

A black and white photograph of a lizard on a log. The lizard is on the left, facing right. The log is on the left, extending towards the center. A tree shadow is cast on the log and the ground to the right. The background is dark. The text 'Manifesto' and 'Edited by Therese Quinn & Elisa Soto' is at the bottom right.

M Manifesto
Edited by Therese Quinn & Elisa Soto

Multisensory / Museum Spaces and the Body / mind

Alice Timmins

The issue of disability and access

is gaining greater awareness, particularly in the context of the global pandemic, where many Americans with disabilities feel dismissed and vulnerable¹ and millions more have *become* disabled through Long Covid.² It is important and timely to ask, what more can museums do to create access for visitors with disabilities? One approach, which is becoming more prevalent within the museum field, employs multisensory stimuli to engage visitors on a bodily and emotional level. Museum scholar, Leslie Bedford, has described the increased focus on the “bodily basis of cognition” as a “global shift in the cultural zeitgeist.”³ She suggests that contemporary exhibition models place increasing emphasis on sensory and emotional experiences. Indeed, one museum in the Netherlands, the Van Abbemuseum, has reinterpreted an entire collection and is offering visitors a range of smells, sounds, and tactual stimuli to convey the sensory features and meanings of museum objects. This approach, referred to as sensory museology, complements standard access features and provides an additional

level of intellectual access.

Multisensory approaches benefit *all* visitors through experiences that speak to the “bodymind.” This term, used in the field of disability studies, emphasizes the interrelatedness of the body and mind, which have long been thought of as separate. It also rejects the segregation of mental health and physical manifestations of disability. As scholar Margaret Price acknowledges, “mental and physical processes not only affect each other but also give rise to each other.”⁴

We have historically compartmentalized our bodily experiences and similarly perceived each sense as a distinct system. This, however, distorts the reality of human sensory experience. In fact, we process our experiences in multiple modes, as our brains gather together all our sensory inputs to inform our observations of our environment.⁵ Because our senses are in fact integrated, museum experiences are unavoidably multisensory experiences.

Traditionally, however, museums have resisted multisensory modes of display and interpretation due to “Western intellectual traditions,”⁶ which value language, the written word, and verbal ability as a mode of learning. This is most obvious in art museums where the influence of Enlightenment thinkers, who

insisted that art should be a visual experience only, lingers. Visitors are expected to read the wall labels, gaze at artworks, and “become all detached contemplation.”⁷ Scholar Fiona Candlin also points to the founders of art history, Aloïs Riegl, Heinrich Wölfflin, and Erwin Panofsky, as setting vision apart from the other senses— touch, in particular. Their theories contend that art, and the ability to interpret through the senses, progressed throughout time and geography, reaching its apex in the ‘civilized’ West. For these thinkers, vision, the supposedly rational and objective sense, sat in opposition to tactility, which was associated with childhood and the “generically non-west.”⁸ Candlin summarizes these concepts as “patriarchal, disembodied, ocularcentric aesthetics.”⁹ Their ideas were contingent on a belief that the senses function independently of one another, and that the mind and the body were separate.

Developments in neuroscience have dispelled this assumption. Nina Levent and Alvaro Pascual-Leone discuss the implications for museology in their interdisciplinary study, *The Multisensory Museum: Cross-disciplinary Perspectives on Touch, Sounds, Smell, Memory, and Space*. The authors call on museum professionals to consider the “combined and complex interactions between visual, auditory, olfactory, spatial”

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experiences and the opportunities that such a multisensory approach could provide visitors.¹⁰ Levent and D. Lynn McRainey observe how sensory offerings have been embraced in children’s museums to encourage curiosity from its young visitors.¹¹ Science museums also foster exploration through interactive exhibits which often feature touch and sound. Sensory prohibitions are mostly found in museums of art, ethnography, and history, which display culturally significant objects. There appears to be a shift, however, as many institutions are encouraging visitors to actively engage more of their senses. The Mauritshuis, for example, recently used sensory stimuli to illuminate historical and art-historical perspectives in new ways. The exhibition, *Fleeting—Scents in Colour*, explored how scent can offer “narratives and insights” into the past by recreating historical odors and pairing them with seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish art.¹² Immersing visitors in the atmosphere of the past through scent increases the potential of communication to “successfully transfer concepts, information, [and] emotions.”¹³ This could be thought of as an enhanced method of access where, in combination with a baseline of access features, the visitor has the option to reach an additional level of intellectual access.¹⁴

While museums are required to

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provide physical access for disabled visitors, disability advocates are looking to institutions to provide a greater level of intellectual access to museum content. After all, ableism is more than a set of stairs. Heather Pressman and Danielle Schulz, museum professionals and the authors of *The Art of Access: A Practical Guide for Museum Accessibility*, stress the importance of cognitive and sensory access, alongside inclusive exhibitions, programming, and language practices, partnerships with disability organizations and communities, professional development and staff training within the institution, and digital and financial access.¹⁵

Museums and cultural workers are rediscovering the power of sensory stimuli on visitors and its potential to create accessible museum spaces. Independent curator and critic, Amanda Cachia, argues that access requires curators to advocate for both conceptual and physical components. Cachia curated two exhibitions that stimulated physical, cognitive, and sensorial outcomes in visitors through “tactile elements, sound, captions, and audio description.”¹⁶ At the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, visitors attending an exhibition about textiles were able to hold tools and touch fabric and thread. Caroline Goeser, the Chair of the Department of Learning

and Interpretation, recognizes that visitors require “many entry points” into museum content that “might connect with their personal lives.”¹⁷ Arts and culture writer, Alina Cohen, points out that “tactile experiences... transcend nearly all social barriers.”¹⁸

Opportunities to touch objects, usually through touch tours, is a strategy that museums have historically used to provide access for blind and low vision communities.¹⁹ In a study conducted in 2011, participants in focus groups composed of blind or low vision museumgoers detailed their enthusiasm for tactile interpretation; they described their past experiences of touching an object or replica as highly memorable and informative.²⁰ Touch tours are able to address the issue of intellectual access, in addition to physical access. Not only do they give visitors the chance to learn about objects through direct handling, but they provide a forum for visitors’ responses and support discussion. Beyer et al. reported, however, that many focus group participants resisted special access days that might segregate disabled and non-disabled visitors. Of course, sighted people can also learn through tactual access.

Candlin provides a number of examples that demonstrate how some artworks can be more fully understood through touch. For

example, the “smooth, slippery surfaces” of Jeff Koons’ *Rabbit* (1986) speaks to the “shininess [that] was prevalent in 1980s art,” and indicate ideas about artistic processes and “the rejection of the artist’s hand.”²¹ This suggests that tactual engagement with objects that are deeply informed by their materiality should be available to *all* visitors. Touching objects is popular with museumgoers and as such, a handling table can now be found in the British Museum. While the inclusion of permanent touch tables goes further to ensure access for disabled visitors on spontaneous trips, often the objects are not representative of the entire collection, having been chosen for their durability.²²

Replicas offer visitors the chance to handle objects which, in their original form, are too delicate to be touched. Indeed, touch tours often require visitors to wear nitrile gloves, which can mask some of the finer details of an object’s texture. Copies recreated with 3D scanning and printing increase the depth of experience for sighted visitors and, of course, provide access for blind and low-vision visitors. Museums now have greater access to 3D scanning and printing due to technological advancements and affordability.²³

Audio guides and image descriptions

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are some of the more conventional and widely used access methods. Audio guides, which provide curatorial interpretations, are readily available to museum visitors, while highly descriptive audio guides or image descriptions aimed at blind and low-vision people are now becoming more common. In the 2011 study by Beyer et al., the authors found that the participants were enthusiastic about highly descriptive audio guides, and expressed a desire to be emotionally, as well as intellectually, stimulated when visiting art museums.²⁴ One example shows how emotive a sensory approach can be, *and* how designing an audio guide for disabled visitors can benefit the visitor experience for everyone. The Guggenheim’s *Mind’s Eye: A Sensory Guide to the Guggenheim New York*, is intended for blind and low-vision communities, but it has been described by actor and *Mind’s Eye* narrator Marilee Talkington (who is blind) as being “for everybody.”²⁵ Narrated by a range of local voices, the audio guide begins by describing the New York streets leading up to the museum, and offers a detailed account of the architectural space and its impact: “We feel compressed, not only by the shape of the walls but also by the color: a deep dark red, which stands in stark contrast to the rest of the building’s bright tones.”²⁶ An additional feature is its inclusion of music, which

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plays behind the descriptions like a soundtrack, creating a contemplative mood. Ambient sounds, such as hiccups and a noisy room packed with people, also weave in and out as soundscapes to the narrative. The inclusion of such techniques makes *Mind’s Eye* compelling for those who cannot physically visit the museum, such as those with chronic illness, and interprets the space in an emotive way.

Anne Kelly, experience designer and producer, suggests binaural audio techniques are underutilized in museums where audio guides are already heavily employed to act “as a narrative or curatorial overlay.”²⁷ Binaural recordings recreate how humans naturally hear sounds, being optimized to recreate a sense of distance and better immerse the listener. Kelly argues that binaural audio techniques can be employed to “cut to your audience’s core and quickly immerse them in a different time and place.”²⁸ Such techniques would be particularly effective in creating a richer understanding of historical periods and unfamiliar cultures. This would “draw people deeper into the stories”²⁹ and strengthen engagement. Institutions could use these techniques to create a richer experience for all visitors and particularly for those who can only engage with exhibitions from their homes.

The pandemic has put many

museums in a precarious financial situation, but there are compelling reasons to consider multisensory strategies as museums seek to attract wider audiences and ensure they are relevant to diverse populations. Concerns that an increase in touching is unsanitary and puts visitors at risk of COVID-19 are understandable, but evidence shows that indirect contact from a contaminated surface is not the dominant form of viral transmission. The future of integrated multisensory exhibits will depend on museums’ commitment to accessibility and, for art museums, a willingness to let go of traditional, ocularcentric perspectives of art history. Questions might be raised over the expense and complexity of implementing multisensory experiences, but I believe a lack of intentionality is the real barrier to this approach.

Lately, the Van Abbemuseum has overcome these barriers and demonstrated the feasibility of multisensory approaches in an exhibition of its permanent collection.³⁰ Named *Delinking and Relinking* in English (*Dwarsverbanden* in Dutch), the exhibition is the result of a new presentation of their collection holdings which includes “35 multi-sensory interventions” including tactile reliefs, scent cards, and musical interpretations.³¹ Head of the collection, Steven ten Thije,

said the aim of the exhibition was to “provide a beautiful, exhilarating experience in which the artwork is approached from multiple perspectives in which the whole body participates.”³² The museum has also worked with Smartify, an app that allows visitors to scan artworks with their phones to access interpretive information through an audio guide. Visitors have the choice between five different audio tours, each offering a different perspective: the Family Tour, Colonial History Tour, Bodily Encounters Tour (where visitors are guided on a multisensory trail), the Love Letters Tour (which offers a queer perspective), or The Broader Story Tour. These thematic tours give visitors the option to select an interpretation that interests them and choose a new interpretation on their next visit. Additionally, the app includes image descriptions of each artwork, guides for tactile objects which explain what the visitor is touching, and soundscapes. These inclusive features, in combination with the thematic tours, give disabled individuals the opportunity to access additional layers of information over time.

The exhibition’s multisensory and accessible approach enables disabled visitors to explore the museum collections independently, without accommodating to the museum’s scheduled access programs. Some artworks, for example, are hung at

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wheelchair height. Suggestions that the inclusion of scent is gimmicky were quickly dismissed by one reviewer, who recognized how the approach desegregates museum experiences for disabled and non-disabled visitors. “What at first glance resembles some sort of a gimmick, like those scented cards, is completely embedded in the concept of the exhibition. You experience art here with your whole body. This means that the exhibition is also explicitly accessible to visitors with a visual impairment or other disability, a group that is normally fobbed off in the museum with an occasional tour or fringe program.”³³

Visitor, Annelies Snijkers, who experiences low vision, was impressed by the scale of the exhibition, which is spread over five floors of the museum’s collection wing. She celebrated the multisensory approach, saying, “Art only becomes art when you yourself experience a sensation. Merely a text description has no meaning. That only gives you a fragmented idea of what there is to see, but that’s all.”³⁴ The inclusion of scent and music allowed Snijkers to experience the mood and nuance of artworks. For example, *Queer Desire is Wild; I’m a Deer* (2014) by Nilbar Güreş (see figure 1), shows a deer mounting a pommel horse and is paired with a “jumpy” musical composition allowing Snijders to hear “the humor and the impulsivity.

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Nilbar Güreş, *Queer Desire is Wild; I'm a Deer*, (2014), textile, 143 x 193.3 cm. Collection Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven. Photographer: Peter Cox, Eindhoven. Image description: *Against a plain tan background, a deer is mounting a piece of gym equipment called a pommel horse. The deer is off-center, to the left of the composition, and decorative patterns border three of the artwork's corners. The bottom right corner does not have a decorative pattern. The deer consists of an outline, so the tan background shows through, although its brown antlers are set against an irregular black shape. Flowing upwards from its antlers is a feathery green plant, reaching towards the top right of the image. Rainbow colors, in a rectangular shape, are lightly sketched underneath the plant fronds, and underneath is a small green and red hummingbird, feeding from a long-stemmed plant with white flowers.*

The music truly conveys an atmosphere,” she said.³⁵

Through multisensory interpretation, the Van Abbemuseum has discarded the value judgments that the so-called founders of art history placed on art, and on the ‘lower senses’ such as tactility. They have shown how art museums with large collections of art and artifacts can reimagine what a museum visit can look, sound, smell, and feel like.

Multisensory interpretation has the capacity to provide meaningful and transformative museum experiences for those traditionally left feeling isolated in museum settings. By offering additional layers of meaning that speak to the bodymind, museums can offer disabled visitors an enhanced level of physical and intellectual access. This type of inclusive design reaches beyond ADA requirements and would improve the museum experience for

those of all ages, abilities, language fluency, socioeconomic status, and cultural background.³⁶

Our existence is inherently multisensory so regardless of ability, a more multisensory, bodily, and emotional approach to museum interpretation will provide visitors with richer experiences, enhanced understanding, and unexpected meanings. Museums should continue to work to provide a space that accommodates everyone so that no bodymind is left out.

1. Like Bunning, I choose to capitalize the word White as well as the words Black and Brown. Though Bunning does not explain her decision, I am following the lead of scholars such as Zeus Leonardo, Beverly Daniel Tatum, and Ali Michael to emphasize that, in Michael's words, Whiteness is a "political categor[y] rather than mere descriptor," in Ali Michael, *Raising Race Questions: Whiteness and Inquiry in Education* (New York and London: Teachers College Press, 2015), 17.
2. Amy Lonetree, "Museums as Sites of Decolonization: Truth Telling National and Tribal Museums," in *Contesting Knowledge: Museums and Indigenous Perspectives*, ed. Susan Sleeper-Smith (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 322-338, 325.
3. Katy Bunning, *Negotiating Race and Rights in Museums* (London and New York: Taylor and Francis, 2020), 109.
4. *Ibid.*, 141.
5. *Ibid.*, 49.
6. *Ibid.*, 11.
7. *Ibid.*, 11.
8. *Ibid.*, 146.
9. *Ibid.*, 147.
10. *Ibid.*, 147.

If you break the rules, please do it unnoticed: Aldo Giannotti's Museum Score

Andrea Steves

1. Aldo Giannotti, *The Museum Score*. Exhibition Score printed on the occasion of *Safe and Sound* at MAMBO Bologna, 2021.
2. Aldo Giannotti, *Safe and Sound*, curated by Lorenzo Balbi, curator, Sabrina Samorì, curatorial assistance. Bologna, Italy: MAMBO - Museo d'Arte Moderna di Bologna, May 5, 2021 to September 5, 2021.
3. Tony Bennett, "The Political Rationality

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4. Eileen Hooper Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 1992): 190.
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Multisensory Museum Spaces and the Bodymind

Alice Timmins

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4. Margaret Price, "The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain," *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, 30 no. 1 (November 2015): 268-84, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12127>.
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6. Bedford, *The Art of Museum Exhibitions*, 50.
7. Constance Classen, *The Museum of the Senses: Experiencing Art and Collections* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 1.
8. Fiona Candlin, *Art, Museums and Touch* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 16.
9. Candlin, *Art, Museums and Touch*, 30.
10. Levent and Pascual-Leone, *The MultiSensory Museum*, xiv.
11. Nina Levent and Lynn D. McRaney, "Touch and Narrative in Art and History Museums", in *The MultiSensory Museum*, 71-72.
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13. Camelia Chivăran, Maria Laura Nappi, Sonia Capece and Mario Buono, "Multisensory Museum Models for Knowledge Transfer," *Advances in design and digital communication II: Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Design and Digital Communication, Digicom 2021*, November 4-6, 2021, Barcelos, Portugal, 38.
14. Although uncommon in museum settings, the inclusion of olfactory stimuli can pose a problem to people with chemical sensitivities, so exhibitions such as *Fleeting - Scents in Colour*, where the aromas were diffused into the room via a foot pedal activated by the visitor, does not offer the perfect model for scent delivery. Alternatives such as scratch and sniff scent cards (which visitors could also take home) or scent boxes, where an individual inserts their head into a perfumed container, offer more localized delivery methods.
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Museums for All of Us: A Proposal

Leslie Simon

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ART059000 ART / MUSEUM STUDIES

HOW DO MUSEUMS RESPOND TO THE URGENCY OF THE MOMENT?

In what ways can museums be critically transformed to foster social justice work? *Fwd: Museums*, an inclusive, cross disciplinary publication, shares interventions, experiments, and community dialogues within and outside of museums. Our contributors reexamine, critique, and challenge museums as socially responsible spaces.

In our seventh issue, "Manifesto," encompassing more than just a declaration put into writing, these pages are the catalysts to spark action and inspire change. Our contributors, artists, professors, museum professionals, students, and others face our present difficulties and imagine bold new solutions and futures. Inside you will find artwork, essays, poetry, and other creative forms that explore topics such as:

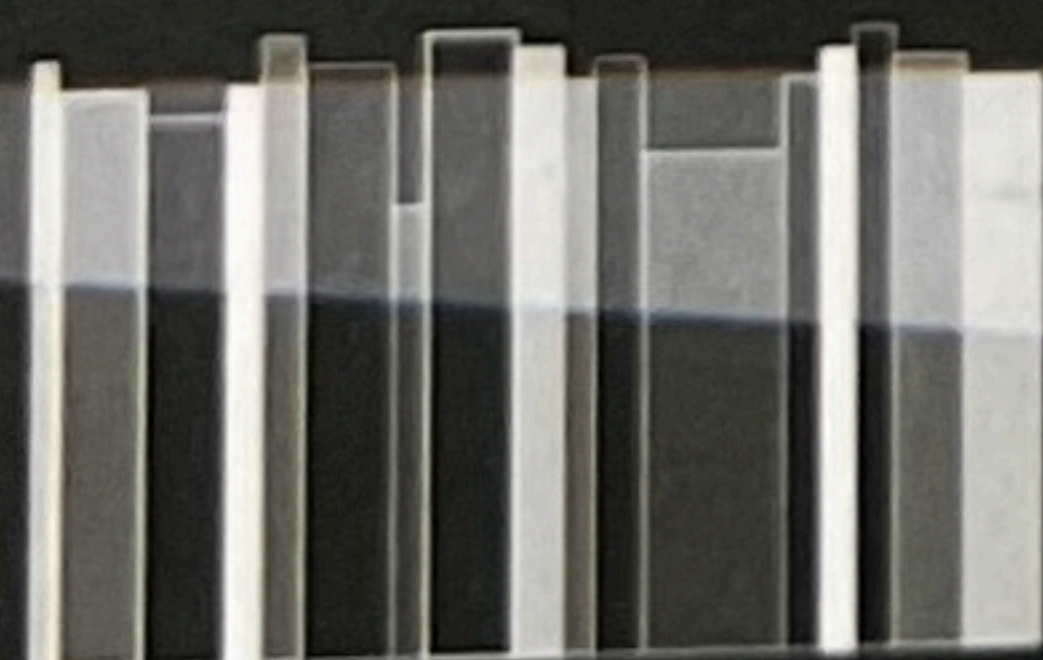
- Reviews examining the use of the museums as *neutral* arbiters to advance problematic ideologies.
- A call for a new multi-realist approach to diversity within the art world.
- A reimagining of the role of security guards in art museums in Italy.
- How even botanical gardens can advance imperial narratives.
- In their own words, how university students are combining social activism and museum practice in Mexico City.
- Presenting the history of girlhood through museum exhibitions as a form of rebellion.

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