

The Thickness of Things

Exploring the Curriculum of Museums through Phenomenological Touch

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MUSEUMS, characterized by their collections of art and artifacts of cultural and natural history that offer visitors material evidence of the natural world, have long been considered to be sites of education and informal learning (e.g., Dana, 1999; Dewey, 1916; Hein, 1998). As such, museums can be understood to demonstrate the capacity of human activity and support the power of imagination (Carr, 2010). The information, knowledge and experiences presented in museum exhibitions are the basis for exploration of identity (e.g., Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; Peers & Brown, 2003; Watson, 2007), an invitation to experience the lifeworld (Masberg & Silverman, 1996) and the unfettered learning self (Ellsworth, 2005). The context of the museum provides visitors with sensory interactions as well as those that intersect body-mind perceptions. In this way, the museum functions as a phenomenological text that stimulates the senses through acts of perception, memory, and consciousness (Ellsworth, 2005; Morris, 1998; Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery & Taubman, 2000). Museums are places where, with a nod to Husserl, we go to see “the things themselves,” where material culture and specimens from nature provide opportunities to help visitors see and understand the phenomena of the world. Museum visitors are able to get closer to objects that help them to understand the lifeworld—sometimes of the ordinary, sometimes extraordinary, but always within the context of relationships to people, places and time.

Ellsworth (2005) proposes that museums, among other designed places of learning, can move beyond the simple transmission of knowledge and “invite the sensation of a mind/brain/body simultaneously in both suspension *and* animation in the interval of change” (p. 17). The intersection of the material world with the imagination is a place of potential and possibility. However, despite this opportunity, museums have not been open to the potentially rich experiences afforded by these more holistic perspectives of sensory learning experiences (Candlin, 2004; Weisen, 2008).

The sensory and intellectual encounters a museum visitor has with objects in an exhibition context naturally integrate Merleau-Ponty's (1962) conception of the lifeworld, where lived experiences of time, space, body, and "other" form our understanding and eventual interpretations of the world. As the primary elements of the lifeworld, these four "existentials" (following Van Manen, 1990) encompass a wide range of meanings that reveal the significance of human consciousness through our physical (bodily) presence. Morris (1998) echoes this sentiment by focusing on the importance of the perceptual, embodied, and situated aspects of phenomenological consciousness, most prominently advanced by the work of Maxine Greene. In the museum setting, the lifeworld experiences are primarily transacted through a human-object connection, though clearly the setting and interpersonal relationships play an accompanying part (e.g., Falk & Dierking, 2000). In the museum, objects invite interaction, and thus, as Abram (1996) suggests, "the simplest things may become a world for me, as, conversely, the thing or being comes to take its place more deeply in my world" (p. 52). It is this deep connection to the visitor's world that we concern ourselves with here.

In addition to this perception of objects is the transaction a human being has with these objects. This deep connection with the object in the museum stems from the moment where the visitor encounters the object through the medium of the exhibit or display. The moment of observing an artifact provides opportunity to simultaneously experience our own perceptions of the object, as well as that time, place, and shared story that the object represents to the visitor. As Merleau-Ponty (1962) describes:

A thing is, therefore, not actually *given* in perception, it is intentionally taken up by us, reconstituted and experienced by us insofar as it is bound up in a world, the basic structures of which we carry with us and of which is merely one of the many possible concrete forms. (p. 326; italics in the original)

In this way the encounter with museum objects provides the visitor with the range of possible human experiences, a personal sense of the life of another as it was lived, or simply provides access to the vital and fundamental aspects of being human—a phenomenological museum curriculum.

This curriculum of the museum and more so of objects and artifacts, yields vast potential for meaning and interpretation that provide as much information about the visitor's conceptualization of the lifeworld as it does of the curators and others who collectively present the exhibits (e.g., Lindfors, 1999). Yet, despite the prospect of being a multi-sensory milieu, the American museum is somewhat limited by the field's apathy to change its notions of learning. It is still common in museums to offer a peculiar provocation to the senses: Don't touch. Exhibition halls and displays are frequently visually oriented, docents admonish children to "touch with their eyes," and proximity alarms inform visitors when they are looking too closely. This type of regulation is by virtue of many museum missions to "preserve and conserve" objects for future generations (Buck & Gilmore, 2010; Pye, 2007). Of course, there are places like Science Centers and Children's Museums where touch is the mainstay of interaction and in those settings museum visitors have ample opportunity to explore the lifeworld more directly. Beyond interactive displays and the idea of "hands-on," the opportunity and desire to touch objects in any museum exposes an intense human need and desire to better know and authenticate the world. The need for touch is the need to sense and perceive. In the museum, this need for touch forms the basis for our sense experiences, the vital communication

with the world which makes it present as a familiar setting of our life. It is to it that the perceived object and the perceiving subject owe their thickness. It is the intentional tissue which the effort to know will try to take apart. (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 53)

Building a relationship between the senses, where the learning occurs by sensing this “thickness” of things, yields a curriculum that is not “in compliance but *in transition* and *in motion* toward previously unknown ways of thinking and being in the world” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 16, italics in original).

While our intention to define a phenomenological museum curriculum moves beyond the classic Aristotelian senses, by framing these considerations of the need for touch within the museum, we recognize the *meaning of touching* as well as *not touching* artifacts and objects as they are encountered in museum settings. This is a central point for establishing the sensual experience (perhaps along the lines of Heidegger’s [1962] consideration of “being at hand”). While there are certainly more discussions on materiality and the influences of technology in object-based interactions, our purpose is to ground this discussion in the intersections between the existing museum curriculum and the potential for one that more readily embraces a wider view of sensing and learning. We begin with an exploration of the ideas of materiality specifically from within the museum context, and then apply these concepts to lived experiences of touch in the museum setting.

The Museum Curriculum

We are surrounded by objects. Our lives are spent identifying, classifying, using, and judging objects...they are things precious, beautiful, boring, frightening, lovable. We are so used to objects...but objects have their existence largely unknown to the senses (Gregory, 1970, p.11).

The museum provides an excellent setting for multi-sensory interactions with ideas and objects that reflects our own lived experiences, affording passage to the lifeworld of others. There are increasing arguments in the museum field (Chatterjee, 2008; Dudley, 2010; Edwards, Gosden & Phillips, 2006; Pye, 2007) that museums must revisit the meaning and purpose of touch as part of the powerful experiences that museums provide. The current preference for visual, or ocular-centric interactions has, according to some critiques both inside and outside the field, rendered museums partly inaccessible to many visitors (Stewart, 1999; Weisen, 2008). While there are numerous examinations on the political nature of the ban on touch in museums (e.g., Bennett, 1995; Candlin, 2008b), our intent in this section is to explore the object-based interactions and transactions in the museum setting. We do so through an exploration of materiality and haptics and then revisit the evolution of touch in museums historically.

Materiality in the Museum Context

Materiality refers to embodied engagement with physical things. The term emphasizes the physical, material characteristics of objects and focuses on the ways in which those characteristics are sensorially experienced by human beings (Dudley, 2010). Materiality in the museum

context—and in the context of this paper—refers to the human relationship with objects, recognizing humans as bio-psycho-social beings and objects as physical sites of meaning and value, triggered by sense, perception, and emotion (as well as cognition) (Knappett, 2005). It involves the acknowledgement that experience with objects can and does include the physical properties of that object, as well as prior knowledge or perceptions about it or what the exhibit labels are suggesting the visitor think about the object (Wood & Latham, 2009). Dudley (2010) makes the case that “through our sensory experience of them objects have some potential for value and significance in their own right, whether or not we are privy to any information concerning their purpose or past” (p. 2).

Materiality here recognizes that all physical things, whether they are human-made or natural, are imbued with meaning by human beings and that humans exist in a physical world in which all thoughts and actions occur both *within* their own material bodies and *with* external material things. One does not pass a moment in a day without encountering the physical world. We sleep in beds (things) with sheets and pillows (things) and put on clothing (things) then make breakfast (things) with utensils (things) and walk down the street (thing) to our place of work (many things) where we sit at our desk (thing) and type on our computer (thing). Within the museum, Dudley (2010) urges opportunities for visitors to consider objects for their physical-ness, that they try to understand them through individual sensory experience, and recognize their value and significance on this level (in addition to the other layers of meaning and information typically subscribed to them). To achieve this level of understanding of objects and ourselves requires a different interaction with museum artifacts. To connect lived experiences, to unlock the meaning of the lifeworld, requires access to the meaning of the object that is best gained through touch, and more specifically through the sense receptors and accompanying affective effects from the skin and hands.

The Unifying Sense: Haptic Perception

Our skin mediates the most important transactions of our lives. Skin is the key to our biology, our sensory experiences, our information gathering, and our relationships with others. Although the many roles it plays are rarely appreciated, it is one of the most remarkable and highly versatile parts of the human body (Jablonski, 2006, p. 1).

The term *haptic* means of or relating to the sense of touch or tactile sensations (Paterson, 2007). Until recently, the sense of touch has historically played a significant role in human perception of the external world. Both ancient Indian and ancient Chinese philosophers gave it an important place in the understanding of humans' existence in the natural world (Jutte, 2008). Aristotle's conception of touch as that which is most closely related to the four elements (earth, water, fire, and air) makes touch the one sense that unifies the others and our contact with the world (Jutte, 2008; Paterson, 2007). This special position in the hierarchy of senses in Western thought lasted from Greek times through the Middle Ages and even into the modern era (Jutte, 2008). St. Thomas Aquinas, in particular, helped keep touch at the forefront, claiming that touch is, “the first sense, the root and ground, as it were, of the other senses” (Aquinas, as cited in Jutte, 2008, p. 5). In fact, he pointed out that since touch is “the basis of sensitivity as a whole,” it follows that all other senses derive from it, putting touch as the central sense and all others subordinate to it (Jutte, 2008).

Although Aristotle believed that sensory touch was distributed all over the body (or, if he had to pick a spot, the heart), it was ultimately the hand that became associated with haptic perception (Jutte, 2008). Jutte (2008) believes it is this association that led to the medieval cults of relics in which touching the remains of saints and their clothing became integral to these belief systems. Feeling and touching were ideal ways to prove the real existence of a phenomenon thus for many historically European Christian communities “touching becomes the simplest and most basic form of communion with the sacred” (Jutte, 2008 p. 7). In other words, touch becomes the site for the intersection of body and mind. Until the Enlightenment, touch was a part of a whole repertoire of ways to know the world (Candlin, 2008a). Museums being heavily influenced by Enlightenment ideals, in many ways continue to practice under these values (Candlin, 2008a). With recent trends in embodiment theory, touch is once again being explored as a unifying sense (Candlin, 2008a).

Person-Object Transaction

In the space where embodied humans and tangible objects meet, a coming together of these two elements creates an entirely new entity: The person-object transaction (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Dudley, 2010; Latham, 2009a). It is at this juncture where the lived experience occurs. In the person-object transaction, the object truly enters the viewer’s consciousness and “in effect, it is only through the object-subject engagement that the material artifact or specimen becomes real at all” (Dudley, 2010, p. 5). This conviction of the relationship between knowing the world through tangible, touchable objects is at the heart of phenomenological knowing and being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1962).

Throughout most of western thought, researchers have approached the world in a dualistic manner, separating mind from body, person from thing (Knappett, 2005; Miller, 2005). Museums continue in this tradition, aligning the museum visitor and museum object into opposing, divided positions during a museum encounter. In contrast to this framing, by employing the concept of materiality and the notion of person-object transaction, museums can refocus their attention on the encounter and treat it as a whole entity rather than discrete units bumping into each other. Paterson (2007) notes that, “with tactility, we are not affected or altered by the sense-object itself, nor simply through the medium (flesh) but actually, *in synchrony with* the medium” (p. 17, italics in original). Recognition of this transaction as a coordinated effort suggests a different mindset for the museum visitor, and perhaps even for the museum staff.

The Idea of Touch in the Museum

By the 19th century American museums, following a model that still prevails today, touching of artifacts was generally off limits; objects and artifacts were cherished and treasured from the other side of glass cases. Early twentieth century practices in museums included the establishment of “teaching” collections and the early idea of children’s museums—a concept begun in the late 1890s with the establishment of the Brooklyn Children’s Museum—where focus was on better access to objects and artifacts but still within the traditional museum format. Certainly many museums have always had “teaching collections” (the kind of objects and artifacts that *can* be handled), but not exhibitions and experiences where the notion of touch and/or “hands-on”

was the goal. Hands-on learning and high-touch exhibit contexts originate in the ideas of Frank Oppenheimer and the development of the Exploratorium in the late 1960s, and with Michael Spock at the Boston Children's Museum around the same time (Schwartz, 2006). These two pioneering institutions led the way for new concepts of learning in museums and more importantly began to dismantle many of the barriers previously created by museum practices to “not touch.” In 1976 Philadelphia became home to the Please Touch Museum, offering a very clear directive for the visitor and an alternative to what existed for children and families prior to that time. It should not be surprising that the primary philosophy driving the development of many children's museums is that of Maria Montessori, whose concepts of sensory learning environments for children emphasize the use of touch as a way to *see* the world (Montessori, 2004).

At this point, it is important to note the difference between the ideas of “hands-on” and touch within the museum context. The term “hands-on” has become a part of everyday museum language and can be found as an element in many museum programs and exhibits. But what does it signify exactly? Simply put, “hands-on” refers to learning by doing, or “any educational experience that actively involves people in manipulating objects to gain knowledge or understanding” (Haury & Rillero, 1994, p. 6). Learning (and teaching) this way means to provide the learner with the actual activity or subject matter under review. The goal is to enable participants to become critical thinkers, to apply what they have learned and to go through the concrete process of understanding something (Haury & Rillero, 1994).

In contrast, the idea of touch within the museum refers more specifically to physically making contact with artifacts in some way, making this the point of the encounter. A good example of this is a “touch tank” in a zoo or aquarium where visitors are allowed to touch animals in simulated tidewater settings such as those found at the Monterey Bay Aquarium in central California (www.montereybayaquarium.org). Other instances of touch within the museum might refer to small samples of a piece of fur, bone, a pottery shard, etc. where the visitor is invited to simply touch the object in order to better understand it.

In each of these evolutions of museum practice, the goal was for visitors to change their mode of interaction, moving from visual perception of the objects to a tactile one. Despite the inclusion of many more opportunities for hands-on interactions, those interactions were of a very specific kind of touch. Even so, it has become a bit of a catch-term in museums and one that seems to now be taken-for-granted. To include “hands-on” activities in a museum can be interpreted in various ways, from teaching with objects to having students manipulate things in exhibitions. Where science museums, like the Exploratorium (www.exploratorium.com), emphasized scientific inquiry and messing around with ideas and concepts, the interactions were not with highly prized artifacts or equipment. Likewise, in children's museums the use of artifacts and objects were again limited to teaching collections—often the lower-end of quality in terms of artifact examples, or hand-me-downs from the museum's collection—the rest of the hands-on experiences were focused on developmentally appropriate interactions where the artifacts played a supporting, rather than primary role. In all these iterations, the emphasis, then and now is on the process, that is, the act of learning about the subject under inquiry. The focus is not necessarily on the object itself, but rather the object is part of the process of doing something in a hands-on way, not the center of attention itself.

Reclaiming the potential for interaction and connection to the lifeworld within the museum will require more than hands-on experiences like these. While the goal for bringing concepts to life through wider manipulation of ideas and process does have its place in learning—and clearly has wide-appeal judging by the attendance figures in science centers and children's museums—

the remainder of the museum and its tenant objects and artifacts need something more to bring them into the meaningful curriculum of the museum.

Phenomenological Touch: Tactual Perception and Materiality

Physiologically, touch is a modality resulting from the combined information of innumerable receptors and nerve endings concerned with pressure, temperature, pain and movement. But there is more to touch. It is a sense of communication. It is receptive, expressive, can communicate empathy. It can bring distant objects and people into proximity (Paterson, 2007, p. 1).

If hands-on is about manipulating objects to enhance one form of learning, could there be any other way of engaging with objects beyond process-based learning and into the meaning of the lifeworld? Indeed, we propose that there is another way. We call this different approach *phenomenological touch*, that is, the lived experience of making physical contact using ones' own haptic senses with a real physical thing. This kind of contact forms the bridge between person and object, connecting all that is contained within the person and all that is available with the object and acknowledges that the bridge itself can become something entirely unique from the person or object singularly. Focusing on the concept of materiality through phenomenological touch can lead to a new way of thinking about touch in the museum, one that can further our understanding of the world and our role within it. As Dudley (2010) explains, "a truly materialist approach necessitates a subtle, but important, re-jigging of emphasis in many areas of study, especially museums, influenced in part by phenomenology" (p. 2). That emphasis is the re-orientation of the museum experiences from exhibition writ large, to encounters and transactions with objects.

We believe phenomenology to be well suited for the understanding of our embedded, continuous existence as embodied, living, immediate creatures and hence our interpretation of the world through touch (as well as the other senses). Indeed, "touch is related to experiencing the world in its immediacy, not something we usually associate with museums" (Romanek & Lynch, 2008, p. 282). From this perspective, methodologies derived from phenomenology are a good fit for describing sensory experience such as touch (Paterson, 2007).

While Patterson (2007) points out that the senses of touch are "multiple, complex and intertwining," (p. 6), he broadly differentiates between two kinds of touch that can be used as elements of phenomenological touch: Cutaneous (immediate and obvious) and deep (affective and metaphorical). Cutaneous touch is what we most often refer to when talking about touch. It is the instrumental aspect of contact, referring to the physiological interface between skin, nerves, brain and the external world. As he describes: "The feeling of cutaneous touch when an object brushes our skin is simultaneously an awareness of the materiality of the object and an awareness of the spatial limits and sensations of our lived body" (Patterson, 2007, p. 2). Conversely, deep touch is felt more internally, as a subjective feeling. It is a connection, using the skin or hands, between the outer world and one's inner affective states. Both kinds of touch, although different, inform notions of phenomenological touch in the museum.

Of all the senses, touch is the only one of the five¹ senses that is inwardly-directed. With touch, one tends to "feel" the reaction to touch *within the body* (Johnson, 1999; Paterson, 2007). Senses such as taste, smell, sight and hearing are all "of" something external, for example, one

tastes something or smells something “out there,” the taste or the smell is associated with the external thing, e.g., “I smell pizza,” rather than “my nose is laden with lovely aromas.” Pizza, rather than the aroma (through sense), is the object of focus. Paterson and Johnson agree that few objects are perceptible by one sense alone, and, as a result of their expanded construction of touch, involve some form of touch, an understanding that underscores the unifying nature of the haptic sense.

How do these elements of phenomenological touch play out in a museum setting? One of the familiar tropes of touch is a person reaching out to feel (with the hand) an object to determine if it is “real.” Museum workers worldwide know well of the museum visitor, astonished by a beautiful or moving object, who wants to reach out and touch it—to verify, to prove, to reassure oneself that it is indeed what the eyes claim it to be (Romanek & Lynch, 2008). Or perhaps the reason for reaching out to touch the piece is to assist the eyes, utilizing the hand as an extension of sight (Paterson, 2007; Candlin, 2004, 2006). In these instances our impulse as a museum visitor is to better understand the object by using touch to help us connect to its material nature as one more way of knowing. Consider the following scenarios of our own experiences as examples of phenomenological touch in museums.

The Berlin Wall. In the exhibition, *The Price of Freedom: Americans at War*, on display at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History, visitors walk through a vast array of artifacts and exhibits that represent the many wars included in the history of the United States. Visitors make their way from the earliest skirmishes of the War of Independence to the most recent interpretations of the events of September 11, and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. It was in the last section, beginning with the cold war, where I (Elee) had a deep touch experience with the Berlin Wall. I rounded the corner on a section about the Cold War, and there in front of me was a full-scale replica of the Berlin Wall. Several people were gathered around the segment, which contained several large pieces of the wall embedded into the replica, and below a segment that you could *touch*. Almost immediately my heart and mind raced to the images of citizens of Berlin taking down the wall—of the jubilation and excitement, and of the awe. I was transported to my teenage self and considering the importance of the moment. I reflected on pieces of the wall given to my mother by one of her students. I remember holding those pieces in my hand, rolling them around, and thinking about where these had come from. Then as I turned another corner in the exhibit, I saw two twisted steel beams from the World Trade towers, and my lived experiences started all over again. In neither of those transactions did I physically touch the artifacts; simply the *idea* of touching them transported me.

The numinous museum experience. During my (Latham, 2009b) study of numinous experiences with museum objects, I listened to many people describe their deeply felt experiences of *what it would feel like to touch* the objects of these powerful encounters if given the chance. One woman, Erin, describes her encounter with a Renoir painting (and apparently the artist himself) in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Her need to imagine touching the painting was quite strong:

...feeling that somehow—and I knew better not to touch—but if I could touch the painting, you know that feeling of “huh” [air inspired quickly], maybe I’ll touch the spot that nobody else has touched since Renoir put the paint there, you know, just that feeling of, I’m gonna find it...it was just that overwhelming sense that if I could just touch this, that I would be touching—that the hundred years would slip away and I—I felt I knew him [Renoir] just by looking at what he had done. Yeah. (Latham, 2009b)

For several people in the numinous experiences study, the chair in which Abraham Lincoln was shot (at The Henry Ford in Dearborn, MI) was the focus of these encounters. In two independent people's descriptions of the chair was an imagined encounter or a desire to touch the chair. One man, Richard, dreamily envisioned "if only" he could sit in the chair, the experience would have been even more intense:

Well, I think it would have been even more powerful just because I think that would have been like the ultimate of that experience. You know, here I am in the *exact* same chair that Abraham Lincoln got shot in and—this is very odd, [nervous laugh]. I mean, it's [sic] literally, that would like literally be being part of history. That would literally...have been like I am now part of history, somehow or another...it was just odd to be that close to [pause] something like that (Latham, 2009b).

Another person, Mary, describes how she would feel if she were allowed to touch Lincoln's chair:

Mary: [inspired breath] I'd probably go, like "AHHHH!" I'd probably freak out. I would probably think next to, you know, having my three children born healthy, that would be like the most exciting experience as far as on a physical level in my life.

Author: Touching the Chair?

Mary: Yeah!

Author: Why?

Mary: Because, it's like, woah, you know, somebody's reading it in the book, and you go [pointing], that's *there!* That was then [pause], that's there! I mean, I guess I have kind of a very distant reverent view of it. By my response now I guess that's what I'm noticing. It would be like, you gotta be kidding me, you know. It's not the same, maybe, as for some people, touching the Pope's garment or something. If he's driving by in the Pope-mobile, something like that. But, to some people some things are, like a real "wow" experience (Latham, 2009b).

Visitors crave opportunities to explore objects beyond the intellectual confines of exhibitions. The potential for phenomenological touch in the museum draws from the two elements of touch, cutaneous and deep—the physical contact made with the object and the internal and emotional connection of the senses to the object—to achieve a new level of interaction and transaction. When museums can plan for these types of potential encounters, it satisfies the need for visitors to experience the lifeworld by bringing them a different sensory understanding of the material and contextual meaning of museum objects.

Exploring the Meaning and Use of Phenomenological Touch in the Museum Curriculum

Art can and should be a touching experience. Standing in front of a painting, appreciating a sculpture, or walking through a building, even if we are not permitted to physically touch the work we should at least be touched by it (Paterson, 2007, p. 79, italics in original).

As we describe above, the opportunity to experience phenomenological touch in the museum setting creates moments for visitors to make sense of their lifeworld. These are person-object transactions that provide a link to meaning and interpretation of the world (Latham, 2007). Such transactions, when fully enabled in a moment of touching, can bring materiality into sharper focus. These material transactions fill a gap that currently exists in museum settings, where the lack of touch and expert-driven perspectives fail to support the ability of the visitor to grasp the full purpose and value of artifacts in a given museum's collections. As we document here, access to this meaning and the deeper perspectives of the lifeworld can be unlocked through touching objects.

Working closely within a phenomenological framework, we can draw on the ideas of consciousness: First that museum visitors are making sense of their own perceptions (Dahlberg, Drew, & Nyström, 2001), and second that their understanding of the world is experienced bodily through temporal, spatial and relational awareness (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). This consciousness is what informs phenomenological touch, a deep interaction that triggers the phenomenological tenet of intentionality through which the museum visitor can bring a directed awareness toward the object and their interactions with that object. This allows for materiality to be brought to the forefront of object transactions, further supporting the inter-connected nature of the object's material, cultural, and personal meanings (Wood & Latham, 2009).

Numerous shifts in museological paradigms of late signal the beginning of new conceptions on the meaning of museums and their relationship to visitors and more importantly, the visitors interaction with objects (for example, Dudley, 2010; Phillips, 2008). Given these new orientations to museum visitor-object interactions, it may seem counter to most preservation practices to argue for the touching of objects in museums as part of normal meaningful routines (Candlin, 2004; Hetherington, 2000). We acknowledge the extensive conservation and preservation literature that suggests the need to minimize handling of museum artifacts or at least to avoid instances that might “unnecessarily hasten the degradation or deterioration of any object” (Curator's Committee of AAM, p. 6). Instead we argue here for the consideration of new ways to bring touch to museum visitors.

Our first suggestion is to continue to build on the notion of educational collections (a.k.a teaching collections) and conscientiously determine which objects can be “sacrificed” for the purpose of allowing visitors to touch a “real” thing in different and more accessible ways. In the UK, museums are incorporating this ethic more fully into their practice, such as the everyday use of the handling tables in the British Museum's Enlightenment gallery (Candlin, 2008a). Here objects are more than “hands-on”; they are expressly intended to elicit a sense of engagement between visitors and objects (Candlin, 2006, 2008a). As another more personal example, at the Arizona Museum of Natural History (AMNH) in Mesa, AZ, during one of my (Kiersten) recent visits with family, we came into an exhibit on ancient indigenous people of Arizona. In the gallery, there was a cart full of artifacts and a volunteer docent staffing the cart. The docent was very engaging and immediately interested us in what she had to show. I was amazed (stunned) when she put a pot in my 8-year-old daughter's hands and proceeded to tell her that it was 10,000 years old. My daughter's eyes lit up and she came close to crying; it touched her so deeply.



Later, she talked about that moment, when she “actually got to touch something really old”—this was an important, connective encounter for her. The AMNH museum had decided that these experiences were worth risking some of their artifacts. In our case, this encounter utterly changed the mood of our visit that day and serves as but one example of how opportunities like this could be more prevalent throughout all museum experiences and similarly oriented toward visitors of all ages.

Our second suggestion is for museums to employ *imaginative touch*. Simply stated, imaginative touch is when we help the visitor to imagine touching an object. This idea (Latham, 2009a) stemmed from listening to people describe their deeply moving (numinous) encounters with museum objects as well as from studies of touch with the blind (e.g., Sacks, 2005; Candlin, 2006). In nearly all of their accounts, people who discussed these intense encounters described what it would be like to touch the normally off-limits museum object (as described above). The detail they used to describe this *imagined touching* was so specific and rich that one might even believe that they had indeed touched the piece though they had not. Museums can use various methods to bring people to such points of experience—text that directs visitors to imagine the feel of an object, facilitated experiences with museum workers that ask people to think about how it would feel to physically interact with an object, and/or imaginative, evocative displays.

By creating these moments where the museum visitor can imagine and transact with objects—the connection to human experience—we can re-energize our understanding and meaning of objects and ideas. These transactions create deeper investigations of the material interplay

within the museum context. Touching, both physically and imaginatively, creates deep levels of reflective meaning; it brings the experience of time, place, and relationship into the foreground. In a museum, this contributes to greater consciousness and intentionality of the visitor around the meaning and interpretation of objects, as well as contributing to the greater purpose and value of the human experience.

Conclusion

At the heart of our argument for phenomenological touch in the museum lies an opportunity to open avenues for greater access, appreciation, and awareness of the lifeworld through transactions with objects. Just as the world around the museum changes, museum practices need to evolve to meet the visitor's experience. Access to the lifeworld through transactions with objects is interpretive, creating curricular challenges for the museum field to consider. One way to understand the role of objects within a museum context is as a stimulus for the senses—to appeal to memory, awaken consciousness and lay a foundation for imagination to envision new meaning, new possibility, and new perceptions of the world. This opportunity to connect to the lifeworld through time, space, and relationship is necessarily mediated through the body. As we have presented here, transactions with objects, whether through cutaneous or deep touch, can serve to underscore the meaning and power of museum objects in our lives.

In a time when museums are in transition, seeking greater connection with visitors and deeper paths of meaning making, attention to materiality and person-object transactions are critical. The human need for touch persists, despite placards and rope barriers. Embracing a more phenomenological approach to interactions with objects is one way that museums can provide greater access for visitors to connect with the meaning of human potential. This is an increasingly important consideration for museums, particularly as our cultural preferences turn toward the virtual. In these ways, imaginative touch and the phenomenological awareness that museums can provide creates a space for visitors to build on the inexhaustible thickness of the things they create the world of possibility that surrounds them.

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NOTES

1. There is great debate as to how many senses there actually are. When referring to the "five senses" we are reverting to an Aristotelian notion of the sense suite, with the understanding that the Western world—and museums—tends to express notions of sense in this way.

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