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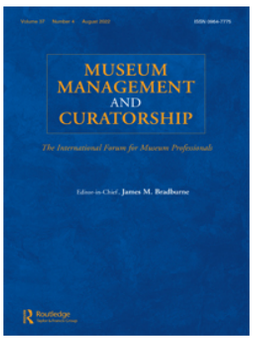

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The affective turn in museums and the rise of affective curatorship

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the affective turn in museums: what does it mean for museum theory and practice? How can we theorize its effects? In order to address these questions, the article develops the concept of 'affective curatorship', denoting curatorial approaches specifically aimed to affect visitors emotionally. Drawing on recent museological literature and exhibition projects in Europe and North America, the article exemplifies the qualities of affective curatorship and examines how emotions can be leveraged in curatorial practice in connection with the exhibition theme, activities, design, and the senses. The main finding is that affective curatorship is subtly transforming curatorial practice and, through that, the way we think and feel about museums. As a curatorial, theoretical and analytical perspective, affect offers crucial insights into the new roles that museums can play in increasingly emotionally demanding times.

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Introduction

This article examines the so-called affective turn in museums. It asks: what does the affective turn in the humanities and social sciences concretely mean for museum theory and practice? How can we theorize the effects of the affective turn in the field of museums? To address these questions the article develops the concept of 'affective curatorship'. Affective curatorship captures a range of recent curatorial approaches specifically aiming to affect visitors emotionally. Whilst museums have long been sites of affective engagement, what is new and noteworthy in the current 'affective turn' is the purposefulness with which affect and emotions are being leveraged in museums.

This article provides evidence for this statement through a two-pronged analytical approach. The analysis of recent topical museological literature provides a general assessment of the affective turn and the main theories and approaches it has generated in the museological field; this is complemented by a discussion of the concept of affect and its relevance in museum practice. A second, connected line of analysis focuses on museum practice, specifically a series of exhibition projects located in Europe and North America. The analysis leads to the development of a new conceptual tool, affective curatorship,

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which casts light on how emotions can be leveraged in curatorial practice in connection with the exhibition theme, activities and design, as well as multi-sensory museum environments.

There is value for museological theory and practice in bringing the affective turn in museums into sharper theoretical focus through the concept of affective curatorship, as this enables us to understand a range of emerging curatorial practices focused on emotions as inter-connected, that is, as facets of the same curatorial shift towards engaging visitors through affect. This shift is highly consequential: the main finding of the article is that affective curatorship is subtly transforming curatorial practice and, through that, the way we think and feel about museums. As a curatorial, theoretical and analytical perspective, affect offers crucial insights into the new roles that museums can play in increasingly emotionally demanding times. Indeed, this article shows that affect is key to grasping the relevance and potential of museums today, in a context of multiple crises that cause a wide spectrum of emotional responses.

Affect and museums

Affect is a notoriously nebulous, elusive concept; here it is broadly understood as 'a mental state characterized by emotional feeling' (Scherer 2014), a subtle shift in consciousness from one state of being to another (Baker 2015). As Bencard explains (2014, 30), affect 'germinates thought, feelings, emotions, sensations and other forms of life in the viewing subject'. For social psychologist Wetherell (2012, 4) affect is 'embodied meaning-making'; she echoes human geographer Thrift's (2008, 175) proposition to think of affect as 'a different kind of intelligence about the world', perhaps a more embodied form of intelligence, as suggested by museum studies scholar Golding (2013, 4): 'in the affective museum, things and people of the world might be brought closer to our "skins"'. Affect and emotions are intimately linked: affect is thought to be prepersonal and preconscious (it precedes personality and consciousness), a raw, 'direct sensation' (Baker 2015, 69), whilst emotions emerge from the recognition of being affected and the labelling of that sensation as an emotional state (e.g., joy or sadness). Whilst acknowledging this distinction between affect and emotions, I will refer broadly to affect as encompassing emotions (affect as both the pure sensation and its recognition as emotion) as both are relevant for the purposes of this discussion.

Museums are affective, in the sense that they elicit emotional responses in visitors. This results from the synergy of various museum elements: architecture, display layout, objects and texts, among other. The affective power of each museum element is then further enhanced by multimedia and multi-sensory museum environments interweaving the visual, the textual, the material, the digital and the imaginative. In other words, museum elements interact to engender a mix of emotions, physical sensations, memories, moods and imaginative lapses, which combine in what we call affect. The condition of being affected in a museum can then be conceptualized as the result of the encounter with *something* that affects us; I call this kind of encounters, 'affective encounters' (Varutti 2021). In an exhibition, affective encounters may occur at the point of intersection between an input from the museum (anything on which our senses and attention can focus, an object, a story, a sound, a performance), curatorial intervention (the *mise-en-scène*, the display context), and visitors' subjectivity (coloured by personal mood,

memories, personality traits, and expectations among others). As Fisher and Reckitt (2015, 361) observed, affect is 'charging the interstice among artworks themselves, as well as in the links between exhibitionary agents, institutions, communities, technologies and platforms'. Interestingly, both affect and curatorship inhabit these in-between spaces, interfaces between the personal and the social, where intimacy and collegiality are being negotiated along the lines of what Howes (2014, 259) has called 'the sociality of sensation and the cultural contingency of perception'. These liminary spaces are also the thresholds where individual and collective identities are made; as Sara Ahmed points out 'it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the "I" and the "we" are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others' (Ahmed 2004, 10). Ahmed's words contribute to cast light on what is ultimately at stake when affect merges with curatorship to influence museum experiences. I will return to this point in the conclusions. The very possibility of affective encounters is what, I argue, makes museums unique and exciting loci for the study of emotions – and what conversely turns emotions into formidable lenses to better understand museums.

The affective turn in museum studies[1]

In the last decades a broad shift in the humanities and social sciences, 'the affective turn', has brought a renewed focus on affect, emotions, the senses and imagination, and their role in shaping individual and collective experiences (see for instance Clough and Halley 2007; Lemmings and Brooks 2014; Gregg and Seigworth 2010). As David Lemmings and Ann Brooks noted, 'if the linguistic turn represents our acknowledgment that language helps to constitute reality, then an affective turn implies that emotions have a similarly fundamental role in human experience' (Lemmings and Brooks 2014, 3). In museums and museum studies, reverberations of the affective turn have produced a move away from text-centred exhibitions, and a stronger engagement with non-verbal channels of communication such as emotions, imagination and sensory experiences. It is telling that in the last decade museum practitioners and museum scholars' attention has turned to a range of concepts and approaches that can all be considered as interconnected facets of the affective turn, starting with an emphasis on affect and emotions (Boyd and Hughes 2020; Golding 2013; Smith, Wetherell, and Campbell 2018; Smith 2021; Tolia-Kelly et al. 2016; Varutti 2020, 2021; Watson 2018), the multisensory (Levent and Pascual-Leone 2014) and the corollary notions of atmosphere (Dorrian 2013, 2014; Forrest 2013), ambient aesthetics (Radywyl et al. 2015), presence (Bencard 2014), immersion and enchantment (Kidd 2018; Perry 2019; Sterling 2020).

Despite their diverse focus and approach, when taken together these works point at a paradigm shift which places affect and emotions at the core of curatorial work. The intended contribution of this article is mainly theoretical: I aim to bring definition to a turn in curatorial practice that has received scholarly attention in its individual components and facets but has not yet been appreciated as an inter-related, organic, overarching development.

Affect has relevance for both museum practice and theory. Affect reconfigures the inter-relations between objects, space, visitors and curatorial intervention; it engages visitors in ways that differ from, and complement, the cognitive processes involved in making

sense of a text, an object, an image or a performance (which of course, can be affective in their own right). For instance, affect opens up fresh analytical perspectives on the power of objects. I share Dudley's (2010, 4) caution against the risk of polarized visions where museums are seen either as merely concerned with preserving objects (in an essentialist vision) or completely devoted to serve society. Dudley stresses the need to elaborate a median position that explores objects as having impacts on visitors – objects as potential bridges between the museum and visitors, as well as among visitors. This can indeed be a fruitful endeavour since, as Dudley (2010, 4) suggests, 'creative, materialist thinking about embodied and emotional engagements with objects can provide more powerful alternatives or additions to textual interpretation in enabling visitors to understand and empathize with the stories objects may represent'.

A theoretical focus on affect in museums further opens up for the possibility to retrospectively examine how museological thinking and curatorial practice have always, to some degree, been informed by affect. It might seem that affect and emotions are incongruent with the claims of rationality, objectivity and the rigorous scientific approaches that have imprinted much of the history of the museum institution, at least in Europe and North America. Yet, from Renaissance cabinets of curiosity arousing wonder, surprise and awe with their spectacular, unique collections, to the civic and nationalistic collective ethos of nineteenth century European national museums, to the strong emotions that we might experience in front of a display of human remains in a museum today, affect has always been at the core of the very concept of museum. Affect then provides conceptual lenses through which we can examine how historically museums (particularly national museums) have aimed to engender affective responses that were and are embedded in major socio-cultural transformations of collective values and norms.

The contemporary relevance of affective approaches in museums becomes evident when we consider the central role that affect and emotions play in pedagogical dynamics and in memory work in museums (Witcomb 2015; Watson 2013), as well as in the development of understandings of museums as sites for collective healing and well-being (Chatterjee and Noble 2016). In the face of global issues such as pandemics and ecological disasters, museums have been responding by leveraging on emotions in efforts to provide support and foster emotional well-being. Consistently, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) offered online guidance for museum professionals on how to promote emotional well-being and community resilience.[2] More broadly, and thanks also to intensified collaboration with artists and affective sciences scientists (neuroscientists, psychologists, philosophers), curators are leveraging on the potential of multilayered emotional landscapes to enrich the overall museum experience (see also Smith, Wetherell, and Campbell 2018). These trends are exemplified through a series of case studies of European and North American museums and exhibitions discussed below.

Affective curatorship

The experience of memorable affective encounters in the curated environment of museums is often (though not necessarily) the result of careful, precise curatorial intervention, in other words, affective curatorship. Media studies scholar Blackman (2016, 34) notes that 'Encounters in museums and galleries between public and objects, and artefacts and practices, invite questions as to how these interactions might be modulated,

amplified, mediated and choreographed.' In an attempt to answer Blackman's query and clarify the essence of affective curatorship, I suggest three interconnected, partially overlapping, analytical perspectives on how emotions can be activated in the context of exhibitions. A first perspective refers to the most obvious instance of exhibitions that *explicitly* refer to emotions in their theme and subject matter. A second perspective focuses on exhibitions where emotions are *implicitly* elicited by the exhibition design and architecture. A third perspective considers exhibitions where emotional responses are engendered by a specific activity. These paradigmatic instances are discussed below.

Emotions as exhibition theme

The first perspective refers to exhibitions that include emotions in their subject-matter. The exhibition may literally be about emotions as in the case of *Joy* at the Wellcome Collection, London (July 2021–March 2022) which explored the effects of positive emotions on the body through a mix of artworks and historical artefacts. Another example is the virtual *Museum of Contemporary Emotions* (https://museumofcontemporaryemotions.fi/). This is an online platform financed by the Finnish government to facilitate the sharing of emotions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The interactive website-exhibition takes its clue from mundane reactions to the pandemic such as panic buying and stocking up on life essentials, in order to address deeper feelings of fear and anxiety; discussions are framed through a scientific, user-friendly perspective whereby a psychotherapist explains the emotional dynamics underlying a given behaviour or feeling and provides concrete tips and helpful suggestions. The closing section of the website invites online visitors to write a letter to themselves for the future – a tested tool in psychotherapy – where they describe the feelings experienced during the pandemic and hopefully build on this in order to develop a brighter, more resilient outlook.

Exhibitions may also address emotions tangentially, as a facet of another topic, as in the case of the exhibition on climate change *Human Nature* at the Museum of World Culture, Gothenburg (2019–2020) which included areas where visitors could engage with the emotions experienced during the visit. Calm 'cocoon' spaces located at the end of the exhibition path allowed visitors to slow down, reflect and turn their focus inward before leaving the exhibition. Here, guided relaxation audio recordings offered visitors a tool to acknowledge and possibly partially release some of the negative emotions, such as anxiety, connected with the current state of ecological decline (Arfvidsson and Follin 2020). Regardless of whether emotions are the exhibition's central theme or sub-theme, what characterizes this first analytical cluster is the fact that emotions are explicitly addressed in the exhibition storytelling; the exhibition raises a veil on emotions felt by visitors and provides tools to deal with them.

Emotions by design

A second analytical perspective includes exhibitions that focus on exhibition design, layout and architecture in order to create atmospheric environments that invite specific emotional responses. Rather than spelled out in the exhibition theme, emotions are *implicit* in the *mise-en-scène* whose various elements conjure to create a certain atmosphere, a mood. Following Bielh-Missal and Lehn (2015, 238), atmosphere can be

understood as 'a spatially extended quality of feeling' which maybe be engendered and informed by a sapient use of display elements such as light, sound, scents, textured materials, room temperature, space organization and visual perspectives. Atmosphere 'helps us to explain corporeal and emotional responses in carefully designed environments' (Bielh-Missal and Lehn 2015 238), of which exhibitions are an example. Atmosphere defines then the special quality (or the *feeling*) of a place: it sublimates sensory stimuli which build on each other to create impressions and moods coalescing as affective experiences.

Interestingly, the exhibition design can inform both the *space* and the *time* of these kinds of experiences. For instance, dark spaces with carpeted rooms and precise contrasting light invite an attentive gaze, thoroughly focused on what lies in the cone of light, which dramatically singles out one object from the rest of the display and sublimates it in its materials, textures, and formal properties. Enhanced physical distancing between exhibits, the discreetness of 'distracting' elements such as texts, videos and other contextualizing material, the presence of benches where to sit and contemplate the exhibition, a soft background music … all these elements subtly contribute to slow down the pace of the visit and expand the perception of time. Then visitors' thoughts and feelings might linger (perhaps longer than usual) in the space and time of perception prior to interpretation. We allow ourselves the time to become absorbed in the sensuousness of what *is,* and to become aware of our feelings in that circumstance.

This kind of exhibition approach is reminiscent of what Stephen Greenblatt has defined 'wonder' exhibitions, which emphasize 'the power of the displayed object to stop the viewer in his or her tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention' (1991, 42). Examples of these exhibition approaches abound in art museums and galleries, but they have the capacity to turn into art also objects that might be initially considered otherwise. This is the case for instance of fashion exhibitions, where a commodity (clothes) are transformed into art pieces, mainly through the workings of elaborate exhibition designs. The exhibition *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty* offers an example of affective curatorship based on exhibition design, atmosphere and ambient aesthetics. The exhibition opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET) in New York in 2011 and was devoted to the work of late British fashion designer Alexander McQueen. *Savage Beauty* was one of the most popular exhibitions in the history of the MET, and it managed to repeat the same success at the Victoria & Albert Museum, London, where it was moved in 2015 (Cardwell 2011). Many factors contribute to explain the exceptional visitors' response, including the renown of McQueen's brand and the stunning features of the fashion designer's creations; here I briefly consider the curatorial imprint of the exhibition. The curator of *Savage Beauty*, Andrew Bolton, has been described as 'a storyteller in chief' (Trebay 2015), yet words are not the main tool he used to tell McQueen's story. Bolton's approach to exhibition-making is disarmingly neat: 'you should be able to walk quickly through a show, reading nothing, and understand what the central argument is' (Heller 2016). This implies that the exhibition has to have an immediate visual and sensory appeal. And indeed *Savage Beauty* strives to create atmospheric, immersive environments where a sense of awe is induced through dark, texture-rich backgrounds that sublimate the craftsmanship and the visual impact of the designer's clothes, effectively turning them into sculptural, spectacular artworks.

Exhibition design may also suggest moods and atmospheres revolving around quite intense emotional experiences. The affective potential of the museum experience is a concern not only for curators and exhibition designers, working on the limited space of the exhibition room, but also for museum architects working on the overall museum concept, as visitors' anticipated desired emotional responses can inform the very structure of the museum space. The Jewish Museum in Berlin offers an example of this. Designed by architect Daniel Libeskind, the Museum reconfigures and interweaves the politics of space, memory and emotions (e.g. Arnold-de Simine 2012; Sodaro 2013). I am particularly concerned with the Jewish Museum as 'a performative space that encourages active audience interpretation' (Costello 2013, 7). The Museum invites the visitor to undertake a spatio-temporal, cultural, physical and emotional journey which has been designed – architecturally and curatorially – in order to produce bodily experiences that trigger emotions, which in turn lead to understanding. For instance, the 'Garden of Exile' is a walled outdoor area filled with concrete square columns that create a labyrinth-like environment for visitors' exploration. Since the ground has been angled and the sight is impaired by the columns, moving in this area can be physically challenging and even to some degree disorientating or upsetting. The architecture stimulates visitors' senses by unsettling or limiting sensory perception. For instance, in the 'Voided Void' (or 'Holocaust Tower') visitors enter an outdoor concrete column of darkness – only the faintest ray of light enters from a high chink connecting with the outside. This is a space of almost complete darkness and immobility, the silence is broken only by the sounds from the surrounding streets echoing from a distance. Balance and proprioception are hindered, it is not possible to see what the space looks like, if there are artefacts, or – more uncannily – if there are other visitors in that space at any moment. 'Voided Void' is a time capsule of isolation and disorientation, presence and absence, meant to convey through this sensory barren landscape, the essence of Jewish experience. In Holocaust museums, darkness in the exhibition has been correlated with the individual experiences of death and pain, providing a contrast with other exhibition areas where light is used in a different way, as for instance in areas devoted to the historical sociopolitical contextualization of WWII and the Holocaust, characterized by a 'documentary-style' exhibition design centred on extensive texts and audio-visual documentation (Messham-Muir 2015). In these instances, light levels become the vectors for affective registers, in the same way as the bodily experiences induced by the architectural environment are meant to become portals for emotional states, which in turn lead to personal meaning-making (for instance gaining insights into the dramatic experiences of Jewish communities in Germany). These examples show how design can profoundly affect visitors, and turn emotional responses into prisms that filter how visitors will encounter and make sense of exhibits – feeling becomes here a doorway to meaning.

Emotions elicited by an activity

This third analytical perspective considers exhibitions in which emotions do not figure necessarily in the theme, nor are embedded in the design, but are elicited through specific activities. The exhibition provides the framework and the impetus for performative acts, interactive experiences likely to produce emotional responses. Emotions are the

end result of the activity, the outcome of a process, and a form of feedback for museum professionals, which can open up new viewpoints and interpretations of the exhibits.

For instance, some museums are pioneering new ways of engaging their audiences through emotions, whereby the elicitation of 'desirable' emotions such as empathy – rather than knowledge transmission or edutainment – becomes the primary outcome of the visit (Gokcigdem 2016). For instance, the Minneapolis Institute of Art (MIA) has established a Center for Empathy and Visual Arts dedicated to the exploration of curatorial art practices that may promote empathy among visitors. One of the most innovative activities include 'empathy tours' which abandon art history canons, and instead approach artworks as platforms to engage visitors in conversations about the emotions felt in front of an art piece, encouraging openness and understanding of someone else's view point, which is the cornerstone of emphatic understanding (Varutti, 2022).

Other exhibitions may focus instead on negative emotions, such as eco-anxiety, and provide venues where the public can constructively engage with these feelings. For instance, the exhibition *Our Broken Planet* at the London Natural History Museum (2021–2022) creatively drew on its collections to explore human footprint on the planet through the three overlapping perspectives of food systems; unsustainable use of resources; and climate emergency. The exhibition was complemented by a rich programme of free online events, including a talk where climate psychology researchers and eco-anxiety activists addressed eco-anxiety among youth. The talk aimed to de-stigmatize eco-anxiety (actually a psychologically healthy reaction to the current situation) and suggest ways in which ecological despair can be transformed into resolution to take positive action and foster environmentally responsible decision-making.

A transversal perspective across the three analytical clusters above is the treatment of negative versus positive emotions. In the case of positive emotions such as hope and happiness, exhibitions tend to focus on ways to actively foster these feelings, as illustrated by the *Joy* exhibition or the empathy tours at the MIA. Conversely, in the case of negative emotions, such as anxiety or fear, exhibitions tend to be concerned with 'working through' negative feelings, for instance devising ways to generate acknowledgment and expression of these emotions and explaining their dynamics in order to destigmatize them and provide emotional support, as illustrated by the Museum of Contemporary Emotions or the London Natural History Museum. Both approaches are challenging and require extensive collaboration between museum professionals and health professionals such as psychologists and psychotherapists. These initiatives stretch the remit of museums and expand the range of competencies of museum professionals, who often benefit from invaluable training and capacity-building from these collaborative projects.

These three analytical perspectives – centred respectively on emotions in the exhibition theme, design and activities – are intimately interwoven. They are identified here as distinct for analytical purposes, to show how exhibition approaches may vary in their *emphasis* on one rather than another leverage for emotions, and to ease the theorization of affective curatorship. Clearly, these perspectives are not exclusive but synergic, and most likely, exhibition approaches will sit across these three clusters, addressing emotions in their storytelling, as well as in their exhibition design and programme of events.

The senses and affective curatorship

Sensory experiences are privileged portals to emotional experiences. Studies in psychology confirm that sensory experiences are central to the affective response: the way we perceive an environment affects how we feel and behave. For instance, sensory stimuli such as light, sound, odours, colours, material textures and atmospheric factors such as temperature and humidity, all contribute to engender emotional experiences (Schreuder et al. 2016).

Whether in full awareness or not, the conceptualization and design of exhibition spaces has long incorporated these insights. Granted, for much of the history of museums, visitors have been confined to the role of spectators; this model was sublimated by the nineteenth century 'exhibitionary complex' (Bennett 2005) where ideas of citizenship, national identity and colonial power were literally 'envisioned'. However, for centuries museums have also been 'playing' with the senses, captivating visitors through synaesthetic surprise, illusionistic representations and immersive environments. These display approaches were deployed massively in nineteenth-century Great Exhibitions, as well as in science and natural history museums (Griffiths 2008), and earlier still in Renaissance cabinets of curiosity, where *trompe l'oeil* paintings and surprise secret cabinets made the magic of the *Wunderkammer* (Bowry 2015).

Interest for experimenting with, and expanding the sensory museum experience has intensified in recent decades (Edwards, Gosden, and Phillips 2006; Levent and Pascual-Leone 2014). Museum scholars have theorized this shift, among others, by framing museums as sensescapes (Classen and Howes 2006), that is, complex landscapes where multiple media and sensory stimulation interact with each other. Today, curators are very keen to experiment with new ways of establishing dialogues with visitors, whose role is consequently shifting from recipients to partners and co-producers of experiences. But most interestingly, often curatorial intervention goes further than interaction for its own sake, and purposefully leverages on the sensory experience in order to attempt to elicit specific affective responses in visitors. The experimentation with multisensory modes in museums is connected with the affective turn, more specifically sensory activation is a crucial tool for curators to engage visitors' emotions.

Let us consider the sense of touch. The history of the sense of touch in museums is ambivalent. Whilst in Renaissance cabinets of curiosity touch was encouraged as a way to assess the unique, wondrous nature of the artefacts on display (Classen 2005), the nineteen century Universal Survey Museum model made of the proscription to touch one of its hallmarks, an indicator of the authoritative, disciplinary power of museums and their mission to educate the masses through the regulation of their behaviour (Huhtamo 2015). Today curators are again, and increasingly, keen to engage audiences through tactile experiences. This is also a response to social and cultural changes: we are increasingly at ease with tactility in museums due to a generalized increased tactile activity in our lives, as we tap into our laptops, smart phones, credit card payment cashiers etc. (Huhtamo 2015). The renewal of interest for tactile experiences in exhibitions has been documented and expounded in a number of museum studies volumes, including titles such as *The Power of Touch: Handling Objects in Museums and Heritage Contexts* (Pye 2007); *Touch in Museums* (Chatterjee 2008); *The Book of Touch* (Classen 2005); *Art,*

Museums and Touch (Candlin 2010); as well as, in a broader sense, *Museum Materialities. Objects, Sense and Feeling* (Dudley 2010).

We can find an illustration of how a focus on affect can subtly reconfigure the overall museum experience in the Tenement Museum, New York. The museum is devoted to America's urban immigrant history; one of its aims, among others, is to 'forge powerful emotional connections between visitors and immigrants past and present'.[3] The museum's unique venue is an apartment formerly inhabited by families of immigrants; at the beginning of the visit, visitors stand at the foot of a staircase and are invited to touch the staircase banister as a way to create a connection with those who lived in the house. One may ponder the significance of this gesture: touching the staircase banister is not about interactivity or knowledge transmission, rather, it is an invitation to some kind of emotional engagement. Here the combination of sensory, bodily experience and emotions acts as a powerful portal to knowledge and awareness. Witcomb (2015) argues that emotions have become a tool for museums to carry out their pedagogical functions, she suggests the concept of 'pedagogy of feeling' to indicate the integration of emotions into the pedagogical function of museums.

Similarly, sound has also recently been given special attention both in museum practice and scholarship (e.g. Bubaris 2014; Wiens and de Visscher 2019). Already a museum object in its own right (Kannenberg 2019) and a powerful interpretative tool, as demonstrated for instance by Bailey, Broackes, and de Visscher (2019) in their analysis of the use of sound in exhibitions at the Victoria & Albert Museum, sound has also an important affective dimension. Rupert Cox defines sound as 'an affective spatial construct of the architecture and materials of museum spaces' and therefore invites us to acknowledge the role of sound in museums as both instrumental in creating, and revelatory of 'modes of affective sociality' (Cox 2015, 216). Sound plays a role in socializing visitors and in forging relationships with objects on display and the exhibition space. For instance, for soundscaper and musician Hein Schoer, sound is a valuable complement in anthropological research. Schoer's project *The Sounding Museum: Box of Treasures,*

> fuses anthropology, acoustic ecology, soundscape composition, and transcultural communication within the context of museum education. (..) it supplies researchers, practitioners, and audiences with an instrument to gain an acoustic image of the contemporary cultural and everyday life of the Kwakwaka'wakw of Alert Bay, British Columbia. The project mediates intercultural competence through the affective agency of sound.[4]

These creative curatorial approaches to the activation of the senses in museums – be it vision, touch, sound, sensory limitation and deprivation or their sublimation in specific atmospheres – illustrate the emergence of what Howes (2014, 259) called 'sensory museology' that is, 'the rising tide of sensory experimentation in contemporary curatorial practice'. This increased focus on the senses and embodied feelings has facilitated the emergence of new ways to engage visitors geared towards enabling more personal explorations of museum environments and providing more and more varied opportunities for emotional engagement.

The power of affective curatorship

The affective turn has generated a new awareness of the multi-layered affective potential of museums (Varutti 2020, 2021). This awareness might not translate into revolutionary

changes in curatorial practice, yet it may lead to subtle but deep and pervasive shifts expressed in a different way of *thinking* about, and *feeling* museums – their collections, environments, activities and goals. The affective turn has brought curators to experiment with approaches that place emotions and emotional engagement at the heart of the exhibition project: the anticipated desired emotional impact on visitors is embedded in, and informs, the physical structure of the exhibition space, its atmosphere, the selection of objects, their layout, the exhibition theme and storytelling, and the ways in which all these elements are leveraged in visitors' activities. The concept of affective curatorship captures this kind of exhibition approaches; the senses and a three-pronged focus on emotions connected with the exhibition theme, the exhibition design and activities, provided analytical tools to delve deeper and get a flavour of the qualities of affective curatorial approaches.

The analysis shows that emotions can stimulate innovative, creative curatorial solutions and open up for intense and memorable museum experiences. A final word of caution is however in order. In spite of curatorial intentions, affect cannot be fully anticipated nor controlled. The argument that museums are affective therefore needs to be complemented by the awareness that the communication of affect and emotions (in museums as elsewhere) is far from a direct, unproblematic process. Assuming this, would overlook the complexity and volatility of affective processes in the individual, which entail the interwoven effects of bodily sensations, memories, moods, personality traits, personal experiences, and context among the many factors involved in the coalescing of an emotion (Barrett 2018). The concept of affective curatorship does not disregard such complexity, but rather embraces it as its *modus operandi*. As mentioned, both affect and curatorship inhabit in-between spaces; this proposition can now be better qualified. Affective curatorship occurs in the space between intentionality on one hand (exhibition design is by definition meant to create a certain effect) and release of control at the point where curatorial agendas meet visitors' subjectivity. This is a space that metaphorically contains everything and its opposite: it is a space of uncertainty of reactions to the display, but also of power and authority to take decisions about what is to be displayed and how; it is a space for artistic freedom and imagination, but it can also be a space of prescription, where cultural norms are being shaped. And of course, this is also a space where misunderstanding can occur, a mismatching of intentions and messages between the museum and the visitor.

It has been said that 'curators are increasingly art directors' (Trebay 2015) as exhibitions become a form of spectacle not too dissimilar from cinema, with aspects of theatricality that are meant to surprise the visitor and induce a sense of wonder – echoing perhaps the effects of Renaissance cabinets of curiosity. This entails allowing for museum environments and museum objects to be experienced in unpredictable, non-normative ways, with tempos that allow for embodied, emotional encounters – encounters triggered not necessarily or not only by interpretation but also by intuition, improvisation, individual needs, interests, and feelings. Affective curatorship invites this kind of encounters and ideally turns them into the breeding ground for new curatorial ideas and approaches as visitors' responses are not disengaged, but become feedback for further curatorial experimentation.

In this way, affective curatorship reasserts and reinforces the uniqueness of museums: the power of museum objects, environments, architecture, storytelling and performances

to touch us emotionally – over and over. Today, objects in museum collections might not necessarily be new to audiences or arrestingly exotic, as they were in Renaissance cabinets of curiosity. Yet with every new exhibition, curators excel in creating new *exhibition contexts* which literally make objects anew by creating around them fresh, engaging epistemological, aesthetic, sensory and emotional frameworks. This is noteworthy since, in order for the exhibition to cast a spell on visitors, atmospheres, sensory and emotional itineraries need to be carefully constructed by curators. The examples and arguments in this article mostly refer to European and North American case studies, yet they point at a broader shift: museum professionals have become more than ever skilled in designing environments and deploying display techniques that can direct attention, unsettle certainties, engender wonder … in short, curators are drawing upon – and forging – a more creative, evocative, affective curatorial vocabulary. There is certainly power in this, but it is a power imprinted by openness to the uncertain, the open-ended. Curators might feel less pressed to tell the 'whole' or 'true' story[5]; rather, the fragment, the suggestion, the mood, are effective *because* of their evocative power and incompleteness. Affective curatorship invites visitors to connect with their emotional responses in order to turn the museum visit into an occasion not only of education and leisure, but also of personal growth, transformation, and healing (Morse 2021; Wallen and Docherty-Hughes 2022). In so doing, affective curatorship becomes an antidote to authoritative, patriarchal forms of curatorship, and puts each visitor in charge of deciding autonomously to what degree they will engage intellectually, on a cognitive level, with the exhibition subject-matter, and to what degree they will dwell in the emotional encounter, letting themselves be immersed in the sensory experience of the environment, or suspended in a contemplative rapture – and perhaps all of this, in various order and combinations, as part of a wholly personal, modular, affective, transformative museum experience.

Notes

1. Small parts of this section originally appeared in French in the article 'Vers une muséologie des émotions' ['Towards a museology of emotions'] published in *Culture et Musées*, 2020, 36: (171–177).
2. ICOM Resilience guidelines: https://icom.museum/en/news/museums-and-covid-19-8-steps-to-support-community-resilience/
3. Tenement Museum, source: https://www.sitesofconscience.org/en/membership/tenement-museum/ accessed 4 March 2022.
4. Source: *The Sounding Museum: Box of Treasures*. https://cup.columbia.edu/book/the-sounding-museum-box-of-treasures/9783837628562, accessed 4 March 2022. Further details on this project can be found in Schoer (2010).
5. This statement does not apply however to ongoing, unresolved issues of cultural representation in many (post-)colonial settings where the history of Indigenous Peoples and their relations to colonizers often still needs to be brought to the fore and publicly addressed.

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