
THE SENSATIONAL EXHIBITION SURVEY, 2011

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In the classic museum, touching is prohibited. If contact between a visitor and an exhibit does occur, it can only lead to disaster. In 2010, a visitor to New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art stumbled and bumped into Picasso's *The Actor*, leaving a 6 inch gash. It was a huge fiasco. Damages were rumoured to have been in the order of nine million dollars.

It wasn't always this way.

In fact, the museum's unilateral focus on sight is new as of the 19th century. Museumgoers used to be free to touch objects, and handling the collection appears to have been a key component of the (early) museum experience. Even plain-looking artifacts (that today would be relegated to storage) could prove popular because of the way they felt when handled.

With the rise of many "alternative" museums and exhibits we are seeing the development of a range of innovative sense-based techniques for engaging audiences. In a way this is a return to the hands-on methods of old, but the technology and affluence of the world today makes possible museum experiences that were previously unimaginable. This essay presents a survey of some of the more engaging display practices of recent years.

Liquid galaxy, Worldwide

In December of 2009 Google unveiled the newest development of their “Google Earth” project: Liquid Galaxy. The invention is basically eight 55” LCD monitor screens in a near complete circle hooked up to Google Earth, and a 3D mouse for complete user control. This system allows you to effortlessly fly over the entire world, and explore any location you want. Since city buildings, mountains, and weather effects are included in the landscape, the effect can be vertiginous. Details like ocean topography allow users to dive beneath the sea, and see all of the hidden features of the ocean floor.

This project recently got even more accessible. Google released their source code and blueprints for all of Liquid Galaxy, allowing anyone willing to spend the \$70,000 - \$80,000 on parts to build and run this same system.

For now, the only feedback from the controller that Liquid Galaxy gives is visual, although some say that the heat from all eight monitors is an experience in and of itself.

<http://www.google.com/earth/explore/showcase/liquidgalaxy.html>

ArtBites, Tours through North America

Maite Gomez-Rejón has a very unique, and interesting way of getting people excited about art history: She lets them taste it. At museums like the Met in New York, she sets up a makeshift kitchen, and allows a small party to eat dishes that were known to be popular in a distant time and place.

For example, one of her exhibits was focused on pre-Columbian Mesoamerica. In it, participants would learn about the classic myths of the indigenous people, and get to prepare exotic dishes of ingredients native to the area and time.

She has about a dozen of these themed shows, from Ancient Greece to the exhibition called “Jeffersonian Feast”. The latter explored how Thomas Jefferson’s experience as a minister to France had an influence on 18th century American art, architecture and food. After giving a group of about a dozen participants an hour long guided tour through the holdings of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, it was time to cook. Inspired by Jefferson’s love for food, Gomez-Rejón helped participants prepare French inspired 18th century cuisine. One such recipe was for macaroni and cheese, and was handwritten by Thomas Jefferson.

Gomez-Rejón says that the meal at the end of the tour is her favorite part and that it “becomes a very social experience that feels like a party, one that is very unlike the experience at most museum tours. People talk, exchange phone numbers and often form friendships that extend beyond the class itself”.

<http://artbites.net/>

The Museum of Old and New Art (MONA), Hobart, Tasmania

MONA is popularly described as “macabre and ungodly”, and its creator David Walsh has deemed it an “un-museum”. So what makes it so different?

First, MONA goes against traditional museum standards. There is no natural light in the building, no real themes guiding how exhibits are set up, and the whole place is designed to make viewers as lost as possible. At the entrance, instead of any sort of ticket drop or donation box, there is a bar. Walsh says that he likes the idea of his “visitors revisiting the art with an accumulating alcoholic insight”.

Other than structural differences, there is a difference in the content of the museum. Many of the works are designed to assault your senses, your morals, or both. For example, one piece is of the Bible and the Torah each containing a bomb inside, and another is a collection of rotting pig carcasses. The air in the museum is often highly pungent, especially around the latter exhibit.

But this all fits into David Walsh’s big, secular, plan. He wants his museum to be filled with things involving “People fucking, people dying, the sorts of things that are the most fun to talk about”, he wants it all to relate to how death is always imminent, and nothing lasts forever.

The design of the Museum demonstrates that last part quite nicely. MONA has cost Walsh at least \$175 million, from acquiring the exhibits to excavating its 6,000 square meters underground, but it is going to “self destruct” in about 50 years. He designed it just above sea level, so that the rising tides will wash away any trace of his project after he has died. When asked about the lifespan of his project he said ““I don’t believe that I am anything other than organized matter and I am quite sure that whatever is the essence of me will cease to be [after I die]. I find projecting myself into the future beyond the point where I am organized matter is of no interest to me at all.”

<http://mona.net.au/>

Croatian Neanderthal Museum (Muzej Kapinskih Neandertalaca), Krapina Croatia)

At the Neanderthal Museum in Krapina, the history of the earth is presented as a 24-hour timeline. On the museum's clock, hominoids appear at about hour 23:52, showing humans' relatively short existence on the planet.

As visitors walk through the museum and see the clock count higher the farther they go, they get to encounter exhibits that differ from what they might normally find. One such exhibit is the reconstruction of a Neanderthal Shelter, which has been deemed the highlight of the show. In this exhibit, you can walk through a recreation of a group of Neanderthals around a fire, complete with smells of burning meat and neanderthal sweat. The neanderthals in this exhibit are "hyper realistic" life size recreations made by French sculptress Elisabeth Daynes using the most up-to-date anatomical data known, tricking the viewers into thinking they are alive. Although this exhibit is old in principle, the museum is one of the most high-tech buildings ever constructed. One exhibit even allows users to explore a neanderthal's medical history and biology all by a state of the art touch screen pad.

Exploiting the senses and using new technology aren't the only ploys this museum uses to make you think you're really living in prehistory, ingenious architecture is also used to create the impression of being inside a cave. Even from the outside it's hard to believe that the museum is more than a cave, since the entrance is the only part of the museum that protrudes from the surrounding woods

Jorvik Viking Museum, York, UK

The Jorvik Viking Centre's goal is to give its visitors a better understanding of the past by using new and alternative techniques to immerse them in history. In doing so, the museum has answered a particularly poignant question: What did the Vikings smell like?

Apparently the smell is not too pleasant, but the on-site cesspit might have something to do with that.

To enter the museum you have to go through a "time machine" room, where the

floor shakes in order to signify to visitors that they have traveled back in time to the year 975 AD. Visitors then climb aboard a track cart to go on a guided tour of a reconstructed Viking settlement. It shows reconstructed wax Vikings doing such tasks as making tools out of antler, and even an animatronic couple arguing in linguistically reconstructed 11th century Norse. It is during this time that the museum gives life to its wax models of Vikings by pumping smells into the air. Although pungent and downright foul at times, the smells are one of the museum's mostly highly acclaimed attributes.

The museum also has "special event" days, which are usually expositions of their newest archaeological finds. Occasionally, they have reenactment days, where a group of actors will dress up as Vikings, which museumgoers are then encouraged to interact with.

Though smells may be Jorvik's trademark, they recently opened the sister exhibit JorvikDIG. Taking advantage of York's rich history, it offers four indoor "dig pits". In these mock archaeological sites, you can dig, sort, and feel your way through history, without actually getting your hands dirty (the mock artifacts are buried in mock dirt). Each "pit" is dedicated to a specific period and people of York's history, from the Romans in 1000 AD, up to the Victorians in the 1800s. After the "dig" you can also use the artifacts that you find to help reconstruct the floor plan of the "excavation site", or bring them to the "lab" where you can learn what archaeologists do to preserve their finds.

<http://www.jorvik-viking-centre.co.uk/>

Museum of Olfactory Design, NYC, New York

In the fall of 2011, the New York Museum of Art and Design will be opening its newest addition, the Center of Olfactory Art. The Museum is directed by The New York Times scent critic Chandler Burr, and he is being made the nation's first curator of olfactory art.

The Center of Olfactory Art's goal is to inspire a greater appreciation of scents in the general public; scents that currently go unappreciated. The first exhibit that Burr is organizing is the Art of Scent, 1889-2011, which will include a variety of smells from

scent artists active during this period. Burr has stated "Olfactory art speaks to the sense of smell just as visual art speaks to the sense of sight, and visitors will experience works at the Museum by smelling them."

According to Burr, the majority of the future projects will be highly interactive, and will focus on the processes that the scent designers themselves utilize. Other projects will explore popular scent trends, ethical issues in olfactory design, and the place of scent in culture. The museum will also host more traditional lectures that are oriented around smell.

<http://boisdejasmin.typepad.com/2010/12/center-of-olfactory-art-at-the-museum-of-art-and-design.html>

Please Touch Museum, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

The Please Touch Museum in Philadelphia shows the public's desire, and need, for a museum that caters to the sense of touch instead of suppressing it. It is aimed at educating young children, but accomplishes much more than that. It was founded in 1976, and has grown exponentially.

Guided by their parents, children have the opportunity to engage with exhibits that range from a mock hospital that allows them to view x-rays and gain insight into the medical process, to a real life Wonderland from Lewis Carroll's whimsical books. In the Wonderland exhibit there is also "the hedge maze", which is designed in such a way that it forces participants to use their sense of touch to navigate instead of their sight.

<http://www.pleasetouchmuseum.org/>

I'm Not There: Soundscapes of Animals, New Orleans, Louisiana

Humans can only see the colors that fall between 400nm (violet) to 700nm (red), but there are far more that our eyes just don't notice. It is the same with sounds: our ears can only hear soundwaves from about 20 hertz to 20,000 hertz. For other animals, it is quite different. With much more adept sensory organs, the world that their senses create is almost unimaginable to humans.

Or at least as it used to be before Carol LaFayette and her team of researchers at Texas A&M University made it possible to see and hear like an animal.

In 2009, they presented the exhibit "I'm not There: Extending the Range of Human Senses to Benefit Wildlife Corridors" to Siggraph conference in New Orleans. It consists of five large projector screens in a semicircle around the participant, and a surround sound system. Participants can choose the range of senses they want to experience (i.e. infrared, ultrasonic etc...) and explore a digitally reconstructed Costa Rican island, and the surrounding ocean using a specially modified Nintendo Wii Controller. All of the extra-human sights and sounds are translated into familiar sounds and colors that are just on the edge of human perception, to give an idea of the world that exists beyond human senses.

While exploring, participants get to see what ultra-violet light looks like to a snake in the jungle, and hear the ultrasonic sounds of snapping tiger jaws. In the nearby sea, they can hear how loud normally inaudible sounds generated from boats are to whales in the ocean, and get a feel of how massive the ocean really is.

Carol LaFayette imagines this exhibit as a first step in getting to know the world that exists beyond human senses. For her, the next step is to figure out how to best translate senses for humans that other animals rely on, but are completely foreign to us. The example that she uses is that of sharks' ability to sense minute electric fields that are generated naturally by all living creatures.

Looking past all of the high-tech equipment, there is a simple ecological goal: to make people passionate about nature. LaFayette feels that "The immersive system ties interest in the environment to knowledge gained through scientific research" and hopes that it will ultimately "generate greater interest in what's out there in one's own back yard".

www.viz.tamu.edu/faculty/lurleen/main/int/int.pdf

Dialogue In the Dark, Worldwide

There are about 40 million legally blind people world wide, and all of them live in a sensorial world that is very different from non-vision impaired people. Through different, their world is made out of rich textures and smells are just as real as one made out of

sights. It is organization Dialogue in the Dark's mission to bring knowledge of that to the non-visually impaired public, and to show the "disabled" are often more "able" than their label would suggest. One of their most popular methods of bringing this to the public are their Dialogue in the Dark Exhibits, which have taken place at locations in more than 30 different countries since 1988.

The exhibit takes place like a guided tour, with one difference: There is nothing to see, since it is pitch black. When visitors enter, they are handed a white cane, a prelude to their hour long emersion in the life of a blind person. During the tour, visitors are lead by a blind tour guide through a simulated park, market place, and bar. While exploring these places without sight for the first time, most visitors find a hidden landscape in the feel and touch of common places. At the end when visitors reach the bar, most describe the flavor of their drink, even when it's "the usual", as something they have never tasted before.

Apart from educating the public about the rich lives of the blind, one of the goals of this exhibit is to create new friendships between visitors. During the hour long tour, visitors are encouraged to talk amongst themselves, and have a real dialogue in the dark. Visitors are often surprised by the power of conversation in the dark stating, "There is this friendship you make in the dark, that you can't really make when you see someone".

<http://www.dialogue-in-the-dark.com/>

Museum for the blind (Muziejus neregiamis), Kaunas, Lithuania

In 2005, the Museum For The Blind was established in Kaunas Lithuania. The original purpose of this museum was to empower blind people by giving them their own museum, which they could fill with non-visual art. This purpose has remained the same, but the means of achieving it has changed. Noting that the museum had become a hit amongst sighted people, museum curators shifted the focus of the museum to educate sighted people regarding the sensory rich lives of the blind.

Located in the catacombs of a Church in Kaunas, and devoid of any sort of lighting, the museum is completely dark. In fact, although most visitors know this before they enter, they are often surprised by just how dark pitch black really is. The museum is

filled with pieces of olfactory and tactile art, but the museum becomes more of a maze than anything to most (sighted) visitors.

This dark maze may be frightening to some, but it also has a lighter side. Visitors have said that sharing the insecurity of being without sight helps them understand just how much more difficult life is for those who live without sight, and that they often feel much closer to their friends and loved ones after a visit to this museum. It's no wonder that a sense of bonding is achieved through this museum, as guiding each other through a labyrinth in the dark is quite a unique experience to share.

http://www.muzejai.lt/kaunas/neregiu_muz.en.htm

Taste and See, Kansas City, Missouri

In museums throughout the western world the traditional procedure is to gaze upon a piece of art, kept separate from you in a frame, until you have attained the proper degree of aesthetic contemplation. Missouri artist Lori Bury challenges not only the primacy given to vision, but also the notion that art has to be restricted by a frame.

In her first solo exhibition *Taste and See*, Bury has created an entire world that visitors can explore with all of their senses. Her exhibits completely fill the room, and are designed to be interacted with. One such piece, *Take and Eat*, looks like a large gauzy alien pod, suspended in the corner of the room. On further inspection you find that this strange ethereal creation has a removable veil, hiding behind which are a few dozen small treats (made out of egg whites, sugar, and peppercorn) that people are encouraged to pluck and eat. The unveiling and consumption of the "fruits" of this alien pod are a few of the many ways visitors can interact with, and actually change the art in this exhibit.

<http://ereview.org/2010/10/14/ethereal-multi-sensory-sculptures/>

Voice and Wind, New Museum, New York

At the New Museum in New York, Haegue Yang's newest exhibit, *Voice and Wind*, sets out to test the very edges of sensory perception, and explore how sensorial stimuli evoke memories. The exhibit consists of fans, scent atomizers, and a few dozen Venetian

window blinds. The blinds are painted color gradients, left half open, arranged into a sort of labyrinth for visitors to wander through. The blinds seem to be painted with vague pictures, which change as you wander further through the labyrinth. Since the blinds are semi-translucent (they are half open), they look quite different when something partially visible appear through them. The way that visitors see images in these “half-images” is how Yang tests perception. What they think they see in these images (usually simple things, such as a house) were never planned by Yang, and exist only in the visitor’s imagination.

Throughout the labyrinth fans and scent atomizers blow, creating a gentle breeze and mild scents. This is to further the sensorial immersion of the exhibit, and to create a strong “sense of place” by evoking memories. One of the most moving scents is the smell of wet dirt, which, coupled with the half-images and the feel of the gentle breeze, often evokes very strong memories of childhood amongst visitors.

One of the most important things about Voice and Wind is that it is not meant to be a silent work. Talking is encouraged, and sharing experiences, whether they be memories or a new perception, is key to fully enjoying this exhibit.

<http://www.heikejung.de/VoiceAndWindNM.html>