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The Multisensory Museum

Traditionally, museums have been visual – ‘Do Not Touch’ – spaces. However, interactive and multisensory media are increasingly being used to help pursue wider democratic goals of appealing to new and more diverse audiences. This essay examines how one museum, Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum in Glasgow (Scotland), has sought to reconfigure its sensory regimes of display. It discusses the incorporation of multiple sensory logics and queries whether one potential result of such mixings is a kind of *sensory disorientation*.

Key words:

museum; Glasgow;
multisensory; touch;
display; disorientation

We live in a society of the image, a markedly visual culture, in which, while there may be representations of touch, there is often nothing there to feel ...

The inability to touch the subject matter of the images that surround us, even through these have a tremendous impact on our lives, produces a sense of alienation

(Classen 2005: 2).

The ubiquitous ‘Do Not Touch’ sign in many museums communicates absences and presences. Tactile engagement with objects and bodily experience is predominantly absent. Present is a sensory hierarchy so taken for granted it is scarcely visible. That instruction is needed at all suggests a deep and inherent desire amongst people to seek out a tactile closeness to things. This closeness is not always satisfied in modern museums where collections are predominantly configured for visual consumption.

Despite this emphasis, some museums are attempting to broaden sensory experience. In this essay I examine how one particular museum, Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum in Glasgow (Scotland), has attempted through a recent refurbishment project (2003-2006) to integrate more multisensory modes of display. This is part of a broader attempt to rework its legacy as a Victorian municipal museum and achieve contemporary ambitions to increase ‘access’ and ‘inclusion’ to the Museum and its collections. While this may be the desired outcome for multi-

sensory models, I propose that *sensory disorientation* might also result from incorporating several different, and at times contradictory, sensual logics within the museum space. Rather than seeing this as a deficiency on behalf of either the Museum or the visitor, I conclude the essay by making a plea for considering the productive potential of any such disorientation.

Please Do Not Touch: the Disappearing Body

Touch has not always been exiled from the museum (see Classen 2005; Edwards, Gosden and Phillips 2006, 18-19). In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century museums it was not only permitted but actively encouraged. Classen (2005) tells us how the curator (or keeper) of a collection would offer tours, while providing information and allowing visitors to hold, handle, feel, press, shake, prod, and even wear objects. This, she suggests, was a way of enacting ‘ancient notions of hospitality’ and ‘as polite guests, [visitors] were expected to show their interest and goodwill by asking questions and by touching the proffered objects’ (275). Mimicking earlier scientific practices, touch (along with smell, hearing, and taste) was an important sensory facet used in empirical investigation.¹ Through multisensory exploration visitors could apprehend material qualities of an object, such as weight, shape, texture, odor, and construction, which might not be experienced by sight alone. In addition, Classen (2005, 278) suggests that beyond empiricism this provided visitors with: an intimate experience of objects and by extension peoples and places, allowed them to ‘access the mysterious powers popularly associated with the rare and the curious’, and facilitated an aesthetic appreciation of objects.

With the rise of the modern museum in the nineteenth century² the sensorial range of experience narrowed. The museum became an institution embodying the ‘hegemony of vision’ (Levin 1993). Sight became the primary means through which objects were encountered. The catalysts for this shift are multiple, complex, and, according to Classen (2005, 281), specific to both the museum and broader socio-cultural change. At its core the modern public museum sought to reconfigure the status of, and relations between, objects and people. With the opening of the museum doors to more diverse audiences, rules, regulations, and display techniques enforced learnt bodily conduct. Prescribed behavior was aimed to educate and civilize visitors; transforming individual bodies into collective citizens for newly emergent democratic states (Bennett 1995, Duncan 1995).³ Corporeality faded from the

¹ Roberts 2005 provides an interesting account of the decline of the ‘sensuous chemist’. She charts changes in technology and argues that as scientists increasingly relied on sighting ‘the calibrated readings of highly complex experimental apparatus’ (106) the human senses were subordinated. Prior to this, argues Roberts, the use of taste, smell, hearing, and touch were trained to be skilled tools in scientific experiment.

² For an account of the birth of the public museum (that is, the transferral of collections to large, state-sponsored institutions which, in theory at least, were open to all) see Bennett 1995.

³ Some scholars suggest that museums still adhere to these disciplinary models. Marstine 2006, 25 claims the result is a sceptical position that museums do not (and cannot) change (see Preziosi and

museum which became a ‘ritual’ space (Duncan 1995) transforming both persons and things. Visitors were no longer encouraged to touch objects,⁴ nor run, talk loudly, eat, or drink in the museum. Displays were to be engaged with via sight alone, thus determining the very act of museum going and consumption of objects. This visual paradigm was enforced by new technologies including: barriers and glass cases to separate objects from spectators, lighting to ensure visitors could see effectively thereby negating the need for touch, and regulated routes through museum spaces (Classen 2005, 282). Importantly, as Classen (282-283) discusses, the effectiveness of a visual paradigm relied on changing public attitudes toward museum objects. By removing objects from everyday circulation they were arrested in a timeless state of perpetuity and their status was aggrandized to one of ‘resonance’ and ‘wonder’ (Greenblatt 1991). In the modern museum visitors were repositioned as less important than, and potential hazards to, objects. Objects were now to be revered and protected from dirt, theft, and environmental conditions such as temperature and humidity (Classen 2005, 282-283, Edwards et al. 2006, 20).

Changing Sensory Regimes

The very visualism of modernity has, so to speak, thrown a cloak of invisibility over the sensory imagery of previous eras. So thick is this cloak that one can scarcely see through it, or even recognize that there might be something worth exploring underneath. When this cloak is lifted, however, the cosmos suddenly blazes forth in multisensory splendor: the heavens ring out with music, the planets radiate scents and savors, the earth springs to life in colors, temperatures, and sounds (Classen 1998: 1).

The foregrounding of the visual in the museum reveals a complex interplay of the (re)classification of people, things, and values. This process created and maintained social orders and ideologies. Increasingly, scholars investigating museums as a ‘way of seeing’ (Alpers 1991), or the politics of the gaze in the museum, have come to scrutinize the role that these institutions have played in marginalizing, excluding, or misrepresenting people through ‘models of class, sexual, and cultural difference’ (Sherman and Rogoff 1994, xviii). They have argued that an emphasis on the visual has come to obscure and marginalize; a central tendency of the modern gaze is to control and subjugate. Calls for change have emerged and, in contemporary museum practice, one notable shift has been an opening up of sensory experience. This has resulted in a move away from visual paradigms to harness the potential of multisensory experience to achieve democratic goals. Open museums,

Farago 2004). The ability of museums to change from earlier disciplinary models has become one of the most pressing questions in contemporary museum scholarship and practice, as recognized by Hooper-Greenhill 1992, 1; Carbonell 2004, 2; Marstine 2006, 5-6; Knell, MacLeod and Watson 2007.

⁴ This is not to say that touch was completely abandoned in the museum. It was still permitted for curators (albeit now through a gloved hand). Object handling became strictly controlled and reflects boundaries of newly emerging professional values, expertise, skills, and authority.

heritage parks, and science centres have been especially inclined to experiment with incorporating the non-visual.

Parallels may be found in what has been called the ‘sensual turn’ in ethnographic practice (Stoller 1989, Howes 1991). This is not surprising given Lurie’s (1981) claim that museums are the institutional homeland of anthropology. For anthropologists such as Stoller (1989, 50), grounding analysis in senses other than visual observation, while critically engaging with sensory categorizations (the researcher’s included), may also address some of the problematic representational issues of ethnographic writing including authority, voice, and authenticity. These are issues which museums as a specific type of ethnographic ‘writing’ have also encountered. Furthermore, Stoller (1989, 8) argues that a sensual anthropology will attract a greater readership for the discipline by speaking to multiple audiences. Similar rationales characterize the incorporation of multisensory experiences in contemporary museums. The increased use of digital and electronic media can be understood, to draw on Classen’s (2005, 404) phrase, as one way of situating museums in an increasingly ‘push button culture’ to compete for new audiences and mass appeal. The use of new media to facilitate sensory experience raises interesting questions about the nature of bodily engagement. What, for instance, is the ‘body’ in an increasingly virtual and hyper-real world? How may the acts of touching, smelling, tasting, or hearing take on new meanings as they are mediated through these technologies?

Although there has been a turning back to multisensory practices, it should not be assumed that these models are analogous with earlier museum concepts.⁵ Given that contemporary museums are operating in vastly different and continually shifting technological, social, political, and economic worlds – smaller than ever before with the rise of mass communication and reassembled borders – new and very different types of sensual museums may be emerging. Karp, Kratz, Szwaja, and Ybarra-Frausto (2006) make a similar point, more generally, about museums in global cultures.

Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum

Current literature claims that multisensory approaches have been particularly embraced by ‘postmodern, entertainment-orientated museum venues’ (Drobnick 2005, 266). There is scope to examine how other types of museums might also be engaging with new models of practice. Including those that are not purpose built and whose collections have been acquired, interpreted, and consumed through visual paradigms. The site that I am most familiar with is Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum.⁶

⁵ Bann 2003, 117-118 explores the contemporary revival of earlier concepts of the museum including the cabinet of curiosity. Evans and Marr 2006 remind us not to assume that contemporary ideas of ‘curiosity’ are the same as earlier understandings. They may be directed toward different social, political, and cultural ends.

⁶This is the site for my ongoing doctoral ethnographic fieldwork.

Kelvingrove is at once a ‘new’ and an ‘old’ museum. While the ‘new’ Kelvingrove is described as an ‘inclusive, self-reflexive [institution], respectful of diversity, and permissive rather than prescriptive’ (Rees Leahy 2006), it has also been called the ‘last and greatest achievement of the Victorian municipal museum movement’ (O’Neill 2007, 380). It is the largest of Glasgow’s museums. Opened to the public in 1901, its collections are an eclectic mix of decorative and fine arts, natural history, archaeology, anthropology, and arms and armour objects. These have been described by Neil MacGregor, Director of the British Museum, as ‘one of the supreme European civic collections’ (cited in Fitzgerald 2005, 133).

In 2003 the Museum was closed for three years to undergo a major refurbishment: The Kelvingrove New Century Project. This was a £27.9 million project – the beginnings of which can be located in the 1990s when it was felt that the Museum, infrastructure, and facilities required updating to better serve contemporary audiences. The project would restore the building and improve access, provide new visitor facilities and education spaces, put more objects on display and, ultimately, create an ‘object-based, visitor-centered, storytelling’ museum (O’Neill 2007, 379). The overall aim of this refurbishment was to enhance physical, emotional, and intellectual access to the building and its collections.

One of the most striking outcomes of the project was a reconfiguration of existing displays. Prior to the refurbishment, displays were organized according to chronological and taxonomic principles. The fine arts were housed on the upper floor and remaining collections on the ground floor in themed galleries including arms and armour, archaeology, musical instruments, egyptology, ethnography, and natural history (Fitzgerald 2005, 137). In the ‘new’ Kelvingrove objects from across the collections are juxtaposed according to multidisciplinary display organizing principles. Curatorial staff have explained how these mixings are intended to, ‘act as a visual grab, encouraging visitors to look at a wider variety of objects – getting an art lover to appreciate geology, or a naturalist to look at furniture in a new light’ (Rutherford, Sutcliffe and Robinson 2007).

A Multisensory Museum

While objects have been repositioned through new organizing principles, it is also important to explore sensory shifts in the context of this museum. Given a chance to re-display its collections in what ways might Kelvingrove become more multisensory? It is certainly evident that the ‘new’ Kelvingrove has become a more multisensory and interactive museum. Through the use of diverse media, visitors are encouraged to engage with displays in bodily, sensorial, emotive, and immersive ways. This sensory shift is aligned to wider democratic ideals (‘access’ and ‘inclusion’) and conceptualizations of visitors (‘active’ and ‘engaged’).

One of the first pointers that new sensory approaches are being taken is the removal of the glass case. Some objects are housed in more traditional ways, but open display has also been used. There are less physical deterrents such as glass, ropes, and barriers. Objects on open display are raised on wooden plinths, posi-

tioned at arms length, and use inbuilt lighting to illuminate the edges of the plinths. These ‘psychological barriers’ are intended to discourage visitors from touching objects as well as walking, climbing, or sitting on plinths. Removing overtly visual deterrents communicates a desire to incorporate a new understanding of collections and visitor experience in the Museum – in particular, the aim of ‘making collections safely accessible’ (O’Neill 2007, 383). The use of open display is one way that a closer and more subjective experience of objects might occur.

Paradigmatic shifts are more explicitly manifest and taken further in the Museum through increased opportunity for multisensory experience and interactive engagement. To examine these it is useful to draw on Losche’s (2006, 224) argument that ‘modernity has two opposed and sometimes contradictory discourses regarding the sensory imaginary in the museological tradition’. These are a desire for distanced overview (the panoptic gaze) in contrast to a discourse of immersion. While these can be associated with different historical, as well as institutional epochs of museum practice, Losche encourages a close reading of the sensory logics that inform different modes of representation within a single site at a single time. She argues for a focus on their hybrid and interconnected nature claiming that, ‘what characterizes the twentieth-century liberal and progressive museum tradition is a dual goal: to present a panorama to observers, but also to immerse them in a foreign place via the construction of an imaginary sensory environment that transports the viewer’ (227). In other words, different, opposing, or even contradictory discourses of the sensory imaginary may coexist within a single museum.

It is impossible to give a singular reading of the more multisensory displays that were integrated through the refurbishment project. However, one of the key aims was to make things accessible to people for examination through touch. Handling objects, replicas, reproductions, models, and interactives have been incorporated. Interactives are both manual (where visitors are invited to touch, move, push, pull, or feel three-dimensional models and aids) as well as electronic (where visitors undertake activities on touch-screen computers or listen to and view audiovisuals). These are situated in gallery spaces and three ‘discovery centres’ for art, history and technology, and the environment. Manual interactives provide opportunities, amongst other things, for visitors to feel fur or feathers, wrap a model of an Egyptian mummy in bandages, operate anatomical models of animals, or dress up in costume. These are intended to complement and interact with objects on display to provide learning opportunities. For visitors with visual impairment sensory aids are provided, including the use of three-dimensional painting touch boards in guided tours to turn, as Classen (1998, 148) puts it, ‘the skin into a tactile eye’. Workshops with learning assistants give school groups, as well as more general visitors, the opportunity to handle ‘real’ objects as well as models and replicas. This is set within a wider educational remit of ‘hands on learning’ (Lane and Wallace 2007). Lane and Wallace (8) describe learning with objects as offering children:

The opportunity to use all their senses to explore and respond to what is around them. This sensory experience of touch, sight, smell, sound and sometimes taste, encourages new ideas, feelings and thoughts, which spark curiosity, questioning, exploration and discovery.

Mimicking earlier concepts of the museum, where tactile investigation was used as a form of sensory empiricism, visitors become active bodies in the museum experience. New media provide opportunities for visitors through seeing, listening, and touching to understand objects in a more comprehensive manner.

While sensory empiricism may echo the panoptic model (or a desire to gain a comprehensive overview of objects from a distanced position) the more immersive discourse that Losche (2006) identifies is also evident at Kelvingrove. The ‘cultural survival’ gallery, for example, uses moving images and sound through audiovisual media to situate ethnographic objects (including a pair of Torres Strait Islands ceremonial turtle posts) in an environment more akin to that from which they originate. The inclusion of sound, video footage of a turtle swimming underwater, and graphic panels of an island scene create the type of ‘imaginary sensory environment’ that Losche (227) discusses. This may be one way that display techniques might evoke the ‘dynamic multisensory life of the artifact in its culture of origin’ (Classen and Howes 2006, 212). Certainly, some of the more interesting experiments in the sensual turn in museum practice have occurred with displays of non-Western people. Interventions where objects are placed in more holistic and often multisensory contexts can function to provide meta-critique on the museum by illuminating the constructed nature of museum categories like ‘art’ and ‘artefact’. Other case studies demonstrate how this might be taken even further than it is at Kelvingrove.⁷

An immersive environment is most evident at Kelvingrove in the ‘object cinema’. Through theatrical and cinematic sensory modalities this is a space not for touching and doing but for feeling and sensation. Visitors are enveloped in a visceral, emotive, and open-ended interpretive space broadly themed around the arctic environment. Cinematic techniques are used including: a darkened room, spotlighting of objects, illuminated floor panels, projection of moving images, and surround sound. There is no obviously coherent narrative to the projected looped images which are broadly themed around titles of ‘festivals’, ‘aurora’, ‘winter’, ‘summer’, ‘food’, and ‘movement’. Prompted by a brief label at the entrance to this standalone room visitors are invited to consider the ‘harsh environment’ of life in the arctic. Thus, similar to immersive exhibits elsewhere, the use of theatrical media attempts to evoke the environment from which objects have been extracted (Henning 2006, 57). Prompted to imagine and identify with the lives of others visitors are encouraged to take on an active role by forming a relationship to displayed objects through affective response. Significantly, this space demonstrates how interac-

⁷ One exhibition I am especially familiar with is *ReDress* (1997). This was an installation by a collective of Pacific Islands artists in the Pacific Hall at the Auckland Museum (New Zealand), see Morgan 2004. The artists’ aim was to completely redisplay objects through the addition of the sound of drums, the scent of frangipani flowers, dimmed lighting, and materials including *tapa* (bark) cloth draped over display cases and river rocks placed on the floor. By creating a more holistic sensory environment for objects housed in the museum, the artists hoped to redress perceived grievances towards traditional modes of display. This included categorizing objects as either ‘art’ or ‘artefact’, presenting Pacific Island culture as static, and objects as inanimate.

tion may not require any physical exertion, movement, or bodily engagement, but may be made manifest through more passive and even still experiences.

Sensory Disorientation

Kelvingrove offers us a new museum paradigm, more like a magazine than an encyclopaedia ... Yet I have been surprised by the reaction of UK curators and directors. Several have told me they like Kelvingrove, but they do not plan to adopt its approach, as it won't work for their museum, which will be a bit safer and more conventional. (Davies 2008, 11)

The two discourses that Losche (2006) outlines are present to varying degrees within different 'sensespaces' (Howes 2005, 143) in the 'new' Kelvingrove. The refurbishment bundled these shifts into a wider sensorial-political discourse of 'access' and 'inclusion'. It was hoped that new methods of display would engage more diverse audiences and provide varied experiences in the Museum. Sensory engagement is harnessed to facilitate physical (closeness), emotional (visceral), and intellectual (sensual empiricism) access. Although widening access to the Museum and its collections, it is also possible that opening up the sensory regime of display can result, on occasion, in *sensory disorientation*. Fletcher (2005: 380) uses an analogous term to discuss an illness of environmental sensitivities – that of 'dystopos-thesia, abnormal place experience' or 'the incompatibility of bodies to the space they inhabit'.⁸ Sensory disorientation is hinted at through public response to new approaches and dilemmas experienced around open display.

Since reopening it has become apparent that not all visitors acquiesce to new sensory models. Some public critique aimed at the use of new media in the Museum brings the (by now) familiar education or entertainment debate to this context. This debate demonstrates response to a shifting 'phenomenological architecture' (Drobnick 2005) or aesthetics of engagement at Kelvingrove. The desire for dedicated quiet spaces (amongst some visitors) could be understood to reflect a response to new kinds of aesthetics; a move away from aesthetics of contemplation (Classen 1998, 149) to that of multiplicity. Kelvingrove has a particularly rich, varied, and blurred soundscape including audiovisual technologies, museum tours, excited children, daily organ recitals, the cafe, announcements over loudspeakers, and so on. Moreover, Classen (1998, 149) tells us that touch, unlike sight, does not distance but unites viewers and spectators through an intimate encounter. She explains that the 'detached air of contemplation which is supposed to characterize the aesthetic attitude in the West becomes impossible as art work and art connoisseur are joined'.

Dilemmas of open display likewise hint at sensory disorientation among some visitors. Since the reopening a number of more traditional 'Please Do Not

⁸ Fletcher 2005, 380 explores the 'physical, affective, and behavioral "reactions" to ... environmental triggers' including the incompatibility of sufferers' bodies to scents and odors.

Touch' signs have been placed on open displays and, in some instances, new barriers erected. This is in response to incidents of visitors touching objects, as well as climbing, walking, or sitting on plinths. It would be glib to claim that this is an outright failing of open display or that audiences are deliberately recalcitrant. Rather, it demonstrates that there remain in the Museum non-negotiable principles around museological concepts including the 'safety', 'accessibility', 'care', and 'value' of museum objects first introduced with the birth of the modern museum. This is not surprising given the historical legacy of Kelvingrove as a Victorian museum. These notions are far from closed given that, within this single museum, there are a range of objects with different tactile status. Furthermore, it suggests that in accordance with the refurbishment goals, the Museum is appealing to new audiences – audiences who do not necessarily share understandings of the above notions. With the abandonment of visual instructions these displays rest on visitors holding implicit knowledge about permissible interaction. Open display is activated through the self-governing visitor. It relies on a complete internalization by viewers of appropriate codes of conduct with the abandonment of reminders like barriers or glass cases.

More importantly, these dilemmas hint at a kind of sensory disorientation. Given that the Museum, as the above discussion has begun to suggest, is now a mixed and somewhat heterotopic sensorial space (or a space that combines differing sensory logics), relationships between objects and visitors shift as visitors physically move around the Museum. As they traverse the building the grounds of museum experience and engagement shift and shift again. Touching objects on open display may demonstrate, amongst other things, disorientation within these changing sense-scapes. It could be said to be a response to multiplicity where before there was coherency, as well as complexity over simplicity.

It is important to remember that the heterotopic can be productive. Multi-disciplinary displays at Kelvingrove aim to use the potential of unusual and unexpected juxtapositions to allow for creative and individual engagement with displays. Likewise, although Fletcher (2005, 381) couches discussion of dystoposthesia in terminology like 'disease' or 'illness', 'divergent qualities', and 'abnormal' experience, he simultaneously describes how 'sufferers' undertake a literal and metaphorical voyage as they 'search for new places of bodily coordination and reshape locations to the requirements of their conditions ... by reforming place'. Through the techniques used to manage this illness sufferers are 'afforded new views of the social practices they can no longer support' (390), while social landscapes are remade 'through the mediation of the actions and meanings embedded in social spaces' (392). In other words, being out of place can result in place being remade. This is a process that is as inherently productive and creative as it is disorientating. Similarly, it is useful to free any notions of sensorial disorientation from being interpreted as a deficiency. Rather, this may be an inherent outcome of multifaceted sensory spaces which draw on divergent discourses to (re)position viewers and objects in shifting interpretive relationships.

By learning to see productive potential in experiential disjuncture the pressing question becomes not how to resort to a singular sensorial discourse, or capture a degree of coherency that has been abandoned, but how to harness the generative

qualities of more fluid sensorial models. Just as Fletcher's (2005) discussion suggests that dystoposthesia has potential to remake space, one of the generative potentials of sensory disorientation may be that it has the ability to redraw the conceptual boundaries of the museum. Boundaries which not only define the museum experience but the very foundations upon which these institutions have been built. To conclude, it could be queried whether by harnessing more open and varied sensory regimes as a vehicle for change, museums are beginning to move away from being ways of seeing to ways of sensing? And, if so, then what exactly are we left with?⁹ Perhaps it is this question, the question of what comes after leaving behind ways of seeing, that is most problematic for new museums and existing institutions which are embracing change. While difficult, the space emerging from this tension is also one that could hold rich potential for reinventing the museum. Ultimately, as visitors are allowed creative opportunities to touch or otherwise engage in a bodily manner with the museum and its contents, this institution might touch the visitor in increasingly potent ways.

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⁹ Stoller 1989 asks a similar question regarding the sensual turn in anthropology.

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Џени Морган

Вишечулни музеји

Традиционално, музеји су били визуелни простори у којима није било пуно места за примање утисака чулом додира. Међутим, интерактивни и мултисензорни музеји се све више употребљавају у циљу привлачења нове публике у музеје. У овом раду се разматрају начини на који је један од традиционалних музеја – Уметничка галерија Келвингрове у Гласгову покушала да реконституише „сензорни режим“ своје поставке. У раду се даље расправља о томе да ли овај одговор на проблеме доминација чула вида и инкорпорација нове „мултисензорске логике“ у музејску праксу доводи до одређене врсте „чулне дезоријентације“ у организацији и перцепцији музејских поставки.

Кључне речи :

музеј, Глазгов,
вишечулни, додир,
дисплеј,
дезоријентација