati; Alberti, *La Pittura*, 6r-6v. For a larger discussion of Alberti in the context of Renaissance theories of intromission and extromission, see Weststeijn, “Seeing,” 149-169.

31 “[A] picture artificially expressing the true naturall motions, will (surely) procure laughter when it laugheth [...] cause the beholder to wonder, when it wondereth, [...] to have an appetite when he seeth it eating of dainties, to fal a sleepe at the sight of a sweete-sleeping picture [etc]”; Lomazzo, *A Tracte*, II, chap. 1, 1-2.

32 As Baldassare Castiglione explains, such external touching could provide reciprocal entanglement, for example in a mutual gaze: when the eyes of a lover “send out their rays straight to the eyes of the beloved at a moment when these are doing the same [...] the spirits meet, and in that sweet encounter each receives the other’s quality”; Castiglione, *The Courtier*, Book III, 232.

33 As Elizabeth Cropper has explored, the art of beauty was bound to affect, which was explicated in the writings of Francesco Petrarca; see her “Introduction,” 4, as well as “On Beautiful Women,” 374-394. Anne Dunlop has explored both Petrarch and Dante Alighieri in relation to vision and the desire for the beloved; see Dunlop, *Painted Palaces*.

34 See Bynum, *Christian Materiality*; Weinryb, “Living Matter,” 113-132; as well as the ongoing research and dialogue of “Material Collective” at <http://thematerialcollective.org>

35 For an example of a portrait with a sliding cover, see Brown, *Lorenzo Lotto*, 73-80. On the veiling and revealing of miraculous images, see Holmes, *The Miraculous Image*.

tapestry-lined rooms depended on mobile viewers that would turn and traverse space in order to make connections between and complete the decorative narratives.³⁶ Illuminated manuscripts and printed books required their bound pages to be held and turned by live individuals, who activated the narratives through a combination of reading, looking, and doing.³⁷ Life-size sculptures of Christ and the saints were carried in procession and made to perform before crowds of the faithful on feast dates of the church, while small-scale sculptures, coins, medals and cameos were picked up, caressed, and examined by individual beholders within the Renaissance studio.³⁸ The beholder's contact with and manipulation of these works was integral to the aesthetic encounter.

Other works fostered somaesthetic engagement due to their perceived boundedness with what they represented. As Richard Trexler, David Freedberg, and others have examined, certain Renaissance images were considered to be highly efficacious due to their ontological communion with their referents.³⁹ Often, Renaissance individuals engaged in body-mind practices that they believed would contribute to their experiences of sacred and secular works and spaces.⁴⁰ Either alone or as part of a community, viewers would craft their bodies and minds to accentuate the intention of their encounters. Such physical interactions with art were underscored by cultural beliefs that fostered an expectation in the viewer that his or her interactivity with the work would produce an efficacious result.⁴¹ For example, not only did individuals pray in front of holy pictures and sculptures, that is, pray at a physical distance from images and connect to the saint or scene represented through

36 Terry-Fritsch, "Florentine Convent," 82-123; Lakey, "From Place to Space," 113-136.

37 The scholarship on the tactile and performative aspects of using manuscripts has grown too large to list comprehensively here, however the following have particularly influenced my understanding of the somaesthetic experience of reading late Medieval and Renaissance books: Camille, "Seeing and Reading," 26-49; Müller, "The Body of the Book," 32-44; *The Book and the Body*; Camille, "Obscenity Under Erasure," 139-154; Connolly, "Imagined Pilgrimage," 598-622; Marshall, "Confraternity and Community," 20-45; Areford, *The Viewer and the Printed Image*; Borland, "Unruly Reading," 97-114; Hamburger and Schotheuber, "Books in Women's Hands"; Rudy, *Piety in Pieces*; Kyle, *Medicine and Humanism*.

38 On kinetic sculptures of Christ, see Jung, "Phenomenal Lives"; Kopania, *Animated Sculptures*. On holding and touching sculpture in the Renaissance, see Johnson, "Touch," 61-74; Johnson, "The Art of Touch," 59-84; Johnson, "In the Hand of the Beholder," 183-197; Randolph, *Touching Objects*; Gertsman, *Worlds Within*; Neilson, *Verrocchio's Factura*.

39 Trexler, *Public Life*; Freedberg, *The Power of Images*.

40 As Emile Durkheim illustrated in *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, rituals are particular modes of action (doing) that express the beliefs (thinking) of a unified body of members. These beliefs are states of opinion and consist of representations. On Renaissance art and ritual, see Warburg, *Gesammelte Schriften*; Trexler, *Public Life*; Muir, *Civic Ritual*; Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family and Ritual*; Strocchia, *Death and Ritual*; Chretien, *Festival of San Giovanni*; Musacchio, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth*.

41 See also the recent conversation around the work of Alfred Gell's *Art and Agency*.

the ocular gaze, they also touched, kissed, caressed, and even sometimes ate holy images or applied them to their bodies in efforts to activate their sacred power.⁴²

A comprehensive study of Renaissance somaesthetic experience is beyond the scope of this book; rather, the aim here is to provide a critical analysis of a select group of works in Medicean Florence that were activated by the performative participation of the viewer to make two broad claims about Renaissance somaesthetic experience, which are borne out in the remainder of this introduction and the chapters that follow. First, the viewer's body was equal to, if not greater than, the artist's work as a generative locus of meaning-making. Certain viewers, like visitors to the Chapel of the Magi in Palazzo Medici (Chapter Two) or pilgrims to the Nuova Gerusalemme di San Vivaldo in Tuscany (Chapter Four), were literally immersed in multi-media artistic programs that were conceived and realized with their experience in mind. Viewers in these situations were located inside the representation itself; their bodies were integrated into the artistic program and used to produce its critical meaning. Other viewers, like readers of an illustrated treatise on *calcio* (Chapter Five), held the image, literally, at a distance. Through the time-based process of reading the text and learning the strategies of the game, viewers trained their vision to tactically navigate the field of play in the printed representation. Their experience, like that of visitors to the garden of Palazzo Medici (Chapter Three) and the pilgrims of San Vivaldo (Chapter Four), was framed by third-person narration, which encouraged them to look at and feel works of art in particular ways. Despite their different mediums, scales, and displays, the works discussed in this book were united in their efficacy to instigate modes of participatory viewing that co-involved the viewer in strategic ways. Through in-depth analysis of the environments in which somaesthetic experience occurred and reconstruction of embodied scenarios of viewer engagement that took place therein, the book considers art through embodiment and suggests an art-historical "somaesthetics of style."

Second, the somaesthetic experiences described in this book were not spontaneous, but rather were carefully curated by the patron and artist. Art historians have constructed a robust socio-economic account of early modern patronage to trace the relationship between the sponsorship of buildings, objects, and images and the fashioning of patrons' status and identity. This book examines how and why certain Renaissance patrons tapped into the performative potential of art and approaches somaesthetic experiences as a means of constructing political communities in Medicean Florence. Long recognized as leaders in Florentine art patronage in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Medici family used art as a form of political expression, both during the Republican period of oligarchic

42 Freedberg, *The Power of Images*; Rudy, "Kissing Images."

governance in the fifteenth century and later when the family assumed control as Dukes and then Grand Dukes of the city and its territories in the sixteenth century.⁴³ Art patronage served to visualize the family's magnificence within the shifting political context of the city through the erection and decoration of material markers and monuments, which literally impressed the family's name and symbols on important Florentine sacred and secular sites. After his return from exile in 1434, Cosimo de' Medici (1389-1464) funded a series of building projects that transformed the urban and ritual fabric of his neighborhood and crafted an image of the family as dedicated to the ideals of Florentine civic humanism, which was iterated in the title of "pater patriae" ("Father of the Fatherland") given to Cosimo after his death.⁴⁴ During the sixteenth-century, Cosimo I de' Medici (1519-1574), and the Medici dukes that followed his lead, systematically assumed patronage of the city's most public spaces and symbolic monuments as a means to visualize the family's new authority over them. This book examines the role that viewers' bodies played in this larger narrative of Renaissance art patronage and argues that viewers were cultivated as critical technologies in the rise and sustenance of power in Medicean Florence.

Somaesthetics and Political Persuasion

If it is possible to locate a generative moment for a book project, then this book essentially began the day the photographs of the Abu Ghraib prison abuses were released by the media in 2004. I was in Florence, putting the finishing touches on my Ph.D. dissertation on the political dimensions of Cosimo de' Medici's patronage of Fra Angelico at San Marco, when I opened *La Repubblica* and was confronted with the macabre reality of the United States' handling of the "war on terror" (Fig. 2).⁴⁵ As an American abroad since shortly after 9/11, I already was forced to define myself in relation to the positions of the Bush administration on a nearly daily basis with my Florentine friends, as well as with just about anyone who figured out that I came from the US. When the photographs were published, we all became witness to the tactics used by the US Army at Abu Ghraib to produce truth. Positioned as a viewer looking at a victim through the eyes of a torturer, I had a visceral reaction to the photographs that conveyed my mental and bodily rejection of its content.

Shortly after the photos surfaced, the visual theorist and art history professor in my graduate program at the University of Chicago, W.J.T. Mitchell, published an Op-Ed in the *Chicago Tribune*, a short but poignant political statement about

43 For extensive bibliographies on Medici scholarship, see Kent, *Cosimo de' Medici*; and *The Medici*.

44 Gutkind, *Cosimo de' Medici*.

45 Caprile, "Abu Ghraib la Città del Male."