CONFERENCE REVIEW

Multimodal Revelations
Insights Beyond Sight

Multimodal Approaches to Learning organized by Art Beyond Sight and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, October 26–28, 2012

Reviewed by Anette Stenslund

Anette Stenslund is a PhD candidate at Medical Museion, University of Copenhagen. She is also affiliated with the Centre for Sensory Studies, Concordia University, Montreal. astenslund@sund.ku.dk

Multimodal Approaches to Learning was the fourth conference organized in collaboration with Art Beyond Sight and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It gathered an international group of 250 people from various fields, including curators, art educators, artists, teachers, academic researchers, engineers, designers, and architects to exchange ideas and seek interdisciplinary inspiration. Of general concern was the question of multi-sensorial experiences of art and museums, which comprises the quality of aesthetic experiences, their synesthetic constitution, and distinct embodiedness. Besides qualitative approaches aiming to grasp what cannot always be captured in words, some panelists chose scientific mappings and measurements when observing and interpreting,
for example, behaviors of museum visitors. Whatever the case, framed within multi-sensuous experiences of art and exhibitions, themes touched on taste, touch, sight, smell, sound, movement, interaction, learning, and drawing, from both an artistic as well as a museal perspective.

As a sociologist engaged in aesthetics, research-based multi-sensory curatorial work presents a specific interest, and I attended the conference with some questions: how to curate the multi-sensory? How to integrate invisible senses such as scent? To pay attention to “things themselves” not only counts as an epistemological challenge within classical phenomenology, it is also a challenge for most historical museums: how can things be allowed to appear on their own terms? In today’s high-speed society, every sensuous aspect of life cannot be taken in; hence, museums show their utility by providing spaces for re-sensitization. As the keynote speaker, avant-garde director Peter Sellars, phrased it, “to re-sensitize means to slow down and open up, to dare vulnerability and, just like when having a wound, feel even the slightest touch.” In many ways, the conference could be taken as a space for such re-sensitization. Many museums however are prisons of art, or even worse, Sellars corrects, they are hospitals for art – extremely sanitized. Being employed at a medical university museum, I could not help finding the comparison both amusing and thought-provoking. This is where a conference such as Multimodal Approaches to Learning promised to create the foundation for future research- and sensory-based exhibition-making.

By highlighting the importance of sensing the invisible layers of life, Sellars set the tone of the conference. “Art is here,” he said, “not to say what something looks like, but to take you, not into the visible, but into the invisible world.” I embrace Sellars’ appreciation of the invisible that, more than anything else, can be felt bodily rather than being reduced to the measurable. This in fact is the reason why I personally find the sense of smell so fascinating. It is more or less resistant to labels, it cannot easily be grasped, and therefore it bypasses normal attention. However, not all panelists agreed, and thus provided interesting counterpoints. For instance, psychologist Rachel Herz made an effort to render the invisibility of smell not only directly visible but also graspable. Through a series of cases taken from everyday life, Herz addressed the appreciation of the so-often neglected sense of smell. Moreover, she touched upon the intimate relation between “pure” sensuous perceptions and their meaningful understandings. With some simplification, one could call this matter a constellation of materialism and meaning. Whatever the case, by creating so called “illusion-examples,” Herz illustrated that smell experiences change dramatically by the change of a label, and she reached a multi-sensuous conclusion demonstrating that eyes and ears are often used when smelling a smell.

Wondering about the challenges of including smell in exhibitions, I asked Herz about the curatorial opportunities using smell as a tool to
“tune” visitors into specific atmospheres. Given that museum spaces are obviously different from those outside, how can smell create experiences found in the “original” scenery? Herz again pointed to the importance of visuality in creating meaning. As she put it, the meaning-context is a powerful determinant of what people think they smell. If people are exposed to, say, pine oil they might interpret it as either a disinfectant or a fir tree, depending on how other sensory impressions wield an influence. Therefore, a curator’s helping hands, or words or visuals, can be crucial for the experience of an olfactory atmosphere.

No matter how the question of making sense of sense is approached, there is no doubt that context is an effective tool. As Mary John Baumann revealed during her wine-testing event, through the aromas extracted from grapes from southern France one could almost “feel the Old World” in a Chenin Blanc. Several among the audience nodded when carefully ingesting one more sip, trying to detect what they had just been told. The interesting question that arises is: did they really taste the Old World in that glass of wine? Can grapes carry a perceptual key to the past? I would like to believe in sensing Atlantic waves rushing in and whipping the oak barrels of a single-malt whiskey, as suggested by the words on its label. A skilled nose, mouth, eye, and ear, along with the imagination, no doubt all play their part in the complex activity of taste.

One thing that makes the study of smell experience so challenging and yet so intriguing is its particularity. First, this is due to the dynamic spatiotemporality of odorants, and second, it is due to perceptual variability. Besides the cultural significance of smell, both curator Jim Drobnick and artist-researcher Andreas Keller pointed to the subjectivity of smell. As Keller noted, “different noses for different people.” With hundreds of different receptors placed in the upper part of the nose, and not all of them active for any individual, billions of combinations are possible. The challenge, therefore, when bringing smell into the museum space, is the difficulty of getting a specific message across. Unfortunately, most gallery spaces are unfit for the unruly behavior of smell. However, Keller lists not only challenges but also opportunities regarding smell-based exhibitions, and such challenges touch upon the evocative power of smell when it comes to emotions, personalization, spatial gigantism, and dynamics of art.

In his paper on mapping museum experiences, sociologist Volker Kirchberg revealed interesting findings on the mismatch of curatorial expectations and visitor experiences. At a group show in Switzerland, he employed biometric sensors and asked if visitors experienced what the curators intended with the pairing of two paintings. While Kirchberg dismissively found that none of those interviewed seemed to “get it,” his study nonetheless usefully invited consideration of the unpredictability of visitor experience and provided an incentive to further explore the sensory dynamics of exhibitions. As Jackie Terrassa, Managing Museum Educator at the Metropolitan, recapped after
the first day, defining the exact quality of aesthetic experience is a museological question that neither visitors nor curators will be able to answer with certainty. Therefore, a conference such as Multimodal Approaches to Learning served as an invaluable platform to cross disciplinary boundaries, seek inspiration from practitioners and theorists, and to dialogue about the multi-sensorial aspects of life and art.