

The deadlock of museum images and multisensoriality

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Musealisation as tool for collective memory management, constitutes a violent intervention in the social life of material objects, which –among other things- transforms them into almost exclusively visual stimuli. This loss of materiality contravenes the consolidated museum practice that is based on the tangible evidence of ‘authentic’ objects, as well as its undoubted educational mission. I argue that the triptych ‘protection – authenticity – learning’ that has been the ontological base of modern museum is characterized by inherent contradictions. Therefore, any attempt to re-determine museum practice should re-examine it. In this vein of thought, it is imperative to challenge vision’s domination, using something more than limited naïve dashes of other sensorial stimuli, that leave intact the dominant visual approach. In other words, I argue that multisensorial museum experience can threaten traditional museum’s ontological features, and, therefore, can lead to a ‘new’ museum that will act principally as ‘public space’, and secondly, as the protector of a collection of dead things.

KEYWORDS museums, multisensoriality, museum education

One of the dearest presences of my childhood was Kitsos Makris,¹ mostly for the very funny stories he used to tell us. Like the one about this poor guy who one day visited the museum-like house of this highly acclaimed folklorist and found himself in apprehension in front of a collection of popular religious icons. He felt compulsive to kiss them and pray with his fingers crossed out of respect. He even asked for a stool to reach the ones who were hanging high. Whenever he told that story he used to laugh hard with the lack of awareness on the part of the guy and we used to laugh along, not because we knew that much about religious icons, but because we did know a few things about museums. Obviously, a similar kind of confusion is what the sign hanging at Nea Moni in Chios² tries to clear up: when you pass through the

heavy wooden gate of the Monastery you face a big label saying: 'The sacred Nea Moni is not a museum. It is FIRST of all a place of worship, and SECONDLY a monument of Christian architecture and art. Therefore, the visitor is a PILGRIM, who should fear God and His Holy Mother'. Needless to say, in a museum a visitor cannot taste the fear of God or His Holy Mother.

In the same way, in the very familiar modernist museum someone fails to engage in a range of emotions, as their visit seems designed to be a purely visual and cognitive experience (Chourmouziadi 2006; 2010). Of course, things were not so in the beginning. It is well known that, at the first private 'museums', European rulers and their courtiers were freely handling the precious objects of the royal collections. Moreover, at the first public museums of the 18th century, art and antiquity lovers of the upper class could pick up exhibits and closely examine them in their own time (Candlin 2008; Dudley 2010; Rees Leahy 2012), since their delicate hands were not regarded a threat of any kind.

However, the promotion of the public aspect of the museums was not solely associated with a romantic predisposition to democratise them,³ but rather more with their role in educating citizens. The carefully arranged objects presented to the working-class people the order of natural and social world in a crystallised and indisputable manner, while the visit itself as social experience, the contact with high art and other more 'civilized' visitors could positively affect their unpolished manners (Bennett 1995; 2006). Thus, the influx of all those 'ignorant' and 'crude' people in museum halls, brought to the fore the necessity of special measures of protection, and established between visitors and exhibits a safe distance that we all take for granted, today. On the other hand, already as early as the first decades of the 20th century, the appropriate exhibition toolkit – especially ample electric lighting and the extended use of glass cases – had been developed to foster a comfortable viewing, regardless of the need for a more sensory approach (Bacci & Pavani 2014; Howes 2014), transforming museum-goers from *handlers* into *spectators*.

So then, the established modern museum exhibition is exclusively directed to the 'pure gaze'⁴ (Bennett 1998; 2006; Duggan 2007), as a long lasting philosophical tradition considers vision to be the sense that maintains a sort of distance from the object observed and leads to its critical evaluation and understanding (Belova 2012). The rest of the human senses, deemed as 'inferior' to vision by many intellectuals due to their association with the early stages of cognition and with instinctive, uncontrollable reactions,⁵ are banned from a museum experience altogether, where a seemingly autonomous vision acquires primacy. In the same time, the behavioural norms imposed on the visitor along with the whole ritual of the visit itself (Duncan 1995; Rees Leahy 2012: 7) are tailored to address a rationally thinking individual. A visitor capable of full cognitive vigilance who refrains from speaking loudly, roll on the floor or eat in the premises, somebody who in many cases does not even feels fatigue or thirst, an entity who yearns nothing but spiritual satisfaction.

The entire museum 'technology' is developed to support this notion; linear narrative struc-

tures based on the information provided by well-organised collections, clean spaces, designated paths, elegant shelves with neatly arranged objects. Moreover, the coded representation of verbal information, the additional visual material, the ample lighting, etc. 'facilitate' the visitor towards learning by seeing.

However, despite the progress of exhibition practices and the fact that no one has ever challenged the educational aspect of a museum visit,⁶ in reality its learning outcomes have without fail been rather disappointing. Admittedly, despite the hundreds of archeological reports about prehistoric times, the Flintstones were the ones who predominantly formed our collective image of the period (Chourmouziadi 2006). Panting then while trying to catch up with the times, almost a century after the formulation of pedagogical theories regarding hands-on learning,⁷ museums have started to doubt whether this fixation on vision has been effective after all and are hesitantly attempting to use a few more sensory stimuli. However, other sensory modalities are introduced only in certain contextual situations – children and technology museums being the most usual examples – and they are aiming at producing certain experiential effects, often enhancing the commodification of museum experience.

Nevertheless, in most cases, the intention of such an introduction is primarily educational in the narrowest sense of the word. So, the use of the adverb 'hesitantly' does not only refer to the small number of examples or to the use of mere soundbites, but also to how limited the use of sensory stimuli is, so much resembling infant education practices. As an example, I can mention Volos Archaeological Museum, where three sonic elements are introduced in an otherwise typical exhibition. The first and rather obvious one is a small booth where an inscription with ancient music symbols is exhibited, accompanied by an explanatory video and headphones that offer to the visitor the opportunity to listen to the corresponding music. Although listening to music dating back to the 3rd century BC can be an overwhelming experience, emphasis is given rather to information than to auditory immersion. Some meters away, when the visitors approach a partial reconstruction of an ancient tavern an electronic sensor stimulates sound of people mumbling. In this case, the discrete ambient sound constitutes an effort to vitalise the ancient relics. The third sonic element is the sound of running water that can be heard when visitors come close to a roman clay water pipe. I must admit that I cannot quite understand the point of this sonic intervention, taking into account that this specific sound does not give any useful information, and that normally the thick clay walls of a semi-buried pipe do not allow the noise of the water to be heard. In other words, what the Volos Museum illustrates is that sonic experience, in most museum cases, boils down to 'I see a hammer and I hear a bash', 'I see a water pipe and I hear running water', 'I see a violin and I listen to a few notes'.⁸

Although demanding in its management, sound can be introduced in an exhibition without unsettling museum protection principles. On the contrary, touch usually – if not always – jeopardises the collection's preservation, and the visitors' temptation to handle the exhib-

ited objects is channeled to specially made copies. In the Museum of London, for example, standing in front of a roman mosaic floor visitors are encouraged to touch the tiles of a small contemporary mosaic embedded in the protective handrail. However, touch is a much more complex sense and is not limited to what our fingertips can feel. It can be evoked by vision or hearing, and in many cases its introduction does not necessarily adds to the museum experience. In the case I've just mentioned, one can wonder what is the point of touching with your hands something that, in its original context, was meant to be felt through your feet. Even more dubious is the adoption of the same practice in the case of a roman bronze dagger; touching a copy – blunt enough for obvious safety reasons – cannot give you the faintest idea how painful, even lethal, making contact with the original was. On the same wavelength are the various handling sessions that began to form part of the standard offerings at mainstream museums, such as the British Museum with its 'hands on desks', etc. (Howes 2014).

Satisfactory or not, we have quite a few examples of using sound and touch in exhibitions, while smell and taste are still troubling museum curators. We can mention limited experimental efforts, especially in art museums where the educational goal gives way to the other core element of the modernist museum, namely contemplation, where the use of marketing practices has been attempted. That is the use of ambient pleasant sounds and smells in the hope that this discreet sensory touch will foster vision and thus enhance the positive impact the works of art have on a visitor, exactly like the way such stimuli work in a supermarket to increase consumption. On the contrary, other experiments have shown that art museum visitors can focus on a pleasant ambient smell and disregard the works of art, or, even worse, visitors can be irritated when being forced to move their attention from the olfactory stimulus to the visual one of an exhibited painting (Cirrincione et al. 2014).

All these attempts are trying to superficially add non-visual elements in a museum exhibition that is designed as a well-organized series of images; therefore, they comfortably leave intact the well-guarded management methods of a museum collection. Recently, there have been several interesting critical voices stigmatising exhibition practices that caused objects to lose their materiality and be converted into plain representations of themselves (Dudley 2012). I have always been one of those who believe that museums were created, are surviving and evolving not to protect and present valuable things, but to house our own stories about things (Weil 1990; Witcomb 1997). However, museums are founded on the fertile ground of things. Having said that I have in mind not a closed, strictly organized collection of objects, or in other words a 'fait accompli' – to use Heidegger's term – but the elastic and continuously expanding record that we generally call 'material culture'. The assemblage that we have failed to precisely determine, and we resort to general terms such as 'materialities'. The assemblage that consists of all those that, since their measurement and physical description do not satisfy the scholars any more, fostered the pursuit of their agency, their decisive role, their fluid but unbreakable lattice relationship with humans.

Therefore, the loss of materiality of exhibited objects in fact entails an inherent conflict of the modernist museum itself, whose objects are indispensable for they are tangible evidence of the exhibitor's perspective. As a result, some innovative proposals discard the iconographic role assigned to the museum objects and seek the reinstatement of the things themselves. This is not done by stripping exhibitions off interpretive material and embrace early museum practices,¹⁰ but rather it means focusing on how active exhibits can become. In other words, by seeking ways of letting objects function as transmitters of a wide range of sensory stimuli. This trend in its extremity, along with a New Age concept, seemingly suggests that if we let our senses run rampant while visiting a museum we will acquire a better understanding of it (Hamilakis 2014: 3).

I will not pause here to dwell on the fainting episodes that such proposals may cause to heads of archeological museums all over, nor on the obvious technical difficulties that have to be overcome. I will only say that apart from their provocative nature, these approaches could trigger, once more, the long-lasting dilemma regarding museums, whether objects or ideas should be at the heart of setting up an exhibition (Dudley 2012; Weil 1990; Witcomb 1997). In my opinion, this is a false dilemma.

Before I attempt an alternative approach to the question of 'whether a visit to a museum should have a multi-sensory character', I would like to make a key observation; the fact that, so far, we have been preoccupied with what visitors see, does not mean that they are not experiencing a museum with all their senses (Bacci & Pavani 2014; Levent & Pascual-Leone 2014: xvi). First of all, because viewing something invariably spawns sensory associations, or – as Merleau-Ponty puts it – it is the whole body and not just the eyes that see. Rather than dispassionately contemplating museum images visitors enter subconsciously in an active engagement with them, *de facto* rejecting the traditional subject-object dichotomy. Moreover, despite the fact that curators address the rational and focused gaze, what actually prevails in a museum visit is a continuously moving gaze, that is rarely fixed on one specific object, being constantly interrupted by activity and spontaneous associations (Duggan 2007).

The complex and, in final analysis, multisensorial character of vision can be explicitly observed in a museum dedicated to the act of watching itself, as it is the case of a cinema museum. Thessaloniki Cinema Museum, for instance, claims that it exhibits a 'collection of film watching moments', i.e. the experience of cinema and not a collection of props and filming or projecting equipment. Thus, the visitor is encouraged to 'walk inside a film', where interwoven still and moving images, light and sound are trying to reproduce the familiar illusive context of cinema; or – to put it in another way – to reproduce the visual by means of a more complex and intense bodily experience.

However, there is no need to look into extraordinary exhibitions to find this intermingled sensorial experience; even in a typical museum, as visitors browse through an exhibition they have a sense of themselves walking on the marble floor, they listen to other people whispering,

they are aware of the high ceiling above them, they pick the faint smell of the detergent from the freshly cleaned floors, they cannot wait to have something to eat after their visit. Furthermore, this apparently agonising effort to suppress all other senses but vision is not emotionally neutral, as the cold and exclusively cognitive process regarding the objects viewed would have required. Rather than the museum objects themselves, it is this effort to keep other senses but vision at bay that provokes awe and admiration for the greatness of ancestors, that instills anguish to hold on to the past and fear for a nation's decline and other things along these lines.

Consequently, since all senses are present in a museum visit, I argue that it would be meaningful to examine the role they can play into replacing the traditional museum with something substantially different, rather than trying to rejuvenate the outdated modernist one. I can refer to more radical experimental exhibition practices that have tried to isolate the sensorial potential, such as *Displace v1.0*,¹¹ an exhibition without any objects, only qualia. In this exhibition, that, according to David Howes, 'opened a crack in the Western sensorium', 'visitors 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' (Howes 2014: 264).

Of course, such experiments are rare and, I am afraid that they do not affect the majority of museums, because they are developing outside the 'normal' museum task-scape. Much intriguing these ideas may be, cannot easily imbue everyday curatorial practice. So, building upon them, if we want to go beyond the mere renovation of traditional exhibitional approaches with sensorial injections, we should challenge museum's three key concepts: the narrow school-like perception of its educational role, the central and dominant role the museum objects hold for themselves, and the belief that visitors are mere consumers of the museum product.

On the contrary, if the primary scope of an exhibition is to critically approach an issue, it might be imperative to ensure that it stimulates visitors emotionally by utilising their embodied experience more than just employing their pure logical analysis. Only then, I think, will we be able to achieve the psychological and cognitive twists required to enable visitors to confront their stereotypes, to question familiar representations, to comprehend discrepancies in interpretation, to be forced to identify contradictions and conflicts. In this case, the information put forward is not offered in a palatable way to ready to be satisfied consumers, but is there to be assessed and interpreted by the visitors themselves. Andrea Witcomb (2013; 2015), for instance, examining some Australian exhibition cases, makes a very interesting analysis of the role that affect plays in exhibitions which try to topple long lasting stereotypic colonialist approaches. She speaks about a 'pedagogy of feeling' that comes after the 'pedagogy of walking' (Bennett 1995) that characterises the 19th century museums whose mission was the formation of citizens capable and willing to serve the newly emerging European nation-states.

It even goes beyond the 'pedagogy of listening' which replaces passive viewing with a more active museum experience, welcoming visitors' response and limited pre-designed interaction. Witcomb criticizes the didactic and one-way character of those 'discovery approaches to learning and constructivist epistemologies in which the visitor was given a role in the creation of knowledge' (2015: 326) and argues that what is promoted by this new pedagogy of feeling is 'empathy rather than simply tolerance toward difference' and consequently 'dialogue and political responsibility' (327).

In this vein of thought, we can argue that an exhibition should neither be just the aesthetically pleasing arrangement of a collection nor just a narrative made up by the curator based on a collection's objects. We can conceptualise it as a three-dimensional opportunity for dialogue. A dialogue that raises issues, sets a framework, but also intrigues and leads to further research which ultimately enables the visitor to form a personal opinion. A similar 'critical museology' produces exhibitions that seek emotional stimulation and demand comprehensive physical involvement so that they manage to shake off indifference and, most importantly, pave the way to change established views or received wisdom. Admittedly, this revolutionary affectual ground is not an easy one. Adopting this approach, we are urged to create exhibitions that are supposed to deny the primacy of our own interpretation; even if this constitutes a realistic goal, no one can guarantee that the outcome of these unleashed alternative interpretations will be rational and unprejudiced, let alone 'progressive'. However, if we hesitate to take the risk we are doing nothing more than a mere renovation of worn out meaning-producing museum structures.

A museum, however, does not produce technologies, but rather borrows and employs what others invent. What I describe could get ideas from ephemeral art installations, introduced by the Dadaist movement as early as in the first decades of the 20th century. As Claire Bishop (2005: 7) puts it, the works of art that follow this tradition 'rather than imagining the viewer as a pair of disembodied eyes that survey the work from a distance [...] presuppose an embodied viewer whose senses of touch, smell and sound are as heightened as their sense of vision'. Visitors do not simply contemplate the work of art; they immerse in it, become involved at a multi-sensory level and ultimately contribute to its completion (Bacci & Pavani 2014). In this way, the distinct role of the museum objects is abolished since they are treated as one of the many tangible and intangible elements of the composition. The exhibition equipment itself is in its own accord an exhibit as it plays an instrumental role in the narrative as well as in stimulating the senses. Things are not just represented or described, they are somehow *there*, as well. The 'original' coexists with the 'copy' as they cooperate to construct a meaningful whole.

On the other hand, visitors are decentered. Exiled from their predetermined Renaissance central viewing position and forced to choose by themselves where to stand.¹² In practice, then, multiple short-lived positions, sometimes quite uncomfortable, should be taken in order to approach the exhibits. The visitor cannot complete the visit if he/she does not intervene

with what he/she is being shown, even by merely moving through space. Therefore, one could claim that he/she leaves traces behind that may possibly alter some of the exhibition aspects, and up to a point, even render him or her a co-creator.

In an exhibition like this, vision is largely not on its pedestal. The glimpse has become more important than the gaze (cf Duggan 2007). The moving body interacts with the exhibition and utilises touch, hearing and proprioception. Smell and taste could even come to play, even indirectly, with the enhancement of synesthetic stimuli that can cause visual, audio and tactile reactions.

Finally, I would like to emphasize that although the exhibition concept that I briefly presented is largely inspired by artistic events, I for once am concerned about the possibility of making good use of all things mentioned in exhibitions with more down to earth topics, like the ones that historical museums have to manage with. I argue that an exhibition aiming to the critical approach of a social phenomenon, and therefore presupposing psychological and cognitive subversion, should rely more on multisensorial stimuli and affect. Instead of the familiar awe and national pride, it should provoke surprise, discomfort, trouble, even anger to the visitors, in order to urge them think differently. Visitors should feel familiar with the presented, open and vulnerable, ready to be affected and altered by this contact (Bonnell & Simon 2007). In the Imperial War Museum North (IWMN) in Manchester, for example, the repulsive smell of the trenches and the blind touch of something furry – rodents perhaps? – that visitors experience can trigger thoughts about the horror and the absurdity of war, much more effectively than a well written text or a statistical graph.

In other words, I believe that what is needed is a balance between the dispassionate way in which traditional museums are approaching every aspect of the past – the people killed by plague during Peloponnesian War, the charred bodies found under lava in Pompeii, or the dead in 1st World War trenches – on the one hand, and over-sentimental melodramatic exaggerations, on the other. I can only mention some exhibitions related to the refugee crisis that have appeared in Europe, lately. Most of them, in my opinion, were pursuing emotion for its own sake; therefore, they may have made people feel sorry for the ‘poor refugee children’ but they didn’t obstruct intolerance and xenophobia to spread like plague all over the continent.

In the balanced mixture I have in mind, the search for a multi-sensory approach is not only about supporting or assisting the cognitive and mental processes, but even more so, about the management of non-defined, non-rational processes that play a cardinal role in shaping people’s perceptions. Because we love our homeland, and the taste of its sweets or the smell of its freshly cut grass reminds us of this love.¹³ But this love is not based on anything rational. The appeal a taste or a scent have on us cannot be rationally explained no matter how hard we try. Similarly, we hate foreigners because they are ‘filthy’, darker, their faces are not easy on the eye and we find them intimidating, their language sounds harsh and offensive, because we are afraid they would do us harm (Crang & Tolia-Kelly 2010). Possibly, no matter how many logical

and well-documented papers we are given to study about equality and solidarity, our irrational fears and the things we love, our instinctive attractions and repulsions might remain ingrained within us forever. Maybe, then, it is worthwhile to try to overcome them by organising exhibitions that from one point onwards aim to go beyond the rational and the clearly drafted. As I say this I remember what I proudly used to recite as a student in primary school ‘what I feel about my country is like a turmoil inside me’.¹⁴

NOTES

1. Kitsos Makris (1917-1988) was a prominent folklorist, honored by the Academy of Athens for his work. Albeit self-taught, in 1987 he was awarded the degree of Honorary Doctor of Philosophy by the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. He has published 47 books and studies, many of which were translated in English, French, German and Serbian. He bequeathed his folklore collection and his enormous archive to the University of Thessaly, along with his house that, today, functions as a folklore museum.

2. Nea Moni is an 11th century monastery, recognised as an UNESCO World Heritage site, due to its byzantine architecture and its magnificent mosaics.

3. It is widely commented how the transformation of Le Louvre from a private collection - contemplated only by the royal court and meant to underline the taste and the political power of French royal family - to one of the first public museums in the world, was closely related to the democratic spirit of French Revolution. Along with the demolition of La Bastille, the ‘opening’ of Le Louvre was one of the most symbolic acts of the new regime (Abt 2006; Bennett 1995; McClellan 1994).

4. The ‘pure gaze’ is a concept discussed by Pierre Bourdieu (1984:1–7). It is something possessed by the culturally and artistically competent, opposed to the ordinary way of seeing the world, which privileges function over form. The pure aesthetic demands a distance from life and necessity. For Bourdieu, this distance is enabled by the lives of ease enjoyed by those who hold this aesthetic disposition.

5. The origins of the theoretical discussion about the senses, their significance and their hierarchy can be traced, as usual, in the work of Plato and Aristotle. It was enriched by Decartes and Lock, reintroduced by theologians and modernists, and had a vigorous come-back, as usual, in the mid 20th century (Howes 2005).

6. The long tradition that considers museums as educators can be traced from the first examples engaged in the nation ideology formation procedures –as ideological state apparatuses (Althusser 1991), to the contemporary museumscape. Even if the size and the variety of the latter cannot easily establish a relation with nationalistic narratives in every museum, the education of the masses remains the key role of museums, as it is clearly mentioned in the ICOM’s

(International Council of Museums) official definition (<http://icom.museum/the-vision/museum-definition>).

7. The significance of experience in learning was first introduced by John Dewey in his classic *Experience in Education* (1938). He focused on students' participation in experience and radical democracy and the learners' praxis. His work proved highly influential, especially on constructivist learning theory, which can be considered as the theoretical base of informal learning (Hein 1998).

8. The sonic design in a museum exhibition is a far more complicated issue. The immersive effect of the exhibition soundscape can not only support the interpretative process, but can alter the visitors experience altogether (Bubaris 2014; Zisiou 2011).

10. New Museology criticized early museums on the grounds that they left the objects 'to speak for themselves', referring to the limited and not at all imaginative interpretative material that accompanied the exhibited objects of the collection.

11. A production of labXmodal and the Concordia Sensoria Research Team (CONCERT) led by Chris Salter, a professor of design and new media art. It 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.

12. Claire Bishop argues that installation art's relationship to the viewer is underpinned by two ideas: 'activating the viewing subject' and 'decentring'. The first refers to the need of the visitor to move around and through the work in order to experience it, rather than just staying still to optically contemplate it. The latter is inspired by Panofsky's critique of renaissance perspective (Bishop 2005; 2012).

13. Nadia Seremetakis, making a splendid correlation between the smell and taste of a specific kind of peaches and homesickness, argues that 'memory cannot be confined to a purely mentalist or subjective sphere. It is culturally mediated material practice that is activated by embodied acts and semantically dense objects' (Seremetakis 1996: 7).

14. It is the final verse of the short poem by Aristotelis Valaoritis (1824-1879), 'My love for my country'.

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