

Book Review

The Multisensory Museum: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on Touch, Sound, Smell, Memory, and Space

Reviewed by Valerie Fletcher

Imagine the future museum as a “sensory gymnasium.” This densely researched book not only invites us to see the potential of multisensory experiences in museums, but also anchors that invitation in evidence from neuroscience that they matter. The editors are pioneers in linking these two uncommonly paired disciplines, and they make a case that is impossible to dismiss. Stories and museum examples illustrate the idea, but this is an enticement to a challenge—not a book of recipes.

Nina Levent is an art historian and museum researcher and was for many years the executive director of Art Beyond Sight, a New York-based nonprofit whose mission is focused on making museum experiences available to people who are visually impaired. Alvaro Pascual-Leone is Professor of Neurology and Associate Dean for Clinical and Translational Research at Harvard Medical School. A series of biennial international conferences on “Multimodal Approaches to Learning,” co-hosted by Art Beyond Sight and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, were forerunners to this publication. Both editors are also contributors to the book but have convened 33 additional authors, an international mix of neuroscientists and museum experts.

The Multisensory Museum speaks to the conversation well underway that visitors are no longer content to be passive recipients of what we choose to deliver. A variation on the notion of “mass customization,” it is increasingly clear that we need to offer museum experiences that can be personalized as “custom” without actually expending the time and cost associated with packaging

an individualized program. Given the inexorably rising proportion of our lives spent staring at screens, it can be tempting to assume that more screens in museums offer the obvious answer to a hunger for personally tailored opportunity.

Levent and Pascual-Leone don’t agree that more screens will satisfy a rising hunger that is partly aesthetic, partly intellectual, partly social, and partly a longing for the personal and unique. They see an answer in our bodies, especially our oft-neglected senses of touch, sound, smell, taste, and proprioception (the sense of our bodies in space). The thrill of this book is that the editors deliver big news: our brains love the multisensory life, and they reward us with deeper, richer experiences that make more and better memories. Great multisensory experiences resonate differently with each of us because each of us brings our own amalgamation of history, memory, and biology to them.

Not surprisingly, Part I of the book is devoted to touch with our hands—the most evolved practice of sensory experience. But these chapters also share perspectives on the role of the whole body in the museum experience. We assume that children want to engage physically in museum visits (though our response may be “don’t touch”). But as adults, we bring our bodies too, although our childhood expectations have changed. Our adult bodies participate by registering the sensation of temperature, the movement of air, and the need to be physically comfortable, whether that’s finding a place to sit or a restroom. And an enticing trend in museum interactions delivers compelling

Valerie Fletcher is Executive Director at the Institute for Human Centered Design in Boston, Massachusetts. She may be contacted at vfletcher@IHCDesign.org.

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information about our bodies and brain—biofeedback, which increasingly allows us to perceive, record, and give back precise individual responses to the stimuli of experience.

One is reminded of a recent, influential summons to the significance of multisensory experience, *The Eyes of the Skin*, by Finnish architect and exhibit designer Juhani Pallasmaa. “My body is truly the navel of my world,” writes Pallasmaa, “not in the sense of the viewing point of the central perspective, but as the very locus of reference, memory, imagination and integration.”

Also in the part of the book on touch, Carrie McGee and Francesca Rosenberg explore art-making by people with sight limitations at New York City’s Museum of Modern Art and speak to all the usual staff issues dealing with atypical visitors of intimidation, managing expectations, and constrained time. In another chapter devoted to tactile experience, Patrick Dougherty’s participatory art-making with branches and sticks illustrates both the physical act of making as well as the appeal to the maker of curling up in one of these nest-like forms when it’s done.

Contemporary art has its own particular challenges, and these are considered in the chapter titled “Bodily Experience in Museums.” Authors Francesca Bacci and Francesco Pavini pose the challenge of sculptor Duane Hansen’s work. There is little potential tactile interest in the fiberglass and polyester that comprise his hyper-realistic figures. Visitors, they argue, would gain little information from touching except to confirm that his figures are not alive. The authors suggest

what to do when touching does not make sense: have the curatorial staff, in collaboration with the artist, determine if it is acceptable or even desirable to touch the piece. Clarify if touching should be limited to people who are blind or be open to anyone. When touching is not an option, consider having curators solicit directly from the artist how he or she would like to convey the essence of their artwork to someone who cannot see it.

Part II, “Museums and Sound,” includes data on the proliferation of sound in multisensory exhibits. In “Sound as a Curatorial Theme, 1966-2013,” composer Seth Cluett tells us that there have been at least 350 sound-themed, group art exhibits globally since 1966 with more than 20 per year over the last 15 years. London-based artist and writer Salome Voegelin describes the discipline of paying attention to sound by telling us about “Soundwalking the Museum,” her explorations at the Tate Britain and the Tate Modern. She helps us to understand listening journeys through museums in which sound imprints a very personal experience, one that is both specific and tied to the environment.

Not surprisingly, this book reminds us that the dominance of the eye in museum experience is a recent habit. In Part III, “Smell and Taste in Museums,” neuroscientist Richard J. Stevenson describes the developing multisensory trend as a return to the pre-Victorian practice of smelling, touching, even tasting objects in museums. He confirms the potent potential of smell and tells us that olfactory processing occurs in the orbitofrontal cortex area of the brain, which also regulates emotion

and motivation. Smell is the queen of evocative memory—what an invitation to designing visceral experiences! Stevenson’s contemporary examples include the dinosaur breath of the Tyrannosaurus rex at the Children’s Museum of Indianapolis and the sweat, dirt, and gunpowder of a World War II trench in Dresden, Germany’s Military History Museum.

Importantly, the editors have not left architecture out of the dialogue of multisensory experience. Part IV, titled “Museum Architecture and the Senses,” considers museum architecture and

the senses. Focusing on wayfinding, one of the most prevalent failures in museum design, neuroscientists Fiona Zisch, Stephen Gage, and Hugo Spiers offer insights into the significance of independent and intuitive navigation and describe methods that we need to facilitate for visitors “foraging for experience.”

Invest time in *The Multisensory Museum*, and I would wager that its generous insights infiltrate how you create meaningful, emotional, and deeply satisfying experiences for everyone. ✨