

THE SENSES IN THE MUSEUM AND THEATER: PRESENTATION THEORY AND STRATEGIES

Theater Studies Department, THST 422a

Fall Semester 2011

Frederick John Lamp, Curator of African Art, Yale University Art Gallery

Seminar open to graduate students and upper-level undergraduates

Limit: 12 students, by permission of the instructor

The art object, as it exists in museum display, has one context: the "White Box" consisting of walls (running footage) and empty space (square footage). The proscenium stage is a "Black Box," a void to receive and contain the work of writers, directors, choreographers, set designers, costume, lighting and sound designers, and the performers. But curators in many fields are coming to see the museum gallery display as inadequate for the understanding of the object, and many in theater are interested in alternate, inclusive contexts and a demolition of the "fourth wall" between audience and performers. The original intent of the makers, the experience of the original actors, and the expectations of the audience/participants in the original context often had to do with a larger form of art in which the museum object is simply a fragment, and the performance of larger scope including enmeshed multi-sensory factors.

Contextualization of the object in the art museum ought to address the entirety of the art form itself in all its integration and the history of the object from conception to material fact, and beyond, to ownership. The problem of translation in the museum gallery is paramount. African art in performance, for example, may require the space of the entire village, incorporating the architecture, the plazas, the walkways and streets, as well as the hot sun of mid-day or the dim gray of dusk, hundreds of viewer-participants, the cacophony of competing groups of dancers, polyphonic singers, and multiple-meter drummers, the billowing dust from under stamping feet, and five or six hours of duration.

This course aims to tackle the question of cultural translation and presentation, particularly in reference to the use of the senses in the arts. It will examine sensory aspects of the material arts, theater, musical and movement performance, ritual, and architectural space. Readings will examine theories on the arts and the senses throughout history. Victor Turner saw in modernist and colonialist thought an obsession with boundaries, polarization, restraint, and control, in which "cognition, idea, rationality, were paramount (for Westerners), marginalizing emotion (for Africans)." Modernist art historians and artists frequently have argued for the pure contemplation of art and the pristine production of art free from experience that would imprison the mind. Some have used the term, "magic," to describe an untainted communication between the mind and the art work on the walls. The separation of mind and body is entrenched in Western thought from Plato and Socrates ("the body disturbs and inhibits the acquisition of truth and thought by the soul") through Descartes (the "cogito" experience) and Kant (the

higher, subjective, empirical senses of the intellect as opposed to the lower, subjective senses of pleasure) to the present.

Postmodern and postcolonial thought argues for understanding through bodily experience, the somatic (awareness within the body as opposed to the mind), the proprioceptive (perception through one's own bodily responses) with a distrust of the taxonomies especially perfected in the past century. Diedre Sklar, a dance ethnologist, writes that "all our actions in the world are at the same time interpretations of the world," and that we need to study interpretations through feeling: "What does the fiesta taste and smell like?" Paul Stoler, an anthropologist, suggests that hearing, feeling, tasting, and smelling occupy a much more critical place in sensory perception in Africa than in the West. Richard Schechner, of performance studies, has noted that Western culture "is almost alone in demanding uniform behavior from audiences while clearly segregating audience from performers." There is a privileging of seeing and hearing in the theater and a banishing of the other senses as a way of sanitizing theater and distinguishing it from ritual especially from the religious, which engages the congregation's participation in an emotional experience. Sally Banes, a dance historian, describes olfactory devices in the nineteenth century used to create meaning in performance, and maintains that "there is a total, integrated sensory image (or flow of images) created in the theater, of which the olfactory effect may be one component." Henry Drewal, an art historian, has stressed "the importance of the senses in the constitution of understanding" and draws upon the arguments of Mark Johnson: "any adequate account of meaning and rationality must give place to embodied and imaginative structures of understanding by which we grasp the world." Drew Leder, in philosophy, has described our technological experience as "the absent body," in which our self-understanding remains incomplete: "Our shelters protect us from direct corporeal engagement with the outer world, our relative prosperity alleviating, for many of us, immediate physical need and distress. Much of recent work finds its origins in phenomenology, a philosophy of the body in space formulated by such writers as Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty.

Students will be asked to read and criticize 2000 years of thought on cognition and proprioception of the multisensory aspects of art and performance. Visits to the Yale museums – Yale University Art Gallery, Center for British Art, Peabody, and Musical Instruments – as well as special exhibitions at Yale and elsewhere will focus on how objects and their presentation appeal to the senses. Performances, theater productions, and other time-based events will be chosen for critical review of the actual or potential multisensory experiences. Proposals will be drafted for the design of the sensorium, or the means of presenting corporeal experiences responding to the sensory nature of original contexts in art, theater, and the architectural space they inhabit. What would it be like if our constructed environment engaged the senses as much as the natural environment does?

FORMAT

Outside class:

Weekly Readings.

Attendance at exhibitions, performances, pertinent events.

In class, each session:

Brief presentation of the current issue by the lecturer.

Invited discussions by:

Robert Storr, Professor of Painting & Dean of the School of Art

Labelle Prussin, Architect and Architectural Historian

Robin Jaffee Frank, Senior Associate Curator of American Paintings and Sculpture

Jennifer Gross, Curator of Contemporary Art

Emily Coates, Lecturer in Theater Studies, Artistic Director, World Performance Project at Yale

One student presents a summary of the week's readings or experiences, and problematizes/critiques it. Discussion by the whole class. Emphasis on active solutions for exhibition and performance.

Each student brings in one example of each of the five senses, in a container, during the semester. Participation in the sensory stimuli by the whole class, and discussion of how, or not, each stimulus could be employed in the theater, art, or exhibition.

Midterm evaluation:

1) participation in class discussion

2) a proposal for the final project (c. 500 words)

Final project: a plan for an exhibition/stage set/sound design/architecture that responds to multisensory elements of art and performance. This would include a paper discussing the content of the project, the intellectual issues, and the application (c. 2000 words); floor plan; and a walk-through narrative (c. 2000 words).

Final evaluation:

1) participation in class discussion

2) creative understanding of the issues demonstrated in the final project

READINGS

Sept 13: Somatic Sensation in Art

Robert Storr, "No Stage, No Actors, But It's Theater (and Art)" *New York Times*, 28 Nov. 1999.

David Howes, "Introduction: Empire of the Senses," and "Culture Tunes Our Neurons" in *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, New York: Berg, 2005. pp. 1-17, 21-24

John Rajchman, "Serra's Abstract Thinking," in *Richard Serra Sculpture: Forty Years*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2007. pp. 61-73

Martin Heidegger, "The Thing," and "Language," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Albert Hofstadter, transl., New York: Harper & Row, 1971.

Sept 20: Duration as Sensation and Performance as Intervention

André Lepecki and Sally Banes, "Introduction: The Performance of the Senses," in *The Senses in Performance*, New York: Routledge, 2007. pp. 1-7

Stanton B. Garner Jr., "Sensing Realism: Illusionism, Actuality, and the Theatrical Sensorium," in *The Senses in Performance*, New York: Routledge, 2007. pp. 115-122

Norton Batkin, "Starting Out: The Center for Curatorial Studies Graduate Program," in *Witness to Her Art*, New York: Center for Curatorial Studies, 2006. pp. 43-47

Michael Brenson, "That Was Then: The Curator and the Collector in 2000," in *Witness to Her Art*, New York: Center for Curatorial Studies, 2006. pp. 48-55

Sept 27: Art Transcending Sight

Labelle Prussin, *Architect and Architectural Historian*, guest discussant

Simon Hayhoe, "The Development of Research into the Psychology of Visual Impairment in the Visual Arts," in Elisabeth Salzhauer Axel and Nina Sobel Levent, *Art Beyond Sight: A Resource Guide to Art, Creativity, and Visual Impairment*, New York: AFB Press, 2003. pp. 84-95

Oliver Sacks, "The Mind's Eye: What the Blind See," *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, New York: Berg, 2005. pp. 25-42

Carolyn Korsmeyer, "Introduction: Perspectives on Taste," in *The Taste Culture Reader: Experiencing Food and Drink*, New York: Berg, 2005. pp. 1-9

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Making Sense of Food in Performance: The Table and the Stage," in *The Senses in Performance*, New York: Routledge, 2007. pp 71-89

Oct 4: Sound in Art, Sound as Art

Michael Bull and Les Back, "Introduction: Into Sound," and "Thinking About Sound," in *The Auditory Culture Reader*, New York: Berg, 2003. pp. 1-23

Jonathan Sterne, "Medicine's Acoustic Culture: Mediate Auscultation, the Stethoscope and the 'Autopsy of the Living,'" in *The Auditory Culture Reader*, New York:

Berg, 2003. pp. 191-217

John Miller Chernoff, "Introduction: Scholarship and Participation," and "Style in Africa," in *African Rhythm and African Sensibility: Aesthetics and Social Action in African Musical Idioms*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979. pp. 208-217

Oct 11: A Question of Taste

Immanuel Kant, "Objective and Subjective Senses: The Sense of Taste," in *The Taste Culture Reader: Experiencing Food and Drink*, New York: Berg, 2005. pp. 209-214

Paul Stoller, "The Taste of Ethnographic Things," in *The Taste of Ethnographic Things: The Senses in Anthropology*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989, pp. 15-34

C. Nadia Seremetakis, "The Breast of Aphrodite," in *The Taste Culture Reader: Experiencing Food and Drink*, New York: Berg, 2005. pp. 297-303

Constance Classen, David Howes, and Anthony Synnott, "Artificial Flavours," in *The Taste Culture Reader: Experiencing Food and Drink*, New York: Berg, 2005. pp. 337-342

Oct 18: Touch and the Tactile

Jennifer Gross, *Curator of Contemporary Art, guest discussant*

Constance Classen, in *The Book of Touch*, New York: Berg, 2005, pp. 273-287, 401-408

F.T. Marinetti, "Tactilism," in *The Book of Touch*, New York: Berg, 2005, pp. 329-332

Susan Stewart, "Nerve Endings," in *The Book of Touch*, New York: Berg, 2005, p. 420, from *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002, p. 334

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), "Spatiality of One's Own Body and Motility," 98-147.

Oct 25: Connoisseurship of Smell: The Nose Knows

Sally Banes, "Olfactory Performances," in *The Senses in Performance*, New York: Routledge, 2007. pp 29-37

Jim Drobnick, "Volatile Effects: Olfactory Dimensions of Art and Architecture," in *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, New York: Berg, 2005. pp. 265-280

Frances Mascia-Lees, "Olfactory Constitution of the Postmodern Body: Nature Challenged, Nature Adorned," in *Tattoo, Torture, Mutilation, and Adornment: The Denaturalization of the Body in Culture and Text*, State University of New York, 1992.

Z. S. Strother, "Smells and Bells: the Role of Skepticism in Pende Divination," in John Pemberton, *Insight and Artistry in African Divination*, 2000: Ch. 7.

Nov 1: Interoception, Visceral Sensations

Emily Coates, Lecturer in Theater Studies, Artistic Director, World Performance Project at Yale, guest discussant

Drew Leder, "Visceral Perception," in *The Book of Touch*, New York: Berg, 2005, pp. 335-341.

Frederick Lamp, "Taste, Touch, Feeling, and Visceral Sensations," in Frederick John Lamp, ed., *See the Music, Hear the Dance: Rethinking African Art at The Baltimore Museum of Art*, Prestel Verlag, Munich, 2004: 254-257.

Robert Farris Thompson, "Idiom of Clairvoyance, Healing, and Shared Moral Inquiry: a Kongo Figure (Nkisi lumweno), in Frederick John Lamp, ed., *See the Music, Hear the Dance: Rethinking African Art at The Baltimore Museum of Art*, Prestel Verlag, Munich, 2004: 258-259.

Nov 8: Art and Exhibition as Multi-Sensory Experience

Robin Jaffee Frank, Senior Associate Curator of American Paintings and Sculpture, guest discussant

Nicolas De Oliveira, Nicola Oxley and Michael Petry, "Introduction," and "The Body of the Audience," in *Installation Art in the New Millennium: The Empire of the Senses*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2003. pp. 12-47, 166-192

Victoria Newhouse, "The Museum as Environmental Art," in *Towards a New Museum*, New York: Monacelli Press, 2006. pp 220-280

Steven Feld, "Places Sensed, Senses Placed: Toward a Sensuous Epistemology of Environments," in *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, New York: Berg, 2005. pp. 179-191

Nov 15: Integration of the Senses

Daniel Mason, independent curator, Yale '08, guest discussant

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), "Sense Experience," 207-242.

Kathryn Linn Geurts, "Consciousness as 'Feeling in the Body': A West African Theory of Embodiment, Emotion and the Making of Mind," in *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, New York: Berg, 2005. pp. 164-178.

Drewal, Henry, "Senses in Understandings of Art," in *African Arts*, Summer 2005, 38, 2, 1, 4, 88, 89

Nov 29: Art in the Age of Embodied Aesthetics

Robert Storr, Professor of Painting & Dean of the School of Art, guest discussant

Robert Storr, *Think with the Senses Feel with the Mind: Art in the Present Tense*, New York: Rizzoli, 2007.

Susan Kozel, "Spacemaking: Experiences of a Virtual Body," and "Virtual Touch," in *The Book of Touch*, New York: Berg, 2005, pp. 439-447

Adrienne L. Kaeppler, "Ali'i and Maka'ainana: The Representation of Hawaiians in Museum at Home and Abroad." in *Museums and Communities: the Politics of Public Culture*. I. Karp, ed. Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1992.