

Book Reviews

Art, Museums and Touch, Fiona Candlin, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010, ISBN: 978-0-7190-7933-7, hardback £.60.00, pp. xii+208

This lively and interesting volume grapples with the complex subject of touch and how this has been conceptualized within both art history and museums of art. It also examines how changing ideas about touch have shaped museal practice in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, especially in terms of interpretation, access provision, and social inclusion. Ultimately, Dr Candlin – Senior Lecturer in Museum Studies at Birkbeck, University of London – calls for a more subtle understanding of the relationship between touch and meaning as socially and culturally constructed, and historically situated.

The six chapters of the volume are arranged thematically, and chart a course from the late eighteenth-century museum to the twenty-first-century gallery of modern and contemporary art. Rather than presenting a chronological narrative, Candlin selects a series of key historical moments in order to illustrate changing practices of touch, and the concepts which underpinned these. In order to achieve this, Candlin draws upon a wide body of evidence in the forms of works of art, historical documents, exhibitions, and interviews. By identifying overlapping themes and exploring how these are connected, Candlin's work re-evaluates historical evidence for the understanding of touch in early museums, as well as offering new ways of thinking about it in the present.

Candlin begins by establishing the emergence of ocular-centric conceptions of art, the separation of touch from vision, and the equation of touch with the primitive, in foundational art historical theories of the early to mid-twentieth century. It is from here, Candlin argues, that touch becomes relegated to the far shores of art historical enquiry (p10). While Candlin is right to challenge our most basic assumptions about touch, this chapter might also have considered how the views of theorists such as Riegl, Panofsky and Berenson were themselves shaped by early modern conceptions of vision.

Candlin proceeds to examine touch and gender in art history, and how touch was construed as either masculine or feminine, high or low, valid or invalid, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In particular, she reconsiders patriarchal readings of touch as masculine in sculptural theory and practice, and suggests that Feminist conceptions of touch have often posited it as simple and hierarchical, when in fact touch is lent different status according to who touched, by whose permission, and what benefits this was supposed to confer (p52). Interestingly, Candlin also explores how the masculine notion of touch became 'disembodied' through the work of authors such as the artist and critic Stokes (p39), who despite focussing on touch, equated it with the poetic and the incorporeal rather than the bodily.

Chapter Three considers the early public museums of the eighteenth century and the social implications and operation of touch as a rational means of generating knowledge. While Candlin acknowledges that the working classes were sometimes excluded from places of culture, she also finds evidence to the contrary, and investigates how the touch of the English social elite was seen to be damaging by their European counterparts (pp80-81). As such, she recalls the work of Classen (2012) on understanding touch across a broad cultural and temporal landscape, and of re-thinking the notion that all knowledge was primarily visually construed during the Enlightenment. However, Candlin also brings the debate up-to-date by considering the thorny issue of social inclusion in contemporary museums.

Chapter Four examines curatorial and connoisseurial notions of touch, and the subsequent demise of this 'expert' touching. In particular, Candlin considers the many changes which occurred within curatorial training over the course of the twentieth century, and identifies a conflict between academic knowledge and practical learning which is still in force today (p106). She considers the pertinent question of whether it is possible to retain the practical skills of the connoisseur without the values that informed connoisseurism, which tend to jar with the more socially-engaged functions of the contemporary museum.

From here, Candlin moves logically to the important issue of touch and access provision in contemporary museums, and the fact that touch alone does not equal 'access' to collections if it is not also accompanied by intellectual context; nor is it primarily blind or visually-impaired visitors who learn through touch (p124). Candlin, thus, considers the limitations of exhibitions incorporating touch in contemporary museums and galleries, and questions whether mediation is always necessary, and what it says about institutional authority. Here, her views might be complemented by Simon's (2010) work on facilitating engagement with objects in museums.

The final chapter deals with modern and contemporary art, and examines exhibitions from the 1960s to 2009, some of which belonged to the 'modern' period, but were re-staged in the contemporary art gallery, such as Morris' *bodyspacemotionthings* (1972 and 2009). Here, Candlin focuses upon curatorial attempts to regulate audience experience of artworks, and the impact of this upon artistic intention and meaning. It would be interesting to read this chapter in conjunction with Rees Leahy's recent publication, *Museum Bodies* (2012), with its discussion of embodied viewing and physical discomfiture as a barrier to accessing works of art, and which also examines the redisplay of Morris' work.

A short concluding statement largely serves to recount the diverse areas in which further scholarship is needed, and the implications of Candlin's research for display, interpretation and audience engagement in the contemporary museum and gallery. While Candlin constructs a well-researched position on a variety of key issues, the purpose of this book is not to offer solutions as such.

Overall, *Art, Museums and Touch* is an interesting, and in parts, illuminating read, which identifies and interrogates some of the basic assumptions on which our knowledge of touch is predicated and presents a carefully constructed revisionism. Candlin fits an impressive amount of material into a slim volume, and the resulting questions and debates are wide-ranging enough to be of interest to a diverse body of scholars, including material culture, visual studies, art history, and museum studies, as well as museum practitioners, and (especially) curators of modern and contemporary art. At times, however, Candlin strays into other territories, which give the reader pause to consider whether the volume might have worked better had it been more focussed on a more specific area of enquiry.

The volume might also attract criticism for its isolation of touch from the other senses, at a time when, in sensory history, studies of synaesthesia and the reputed impossibility of understanding the human sensorium, except through the interaction between the senses, are becoming increasingly popular. Scholars such as Smith (2007) and Howes (2005) have moved beyond the known senses into other, harder to define areas of enquiry, including the mysterious 'sixth sense'. However, Candlin successfully justifies the focus of this volume, and clearly demonstrates where the connections are between touch and the other senses.

Candlin's style is eminently readable and accessible and she describes complex ideas with clarity and lucidity. She deals with her secondary sources in an expert manner, and very cleverly identifies where the shortcomings and missed opportunities in scholarship lie. On occasion, Candlin's arguments can be slightly overstated, as in her interpretation of the photographic presentation of Barbara Hepworth (pp44-48), and, sadly, the book is sometimes let down by its editing, as the early part of the volume suffers from a fair few errors of punctuation.

To conclude, Candlin's work successfully throws down the gauntlet to traditional art historical and museological interpretations of touch as simple, unproblematic and pre-modern, and wider scholarship on museums and touch will undoubtedly benefit from her incisive observations and wide-ranging and nuanced critical enquiry. It also adds to a growing body of literature on the once-neglected subject of touch and its significance in not only in understanding historical practice, but of its value and purpose in the contemporary museum.

References

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Looking for Non-Publics, Daniel Jacobi and Jason Luckerhoff (eds) Québec: Presses de L'Université du Québec, translated from French, 2012, paperback, \$24,00, 158pp

The question of who does not visit museums is almost as important in visitor studies as who does visit museums: as public institutions, it continues to be a concern that, as Robert Janes pithily summarizes, 'The majority of the world's museums still cater to society's elite... an obstinate characteristic of museums that continues, albeit unfairly at times, to undermine the public perception and value of museums' (Janes 2009: 21). Whether fair or not, the question of why particular groups do not visit museums continues to tax museum professionals, researchers and governments alike. This edited volume, originally published in French but now translated into English, promises to offer a different perspective on the 'cultural gap', between those who participate and those who are excluded from what is described in the blurb as 'a culture that is unfamiliar, even foreign'. At first, the use of non-publics needs to be explained for a non-Francophone audience, as the editors readily admit, the use of the term *public* is used very differently. Coined in the late 1960s in France, *non-public* is used to mean those who do not participate in culture, who are actively excluded from participating (for a number of reasons), as opposed to the *public* who are actively and regularly involved in culture – visiting it, discussing it, making active choices to take part. Once the meaning of the term as used by the editors is grasped, it becomes clear as to how useful and powerful the term is – excluding a *public* sounds much more fundamentally wrong than excluding an *audience*.

This is not a how-to book. I did not come away from this book with any new ideas as to how museums, and other cultural activities, might redress the matter of exclusion. It is more helpful as a meditation, with evidence, as to what exclusion is and how it changes according to the cultural activity under examination. There is an interesting, if dense, discursive chapter by Bonaccorsi on the meaning of the term *non-public*, which, like many terms, has proved to be slippery and inconsistent the more academics try to define it, or replaced with well-meaning euphemisms such as 'marginalized' or 'lack of familiarity' (Chapter 1: 11). Similar issues emerge from the other chapters – are *non-publics* those who have never engaged with museums, as Gottesdiener asks, 'Or those who have made no visit over the past year?' (Chapter 2: 27). It conveys the importance of being clear about what is meant by 'public' – and made me question the rather vague use of 'public' in the UK, which ultimately is meaningless unless implying a complex, many layered group of people.

The Introduction (pp1-5) and Chapter 1 (pp7-26) are heavily theoretical, explaining the shifting, fluid and unstable concept of *public* and *non-public* from a sociological perspective. As Bonaccorsi asserts (Chapter 1), the *non-public* only exists really in the minds of those who define it, and is used in many different ways to validate cultural practice. These explorations

were heavy-going but useful for establishing the boundaries of the term prior to chapters 2-7, which explore the meaning of the term in relation to quantitative and qualitative research studies with a range of *non-publics*. Some of the approaches seem to reflect a changing emphasis from looking at social structures such as age, social class, education and ethnicity (which remain important as Rosaire Garon demonstrates in Chapter 3: 49-70 when comparing cultural practices in the US and Quebec), to attempts to understand the psychological make-up of museum visitors. For example, Gottesdiener and Vilatte (Chapter 2: 27-48) explore the role of personality in influencing art museum attendance, suggesting that certain traits and tastes are significant when determining who makes up the *public*; furthermore, people often have an *imagined* art museum visitor in their heads and how close that imagined visitor corresponds with their own self-image is likely to determine whether or not they will visit. It is refreshing to see mixed methods research used to explore the 'research puzzle', combining statistical analysis with interviews and observation, which sets an important standard for exploring issues of this type in museums.

At times, however, I found myself recalling Mark O'Neill's important chapter in Sandell's 2002 edited volume, *Museum, Society and Inequality*, on 'The good enough visitor', which highlights the way in which cultural critics decry the 'dumbing down' of museums to make them more accessible to visitors who have no right to be there because 'they can't take their art neat, they are shoppers or voyeurs in a pornography shop, they have a mental age of four, and are so weak-minded that they might be damaged by the exhibition' (O'Neill 2002: 32). In Jacobi and Luckerhoff's chapter on '*Publics and Non-publics of cultural heritage*' (pp71-91), I was not always certain of the authors' intentions. Were they criticizing cultural institutions for attempting to appeal to wider audiences for economic reasons through (for example) populist blockbuster exhibitions, or counting *all* tourists to cultural centres such as Arles in Provence despite them spending only a couple of hours there? Or were they criticizing visitors who do not use these cultural centres and institutions 'properly'? For example, they describe at length visitors to Arles who only spend a couple of hours walking around the city, merging commercial and cultural activity together, not visiting museums or heritage sites but looking for atmosphere in its colourful 'old stones'. Rather dismissively I think, the authors comment how:

Even more astonishing, a segment of these walkers assigned properties to the city that it does not possess. They described the colours of the facades, for instance, while Arles is mostly a grey city. In essence they reduced the city to a set of old stones seen through a filter of conventional clichés of what "being in Provence" means. (p78)

Underlying such a comment is the idea that these visitors are 'not good enough', they do not visit the legitimate cultural monuments, they see Arles through an imperfect lens, they do not even spend enough time in the city to understand it properly. Whether the authors intend this is another matter, but without addressing directly *why* it is so important for *non-publics* to participate in culture, this chapter seems to reflect the concerns of the critics described by O'Neill, fairly or not.

The book is lacking a conclusion to draw the ideas explored here together, which might have been useful for thinking about a way forward with *non-publics*. From this book I learnt that there is no *real* or tangible *non-public*, it is more an idea to express a set of values, the idea that everyone, whatever social class, age, ethnicity etc., should have access to culture. The *non-public* imagined by cultural practitioners is, however, often far less complex than the reality, often *non-publics* do engage with culture, simply not 'high' or state sponsored forms of culture. As demonstrated by Luz Maria Ortega Villa in chapter 5, the so-called *non-public* in Mexicali (middle and lower income groups) do not feel comfortable performing their cultural preferences in public, they prefer more private, homely forms of culture such as television. Unfortunately, the book does not suggest any solutions to these findings; it is the first stage of the puzzle – who does not visit, and some suggestions as to why.

References

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