Lidchi, Henrietta

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BOOK REVIEWS


*Touch in Museums* arises out of a series of themed seminars funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and held in 2006–7. In her ‘Introduction’, the editor Helen J. Chatterjee (deputy director of museums and collections at University College London) sums up the volume’s task as setting out a ‘framework for understanding the role of object handling for learning, enjoyment and health’ (p. 1). She argues that the volume builds on the ideas and research published in the collection, edited by Elizabeth Pye, *The Power of Touch: Handling Objects in Museum and Heritage Contexts* (Walnut Creek, California, 2008). Indeed, some authors contribute to both volumes, hinting at the existence of a restricted but potentially emerging field. *Touch in Museums* identifies the field as one that requires a multidisciplinary approach drawing in part on innovative research in psychoneurology, the source of some of its best and most interesting contributions.

The volume comprises a variety of types of contribution that consider the scientific basis of touch, the impact of touch, and current policy directions and practical programmes to incorporate touch into therapeutic and museum contexts. The volume has broad aims and is organized thematically in five parts (though the original seminar series had only four sessions). Part one considers the meaning of touch and why touch is an important and thus unfortunately neglected aspect of museum visits. Part two focuses on new technologies for interpretation. Parts three, four, and five are case-study driven, dealing respectively with memory and touch, the therapeutic value of touch, and handling practices in museums. There is a rather sparse introduction and a fuller conclusion—essentially a summary of session discussions, which suggests future avenues for research. While the volume has the word ‘museums’ in its title, it explores a number of locations for the handling of objects, including museums. In my view, the most stimulating chapters are those dealing with the area of psychoneurological research that explore the neurological impact of touch and how this affects emotion. On the whole, of the twenty-one chapters in the volume these are the most significant and provocative. They address touch as a sophisticated process and an integral part of a multisensory system. They raise interesting questions that museums would do well to understand and reflect upon.
Part one is especially dominated by chapters on psychoneurological research that reach some compelling conclusions. In ‘Making Sense of Touch’, Charles Spence and Alberto Gallace suggest that in contrast to the lexicon of words used to differentiate nuances of visual and auditory stimuli, there is little in the way of language to distinguish separate touch experiences. This neglect of touch, they suggest, is at odds with new research on the cortical plasticity and compensatory abilities of the brain through touch. Spence and Gallace state (p. 27) that there are ‘differences in the pattern of brain activation between individuals who have different levels of tactile expertise’ and that touch activates the visual cortex. This means that developing touch ‘literacy’ (through playing mah-jong, for instance) allows people to see, almost literally, even if they are blindfolded. In ‘The Two Sides of Touch: Sensing and Feeling’, a slightly denser chapter, Francis McGlone takes this argument further by looking at touch as part of exploratory behaviour, arguing that we use touch to compensate, or further investigate, information derived from other senses or the world around us. He provides a useful distinction between discriminatory and affective touch, explaining both in neurological terms (a subject that Hugo Critchley then takes up in the following chapter, ‘Emotional Touch: A Neuroscientific Overview’). This is enlightening in part because McGlone uses this framework to explain how handling objects can become a much more embodied sensation, a sensation that is read emotionally; his point being that while handling objects allows discrimination of material and form, it provides a different kind of knowledge. Touch satiates curiosity in a manner that other senses do not, provoking a range of emotional responses. Critchley then analyses touch as an emotional activity, which calms, sedates, and engages.

Later in the volume there is a reprise of these themes in ‘A Memory for Touch: The Cognitive Psychology of Tactile Memory’, another chapter by Gallace and Spence, which is grouped with others looking at the link between touch and memory, and therefore therapeutic applications. Gallace and Spence argue that touch triggers memories in a very particular way, allowing access to more remote and intangible feelings. Conversely, they explore how tactile memory intersects with, and potentially disrupts, oral and visual memories. Whereas later chapters, in parts three to five, also address these issues, they do so from a sociological, anthropological, or museological perspective, largely through small case studies with anecdotal evidence. I found these less stimulating, in part because they were more statement than possibility. This implies that while the psychoneurological essays are attempting to identify innovative promise, the case studies seem to have few incisive questions about the realm of touch beyond its affective value, and how this can be elicited through programming.

If the psychoneurological strand is strong, there are also intriguing chapters in part two that address haptic technologies and experimentation. These attempt to demonstrate the importance of different applications for understanding: (1) how perceptions of objects can be built up through touch
and artist projects (‘The Use of Haptic Interfaces in Haptics Research’, by Christos Giachritis, and ‘Tactual Explorations: A Tactile Interpretation of a Museum Exhibit through Tactile Art Works and Augmented Reality, by Isil Onol); (2) how visual and virtual access aligns itself with haptic interaction (‘CONTACT: Digital Modelling of Object and Process in Artefact Teaching’, by Roger Doonan and Michael Boyd, and ‘Out of Touch? Digital Technologies, Ethnographic Objects and Sensory Orders’ by Graeme Were); and (3) the overall applicability of new haptic technologies (‘A Versatile Large-Scale Multimodal Virtual Reality System for Cultural Heritage Visualization’, by Celine Loscos, and ‘Touch Technologies and Museum Access’, by Robert Zimmer, Janis Jefferies, and Mandayam Srinivasan). There are also a number of insights in those chapters discussing teaching applicability. For example, in their chapter, Doonan and Boyd note that whilst in the hierarchy of the senses sight is the richest source of information, touch is the arbiter when there is contradictory information at work (p. 114). They also suggest that an assessment of objects by hand and eye together works optimally when the object is moving, whereas visual exploration works best when the object is stationary (ibid.). In his chapter Were reports that as a result of conducting a survey of student responses to 3-D imaging, he has concluded that it permits a more considered response from students and that, ultimately, it can have an impact on understanding analogous to that provided by touch. Generally, these chapters propose technological means for understanding the role of touch, although Onol looks inconclusively at artistic avenues. Indeed, Onol’s chapter starts off very promisingly, but falls short because the results are not really disclosed (though this may be because it is a product of a larger research project). Overall, the chapters in part two vary in terms of how tentative their conclusions are. Although it is to be expected that they do not have solutions, there are repeated calls for further research, with more space devoted to methodology and technical details than to results and conclusions.

The weakest strand in the volume is that devoted to more sociological, anthropological, and therapeutic approaches, a result I think of an emphasis in these chapters on short case studies. In contrast to the emphasis in the earlier scientific chapters on the sophistication and complex interconnectedness of the human sensorium, the more sociological, anthropological, and therapeutic chapters seem to lapse inevitably towards emotional impact with a lack of discrimination. The tone for this simpler analytical model is set in part one by Fiona Candin’s chapter ‘Museums, Modernity and the Class Politics of Touching Objects’. Her partial, though no doubt influential, argument is defined through the optics of class consciousness, namely that the deprivileging of touch in museums has been a consequence of their democratization. Candin argues (p. 18) that ‘historically, working-class visitors have not been credited with the ability to learn rationally through touch’. In my view, she seems to be setting out an overall framework for exclusion/inclusion, not exploration.
Consequently, touch is invariably discussed as a good thing, but not always as an interesting thing, with the authors of the following chapters setting themselves the restrictive task of proving the affective value of touch. This makes for rather slow reading.

Three authors, Michael Rowlands, Laura Phillips, and Bernie Arigho, take on the issue of reminiscence work. Of these three, Arigho’s chapter ‘Getting a Handle on the Past: The Use of Objects in Reminiscence Work’ is the sharpest because it devises a helpful ‘how to’ list for using objects in reminiscence work. In his ‘Aesthetics of Touch among the Elderly’, Rowlands develops a theoretical model invoking a polysemic meaning of ‘care’, which shows a good regard for semiotics and a healthy desire to make the best of anthropological work as part of a larger role in town planning for care facilities, but it is largely narrative. Both Phillips’s ‘Reminiscence: Recent Work at the British Museum’ and Jane Samuels’s ‘The British Museum in Pentonville Prison: Dismantling Barriers through Touch and Handling’ seem underwritten and overstated. Phillips, for example, asserts (p. 103) that one participant ‘revealed that they needed support in order to enjoy the present’. This is a surprising statement to make (in a five-page chapter) about a participant who was encountered within the confines of a time-limited, museum-based, educational project. It made me, as a reader, wonder about research protocols (disclosure) and therapeutic training (analysis). In their short but well-argued chapter ‘Enrichment Programmes in Hospitals: Using Museum Loan Boxes in University College London Hospitals’, Guy Noble and Helen J. Chatterjee provide a more reasoned and substantial argument centring on the potential for use of museum collections within a hospital environment. Similarly, in her ‘See, Touch and Enjoy: Newham University Hospital’s Nostalgia Room’, Jackie O’Sullivan recounts, touchingly, the impact of an object-designed space. Both Caroline Selai, in her ‘Measuring the “Difficult-to-Measure”’, and Marcus Weisen, in his ‘How Accessible are Museums Today?’, provide somewhat dry and, in the latter case, bullet-point ridden analytical accounts of how to go about investigating key issues. Bernadette Lynch’s juxtaposition of theory and practice in her dense but short chapter ‘The Amenable Object: Working with Diaspora Communities through a Psychoanalysis of Touch’ is baffling.

As is perhaps clear, Touch in Museums is uneven, which may be a consequence of its multidisciplinary rather than interdisciplinary approach. Whereas the aim may have been to use the case studies to provide qualitative substantiation of the psychoneurological chapters, the relationship between the two types of contribution is not straightforward; indeed, they seem to have been written in isolation from each other and do not seem to have been edited to marry up. Moreover, there is some glibness, particularly regarding museums, that sympathetic and systematic editing should have resolved. For example, Rowlands writes (p. 190) ‘if one of the cardinal rules of the good curator is “do not touch”’. Even though it is clear what he is getting at, it is essentially
incorrect, since that is precisely what the curatorial trade asks one to do. Similarly, Zimmer, Jefferies, and Srinivasan describe (p. 150) more than two hundred years of museum history in reductive fashion: ‘museums have taken on a dual role: they perform conservation and they enable access’. This assertion is supported by reference to a previous article by themselves, rather than to the enormous body of literature on the subject. This is perhaps a more or less inevitable downside of a volume that draws on so many disciplines, literatures, and readerships, and which appears to have received only a light editorial touch.

*Touch in Museums* alerts the reader to the fascinating psychoneurological research currently being undertaken and hints at its wider applicability in museums and other contexts. This is very inspiring and suggests that there would be great mileage in research into those who consistently handle material culture, as this improves visual acuity, allowing memory and imagination to develop, linking and developing touch and vision (p. 28). This would logically imply that analysing, scientifically, the whole process of making and touching material culture, and the cultural and professional practices associated with it, might indicate how touch and the other senses are articulated. Such work would be fascinating if done cross-culturally and anthropologically. Consequently, the strength of the volume rests in the psychoneurological and technological strand, as it provokes many questions and presents sophisticated and complex as well as theoretically challenging arguments, which should be the basis for designing research questions and devising exhibitions and public programming in museums. This theoretical framework extends the debate around touch, beyond simple arguments about inclusion and alienation, by hinting what the lack of touch *actually* deprives people of, or what kind of feeling, learning, or imagination touch ‘literacy’ could foster.

HENRIETTA LIDCHI
*National Museums Scotland*


This thought-provoking book comprises a catalogue of and reflections on the groundbreaking *Pasifika Styles* exhibition held at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge from 5 May 2006 to 23 February 2008. The exhibition brought together the work of thirty-six New Zealand based Pacific artists. Their work was interspersed amongst the ethographic displays in the lower gallery of the museum and as an installation-