Please Touch: The Use of Tactile Learning in Art Exhibits

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The literature on learning styles tells us that as infants, we learn and experience the world by touching and moving objects. As we grow older, the supposedly more advanced techniques of learning by looking and listening and/or reading gradually take over, and most school learning has traditionally tended to rely on these latter styles. A small percentage of people continue to rely heavily on touch and motion as their primary means of learning, and statistics have shown that these pupils make up a large proportion of those who fail at school or drop out. Another group that relies heavily on touch are people with visual impairments. Where touching has crept into the museum world, it has generally been in the name of making objects accessible to these groups, who are often perceived as suffering from a disadvantage that must be compensated for through other sensory means. My experience has taught me that, on the contrary, exploring art works through touch can have beneficial outcomes for all of us, and can even help us to understand, and sometimes challenge, the visual judgments and verbal interpretations we rely on so heavily in the art museum. I shall describe the findings produced from evaluation of two exhibits I curated for Wolverhampton Arts and Museums Service at their Art Gallery and Bilston Craft Gallery. Wolverhampton has long been committed to access for all visitor groups and to the encouragement of new ways to make meaningful experiences out of art for family audiences.

From the point of view of the family audience, making tactile contact with artworks helps to reconnect us with our children's sensitivity to touch in two ways. Firstly, it awakens the strong urge to reach out towards certain kinds of desirable objects. Memories and associations are triggered and take hold more readily through the senses, especially those of touch, taste and smell, than through sound and sight alone, allowing abstract experiences to connect with concrete ones. Studies have found that encouraging students to investigate an object through touch increases attention to learning and time spent with it, thereby increasing the chances of understanding and retaining information about the work. Sally Matthews' *Welsh Mountain Pony* is a big draw for children from this respect. Although fully functional as an artwork, its tactile animal qualities, life size and realistic surfaces play upon children's instinctive desires to touch soft objects such as animal toys. This piece worked for us, because of its connections to tactile desires; something which was replicated for adults in Sophie Zadeh's abstract set of untitled pods, made out of various different woods. The extent to which these pieces speak to adult desires for collectible aesthetic items has been much observed, and the almost irresistible urge to touch and stroke these objects being satisfied, rather than frustrated, finds an adult echo in the children's responses to the *Welsh Mountain Pony* piece. Their quality and status as art result in a concrete and real relationship between the audience and the work, unlike a handling object, where the link with an art work is at one step removed, rather like reading about an event compared to being there.

Secondly, touching certain kinds of objects answers to the need of the curious child to find out what something *does,* or what it is *for* – perhaps as a basic form of the need to make meaning out

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of experience. This does not necessarily have to translate into an intellectual or rational form of understanding – for a child, a reaction of wonder or amazement may be sufficient to account for an object's reason for being. Malcolm Buchanan-Dick's *The Concrete Harmonium* provides a useful starting point for observing behavioral patterns among differing age groups within the family audience. The piece consists of an antique organ, surrounded by a wall of recycled objects – organ pipes, vacuum cleaners, personal stereos, radios, TVs, etc. Each key on the harmonium drives one of these objects, and users can manipulate sounds and videos by making their own recordings, or bringing in their own tapes to play in the stereos. On its first day, we observed children running straight to this piece, which has remained one of the most popular in the exhibition, and playing the keys, then often running to show another friend or family member how it works. By contrast, adult visitors have been observed looking intently at the work, reading the information labels provided, which explicitly instruct visitors to play the keys, and then walking away without making any physical contact with it.

What the *Concrete Harmonium* provides for our visitors is the notion, once their inhibitions have been overcome, that the work – and by extension, other works in the museum – are here to have meaning made from them by tactile interaction, not to resist divergent meanings with monolithic authoritative significance. We find that this actually helps to garner respect for the object and a desire to handle the piece intimately and carefully.

Robert Jackson Emerson's allegorical bronze *Flight* is a somewhat more traditional piece from the collection. It represents an older ideal of the aesthetic and beautiful. Making it available to touch led to an unexpected response: not only was the bronze cold and hard, but the eye sockets were read as holes into which you could stick your fingers. This action, which disturbed some of our audience, resulted in a tendency to undermine the visually pleasing aesthetic of the work. It also led us to reconsider the extent to which we mentally, almost without thinking, 'fill in' the gaps, or accept the illusions on which much Western art is based – gaps and illusions destroyed or deconstructed by handling. Thus, not only can touching promote learning and understanding about art by providing a closer and more direct experience, it can also work to help us challenge and understand some of our own visual preferences and illusions that may otherwise remain unnoticed. This is a first step towards appreciation of form and the interpretation of abstract works: we become so accustomed to categorizing objects such that what we expect to see and what we do see can be conflated – we see eyes where there are in fact holes. Touch is a non-illusionistic sense, and helps us to rethink our ways of seeing.

Jackson's *Flight*, like other items from the collection, is coated regularly with a layer of Renaissance wax to form a barrier against finger grease and acids. It is also regularly photographed and examined for condition to observe changes over time. Several of the works on display are loans from artists, which change or rotate at intervals. In my experience, no artist has declined to lend a work for reasons based on conservation and handling. In fact, many actively encourage it. Nevertheless, we recognize that not all objects can be suitable for handling.

As desirable as Zadeh's abstracts are the 18th century enamel boxes in the collection of Bilston Craft Gallery. Considerations of rarity, value and age prevent any kind of handling. Therefore we

sought instead to find and commission new work that would not simply replicate the original object, but would explore tactile aspects of it in works that maintained their own status as art.

John Grayson's enamel boxes painstakingly reproduced the means by which the 'originals' were made, and provided us with stages of production that give a complete picture of the whole process. Karina Thompson took a miser's purse – an example of 18th century steel jewelry in which tiny faceted steel beads are sewn into a knitted fabric – and recreated the combination of textile and metal in a large-scale work in which surface, texture, light and color are abstracted from the original and made the subject of a tactile work. Exploring this piece is akin to putting its source work under a microscope and observing it – each stitch, fold and seam – very close up, which allows the tactile imagination reacting to touch to appreciate the intricacy of the original all the more.

Also included were japanned paper maché boxes that were constructed by a technique in which sheets of paper, rather than being pulped, were bonded with an adhesive which turned them into hard blocks of material. Karin Muhlert's *Aeolian Vessel* uses the same materials and techniques which is only discovered through touch, much to the surprise of the viewer who sees a wooden carved bowl.

Evaluation of these exhibits has indicated that allowing touch – as well as increasing our understanding of art – has had the effect of breaking down the barriers that can arise from the distance placed between the viewer and the art. In all cases, careful monitoring and observation has been in order: but as yet, nothing has had to be taken off display prematurely, and riotous behavior has not ensued. It is my contention that the permission to touch has increased respect for the objects and concern for their well-being.