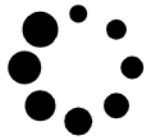


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Inhabiting the Museum: A History of Physical Presence from Analog to Digital Exhibition Spaces

by Anna Calise

Museum

Visitor body

Technology

Exercise of power

Proximities

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Inhabiting the Museum: A History of Physical Presence from Analog to Digital Exhibition Spaces



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Abstract

From summer 2021 to spring 2022 the Nxt Museum in Amsterdam has run the exhibition *Shifting Proximities*, meant to investigate the ways in which global events and developments, mediated by technologies “are continually shifting the proximities between us, both literally and metaphorically.” This study wants to offer an account which, starting from this exhibition experience, addresses the temporal variations of the relationship between museums, visitors and their bodies, trying to investigate the extent to which technological developments, guided by changing epistemic paradigms, have contributed to influence display and curatorial choices and their relationship to the visitor’s body. In this interplay artistic intuition – intertwined with technical innovations – will prove essential to trigger institutional changes, together with philosophical undertakings of the political ideologies that inform power dynamics in the museum system. The visitor’s body, in its materiality and motion *habits*, will be seen as engaging in continuously changing ways with the museum space, mirroring the evolving epistemological paradigms of its times. Through an historical account of bodily practices and customs across museum spaces, this study aims to discuss the ways in which citizens’ *dive* through museum halls have been and are used to establish socially shared ideas of art and knowledge.

Keywords

[Museum](#)

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From summer 2021 to spring 2022 the Nxt Museum in Amsterdam has run the exhibition *Shifting Proximities*, meant to “explore human experience and interaction in the face of social and technological change.”¹ Beginning from the premise that “global events and developments, whether socio-political, technological or environmental, have a significant impact on how we communicate, how we move and how we live in the world”² the exhibition aimed to investigate the ways in which these “are continually shifting the proximities between us, both literally and metaphorically.”³

The museum presented eight artworks by different artists which allowed the visitor to experience the change in distance – or closeness – with others and with oneself, through the mediation of technological devices, at times transparent, others opaque.⁴ The key to the aesthetic experience inside the museum space, as we will see throughout this article, was the visitor’s body, and its motion. The knowledge required in order to fully dive into this exhibition had to do with one’s ability to move through space and interact with light, screens, cameras: media.

With this exhibition, the Nxt Museum becomes part of a series of museums which have structured their cultural paradigms around the idea of a *performative* rather than *informative* museology,⁵ one which stands in a more reflexive position towards its own operations, and admits to problematize the epistemological premises which underlie cultural and curatorial choices. In this line of thought the visitor’s body becomes an instrumental tool that guides a different kind of museological experience, which does not rely on vision⁶ as the main guiding sense, and encompasses

1 “Shifting Proximities,” Nxt Museum, <https://nxtmuseum.com/event/shifting-proximities/>, accessed May 15, 2023.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 J.D. Bolter, R. Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1998).

5 B. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “The Museum as Catalyst,” keynote address at ICOM Sweden conference “Museum 2000: Confirmation or Challenge?,” Vadstena, September 29, 2000, <http://www.michaelfehr.net/Museum/Texte/vadstena.pdf>, accessed May 15, 2023.

6 For a discussion on visibility cfr. N. Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (London-Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1983): 36; P. de Bolla, *The Education of the Eye* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); C. Otter, *The Victorian Eye* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008): 24.

the sensorium more widely, reinstating visit practices that can be dated to early museum history.⁷

This study wants to offer an account which, starting from this fairly contemporary yet not isolated new mode of *diving* into the museum, addresses the temporal variations of the relationship between museums, visitors and their bodies, trying to investigate the extent to which technological developments, associated and guided by changing epistemic paradigms, have contributed to influence display and curatorial choices. In this interplay artistic intuition – intertwined with technical and creative innovations – will prove essential to trigger institutional changes, together with philosophical undertakings of the political ideologies that inform power dynamics in the museum system. The visitor's body, in its materiality and motion *habits*, will be seen as engaging in continuously changing ways with the museum space, mirroring the evolving epistemological paradigms of its times.

The paper will begin by presenting the *Shifting Proximities* exhibition, and observing the topics it raises. Amongst these are the use of technology for artistic practices inside the museum space and the use of the body for aesthetic experience during the cultural visit. Moving from this case study, a wider theoretical and historical scenario will be discussed, trying to identify some key positions which can help to contextualize today's museum behavior within a more complex understanding of the use and discipline of the body within the museum space. Tony Bennett's and Douglas Crimp's use of the Foucauldian philosophical apparatus will prove extremely helpful to conceptualize how power systems and ideological stances can translate into behavioral etiquettes and technological artistic endeavors.

Parallely, an account of the change of the use of the senses and the body inside the museum space through time – addressing mainly shifts from the late seventeenth century to the early nineteenth century and then again in the late twentieth century – will help historicize museum

7 C. Classen, *The Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of Touch* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2012): 136-146.

experiential habits with reference to changing epistemic paradigms. As human beings today dive into museum halls, what kind of influence is the environment surrounding them exercising on their physical bodies? And how are these experiences *used* to establish an idea of art and knowledge?

Shifting Proximities at Nxt Museum

Nxt Museum is a fairly recent institution, opened in early 2020 in Amsterdam North, the new upcoming neighborhood of the city, over the lake IJ. The area is already home to another important institution, the Eye Filmmuseum,⁸ and houses a number of art galleries and studios. NXT is part of those institutions which are resignifying the district, functioning as *symbolic references*⁹ which advocate for new urban agendas, impacting the city from a socio-political perspective. The area, originally “location of shipbuilding and other heavy industries [...] evolved into a hotspot for the creative sector since the 1990s and has been the [...] subject of active urban redevelopment since the 2000s.”¹⁰

As the website promptly declares:

Nxt Museum is the first museum in the Netherlands dedicated to new media art. We focus on art that uses modern tools to embody modern times. We believe that the tools used in artistic expression reflect the times we live in. That makes them the perfect means to understand contemporary complexities allowing us to recognise, relate and reflect on our realities.¹¹

The museum highlights how it is devoted only to new media art, the only kind of art capable of capturing and addressing contemporary times. It does not hold a permanent collection, directly curating and producing exhibitions which thematically address diverse issues. The building itself

8 Eye Filmmuseum, <https://www.eyefilm.nl/en>, accessed May 15, 2023.

9 F. Savini, S. Dembski, “Manufacturing the Creative City: Symbols and Politics of Amsterdam North,” *Cities: The International Journal of Urban Policy and Planning* 55 (2016): 139-147, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2016.02.013>.

10 Ibid.: 140.

11 Nxt Museum, <https://nxtmuseum.com/about/>, accessed May 15, 2023.

was designed and furnished in order to be able to cater for these kinds of programmes:

the space is built specifically to explore new media art [...] that expands technical possibilities and applications, is dynamic and unbound by form and that generates movement whether physical, mental or emotional. The space provides all the ingredients for these progressive art forms to grow, flourish and evolve. Nxt Museum is a place where creatives bring their visions to life.¹²

The technological capacity of the museum is fundamental to the identity of the space: it unlocks the creativity of the artists invited to exhibit, and enables the *motion* which qualifies the power of the aesthetic experience. Not unrelated, the whole museum is heavily sponsored by a giant of the tech industry, Samsung:¹³ “With a full technical Samsung set up including hi-tech hardware [...] integrated throughout the museum, we seek to enrich the experience for our visitors and extend our educational programme.”¹⁴

As aforementioned, the case study here analyzed is the exhibition *Shifting Proximities*,¹⁵ which directly investigated the concept of proximity and its change due to the engagement of technology. The exhibition purposely addressed the active dimension of proximity, creating experiential environments where visitors were called to, precisely, *activate* the artwork through their engagement. Overall the programme hosted eight different artworks,¹⁶ each designed by a different artist. Upon entering the museum, the visitor was invited to cross a door which led into a dark room, beginning a journey linearly dictated by the alternation of a series of smaller rooms, with information on the next artwork,

12 Ibid.

13 The topic of the connection between industries, infrastructures, technologies and artistic endeavors is a complicated one, which is not necessary to address in the present discussion. For an account which draws the relationship between infrastructure studies and digital media studies please cfr. J.C. Plantin, A. Punathambekar, “Digital media infrastructures, pipes, platforms and politics,” *Media, Culture and Society* 41, no. 2 (2018): 163-174, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443718818376>.

14 “Partnerships,” Nxt Museum, <https://nxtmuseum.com/partnerships/>, accessed May 15, 2023.

15 The exhibition was open from the August 29, 2021 to May 8, 2022.

16 The complete list of artists can be found in the exhibition page on the museum website: <https://nxtmuseum.com/event/shifting-proximities/>, accessed May 15, 2023.

and a series of bigger rooms, where the installations were hosted. In each introductory room the visitor was advised on how long to spend in the next room and given some generic information on a screen on the meaning of the following artwork. Among the various works two have been here chosen as interesting for the discussion at hand: *Connected* (Fig. 1) by Roelof Knol¹⁷ and *Zoom Pavillion* (Fig. 2) by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer.¹⁸

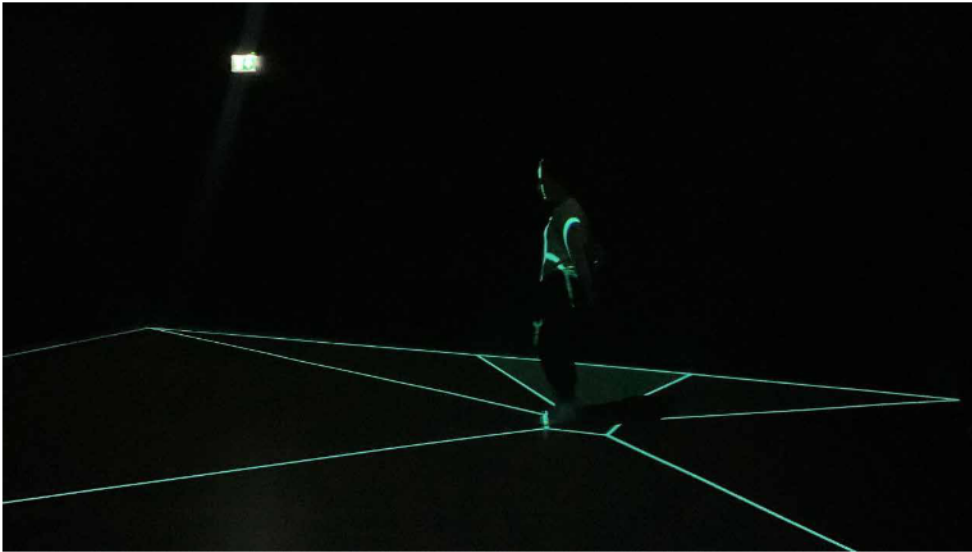


Fig. 1. R. Knol, *Connected*, 2022, view of the exhibition *Shifting Proximities* at Nxt Museum, May 2022.

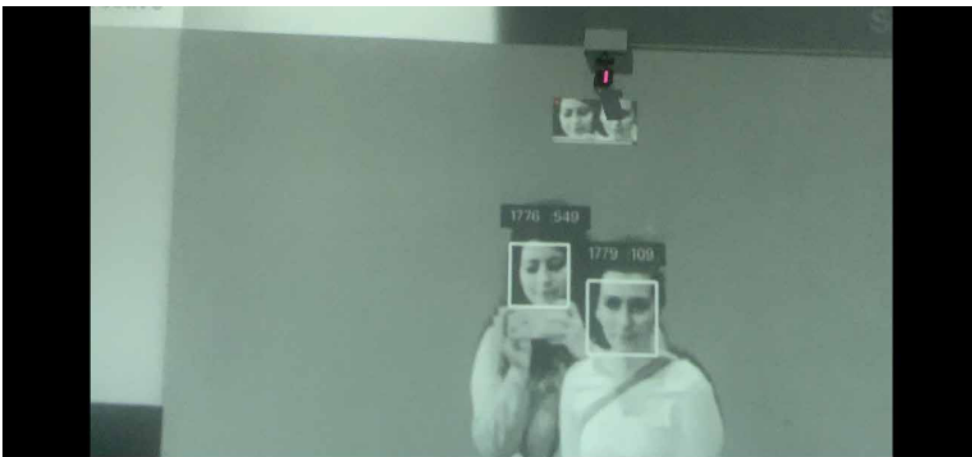


Fig. 2. R. Lozano-Hemmer, *Zoom Pavillion*, view of the exhibition *Shifting Proximities* at Nxt Museum, May 2022.

17 Amsterdam born, raised and based, Robert Knol is a new media artist and developer, who works with projection mapping, augmented reality and coding to design interactive- reactive experiences. His website can be accessed at <https://roelofknol.com/>.

18 Born in Mexico City in 1967, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer is a media artist working at the intersection of architecture and performance art. He creates platforms for public participation using technologies such as robotic lights, digital fountains, computerized surveillance, media walls, and telematic networks. For a more in depth biography see his website at <https://www.lozano-hemmer.com/bio.php>, accessed May 15, 2023.

*Connected*¹⁹ was the first installation of the exhibition, introducing the experience. The visitor was asked to join

in a ritual of connection. Each visitor is represented by an interactive visual projected on the floor. Together, they form new networks of connections between the visitors who will navigate through the exhibition. As personal space becomes shared space, *Connected* sets the tone of the exhibition by examining the type of space we inhabit.²⁰

Through one's own motion in the room, and activation of the interactive visuals that follow visitors around the space and connect them with other participants, the artwork activates. The emphasis on the role played by technology in building and tracing connections between people is evident, as is the dialogue between visitors, their bodies, and the devices used. It appears as the technological layer is already there, embedded in reality in an almost undetectable and natural²¹ way, yet it is through people's presence and motion that it manifests itself.

Zoom Pavillion, further into the exhibition path, is described by the artist on his website as

an interactive installation that consists of immersive projection on three walls, fed by 12 computerized surveillance systems trained on the public. The piece uses face recognition algorithms to detect the presence of participants and record their spatial relationship within the exhibition space [...]. The zooming sequences are disorienting

19 While audio-visual artist Roelof Knol designed the installation, he commissioned the sound design to sound-artist Marc Mahfoud.

20 "Connected," Nxt Museum, <https://nxtmuseum.com/artist/connected-roelof-knol/>, accessed May 15, 2023.

21 On the *naturalization* of technology in the environment cfr. R. Eugeni, *La condizione postmediale: Media linguaggi e narrazioni* (Milan: La Scuola, 2015): 46-47.

as they change the entire image “landscape” from easily recognizable wide shots of the crowd to abstract close-ups.²²

The technological layer appears, in this case, even more evidently than in the previous installation. Devices are surrounding visitors, and their activity is shown in real time on the walls of the room: they trace distance between visitors while picturing them, providing images which portray frontal representations and capturing motion from above. Realistic and more graphic and technical images are mixed in a random manner, conveying the message that our appearance can be translated into different visual languages, depending on who is looking. The problematic paradigm of surveillance²³ is exposed by the author in a way which uncovers the dialectic relationship between human beings and the technological ecosystem that surrounds them.²⁴

The two artworks, and the exhibition in itself, testify for a new way of understanding museum journeys in contemporary culture. One which assumes an embodied, extended, embedded and enacted²⁵ idea of cognition, granting a more participative nature to the aesthetic experience. In the museum logic, the visitor needs to be guided into an environment which elicits stimuli and activates a physical dynamic, one which anticipates a mediated – meaning media related – and technologized way of living art.

Surely this is the case of a single museological instance, clearly not representative of a pervasive and over-riding trend in museums policies. Yet it has been argued²⁶

22 “Zoom Pavilion,” Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, https://www.lozano-hemmer.com/zoom_pavilion.php, accessed May 15, 2023. As the website further specifies, Zoom Pavilion marks the first collaboration between artists Rafael Lozano-Hemmer and Krzysztof Wodiczko. It was originally conceived for the Architecture Biennale in Beijing.

23 For an analysis of contemporary artistic projects which problematize the relationship between surveillance and facial imaging in today’s visual culture cfr. D. Borselli, G. Ravaioli, “Facing Power: Fotografia, partecipazione e tattiche di resistenza artistica nella sorveglianza contemporanea,” *VCS. Visual Culture Studies*, no. 5 (2022): 115-132, <https://hdl.handle.net/11585/922401>.

24 For an overview on the topic of surveillance and aerial view in relation to visual culture studies see A. Pinotti, A. Somaini, *Cultura visuale: Immagini sguardi media dispositivi* (Turin: Einaudi, 2016): 251-253.

25 A. Newen., L. De Bruin, S. Gallager, *The Oxford Handbook of 4E Cognition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

26 D. Howes, “Introduction to Sensory Museology,” *The Senses and Society* 9, no. 3 (2014): 259-267, <https://doi.org/10.2752/174589314X14023847039917>.

that since the last two decades of the twentieth century, and onwards, there is a tendency that can be observed in museums towards a more body related and sensory engaged understanding and planning of the experience. One which encompasses different conceptions of knowledge, accepting also more horizontal and even possibly *humanizing*²⁷ epistemological stances. Engaging the body, from this point of view, seems to be in line with the idea of democratizing access to the museum. Instead of expecting visitors to possess the intellectual cultural capital²⁸ necessary to access the aesthetic elitarian museum experience, this curatorial account somehow *lowers the bar*, requiring epistemic grounds which have more to do with everyday experiences than higher education.

This shift, today as much as in museum history,²⁹ is related to the use of media: new technologies which are expected to increase accessibility. Yet, as much as in the past, the introduction of technological devices in museums comes with a conflicted debate which carries the weight of the discussion on the material conditions of technological production³⁰ and consumer culture³¹ debacles. Whilst these devices – and device hosting museums – are seen as attracting and engaging a wider public, the danger that they represent has to do with parallelly building a control system that collects data and works as a feedback accumulator:³² exploiting visitors under a false inclusivity

27 The idea of organizing museum experiences on humanizing premises to knowledge belongs to the Austrian physicist and museum director Otto Neurath, who operated in Vienna at the beginning of the twentieth century. For an account of his work and principles see F. Stadler, ed., *Encyclopedia and Utopia: The Life and Work of Otto Neurath*, (London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996); O. Neurath, *Encyclopedia and Sociology*, ed. M. Neurath, R. Cohen (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1973).

28 P. Bourdieu “Three Forms of Capital,” in A.H. Halsey, ed., *Education: Culture, Economy and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

29 Neurath’s museum is also to be understood in a line of mediatized museums, institutions which employ media and technologies to make the cultural experience more accessible.

30 A. Barry, *Political Machines: Governing a Technological Society* (New York: Athlone Press, 2001).

31 T. Adorno, M. Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (1947), trans. E. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1986).

32 A. Barry, *Political Machines*: 130.

pretense. Even more so in the era of big data³³ when the controlling potential of technology is ever more striking.

Further, this framework becomes more complex if enriched through the perspective, in museological literature, that has addressed the disciplining power of museums. Primarily since the last decade of the twentieth century, a number of authors have started applying the theoretical framework developed by Michel Foucault on *apparatuses* and discipline³⁴ to museum environments, highlighting the multiple ways through which these spaces have historically exercised their power on people. These accounts can help to conceptualize the relationship between epistemic premises, dominant ideologies, art, technologies and bodies.

Museums inhabiting bodies

While the discussion on the place and time where museums were born is still an open one, scholars seem to agree on the fact that, since the early days, museums have been meant to host people. Their *inhabited* nature is somewhat intrinsic to their identity, as renowned museologist Krzysztof Pomian points out in the introduction of his three volume publication *Le musée, une histoire mondiale*. When faced with the task of defining museums he qualifies them as “all the public collections of natural or artificial objects exhibited in a secular or secularized environment and destined to be preserved for an indefinite future.”³⁵ Inherent to the *public* character of museums and

33 V. Mayer-Schönberger, C. Kenneth, *Big Data: A Revolution That Will Transform How We Live, Work, and Think* (Boston-New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013).

34 While Foucault’s corpus is extremely wide and identifying the publications which most influenced the museological discourse would be a delicate and somehow futile effort, guiding concepts to the present discourse can be found by M. Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1966) (London: Vintage, 1994); M. Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (London: Routledge, 2002). With reference to publications which directly address the author’s discourse on museums see A. Kauffman, “Manet, museum, modernism: Michel Foucault and modernist art history,” *Journal of Art Historiography*, no. 22 (Jun 2020): 1-21; K. Hetherington, “Foucault, the Museum and the Diagram,” *Sociological Review* 53, no. 3 (2011): 457-475, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2011.02016.x>; B. Lord, “Foucault’s museums: difference, representation, and genealogy,” *Museum and society* 4, no. 1 (March 2006): 11-14, <http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/museumstudies/museumstudies/documents/volumes/1lord.pdf>.

35 K. Pomian, *Le musée, une histoire mondiale*, 2 vols. (Paris, Gallimard, 2020), vol. 1, “Du trésor au musée:” 47 [my translation].

their collections, and to the *exhibited* status they acquire, lies the assumption that their value is to be deeply connected with their appreciation by people. After all it is their being experienced by citizens which seems to have been the emancipatory factor which led to the shift from cabinets of curiosities to *museums*.³⁶ Inaugurating what German Bazin has famously defined the “museum age,”³⁷ when the beauty of objects which were before the privilege of a few became available to many.

While museums can be hence imagined as *born* to be inhabited, it is legitimate to wonder to what extent this relationship is reciprocal, and how museums themselves end up *inhabiting* their audience. Which environment is materialized through their existence and how this causally affects the people who enter it. Tony Bennett, in *The Birth of the Museum. History, theory, politics*³⁸ draws from the Foucauldian philosophical corpus, renownedly linking museums’ political and governmental ambitions to the semiotic organization of museum environments and the behavioral influence on the visiting public.

As the author argues throughout his work, ideological stances and conceptions of visibility heavily underline museums displays through history, influencing the structural conditions of *learning* in the museum space. The epistemic paradigm the museum is based on becomes actively governmental insofar as visitors inhabit the museum and in it perform the kind of behavior which will allow them to internalize what they are seeing. This entails also designing an environment which

deploys its machinery of representation within an apparatus which [...] is concerned not only with impressing the visitor with a message

36 As Pomian had already argued in a previous work, it is the phenomenological structure of collections which discloses the kind of relationship that is implied between the visible – the collected objects and how they appear – and the invisible – what these objects represent and which is meant to be conveyed to posterity. K. Pomian, *Collectors and Curiosities: Paris and Venice, 1500-1800* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990). In the organizational dynamics which explicit the public destination of the museum can therefore be identified the change in scope and target which marks the passage from private to public collections.

37 G. Bazin, *The Museum Age* (New York: Universe Books, 1967).

38 T. Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London-New York: Routledge, 1995).

of power but also to induct her or him into new forms of programming the self, aimed at producing new types of conduct and self-shaping.³⁹

Shaping ones' habits and modes of behavior, especially in terms of conduct and appearances, emerges, in this reading, as one of the programmatic objectives of nineteenth and twentieth century museum policy, encouraging self-regulation and self-monitoring, making the museum a proper *reformatory of manners*.⁴⁰ As these words anticipate, a direct connection can be found historically between museum environments and displays, on the one hand, and the behavioral etiquette which is expected when entering the temples of knowledge, on the other. As Helen Rees Leahy writes in *Museum Bodies. The Politics and Practices of Visiting and Viewing*, during the nineteenth century there were well known guidebooks and periodicals, openly advising proper museum conduct.⁴¹ In 1832 *The Penny Magazine of The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge*,⁴² prescribed the three rules which would guarantee enjoyment of the museum, whilst also ensuring not to trouble either fellow visitors or museum authorities. These included first "touch nothing," secondly "do not talk loud" and third "be not obtrusive,"⁴³ aiming towards a discipline of behaviors which directly addressed the use of the senses during the visit. Touching, talking, and obstructing – understood as physical disturbance of others – were heavily discouraged. As the pamphlet spells out "real knowledge

39 Ibid.: 46.

40 M. Henning, *Museums, Media and Cultural Theory* (Maidenhead UK: Open University Press, 2006): 13.

41 H. Rees Leahy, *Museum Bodies: The Politics and Practices of Visiting and Viewing* (Farnham UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2012): 7-8. As the author here specifies, these publications targeted readers which were deemed most deficient in techniques of self-restraint and attentive viewing. Amongst these mainly women and working-class visitors.

42 "The British Museum," *The Penny Magazine of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge* 1, no. 2 (April, 7 1832): 13-15.

43 Ibid.: 14.

[...] can only be obtained through self-discipline of the body as well as the mind.”⁴⁴

Acceptable behavior, moreover, contributed to ensure the success of the aesthetic experience:

the behavior of visitors to early museums [...] and art exhibitions [...] was scrutinized, not only for compliance with the institution’s rules of admission, but also for evidence of aesthetic receptivity and cultural competence. [...] modes of walking and looking had to be re-tuned in accordance with changing practices of display and conditions of visibility – that is, the practical and discursive dimensions of seeing – within the institution.⁴⁵

This mode of behavior, far from being required since the beginning of museum history, was actually an innovation brought by nineteenth century policy. As Constance Classen widely addresses in *The Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of Touch*,⁴⁶ museum habits regarding the use of the senses have not always been as binding and restrictive as *The Penny Magazine* would suggest. Especially touching artifacts, she argues, was a common practice during the late seventeenth century and throughout the eighteenth century. Through the sense of touch, visitors were deemed able to enrich their experience, gain more information about the objects, and build a connection with their history. They were actively incentivized to navigate through the museum space, open glass cases and choose for themselves how to build their own cultural experience. Only since the beginning of the nineteenth century, for a number of reasons which span from practical concerns to ideological positions⁴⁷ – touch started to be identified with an unmediated and uncomplicated mode of learning⁴⁸ – freer exploration became prohibited inside the museum. “Touch what you like with the eyes, but do not see with the fingers” was the inscription which headed the Picture

44 Ibid.

45 H. Rees Leahy, *Museum Bodies*: 4.

46 C. Classen, *The Deepest Sense*: 136-146.

47 Ibid.: 137.

48 F. Candlin, *Art, Museums and Touch* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 2010).

Gallery of the Bodleian Library of Oxford,⁴⁹ and the new norm.

On the one hand, as Bennett points out, museums are and always seem to have been governing apparatuses which start from specific epistemological conditions and build performative environments which are designed to condition the visitors. These, by abiding to a dictated etiquette and performing in a specific way, begin to internalize and embody a wider and complex ideological paradigm. Yet, history testifies to a more varied than expected body of bodily practices in museums, one which has shifted from a full hands on approach to a purely visual one and that is today reinstating a freer and wider sensorily encompassing set of habits. Intuitively, being free to use one's own senses, instead of being intimidated by the white cube aesthetic,⁵⁰ seems to represent a less coercive undertaking. By allowing the visitor to move at his or her own pace – and taste – through the museum, cultural institutions seem to be operating in a way which is more respectful of individual freedom. Yet, the issue might be that this kind of permissive behavior would enable a merely *positive*⁵¹ and in itself still heavily predefined conception of liberty, which alludes to the space for autonomy while representing a strongly defined set of possibilities. In this sense, the concerns expressed at the beginning with reference to the controlling power of new technologies, heavily employed in today's sensory museums – become ever more relevant. Perhaps by investigating the relationship between epistemic paradigms, technological and technical possibilities and art in museums further insight can be offered.

Technologies inhabiting art

Douglas Crimp, in *On the Museum's Ruins*, also follows in Foucault's step and qualifies the museum as an

49 C. Jr. Dickens, *Dickens's Dictionary of the Thames* (1893) (New York: Taurus Press, 1972): 153.

50 B. O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Berkeley-Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976).

51 For a critique of positive conceptions of freedom cfr. I. Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969): 118-172.

“institution of confinement” with its proper “discursive formation,”⁵² the discipline of art history. He operatively develops the archeological⁵³ analytical approach envisioned by the French philosopher, studying museums across time as institutions which carry, and enable, the historical *marks* of the “tables on which their knowledge is formulated.”⁵⁴ He argues for a strong and visible connection among museological logics, artworks, and the techniques that are used to produce them, emphasizing how an artwork, especially through the technology that was used to produce it, can unveil paradigmatic cultural and ideological shifts. The analytical framework offered by Crimp, therefore, seems to widen the discussion, yet at the same time also offer a more targeted viewpoint.

On the one hand the author himself remarks the connection between different time periods and ideological positions, also emphasizing how museum strategies and policies change decade after decade, debunking the presumed a-temporal logic which these institutions attempt to elicit.⁵⁵ On the other hand, Crimp directly addresses the connection between artworks and technology through time, remarking to what extent different techniques unveil significant aspects of the ideology of an era. It is in the technological possibilities which structurally impact the artwork that one can read the shifting historical and artistic perspectives.⁵⁶

If scrutinized through Crimp’s account, museums through time express their dominant positions not only by organizing their space and advising for a specific behavior, but also by exhibiting artworks which represent the ways in which technologies are changing reality and the way we perceive it. Read through this analysis, the

52 D. Crimp, *On the Museum’s Ruins* (Cambridge MA-London: MIT Press, 1993): 48

53 In Foucault’s account, an archeological analysis entails on the one hand being attentive to discontinuity, more than to linear developments, within the history of ideological paradigms; and on the other being focused on the materiality of the research object, which holds the parameters that should guide the research process. See M. Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*.

54 D. Crimp, *On the Museum’s Ruins*: 47.

55 Ibid.: 50. Differently from Bennett and Classen, Crimp offers an account which focuses more on the connection between ideology, technology and art, less with the overall museum organization and behavioral etiquette.

56 Ibid.: 58.

apparatus nature of the museum, understood in the Foucauldian sense, is even more evident: it spans from the wider epistemic meaning of the system of power to the somewhat lower and more down to earth level of the functioning of the technology employed.⁵⁷

Following this line of thought, it could be argued that different technologies call for different uses of the visitor's body throughout the museum environment. From artifacts kept in openable glass cases to aesthetic experiences structurally built thanks to technological devices, the role played by technology in shaping cultural experiences in museums is central. It changes, as Crimp would argue, together with the epistemic paradigms which characterize each epoch. As does the way in which these technologies impact the visitor body, and help mediate the museological experience which is taking place. As Helen Rees Leahy writes, citing de Bolla's definition of a customized "specific activity of looking"⁵⁸ within the space of the museum, "a successful performance of spectatorship therefore invoked and enacted a precise set of socio-cultural coordinates."⁵⁹

Except at this point in order to perform successfully as a spectator the visitor of the Nxt Museum has to engage with his or her own body, and not just *look*. What is asked in the museum space is to relate with the technologies which structurally support the artwork in order to live the experience, abiding to the aesthetic, technical and informational systems which are behind them. The socio-cultural coordinates which guide the performance are still invoked with the utmost precision, yet they call for an evident degree of motion, one which requires to engage with the technology. Without moving through the space, and activating the technology behind the installations, feeding it one's own data, the performance would not exist. Retracing Marcel Mauss's 1935 argument discussed

57 Cfr. R. Eugeni "Che cosa sarà un dispositivo: Archeologia e prospettive di uno strumento per pensare i media," in J.L. Baudry, *Il dispositivo: Cinema, Media, Soggettività*, ed. R. Eugeni (Brescia: La Scuola, 2017) for a breakdown of the different levels at which an apparatus can be understood to be operating: epistemic, situational, technological.

58 P. de Bolla, *The Education of the Eye*: 72.

59 H. Rees Leahy, *Museum Bodies*: 6.

in *Techniques of the Body*⁶⁰ Rees Leahy specifies how “the habitus of the practiced museum spectator is palpable in their demonstration of socially acquired and sanctioned bodily techniques within the exhibition; for example, standing at the ‘correct’ distance from the artwork, walking at a pace that is neither too fast nor too slow, and judiciously editing the number of artworks deserving their closest scrutiny.”⁶¹ In NXT the bodily behavior required to appreciate the artwork is not learned within the museum, but in real life. After all, the title of the exhibition, *Shifting Proximities*, recalls purposely how concepts of closeness and distance are actually changing in our society, due to technology. What is interesting if Mauss’s paradigm is used to interpret the experience of the visitor, is that the curators and artists engaged in the exhibition do draw on habits that visitors have developed⁶² in order to build the exhibition script,⁶³ yet these are customary to our technologically mediated everyday life.

Rather than as a liberating and emancipatory story, which sees the visitor’s body gradually being freed from physical inhibitions inside the museum space and incentivized to move in an experimental and autonomous manner, the history of physical presence through museum halls appears to be more linear than expected. Whilst it can be argued that different philosophical and epistemic positions have surely guided a change in experiential and bodily access to knowledge and collections – shifting from a more sensorial account in the early museum towards an exclusively sight dependent aesthetic visit throughout the nineteenth and most of the twentieth century and then towards a more active bodily undertaking in the last fifty

60 M. Mauss, “Techniques of the Body,” trans. B. Brewster, *Economy and Society* 2 (1973): 70-88.

61 H. Rees Leahy, *Museum Bodies*: 6.

62 On media related cognitive habits cfr. J. Fingerhut, “Habits and the enculturated mind: pervasive arti-facts, predictive processing, and expansive habits,” in F. Caruana, I. Testa, eds., *Habits: Pragmatist Approaches from Cognitive Neuroscience to Social Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022): 352-375, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108682312.018>.

63 J. Noordegraaf, *Strategies of Display, Museum Presentation in Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Visual Culture* (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 2004).

years – it is difficult to read these changes as other than changes in prescriptive accounts.

Perhaps the museum has in part ceased to actively discipline visitors, and operates more in an observant manner to contemporary experiential habits, mutuating from reality more than shaping it. Yet today's motion inside museums seems still heavily guided by ideologies, conceptions of knowledge and the technologies which inform them and our habits, leaving open the question whether art, within museums, can still represent a transformative and free space for creativity, or if it caters more to the – bodily – reinforcement of the status quo.

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