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## **Don't Touch! Hands off! Art, blindness and the conservation of expertise.**

Watch the crowds in any museum and despite the prohibitive ropes and signs somebody will be touching something. Once the guards' backs are turned museum visitors touch precisely because it is forbidden; but they also use touch to investigate an object's surface, to verify what they have seen or in an attempt to make a connection with the past. Increasingly museums are recognising this desire to touch and providing opportunities for their audiences to do so. Visitors to the V&A's *Versace* exhibition could handle selected dresses while at Tate Modern examples of Eva Hesse's fragile materials were made available to touch. The British Museum has a handling collection of ancient coins for visitors to its *Money* display and a dedicated touch gallery opened at Wolverhampton Art Gallery early in 2003. These are by no means isolated examples but part of a growing trend within museum practice that acknowledges the value of sensory experience.

The impetus behind this sensory shift is highly over-determined. Embodiment theorists have convincingly argued that knowledge is not detached from the body, suggesting instead that the body is the ground of culture and thought (Merleau-Ponty, 2000; Csordas, 1994; Lingis, 1994) and similarly concepts of physical intelligence and bodily learning have become accepted within educational theory (Gardner, 1993b). Handling sessions and other forms of sensory engagement are therefore in line with current thinking on learning and make good pedagogical sense for museums. Crucially, however, the introduction of haptic experience and of interactivity more broadly is also motivated by current government policy.

For most national museums funding is now closely tied to audience statistics, particularly to the numbers of visitors categorised as C2D2, and to educational provision. Rather than functioning as storehouses or centres of scholarly knowledge museums are now being characterised as resources for informal learning and for social inclusion (Anderson, 1999; Department of Culture, Media and Sport, 2000) so they simply cannot *afford* to alienate their visitors. On the contrary, museum staff need to make sure that the displays are appealing to a wide range of age and class groups, including non-traditional museum goers. By introducing sensory and interactive components into exhibitions and the events programmes museums hope to encourage both learning generally and those visitors who would be repelled by scholarly approaches. More specifically, opportunities to touch also help satisfy government requirements on physical access for blind people which under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA) are now a legal requirement.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, importantly, interactive and sensory elements within museums form a way of negotiating and containing damage. Providing handling material at an exhibition is explicitly intended to protect the larger collection by discouraging visitors from touching other more delicate or valuable items and organised handling sessions or touch tours can be viewed in a similar light. Allowing people to touch selected objects from the collection in supervised circumstances is a way of granting access through touch without giving people choice or control over what they touch. Like interactive elements in displays or programmes that only permit the visitor a closely prescribed set of responses, this level of access is arguably palliative. Instead of developing haptic experience as a source of knowledge and pleasure in

its own right, handling material is used to demonstrate that the museum is accessible to blind people without impinging upon the museum's remit to preserve the collections.

Handling is one area where the right of the individual to learn from and enjoy public collections is in tension with the duty of the museum to care for its objects in perpetuity. Thus as Hetherington points out 'access often has to respond to the demands of conservation rather than the other way around' (2003, 195). Unlike sight, touch is a threat to conservation and for Hetherington it thereby has the potential to undermine the very idea of the museum. In consequence, he positions blind people and their demand for haptic learning as other to ocularcentric museum practices (2003, 195; 2000, 462). Hetherington's comments are certainly echoed by museum curators for whom reference to conservation usually curtails any further discussion on access through touch other than to posit the collapse of the museum as we know it (CV, 17/5/02; D 31/06/01).

In this paper, however, I use interviews with blind museum visitors and with members of the activist group Art Through Touch to investigate what else might be at stake in the institutional resistance to touch. I begin by arguing that the emphasis upon conservation can serve to legitimate a different kind of containment, namely that of lay challenges to expert territory. This is not a straightforward conflict over what kinds of knowledge are permissible within the museum or a clear-cut division between experts and lay commentators with conservation and optic, disembodied knowledge on one side and haptic, embodied knowledge and greater access on the other. Instead I suggest that the status of who does the touching and knowing is crucial rather than the use of touch per se and that resistance to touch is as closely connected to the conservation of territory as it is to the preservation of

objects. This in turn opens up the possibility that touch is not necessarily other to the museum. Using Bruno Latour's (1993) conceptions of hybrid networks and purified zones of academic practice I then explore what the unacknowledged existence of touch within the museum means for the constitution of authority within national museums and indeed, how hybrid knowledge impacts upon the notion of expertise more generally.

A focus on who touches hopefully takes the discussion past its current stalemate where conservation is always the contrary of access and the only way for the museum to encompass touch is to change beyond all recognition. This has implications for blind people's access, for how museum practice is conceptualised, and is thus of consequence for all museum visitors, for how they understand the collections and quite literally articulate that knowledge.

### **Conservation and art through touch**

Although museums rarely use touch as a means of learning about art and objects (handling sessions are often considered an opportunity to *look* more closely) all of us, blind or otherwise, experience and understand the world through touch. Touch is not just a single sense, rather it requires a combination of inputs from our skin, from the movement of fingers, hands and arms, as well as information about how our limbs move and are positioned in relation to our body as a whole and to that which is touched. Touch involves the inter-relation of rhythm, movement, contact, proprioception (postural or bodily awareness), articulation and pressure and with it we can grasp shape, space, size, texture, temperature, vibration and response (Heller, 2000). Touch cannot be a substitute for sight;

they will certainly produce overlapping information but there will also be perceptions particular to each sense. Fine touch, for example, enables us to feel what is not always accessible to sight; the quality of fabric or a smooth wood plane is usually better judged with the finger tips and hands than with the eyes.

Touch is used both pre-consciously and is a skill which, like a perfumerer's trained nose, can be learnt and developed. As with the other senses, touch is used with varying degrees of acuity and is not an ability that blind people somehow acquire automatically or necessarily excel in. People who have been taught Braille often develop a very acute sense of touch, indeed there is some evidence that prolonged haptic experience results in a certain degree of cortical reorganisation and specialisation, but this happens through extensive practice and not by some magical process of sensory compensation (Millar, 2000).

In the interviews that were conducted as part of this research, the majority of museum visitors who were blind or partially sighted stressed the importance of touch. Whatever their level of skill, touch formed a primary means of learning about art objects and artefacts. On the one hand, touch supplemented poor sight and confirmed or contradicted ambiguous visual inputs. In these instances visitors with various types of partial sight used touch exactly as 'fully' sighted people do, to fill in the inevitable gaps and uncertainties of vision (Merleau Ponty, 2000). Notably, touch was often used to help the visitor build up a *visual* picture:

With a sighted person, they can see every contour on a person's face, the way they laugh, the way they smile and the way they look when they haven't got a smile. So imagine yourself with very low vision ... that person's face is so broken up, you can't see it properly. So when you touch that person's face ... and every contour of

the ears, eyes, mouth, you get a photographic memory ...of what that person looks like, so put that to a statue's face, and it makes a big difference, because you can visualise what that (statue) actually looks like, from whether the eyes have got - say Asian eyes, Chinese eyes, or whether they have got round eyes, or droopy eyes. And the nose, and the ears. So put that on a statue, in front of you, and you have got a picture to construct, a face shape (QE, 11/12/01).

For other visitors touch was not a supplementary activity:

Well for me (touch) is the only method of appreciating what's there. A lot depends, you see, on whether someone has residual vision whether they appreciate art at least to some extent by the combination of vision and touch and maybe some people vision only. But (for people with no vision) unless you can touch the visit is more or less meaningless because even if you get a description you are getting someone else's interpretation or account of the object ....which one could quite easily get through a book or a programme indoors (CL, 3/5/02).

Both this respondent and one of his colleagues described a visit to a Rachel Whiteread exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery in terms of spatial relations. Rather than characterising the artwork by the way it looked, they discussed how the casts of empty spaces that Whiteread made were themselves situated in space. This set of observations could equally have been made by someone who *saw* the show and in this instance, touch and sight perceptions could be thought of as potentially overlapping or existing in parallel. In other cases, however, touching artwork elicits responses not amenable to those who only see.

You don't just look at shape and form, you look at the texture of things, temperature. You are sensing all of it ... cold for bronze work, maybe if it is inlaid the different grains (Recorded group discussion, 2002).

For many of the interview respondents touch worked at numerous interlocking levels. In addition to a pre-conscious use of touch which was part of the way in which individuals lived in the world, it was a means of consciously examining an unknown object in detail. Touch enabled those people who had seen or who retained some sight to build up a visual image of an art object, while visitors who were congenitally blind, or who had increasingly begun to understand the world in non-visual ways, could develop a spatial or tactile figure through handling. Those few people that managed to negotiate museum restrictions on touch to a degree that allowed them to develop a thorough knowledge of form and texture then used touch as a means of identifying objects or making comparisons and judgements.

Despite touch being an important and at times irreplaceable way of understanding art objects and artefacts, museums rarely encourage it outside of designated handling sessions or occasional touch tours. Many artefacts are far too fragile to be handled regularly and even relatively sturdy art objects can be adversely affected both by the erosion of repeated handling and by the residue of sweat and oil from people's hands. Sandstone for instance can be easily stained and is difficult to clean. Thus, the opportunity for blind people to learn through touch is ostensibly in tension with the preservation of art objects. Yet on closer examination the case is not as clear cut as it might first appear.



At a seminar held by Arts Through Touch, a group that campaigns for blind people's access to museum and gallery collections, Ken Uprichard, a senior conservator from The British Museum commented that:

One of the primary functions of the museum is to preserve the collections ... that is a clear principle in the museum. But there is also a need for access. If we just had to preserve the collections, we'd put them in a room, we'd lock them in a controlled environment and throw away the key, but we don't do that, we put them on display (Recorded seminar 31/6/01).

While the exhibition of objects is itself a negotiation between conservation and access, the question of touch highlights this tension even further. At the same meeting, David Rice, the chairman of Arts Through Touch argued that:

Being totally blind the only way I can appreciate the national heritage is by touch. You keep saying it's being saved for future generations, well I'm sorry but this is my generation and I need to appreciate my national heritage (31/6/01).

Both these comments implicitly raise the question of what the museum's purpose is and certainly institutions vary in their response. Michael Harrison, the Director of Kettle's Yard in Cambridge, a small museum based on the collection established by Jim Ede and housed in his former home, noted that the approach to conservation and access at Kettle's Yard was markedly different from that in the national museums:

For a conventional curator Kettle's Yard might seem something of a nightmare. Objects are on open display and daylight - though UV filtered - is one of its essential

qualities. Visitors are encouraged to sit on chairs and are able to walk on wonderful rugs so there is inevitably some wear and tear. We discourage the touching of objects except under supervised conditions but some visitors can find the temptation too great (31/6/01).

At Kettle's Yard the emphasis is on preserving the accessibility and original ambience of this domestic collection.

Even in more conventional museums, however, the needs of the current generation are not necessarily in stark opposition to conservation. At present there are two main ways for blind people to access museum collections through touch; organised handling events that take a different theme in every session and permanent touch tours (on educational provision for blind museum visitors see Candlin 2003). In both cases the number of blind visitors making use of these facilities is minute. For instance, last year The British Museum held six educational events for adults that averaged six visitors each and while the permanent touch tours are being reorganised in light of gallery and exhibition changes they were previously taken by about 15 people a year. At the Victoria and Albert Museum there were twelve classes each attended by an average of thirteen people.<sup>2</sup> Given that handling sessions usually use different objects on each occasion the amount of contact between blind people and art objects is negligible, particularly when the number of visitors is compared to the size of these museums collections – The British Museum holds approximately eight million objects and the V&A four million. Even discounting two-dimensional works and objects that are extremely fragile, the amount of contact with individual art and artefacts remains minimal. Some materials are virtually unaffected by touch. Granite and basalt can bear any amount of

handling. Bronze will discolour but will not erode easily so the use of surgical gloves or hand wipes is sufficient to prevent damage, as is the case with many other metals. Moreover, whereas art objects are often unique and therefore irreplaceable, museums often have many versions of the same object held in reserve collections, some of which could be, and occasionally are, designated handling material.<sup>3</sup> The damage that might be done to objects by blind people thus seems disproportionate to the resistance it elicits. Why then, this anxiety about blind people learning through touch?

### **Touch and status**

There is often a conflation between blind people touching objects and the general public mishandling the collections. Again, at the Arts through Touch seminar conservators recognised the difference between the general visitors' casual touching and the touching that a visually impaired person needs to do to understand the object. This acknowledgement, however, segued almost seamlessly into concerns about the damage perpetrated by millions of visitors a year to objects that are displayed within reaching distance:

For both the BM and the Tate the fear is that if you allow one person to touch everybody's going to touch hence (there are only) twenty-two things available to touch (Michael Harris, 31/6/01).

At the seminars issues such as graffiti and security were raised which clearly have little to do with blind people specifically and much more to do with the general public's contact with objects. In effect, part of the reason why blind people's access is being restricted is not

because they might damage objects but because the vast numbers of non-blind visitors apparently do.

*Apparently* do, because throughout the history of museums, the general public has been characterised as unruly, unwashed, as a threat to both the preservation of objects and to other visitors' proper enjoyment of the collections. The following comment made by the art historian Gustav Waagen in 1853 is by no means uncommon:

I have ... been in the National Gallery when it had all the appearance of a large nursery, several wet nurses having regularly encamped there with their babies for hours together, not to mention persons whose filthy dress tainted the atmosphere with a most disagreeable smell ... it is highly important, *for the mere preservation of the pictures*, that such persons should in future be excluded from the National Gallery. The exhalation produced by the congregation of large numbers of persons, falling like vapour upon the pictures, tend to injure them, and this mischief is greatly increased in the case of the two classes of persons alluded to (Trodd, 1994) (my emphasis).

It is not simply that the working class visitors behaved in ways unapproved of by the upper middle classes, but that they visited a territory that Waagen assumed to belong to his class without removing the traces, literally the smells of their foreignness. Clearly, judgements about preservation, damage and dirt are not always logical or practical ones but in this instance derive from social boundaries being crossed by working class visitors. Is there then a similar politics of pollution at play when blind visitors enter contemporary museums?

Damage done to art objects in the contemporary context is often inflected by a sense of whose touch is appropriate. In reference to the damage done to objects on open display Uprichard from The British Museum noted:

One of the things that is very obvious on objects that are touched on a regular basis, particularly touched, is the soiling ... where you can get the handling grease on the objects, the handling grease itself then attracts dirt, holds dirt and so on. I think that we all have experienced the dirt on the door, where – you know – your hands aren't dirty but after five years you can see where people touched the door, you can see it. Indeed when we cleaned the Rosetta Stone recently, everybody thought it was a black and white object. The white was easily explained because in 1980 one of our curators sat and inked in the whole inscription in white ink. The black we had analysed and all of that black, most of that black, not quite all of it, was simply as a result of handling. It was handling grease, that is what they analysed. When we took it off we discovered a grey stone underneath with a light sparkle – so that is just an example of how dirty something can get (Recorded seminar, 31/06/01).

What is considered good practice is of course historically specific and conservators obviously cannot be held responsible for their predecessors' actions, but it is noticeable that it is the handling grease that Uprichard emphasises and not the curator's white lettering, although both have resulted in discoloration. Inappropriate touching is considered more damaging than the legitimate intervention made by a curator.

The curator's touch is perceived to be qualitatively different from that of the casual visitor. Museum curators often research or work with the same collections for many years and their

ensuing expertise entitles them to handle objects. This expertise is not, however, the only issue at stake. In *Touching: the human significance of skin*, Montagu Ashley (1986) notes that who can touch whom is deeply inflected by status; employers can make physical contact with their employees but junior staff would rarely pat the hand of their boss. The upper classes tend to touch the lower classes and men touch women more frequently than the reverse. Touch is hierarchical and proprietorial, we touch what we have relative power over and conversely in touching we establish our rights to that person or thing. Likewise, the curator's rights over an object are connected in part to his or her expertise but also to status (the one not necessarily guaranteeing the other). Museum curators do not necessarily touch objects in accordance with how much they know, but because being a curator entitles them to do so. The fact that they do touch in turn reinforces their status and right to touch.<sup>4</sup>

How much direct contact curators have with objects depends both on the fragility of the object and the institution they work for, but it is not uncommon to see curators in some museums handling art objects without gloves or touching the objects on display. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with curators handling objects, indeed it is a necessary part of their research and role, but it is notable that their touch is rarely considered damaging in the way that the public's is. The curators' status and perceived rights over what are often public collections enables them to touch because, as the object's appropriate guardians their traces cannot be harmful. The curators' clean hands recall Mary Douglas' (1966) descriptions of high priests whom alone amongst their tribe can come into contact with sacred objects; a characterisation echoed by Suzanna Taverne's comment on resigning her directorship at The British Museum. Referring to the 'priesthood of curators' Taverne said that:

There is this notion that only they can be the intermediaries between the relics and the public ... They carry the sacred flame of the institution – the museum. These same people question when anybody doubts the apostolic succession (Gibbons, 2001).

In contrast, the public, those people who are not entitled to touch, have grubby hands that potentially render objects filthy.

The degree to which damage through touch is not simply a matter of fact is perhaps best illustrated by instances of positive damage when people of importance are perceived to change an object for the better. While describing the difficulty of getting access to objects through touch one interview respondent said

Have you ever been to the House of Commons? They have got Churchill in there, it is a kind of greenish if I can remember, it is a bronze statue, it has a green finish colour, but his left foot is really polished, a kind of brassy colour, because when all of the MPs go in to make their first speech, they always rub their elbow on his foot, saying “can you give me some of your powers of oratory”. And so he has got a brass toe and side of his foot is all shiny, and the greeny colour is off it (JE, 27/11/01).

Instead of being damaged by touch the statue becomes the archive of a tradition, a tribute to Churchill and it also retains the traces of those who have marked the beginnings of their political careers and ascent to power with this touch. Unlike other quasi-magical objects such as the Blarney Stone where power moves from the object to the subject, this touch involves an exchange of power. Touching Churchill’s statue potentially conveys something of his power to the new Member of Parliament while the MPs’ touch incrementally

transforms and adds to the history and power of the statue. Notably this exchange of touch is not open to everyone, only the elect are allowed to receive the possible power of the statue and equally only those of importance can change that object positively. In extreme cases positive touch transforms objects into relics.

Touching leaves a trace of the body on the object so the constitution, status or quality of that body matters. Depending upon whose body it is, the object will be damaged, unaffected or even transformed. Within classical literature blind people are closely associated with spiritual insight, although as Barasch (2001) points out these prophetic abilities are often highly ambiguous for they are usually acquired as a result of having transgressed and watched something forbidden to human eyes. It is significant that the Judeo-Christian tradition loses the image of the blind seer but retains the connotations of sinfulness. In Leviticus it is made clear that blind people cannot be priests:

Say to Aaron, None of your descendants throughout their generation who has a blemish may approach to offer the bread of his God. For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, a man blind or lame (21:17-18).

Both sacrificial animals and the people who approach the temple had to be physically perfect. All bodily discharges were potentially defiling and had to be either ritually cleansed or were banned from sacred spaces. The whole and perfect body literally acted as a container for the body, so if this body were perceived to be incomplete it could conceivably *leak*. Blind people were thus potentially more polluting than those people with supposedly intact bodies (Douglas, 1966: 52-4).



The faultiness of blind people's bodies is reinforced in New Testament teaching where blindness is linked to sinfulness and ignorance of God. Saul was blinded for his lack of faith and had his sight restored upon gaining it while stories of Jesus healing the blind by touching their eyes (another example of the power of touch) are key within a Christian tradition for they symbolise the transition from ignorance to belief. Consequently, within this tradition, blindness is elided with wilful ignorance, sinfulness and error.

From the classical era onwards blind people have been associated with sin, ignorance, faithlessness, lasciviousness, and error (Barasch, 2001). Blind people's hands do not therefore confer power and nor have they been considered clean. These negative connotations of blindness do not remain conveniently in a historical past but inform our sense of blindness today.<sup>5</sup> I am not suggesting that curators or conservators *consciously* think that blind people's hands are more damaging than their own or that of the general public but that touch in the museum is inseparable from both a cultural history of public pollution and of blindness which inflects an inherited sense of whose touch is appropriate.

As a congenitally blind member of Arts Through Touch said:

This whole infrastructure of myths and shall we say the way it is duplicated and believed is not unrelated to social services provision. You know going back to the physical disability and the idea of someone's disability being somehow dangerous is at the root of the whole idea of incarceration: put these people away (CL, 3/5/02).

Or, in the case of museums, don't let them touch.

## **Aesthetic repressions**

Touching objects within museums is not then wholly prohibited but it is only permitted to those individuals who have the correct institutional status. Yet even as curators pick objects up and in touching understand that piece differently, the knowledge and pleasure they derive from handling artefacts *has* to be repressed within the institutional framework of the museum.

Within a western philosophical tradition both the acquisition of knowledge and aesthetic pleasure are potentially disrupted by anything that was not associated with the higher faculties of judgement. In the first instance academic distance, empirical thought and objective observation have all been predicated on the concept of the disembodied eye and the supposed capacity to transcend base bodily desires or lapses. Blind people are not, however, perceived as possessing the ability to do this because they are seen as being irrevocably attached to their bodies.

Both Jacques Derrida and David Applebaum have used Milton's lines from *Samson Agonistes*: 'Which shall I first bewail / thy bondage or thy lost sight / prison within prison / inseparably dark', to draw a parallel between blindness and being literally locked into your body. Applebaum writes that

Being blind he is confined. Being confined he is returned to the confines of his own body. To move forward, toward the world, he must stumble or be led ... Blindness returns Samson to the earth, where ... he dwells in the cave of his being (1995: 3).

While Derrida points out that bodily confinement might be rich, full of smells and sounds, this sensory experience remains an insular one leaving blind people unable to shed their embodied existence in the search of pure knowledge (Derrida, 1993). As Applebaum puts it ‘contrasted with the clarity of an unimpeded line of sight, blind groping is of questionable value. Philosophical method is achieved by stepping back, thereby extending the world beyond our focus’ (1995: 5).<sup>6</sup> Within the framework of western philosophy blindness makes intellectual clarity impossible.

Likewise, inescapable embodiment outlaws access to aesthetic experience. The British art historian Clive Bell made the opposition between aesthetic understanding and the body only too clear in the following passage:

When an ordinary man speaks of a beautiful woman he certainly does not mean that she moves him aesthetically ... Indeed, most of us never dream of going for aesthetic emotions to human beings ... With the man in the street ‘beautiful’ is more often than not synonymous with ‘desirable’ ... The confusion between aesthetic and sensual beauty is not in their case so great as might be supposed. Perhaps there is none; for perhaps they have never had an aesthetic emotion to confuse with other emotions (Bell, 1982: 70).

Here, physical desire actually suggests an incapacity for aesthetic experience. Within the history of art touch is often equated with sexual rather than sublime pleasure. Whereas looking at art theoretically allows the disinterested viewer to appreciate it at a seemingly distance with no ulterior motives, touch brings the body into direct contact with the art object.

The association between blindness, touch, body and desire and, in turn, their opposition to aesthetics and transcendence is made quite excruciatingly clear in ‘Sight versus Touch’ where James Hall discusses the uncouth, ‘gross and gloomy’ associations connected to touching sculpture (1999:84). It is noticeable, however that his own comments on images of people touching rapidly veer away from historical accounts and make his own discomfort only too apparent. Describing Caravaggio’s *Doubting Thomas* (1602-3), Hall writes:

Thomas parts the thick *labial* skin and plunges his finger inside. Here touch is not just nauseating; it is an admission of ignorance and faithlessness (1999: 85) (my emphasis).

Hall’s equation between touch and sexual penetration similarly informs his discussion of Luca Giordano’s painting *Carneades with the Bust of Paniscus* (1650-54) about which he writes:

...so disturbing is the bust’s uncanny fleshiness and greasiness. It seems horribly alive. Carneades *unashamed* fingers prod its lower lip and the corner of its eye. Pan was the god of lust but even he seems alarmed by the blind man’s ministrations. Touch gets us too close for comfort (1999:87) (my emphasis).

Anybody’s touch would potentially threaten aesthetic pleasure or intellectual contemplation but blind people’s contact with art objects poses particular problems not least because it is construed as being unashamed. In this text the assumption is that the inability to see equates to immodesty.<sup>7</sup> Derrida has made a similar point writing that:

More naked than others, a blind man virtually becomes his own sex, he becomes indistinguishable from it because he does not see it, and is not seeing himself

exposed to the *other's gaze*, it is as if he has lost even his sense of modesty (1993: 106) (my emphasis).

That the issue is not so much blindness as the other's gaze becomes increasingly clear when Hall claims that the image of blindness actually *enables* erotic touching. The blank pupils of Canova's sculptures are for Hall, 'an alibi for exotic sensory experiences', while the narcissistic intertwining of *The Three Graces* is only made possible by 'their blindness and their corresponding lack of self-consciousness'. The lack of self-consciousness is in fact the sighted viewer's, faced with a blind subject the spectator can become the ultimate voyeur for his or her own lascivious stares cannot be acknowledged within the logic of the artwork.

In these paintings and sculptures blindness is used as a way of exonerating looking but it also opens up the overlap between physical desire and art. For Hall *Carneades with the Bust of Paniscus* is uncanny and disturbing because the image of a blind man touching sculpture is too close to that of a blind man touching flesh. A similar elision between sculpture and flesh was evident in one of our recent interviews. Asked if he ever touched artworks this respondent replied:

Um, oh! Now that is a very interesting, that's a very interesting proposition. But my dear, in our country that would be disgusting. I am an expert in life drawing and they are all nudes dear. I mean (laughing) touching a nude, no I wouldn't. I remember before the war, before the second world war darling, I was at school and I was in a life class. And the model fainted and she was cold and clammy and wet. And I think this was about 1936 when I was fairly new to all this being an artist stuff and I didn't know what the hell to do and there was no older student just at that moment and I

had to go and pick her up. And that I think did tend to put me off picking, uh, touching models (JRE, 25/3/02).

Sculpture becomes flesh, the connotations of one slide into those of the other, so much so that Hall can read Careneades fingers as intruding into the openings of the (stone) face, conjuring images of sexual investigation that go too far for even the god of lust. The blind man's examination threatens to literally penetrate the smooth surfaces of classical sculpture. Through touch the marble ceases to exist as only a surface for the pleasures of vision. It is as if the blind man's body, historically considered imperfect could disrupt the perfection of these ideal bodies and make them fleshily material thereby casting doubt on their status as aesthetic objects.<sup>8</sup>

In order for the aesthetic experience to function as such (and there is considerable doubt as to whether it functions at all see Connor 1999) bodily desire and contact must be repressed.<sup>9</sup> In Hall's text and the examples he documents touch and desire re-emerge through the figure of the blind man who makes the bodily responses, so fiercely outlawed by the aesthetic, only too visible. Within these aspects of the history of art, the illicit desire to touch is displaced onto the blind man who allows for the return of the repressed in a manner that the sighted can both judge and enjoy.

If touch is the repressed other of the aesthetic then it is unsurprising that despite the capacity of touch to produce different and by no means lesser perceptions to those acquired through sight alone, museums and still regard blindness as a major impediment to understanding art objects and artefacts. In contrast restrictions on touch are not considered to be a loss for museum visitors. Sight is privileged to the extent that despite the various sensory attributes

of art objects they become synonymous with the visual, and curators work within a paradigm where touch is not only an antithesis, but is quite literally repellent to the conjuncture of vision, aesthetics and knowledge. Even as they do touch it is thus extremely difficult for curators to conceive of learning about or appreciating art through touch and it is clear from the interviews that many curators were surprised by blind people's ability to do this in any competent way:

He (the curator) learnt, it was the first time that they had had blind people come to their sort of thing. So that was - well you imagine blind people groping and hammering ... he could not believe the way our fingers were smooth and we went over the objects touching gently and a slight pressure obviously to get a bit more detail but that quite amazed him he was quite sort of ... he was quite amazed (RD, 19/4/02).

Although everyone learns from touch all the time, this curator was nonetheless amazed at blind people's apprehension of art, an instance which demonstrates how the repression of touch within western aesthetic traditions remains almost entirely unquestioned within art education.

### **The limits of expertise**

Preservation and conservation is part of the founding logic of many museums. The British Museum's Plan for 2001/2 to 2002/3, for instance, notes that 'the stewardship of the collections and their contribution to the enrichment of cultural heritage is fundamental to every aspect of the Museum's purpose' (2001: 13). Yet in interview several education

officers commented that while conservators were generally helpful in establishing which objects could or could not be touched safely, it was the curators who resisted touch being used more widely within the museum. Nobody disputes that some objects would be damaged by handling but what is at stake here is not only the vulnerability of the collections but the professionalism and standing of the curatorial staff.

In order for a professional to master a specific aspect of knowledge it is important that what counts as knowledge is clearly defined. To become an expert you have to have a specialised field, a point that Samuel Weber makes:

A professional was - and is - a specialist ... who has undergone a lengthy period of training in a recognised institution (professional schools), which certified him as being competent in a specialised area; such competence derives from his mastery of a particular discipline ... professionalism lends its practitioners their peculiar authority and status: they are regarded as possessing a monopoly of competence in their particular field (2001, 25).

To construct or defend those boundaries is to assert a right to the territory, to make it one's own. It is to claim that art historians, for example, know what art history is and what methods are appropriate within it. Expertise and professional standing are thus dependent on the differentiation of specific intellectual and methodological grounds. The demarcation of the art world in relation to vision explicitly includes only certain ways of apprehending art and establishes visual competence as being of primary importance. Smell, taste, hearing and touch are not within the register of necessary skills, indeed, they are understood as detracting from the study of art.



Viewed in this context touch is deeply oppositional to the structure of museum professionalism as we currently understand it and it would be easy to characterise blind activists as attempting to undermine the founding logic of both conservation and aesthetics. Reading the situation as a choice between the museum as a disembodied and optic space *or* as embodied and haptic is however to miss its already hybrid nature and the possibilities of heterogeneous practice. The notion of aesthetic pleasure and knowledge in museums *is* predicated upon sight functioning in isolation from touch, but touch is still actively desired, achieved, repressed and displaced within the institution. Just because the museum *claims* that touch is other doesn't mean we have to believe them.

Blind people do not, then, introduce a new form of knowledge into the museum, rather they insist on its recognition, validity and democratisation. Such an acknowledgement does not discredit sight as a mode of learning and pleasure since haptic and optic experience can and are already used in mutually productive ways, not least when visual images are informed by a recollection of texture (Klatzky and Lederman, 2001). Nor does haptic experience automatically threaten conservation for as I have suggested some objects can be touched with relative impunity while other more fragile artefacts could still be analysed and discussed within a haptic framework without necessarily being freely available to direct touch.

Relinquishing the notion of the museum as a purely optical space does however come at some cost, particularly in relation to institutional expertise. This could be understood in relation to the challenge of accepting lay opinions and the necessity of mastering new skills. It would require a paradigm shift in that curators would need to accept that sight is not the

sole route to aesthetic experience and knowledge and that embodiment is not disassociated from thought. Yet given that the validity of pure aesthetic experience has already come under considerable criticism it would not necessarily be a momentous jump to adopt a more relative position on visual knowledge. In all probability once curators and academics began to develop linguistic, analytic and bodily skills in relation to touch, the borders of what constitutes expert knowledge within the museum and art establishment would be slowly extended and after some mild controversy the question of expertise would recede into the background.

In this instance the borderlines of professionalism swell and are re-oriented to include touch but the resistance to touch may be symptomatic of a far greater shift in the parameters of expertise. Bruno Latour (1993) has argued that academic practice has until recently accepted a series of divides between nature and society and therefore by extension between different disciplines; physics is apparently unrelated to politics for example, or in this case, culture supposedly exists in a different sphere to touch, the body and biology. In practice however these disciplinary separations do not work but precipitate hybrid conjunctions. Instead of dismissing these hybrid forms of knowledge as aberrant Latour suggests that academic disciplines have never actually maintained their apparent separation, thus, instead of conceiving of knowledge as a series of discrete areas it should be conceived of as a network.

The pre-existence of touch in museums tunes closely with Latour's model of pure disciplinary areas and hybrid knowledge. Ocularcentric learning and its correlative forms of professionalism have been predicated upon the separation of sight from a broader sensory-conceptual matrix but this does not mean that touch (or the other senses) have ceased to

operate in this context. Rather, as Latour posits, a doubled practice has come into play wherein curators use touch while simultaneously denying it. These official and unofficial forms of learning do not remain in separate zones but interweave. In museums, as elsewhere, touch cuts across the apparently optic circuits of knowledge, responding to and counterbalancing visual cues, implicitly disputing the separation and integrity of optic knowledge.

Admitting that optic knowledge is not reified has consequences for the attribution of knowledge within the museum. If as Weber maintains, expertise is based on a conception of a field that can be mastered then the separation of the different disciplines is key to the foundation of academic authority whereas once knowledge is thought about in relation to networks rather than fields, then the usual basis for establishing expertise is correspondingly lost. No approach or object is automatically excluded from a given network, indeed any one thing can potentially be related to another, so by definition there are no clear boundaries or fields over which mastery can be demonstrated. Acknowledging touch within the museum may therefore induce resistance not because it pressurises staff to learn new skills and to re-establish the parameters of their subject, but because it indicates that there are no fixed parameters to learning and that their authority is never an accomplished fact.

Blind people's demand for access through touch is not then a challenge of one paradigm to another, haptic versus optics, access versus conservation, embodied versus intellectual thought, it questions the accreditation of authority per se. As such it forms part of a wider institutional shift with regards to expertise. That blind people are lobbying for greater access to collections and that they now have some legislative muscle is itself indicative of changing

power relations which involve museums. Current government policy pushes curators towards educational programmes and consultation with user groups while discouraging unilateral research projects and decision making. Despite the lack of prior training or educational background curator's jobs are moving away from familiar academic grounds towards a much wider and more accountable remit. This not only problematises their authority in relation to skill but by insisting that lay experience must be central to museums' plans, current policy implies that expert knowledge of an area is insufficient. Thus, it is not only that the demand for touch de-stabilises accepted paradigms of knowledge and the corresponding ascription of expertise but that the demand can be seriously made is symptomatic of how authority within the museum is already under question. In effect, the emphasis on consultation and social inclusion means that an equation between disciplinary expertise and institutional authority is no longer automatic.

Field boundaries generally favour the landowners and likewise the weakening of disciplinary expertise offers new opportunities for the landless. In this case the shift away from traditional patterns of expertise signals the possibility of new networks of learning and improved levels of access for blind and non-blind visitors alike. At the same time these changes provoke high levels of resistance from those people who fear the loss of their territory. Yet a complete institutional overhaul and dispossession of experts would be to simply reverse an injurious structure and therefore perpetuate it. Academic knowledge is necessarily exclusionary and often oppressive but it undoubtedly has great value; the problem comes when it is assumed to be the only way of approaching a subject, when it is considered to exist in isolation and where authority is given unquestioned precedence.

Conversely, lay knowledge should not be over-valourised for it is equally capable of bias and exclusion (Wynne, 1996: 77).

Moreover, the notion of replacing one paradigm with another remains within the logic of separate spheres of practice. Conceiving of knowledge as a network may foreclose on the seductive possibility of academic mastery but it equally implies that one paradigm of knowledge cannot replace another one. Lay experience cannot oust scholarly expertise or haptic knowledge supersede optic learning. It may come as some comfort to academics and curators that territory, authority and expertise are therefore not entirely lost, nevertheless, they do have to be negotiated and shared.

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<sup>1</sup> From the mid 1970s onwards, terms such as 'handicapped' or 'the blind' were replaced by 'people with disabilities', 'people with visual impairments', thus emphasising that disability was a element of subjectivity rather than its determining factor. More recently, activist groups have begun to refer to 'disabled people' and 'blind people' thereby indicating their presence as a constituency group who are highlighting their specific needs. Visual impairment is a legally recognised category which includes people with partial sight and the legally blind. Out of the estimated 1,042,340 visually impaired people in the UK in 1996 only 190,322 have no vision, so the term 'visual impairment' is more representative of majority experience ([www.rmib.org.uk/fctsheets/authuk.htm](http://www.rmib.org.uk/fctsheets/authuk.htm)). In this article I do not use the term visual impairment because it implies a norm of full, non-impaired sight, rather than blindness or partial sight being a different experience of the world which is valid in its own right.

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<sup>2</sup> The reasons for low numbers are varied. Above and beyond issues of social exclusion and difficulties with transport, educational events will rarely provide more than twenty places for pedagogical reasons, in some instances publicity is not available in large print, Braille or audio, advertising is often poor and these kinds of provision are not institutionally prioritised. The situation *is*, however, improving.

<sup>3</sup> Reserve collections are not necessarily of a lower standard than exhibited works, so the use of these artefacts for handling is not to consign blind people to the poorer end of a collection.

<sup>4</sup> In addition, long service in an institution engenders a sense of familiarity with the collection and in turn, ownership. Curators often talk about ‘my’ museum, ‘my’ objects.

<sup>5</sup> For example Joseph Grigley (2000) has pointed out that remarks such as Elaine Showalter’s comment that ‘We have so long lamented the blindness, the deafness, and indifference of the male critical establishment towards our work’, demonstrates the elision between not being able to see or hear and not wanting to see or hear.

<sup>6</sup> However, this image of ‘blind groping’ is not a particularly accurate one. Throughout the history of visual images blind people have been depicted as clumsy and stumbling. Georgina Kleege (2000) argues in relation to film that this representation is pervasive not because it is necessarily truthful but because it is the only way to make blindness visible to the non-blind.

<sup>7</sup> In fact Stephen Thayer (1982: 276) reports that blind people use social touching less than sighted people for fear that they will make mistakes and appear foolish.

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