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David Howes

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In the last few decades, scholars from across the humanities and social sciences have been turning their attention on the sensorium, challenging psychology's longstanding monopoly over research in this area. This turn has given rise to many key insights into the sociality of sensation and the cultural contingency of perception. It has also led to the emergence of a range of new academic fields and approaches, including the anthropology of the senses, history of the senses, sociology of the senses, and sensuous geography, to name but a few. One of the latest and most striking instances of this expansion has been in the field of museum studies. This special issue is dedicated to showcasing breaking developments in this dynamic new area of inquiry, which we call "sensory museology," by bringing together a series of articles that delve into the history of display and the rising tide of sensory experimentation in contemporary curatorial practice.¹

Perhaps the most salient trend in the new museology has been the rehabilitation of touch. The importance currently being given to the sense of touch in museum studies is evidenced by the number of recent publications dealing with the subject, including *The Engaging Museum* (Black 2005); *The Power of Touch: Handling Objects in Museums and Heritage Contexts* (Pye 2007), *Touch in Museums*

(Chatterjee 2008); *Art, Museums and Touch* (Candlin 2010), and *Museum Materialities* (Dudley 2010). Indeed, some museum scholars now assert that “touch and object handling should be built into the gallery as a normal element of the display” (Black 2005: 265). The rehabilitation of touch has in turn created a more receptive environment for the (re)introduction of other senses traditionally classified as “base” – in contrast to the “higher,” “aesthetic,” “distal,” “intellectual” senses of sight and hearing – such that smell and taste are now being actively solicited instead of censored.²

Until comparatively recently, however, scholars typically thought of the museum as a site of pure spectatorship, with objects in glass cases and visitors warned to keep their hands off. While this situation was generally true of twentieth-century museums, research into the sensory history of early museums has uncovered a different scenario. The first museums of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were hands-on sites in which visitors expected and were permitted to handle artifacts (e.g. Ovenell 1986: 147; Classen and Howes 2006). Analysis of visitor and curatorial accounts of handling that date from this period reveals four major reasons for this tactile engagement (Classen 2005, 2012: Ch. 6). The first reason for handling artifacts was to learn more about these intriguing objects than was accessible to vision alone. The use of touch as a means of learning was fundamental to contemporary notions of scientific investigation as well as popular practice. The natural philosopher, and Curator of Experiments of the Royal Society, Robert Hooke, for example, stated that the ocular inspection of objects under study needed to be accompanied by the “manual handling ... of the very things themselves” (Hooke 1971: 335). The second reason for handling artifacts was for aesthetic appreciation. Touch was widely believed to enhance one’s enjoyment of art objects. It was also declared by art theorists such as Johann Gottfried Herder to allow access to forms of beauty unavailable to the eye (Norton 1990). The third reason for employing touch was in order to experience a sensation of intimacy with the original creators of the objects on display. The fourth reason, and the one which might seem most alien to museum-goers today, was for purposes of healing. Rare and precious, exotic or of great antiquity, museum objects were often treated as charms. In a practice with origins in the touching of relics, visitors sometimes handled museum artifacts with the hope that some of their apparent power would rub off on themselves and give them an increased sense of well-being.

By the mid-nineteenth century, such hands-on practices were increasingly rare in museums (Candlin 2010) and by the later nineteenth-century – an important period for the foundation of public museums around the world and the entrenchment of “the exhibitionary complex” (Bennett 1995) – it was generally assumed that collections were to be seen, *not* handled by the public. It would appear that this was not only because such handling was thought of as too

damaging. It was also because the motivations which had earlier made the sense of touch such an important medium in the museum were no longer believed to be valid. Aesthetic appreciation, it was now understood, could not come through handling, and touching museum artifacts was no longer believed to have therapeutic value.

The demotion of touch was otherwise precipitated through the progressive inculcation, via “prestigious imitation,” of new ways of walking, looking, sitting, and speaking. As Helen Rees Leahy documents in *Museum Bodies*, learning how to stand at the “correct” distance from an art work, walking at a pace that is neither too fast nor too slow, and knowing what to “feel” (without touching, of course) are corporeal techniques that must be mastered if a museum visitor is to display the requisite degree of cultural competence. The normative practices of attentive viewing and self-restrained comportment, which were the corollary of “the *institution* of the artwork as an object of contemplation” (Rees Leahy 2012) resulted in the interposition of more and more distance between the average museum visitor and the work of art or exotic artifact, whether there were physical barriers (a glass case, a rope) or not. Only curators and connoisseurs were permitted to handle objects on account of their expert knowledge, and only curators possessed the authority to interpret objects (Candlin 2010; Krmpotich and Peers 2013: 35–43).

While the transformation of museum-goers from handlers into spectators, and of curiosities into object lessons in the “progress of civilization” proceeded apace, there were also certain hold-outs. A case in point is the enduring fascination with mummies discussed by Constance Classen in her contribution to this collection. As she shows, older styles of tactile and indeed multisensory investigation survived in the case of the mummy through the Victorian period. Her careful reconstruction of how the senses and affects were mobilized in the context of the sourcing or acquisition, exhibition and public unwrapping of the “long dead” gives new depth to such theoretical constructs as “the archaeology of perception” and “the social life of things.”

In the next article, entitled “Incorporating the Period Eye,” Helen Rees Leahy elaborates on her archaeology of perception and mobility in *Museum Bodies* and adds more layers to our understanding of the sensorial subconscious by exploring the recent trend towards staging “exhibitions of exhibitions.” These displays seek to reproduce past conventions of spectatorship and in so doing sensitize contemporary visitors to shifts in the corporeality and performativity of “going to the museum.” Historically outmoded ways of sensing spring back to life at these re-dos, giving the museum experience a reflexive edge – at least to the extent that the safety and hygiene standards of the contemporary museum allow.

Sandra Dudley continues the exploration of how visibility is structured by comportment and movement in her article on surprise and proprioceptivity in the Pitt Rivers Museum. She analyzes how

the action of stooping to open one of the storage drawers under the display cabinets in the Pitt Rivers Museum transforms sight from a distance sense into a proximity sense. The manual action of opening and shutting the drawers results in a form of visibility closely allied with touch, quite different from the typical surveying gaze of the strolling museum-goer. This action has the potential to draw the visitor into a more intimate and dynamic engagement with museum objects, even though they remain ensconced under glass. The museum drawer can hence be seen as the prototype of the interactive display.

The first public museums to reverse the hands-off trend and include handling as part of their program were children's museums and science museums, established for the most part in the twentieth century as counterparts to traditional museums. However, these museums rarely allowed for any tactile contact with objects deemed to be collectables – the classic display items of museums. It was not until the late twentieth century that handling sessions began to form part of the standard offerings at mainstream museums, such as the British Museum with its “hands on desks.”³ This development was part of a general trend to make museums more “interactive” and engaging for contemporary visitors (Hooper-Greenhill 1994, 1995; Anderson 2004). It was also influenced to some degree by the efforts of organizations for the visually impaired to gain full access (physical *and* intellectual) to museum collections (Candlin 2010). This trend is tracked by Mark Clintberg in his article on the “Stimulating the Senses” program at the National Gallery of Canada. This program is primarily aimed at visitors with low vision but also allows sighted visitors to participate. As Clintberg relates in his auto-ethnography of a touch tour wearing a blindfold, encountering the sculpture which was the focus of the tour without the interposition of sight, and then being invited to model his impressions using clay, deepened his enjoyment and understanding of the piece in a host of ways. It also sensitized him to the underdevelopment of his sense of touch as a mode of understanding and representing the material world.

The contemporary revalorization of touch in the museum has otherwise derived some impetus from requests by indigenous communities to either regain possession of or have hands-on access to ancestral artifacts owned by museums (Peers and Brown 2003; Krmpotich and Peers 2013). Marie-Pierre Gadoua's article, “Making Sense through Touch,” pertains to this trend. She describes a project in “collaborative archaeology” which she ran at the McCord Museum of Canadian History in Montreal. It involved inviting Inuit elders to share their knowledge about their traditional material culture through participating in handling sessions. In this exercise, it was the objects (e.g. hunting implements, a model kayak, and some items that had no known use) that posed the questions. The sessions were lively occasions, particularly once the gloves came off, both for the participants (on account of the social relations and storytelling

the objects prompted) and for the objects, which were temporarily “brought back to life” through being handled. The workshops led to the recovery and occasional discovery of “affordances” that the professional archaeologists and the curators present had never suspected, and the realization that, in the final analysis, the meaning of an object is in its use. Video clips of the workshops are to be integrated in the McCord Museum’s exhibitions and website, thereby constituting an “archive of the immaterial” (Leahy, this issue) alongside the collection itself.

In her remarks on the emotional benefits of the workshops (e.g. evoking cultural pride, alleviating stress – especially for those Inuit who were in Montreal on medical visits), Gadoua alludes to another growing area of research in sensory museology. It has to do with the renewal of interest in the healing value of museum artifacts. In 2007, researchers at University College London were awarded a £300,000 grant by the Arts and Humanities Research Council of the UK to study the therapeutic benefits of handling museum pieces. Recent studies undertaken in this area suggest that “handling museum objects can have a positive impact on patient wellbeing” (Chatterjee et al. 2009: 175). This points to a possible major new development for the use of touch in twenty-first-century museums, and one which evokes the healing role of touch in early museums.

The final article in this collection, by Julia T.S. Binter, analyses the display strategy of “versioning” as employed by Anette Hoffman in *What We See*. This exhibition, which was shown in Cape Town, South Africa, and Vienna, Austria was designed to trouble visitors’ visual perception of a collection of life-casts of Namibian people made by a German artist and self-proclaimed anthropologist in the 1930s. It did so by conjoining the sight of the casts with the voices of the Namibians (originally recorded on wax cylinders, then “forgotten,” but thanks to Hoffman’s diligence, tracked down and digitized). The casts were also set off by some very lively portraits of the speakers by contemporary South African artists. The resurrected voices spoke to the sensory deprivation and alienation of the colonial encounter (including the experience of being cast) in ways that had both an unsettling and profoundly conscientizing effect on the visitors.⁴

The reintroduction of touch to the museum has been further facilitated by the use of haptic interfaces employing digital technology. By combining a three-dimensional image of a virtual artifact with simulated sensations of touch produced by a desktop device that provides force feedback to the user’s fingertip, the digital technology known as haptics allows museum visitors to “feel” three-dimensional works of art without physically touching them (McLaughlin et al. 2002; Paterson 2007).

The progressive technologization of the sensorium (e.g. not only haptic devices but video screens, speaker systems, digitized scent machines, etc.) has generated other possibilities for the transformation of the museum and art gallery into sites where visitors

can exercise their senses, instead of holding them in check. The *Sensorium* exhibition at the MIT List Visual Arts Center (2006–7) curated by Caroline A. Jones and her team, which was dedicated to showcasing key works in new media art, was the first to take in-depth stock of the “hybrid moment” we live in – a moment “where modernist segregation of the senses is giving way to dramatic sensorial mixes, transmutations, and opportunities for intensified and playful mediation” (Jones 2006: 3). The works included singing microscopes, body-fluid architectures, odor-saturated walls, and mind-bending *son et lumière*. As Jones observes:

Contemporary artists emerging into this field of practice [i.e. new media art] come from backgrounds in sound engineering, video, performance, and installation art, from places ranging from rural New Mexico to “the new Europe.” They have responded to the appearance of new technologies in uniquely concrete and physical ways. Far from an imagined bodiless existence once celebrated as “virtual reality,” the art featured in *Sensorium* explores the modes by which sensing bodies (the rearguard “meat machines” of 1980s cyberculture) can now become technological to produce an amplified, connected, expanded but also disequilibrated corporeality – a new sensorium. (Jones 2006: 2)

One of the more far-reaching recent experiments in the technologization of aesthetics, which is also noteworthy for its cross-cultural ambitions, is *Displace* v. 1.0, a production of labXmodal and the Concordia Sensoria Research Team (CONCERT) led by Chris Salter, a professor of design and new media art. This installation, or “performative sensory environment,” was first staged in the Concordia Blackbox in November 2011. It ran for four days during the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Montreal. Billed as “a flight simulator for anthropologists,” the interesting thing about *Displace* is that it was an exhibition without any objects, only qualia. Inspired by the multisensory cosmology of an Amazonian society, visitors (in groups of six) navigated three successive chambers (over a period of 45 minutes) during which they were immersed in a symphony of sensations which included unusual combinations of flavors delivered in the form of liquids and jellies, an assortment of odors, vibrating surfaces, a rotating platform, an enveloping fog, waves of heat, and a giant hexagon formed of sheets of light that shifted color in sync with a computer-generated soundtrack. The exhibition opened a crack in the Western sensorium and enabled visitors to temporarily inhabit a parallel sensory world. During the discussion session that followed, visitors were invited to share their associations and reflect on the role of the senses as portals of reality, or rather realities.⁵

To sum up, in the museum of the twenty-first century, the senses are making a comeback. Didactic instruction has increasingly come

to be supplemented by multimodal approaches to learning, disinterested contemplation has been offset by affective participation, and the authority to interpret objects has been redistributed. From a site for “single sense epiphanies” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 58) the museum, in at least some cases, is becoming a kind of sensory gymnasium. While at times the new emphasis on experiencing the properties of things might remain at the level of “sensationalism,” it also has the potential to recreate the museum as an exciting place of historical, cross-cultural, and aesthetic discovery and inspiration.

Acknowledgments

The articles included here by Constance Classen, Helen Rees Leahy, Sandra Dudley, and Julia T.S. Binter were first presented as part of a panel I organized on “Experiencing Collections: Display, Performance and the Senses” at the conference of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences at Manchester University in August 2013. The articles by Marie-Pierre Gadoua and Mark Clintberg are based on research carried out in connection with the Sensory Museum project headed by Constance Classen, with the support of the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada. I am grateful to all of the authors for their stimulating contributions to this special issue.

Notes

1. This journal has been tracking developments in the area of sensory museology since its inception, in the “Exhibition and Conference Reviews” section. Reading those reviews alongside the articles in this collection will provide a fuller appreciation of this vital new branch of sensory studies.
2. In addition to smell and taste now figuring as suitable topics for investigation and exhibition (e.g. *The Art of Scent 1889–2012* show at the Museum of Art and Design in 2013), there is a growing emphasis on the multisensoriality of museum objects and on the importance of enabling visitors to experience “the properties of things” directly instead of only via labels or being told what to look for (Edwards et al. 2006; Dudley 2010, 2012). This stress on the experiential is one of the hallmarks of sensory museology. For the latest word on these developments see *The Multisensory Museum: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on Touch, Sound, Smell, Memory, and Space*, edited by Nina Levent, executive director of Art beyond Sight, and Alvaro Pascual-Leone, professor of neurology at Harvard Medical School.
3. At first, hands-on offerings at mainstream museums tended to be child-oriented, in keeping with the modern notion of touch as an “infantile” or “primitive” means of comprehending the world (see Classen 2001). Adults, it was assumed, would better relate to museum exhibits through the more “mature” and “intellectual” medium of sight. At the turn of the twenty-first century, however, curators recognized that visiting children were accompanied by

adults and, in fact, often provided a motivation for adults to visit a museum. Hands-on activities involving the whole family were therefore increasingly made available. As one scholar of museum display practices has written “Today the value of touch for every museum visitor is widely recognized” (Pearson 1991: 122).

4. The impact of playing different senses off against each other, or engaging different senses in different parts of an exhibition, was highlighted by Gedis Lankauskas in his sensory analysis of the set-up of a socialist theme park located on the outskirts of Grūtas, Lithuania, which appeared in the inaugural issue of this journal (Lankauskas 2006). There, Lankauskas documents how the medium of food elicited very different social comportments and emotional reactions from the medium of sight. See further the highly innovative sensory display strategies discussed by the contributors to *Museum Materialities* (Dudley 2010).
5. For an anthropological review of *Displace* see Nicole Labruto, “A Play of Senses”: <http://sensatejournal.com/2012/03/review-nicole-labruto-on-displace-v-1-0/>. For the artist’s own account see *Alien Agency* (Salter 2014).

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