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SENSATION AND CONTEMPLATION –
A SLOW APPROACH TO DESIGNING
INCLUSIVE MUSEUM EXPERIENCES

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Before we step into the space of this metaphorical museum experience it is important to begin with an Acknowledgement of Country on which this research takes place. Bendigo Art Gallery (BAG) is situated on Dja Dja Wurrung land (Central Victoria, Australia). Dja Dja Wurrung people have cared for this land and continued their rich cultural practices on Country for thousands of years. I pay my respect to their Elders past and present, as custodians of deep knowledge and carers of Country.

Because this research is related to time, temporality and duration, it’s also important to highlight that Aboriginal people in this country are the oldest continuing culture in the world, they have been caring for Country and engaging with creative practice for more than 60,000 years. By contrast, the speed with which colonisation has changed this country in less than 250 years, has caused great harm to Aboriginal people and Country. Slowness as a resistance to fastness can be viewed as a decolonial act, an act of care, and there is much to learn about slowness from Indigenous ways of knowing and being.

(The richness of diverse cultural philosophies of slowness is beyond the scope of this paper but further exploration of this is to be included as a chapter in the thesis of this PhD project.)

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https://doi.org/10.21606/nordes.2023.38
EXHIBITION INVITATION (ABSTRACT)

In a world where stillness and silence are increasingly hard to come by, museums can provide space for slowness, reflection and contemplation that contributes to wellbeing as well as inclusion of communities. This paper maps my current ongoing PhD research into the benefits of a slow approach to designing museum experiences, as well as how this research contributes to a larger project making Bendigo Art Gallery more inclusive of blind and low vision (BLV) visitors. It guides the reader through a metaphorical museum visit, where inclusion and wellbeing are the exhibition subject. The reader is invited to engage with sensory design interventions which aim to address the absence of accessible materials for BLV visitors in museums and discusses the potential for innovative design in this space.

Note to the reader – Considering the ‘exploratory’ nature of this paper and its contents I felt there was opportunity to make space for an Acknowledgement of Country as well as image descriptions for accessibility. These details are not often included in research papers but are more common practice in digital and physical museum spaces. I have also left blank spaces in the layout with the intention of slowing the reading experience.

Figure 1. [Image description: These three images depict the train Journey from Narrm (Melbourne) to Dja Dja Wurrung Country (Bendigo). The sky is mostly cloudy and grey with hints of blue, the colour of the landscape changes from greens to browns as you journey further inland to drier climates. The vegetation also changes, transitioning from colonial farm landscapes to native bushland.] Photographs: Jenna Hall
1. ENTERING THE MUSEUM (INTRODUCTION)

Imagining you have just stepped off your train journey to the museum and are entering the museum foyer—this introduction is designed to help you attune to your surroundings. Slowness exists in spaces between conversation, between sound, between engagement with objects, people and environments. Slow experiences bring us back to our bodies, prompting new ways of thinking and the process of learning and contemplating new ideas. Designing for this means designing for emptiness, designing for the in between means making space for pause and contemplation. Similar to how Akama (2015) talks about the Japanese philosophy of Ma as in-betweenness, the space that slowness opens up holds potential for a ‘chance of becoming’ (Akama, 2015). Slowness thrives off silence and it creates space for the emergence of new ways of thinking, understanding and being, as individuals and communities. Of particular importance in the context of the museum, are the opportunities for slowness in these spaces to support the inclusion and wellbeing of visitors.

Slowing down is something we usually need to be reminded to do, myself included. In a museum there is much temptation to skim over things and see what’s around the corner or in the next room, but what changes when we take things slower and allow more space—between? My personal seeking of slowness is an effort to balance the speed with which I generally have to operate in the everyday. In saying this I acknowledge the privilege of operating at different speeds, where for those with disabilities moving, working, or speaking slowly may not always be a choice.

GALLERY 1 WALL TEXT (INTRODUCTION CONTINUED)

In the next phase of your museum paper experience, you enter the first gallery room where a wall text outlines the contents of the paper. This project introduces ‘slow design’ as a response to issues of inclusion and community wellbeing by contributing to a larger Monash University research project ‘Inclusive Gallery Experiences: Creating an Accessible Bendigo Art Gallery for Blind and Low Vision Visitors’. This practice-based research emphasises a ‘slow’ approach to designing museum experiences, suggesting that by slowing down our experience and placing greater awareness onto other senses we can deepen our understanding of, and personal–as well as interpersonal–connections to art.

Slowness is expansive—when considered in relation to design it provides space to consider the broader implications of design and identify relationships between design challenges and the interconnectedness of design possibilities. Slowness expands our awareness. In slowness we can find deep knowledge of self and empathy for others. Slowness can be an act of care for the self, for others and for the environment. Slowness doesn’t leave anyone behind. So, how might we design for slower, more mindful, intimate and sensory experiences in museums? How might this make museums more inclusive? And what role does the presence or absence of technology play in this?

Figure 2. [Image description: The structure of the paper mapped on the floorplan of BAG. This graphic has been used in the ‘Inclusive Gallery Experiences’ project printed with a thermal fuser as a tactile map for BLV visitors.] Source: Accessible Graphics (www.accessiblegraphics.org)

The project is fortunate to have access to gallery and studio spaces—at BAG for use as testing grounds for experiments with ‘slow’ design interventions which will be discussed later in the paper. Using the floorplan of BAG (Figure 2) to structure the paper, I have mapped the contents of this ‘museum experience’ with space intentionally left in—between.
2. HISTORIC COURT: PERMANENT COLLECTION (LITERATURE)

Moving into the ‘Historic Courts’, you are introduced to the foundations from which this project emerges. Building on literature from the Nordes archive, this research situates itself in a space between discussions of exhibition design (Pilegaard, 2021; Turpeinen, 2005) temporality and reflection (Baudo & Henning, 2013) and slow design (Brown, 2011). Contributing to these lines of inquiry, this paper takes a specific look at slowness and sensory design in the museum. Slowness can encapsulate a broad range of considerations for ways of being, ‘slow’ has been popular as a resistance to increasingly rapid production and consumption of fast food, fast fashion etc. Brown (2011) argued the need for ‘slow homes’ as inspired by the values of Carlo Petrini’s ‘slow food’ movement in resistance to the damaging effects caused by the speed of ‘McMansions’ built by big companies with a lack of care for their residents. The term ‘slow design’ was coined by Carolyn F. Strauss and Alistair Fuad-Luke who published ‘The Slow Design Principles’ in 2008. The principles are intended as prompts for designers to consider how their practice might better support individual, social and environmental wellbeing. Encouraging thinking around how design artifacts might be engaged with and interpreted from diverse perspectives, and what they help to reveal about the human experience. To address the social responsibilities of design, the authors suggest collaboration with communities is an essential part of the design process. They also emphasise the importance of seeking to produce design artifacts, interventions and experiences which induce ‘reflective’ over excessive consumption (Strauss and Fuad-Luke, 2008). More than a decade on Strauss (2021) has continued her ‘slow research’ which has expanded and evolved over time. In more recent publications Strauss (2016, 2021) invites artist’s, designers and architects to contribute their thoughts on slowness and slow practice. Strauss identifies a link between slowness and feminism, with the majority of contributions being by ‘women or individuals who practice tactics of feminism(s)’ (Strauss, 2021, p.17). Slow research has also been a topic of discussion in broader discourse related to climate change and sustainability with philosophers Isabelle Stengers (2018) and Kate Soper (2020) questioning how we do research, how we consume and how we live well.

Although grounded in design philosophies and practice this project draws from discourse in museum studies related to inclusion and wellbeing, seeking to create design interventions which respond to issues in this field. Sina Bahram (2018) discusses the difference between inclusive design and universal design and connects it to his experience as a blind museum visitor. While universal design provides designers with an impossible task of designing for all audiences, he says ‘inclusive design recognises that people have multiple forms of identity’ and that ‘accounting for those differences doesn’t mean making everyone the same’ (Bahram, 2018, p.25). Bahram argues there is much space—for further research into designing accessible experiences but it requires a commitment from museums as he explains ‘inclusion is a state of thinking and acting toward a shared purpose based on a commitment to iteration, refinement and self-improvement’ (Bahram, 2018, p.34).

Health and wellbeing have become prominent trends in museum studies over the past decade. In ‘Connecting Museums’ (2020), Nuala Morse speaks of the social role of museums, connecting social inclusion with health and wellbeing. Including the diversity of responses needed to accommodate the diverse needs of visitors and wellbeing of their communities. Morse suggests that when considering their social role, museums need to be flexible and responsive. Change should be viewed in a more ‘continuous and adaptive manner’ as opposed to the rhetoric of reinvention or revolution that such discourse generally encourages (Morse, 2020, p.60)

3. TRANSITION HALL [THE GAP]

In acknowledging the absence of opportunities for tactile engagement in museums, our awareness is directed to the possibility for greater care in exhibition design due to the necessity of touch and assistance of technology for BLV visitors. When thinking more broadly we can also imagine the potential benefits for what more thoughtful inclusive design, and tactile experiences can have for all museums visitors by prioritising the specific needs of BLV visitors as well as care givers who are likely to accompany them.

‘There is some-thing excessive in that we touch with our whole bodies, in that touch is there all the time— by contrast with vision, which allows distant observation and closing our eyes.’ (Puig De La Bellacasa, 2017, p.99)

Touch is omnipresent, but as with slowing down we need often to bring our awareness to it, and in museum—spaces where touch is prohibited there is by contrast a need for BLV visitors to be able to touch things in order to make sense of art without vision. In ‘Touching Visions’ Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017)
contemplates the ethics and politics of touch, relationships between touch and care and touch and emerging technologies – all relevant to ways of thinking about designing experiences for BLV visitors in museums.

4. EXHIBITION PRIMER – WAYS OF SLOWING (METHODOLOGY)

Prior to entering the ‘main gallery’ space, some context must be given to the connections between the theory and practice of the project. As a PhD project, by contrast to other projects with tighter timelines, the act of researching is able to embrace a slow process that can ensure that ethics and empathy are found at the core of how the research is conducted. Fieldwork at BAG is an iterative process; of working with others and working alone, questioning and responding, testing and reflecting, experimenting and refining. The methodological approach is drawn from design ethnography (Pink, et al., 2022) and is centred around the concepts of relationality, immersion and emergence. This is being explored through qualitative methods of interviewing, design interventions and participatory activities with gallery staff and visitors.

Maintaining a practice of critical autoethnographic reflection (Adams et al., 2015) helps me to situate myself within research as a designer but also as a museum visitor and member of the dominant culture (Tilley-Lubbs, 2016) in this space. We bring our subjectivities to our research; and it’s important to acknowledge this. Autoethnography embraces subjectivity, embodiment, and reflexivity, guided by the content, as well as context, of the research. It is about starting with the self to get to the granular, specific and personal – so that when you approach and relate to others you have something to work with; the researcher’s personal position provides a bridge to the experience of others (Holman Jones, 2016).

Methods of photography, participatory activities and interviews, all produce material for reflection and opportunity to invite other people into the research process. Photography has been used as a key method of documentation, analysis and reflection in studio and in the field. Photographs from workshops at BAG provided insight into ‘ways of touching’ or ‘sensing objects’, capturing observations that might have otherwise escaped my attention. A photo essay of the train ride to BAG (Figure 1) also produced research material to reflect on, including how this ‘slow’, ‘in between’ time traveling to the museum could be thought of as part of the museum experience. Revisiting images extends the experience of fieldwork and allows for slower reflection outside of the research environment, allowing me to explore the experience in multiple ways, in person and in memory. Design interventions and workshops at BAG provide opportunities for designing sensory experiences related to exhibition concepts, narratives and materials. Having access to this space—allows me to invite staff and visitors into the design process at different stages.

As part of a series of interviews conducted with experts working across the fields of slow design, museum studies and psychology in November 2020, I was fortunate to speak with Carolyn F. Strauss, who, since publishing the ‘Slow Design Principles’, founded Slow Research Lab (www.slowlab.net). I spoke with Carolyn about how her ideas of slowness have evolved through her slow spatial and curatorial practice. On her work with SlowLab she says:

“Telling more of the story is also part of a slow approach, not just that it’s sensory and a different kind of durational engagement, but also that it’s challenging and, you know, pricking different nerves and different things than you maybe expect. Or maybe even telling a story that’s not complete, that leaves more questions than answers. Something like that, we regard as slow— as having certain slow qualities.” (Carolyn F. Strauss in conversation with Jenna Hall, November 2020).

On this note, the paper now enters a—–space to share ‘more of the story’ about my practice designing slow interventions for inclusive museum experiences.

5. MAIN GALLERY – SLOW DESIGN INTERVENTIONS

Moving into the main gallery you are immersed in sound. A familiar song by a well-known pop star except more ambient and s l o w. You can hear other visitors talking about the installation ‘It’s very soothing on the senses’ one person says. ‘It would be great to have in a quiet space in the gallery - it’s sometimes exhausting having lots of sound in the gallery.’ says another. As you reach to pick up a balloon and experience the sensation being discussed, another visitor holding a balloon close to their chest says, ‘It’s like [the vibration] goes through you’. The visitors you share in this experience with have come to the gallery for the ‘Access Elvis’ sensory tour, one of two dedicated events designed to provide exhibition access for BLV visitors and their friends and family. Someone in the group asks ‘Is this always here? It should be part of all exhibitions, just 3-4 pieces at least that make it more inclusive.’ As you ponder what seems a very reasonable request, the
room begins to get increasingly packed as the general admission crowd begin moving through, they too engage with the intervention and one expresses ‘I love music, but I’ve never thought of [experiencing] it like that’. This openness and awareness to experiencing something differently is as Akama describes ‘a potential of awakening, perceiving attuning and sensitising to between-nes’ (Akama, 2015, p.272).

Figure 3. [Image description: These three images depict design interventions shot on a light grey coloured backdrop in the designer’s studio. A black speaker sits on top of a moulded grey plaster sculpture with three stepped levels which reference the art deco details in the exhibition design of ‘Elvis: Direct from Graceland’ at BAG. Metallic gold and silver balloons move in and out of the camera frame and appear blurred due to the long exposure used for photography. A hand holding a silver balloon moves into one of the shots and in front of the speaker to demonstrate how to engage with the intervention. Audio track: ‘Can’t Help Falling in Love’ (instrumental) slowed 50%.] Photographs: Jenna Hall
‘Access Elvis’ was a multisensory access tour for BLV visitors designed by the ‘Inclusive Gallery Experiences’ project team for the ‘Elvis: Direct from Graceland’ exhibition at BAG. The intervention I designed explored sound and vibration using portable speakers, plinths and balloons. The interactive experience used an instrumental version of Elvis’ ‘Can't Help Falling in Love’ slowed down by 50% to create a more ambient sound, we found that the slowness also helped to define the melody when sensing it through the vibrations in the balloon.

[The space——inside the balloon allows the vibrations to be felt.]

The concept was inspired by the Meditation Garden at Graceland. Designed for reflection and contemplation, Meditation Garden is the final space visitors enter on their tour of the Graceland Estate, a favourite place of Elvis’ and a spiritual experience for fans who make a pilgrimage here seeking connection with the star. We attempted to recreate the atmosphere of the meditation garden to create a ‘slow’ moment on the access tour as the rest of the exhibition was narrative and object rich. We aimed to create a space——between where people could reflect on the exhibition while enjoying Elvis’ music.

Figure 4. [Image description: These three images show installation views of the ‘Access Elvis’ sensory tour for BLV visitors at BAG. The images focus on design interventions consisting of black portable speakers, sitting on moulded grey plaster sculptures (as previously described), atop of wooden plinths with metallic silver and gold balloons underneath. In the background are artifacts from the Elvis exhibition including a cream colour glazed ceramic bust of Elvis, the white rusted metal Graceland letterbox and the red MG convertible used in the film ‘Blue Hawaii’. One image also shows the blurred movement of someone’s hands and leg as they walk into the camera frame.] Photographs: Jenna Hall
Based on observations in the gallery those who engaged with the interventions usually spent a minute or more exploring the sensations, some of the visitors who were fully blind seemed to spend a bit longer than others. They seemed more focussed and immersed than some of the low vision visitors, which raises questions about the effects of visual distractions on our ability to be fully engaged or immersed in multisensory experiences. Having similar responses from both BLV and general visitor groups suggests that the thoughtfulness put into the design process helped to slow people down in different ways. So, as well as making the exhibition more inclusive to BLV visitors we’re also bringing this social awareness to visitors who haven’t personally experienced living with a disability.

Figure 5. [Image description: These three images show BLV visitors engaging with the design interventions, they are holding gold and silver metallic balloons in front of portable speakers at different distances speakers to feel the vibrations of the sound. One image shows a visitor holding a balloon against their chest to experience the sound vibration through a different part of their body. Another image shows three visitors experiencing the work together, each holding a balloon near the speaker.] Photographs: Jenna Hall
6. EXIT THROUGH THE CAFÉ (DISCUSSION)

Reflecting on this museum experience, sensory experience and opportunities for slowness in design research and practice we begin to identify space——in the museum that has been un/intentionally left blank, creating a void for BLV visitors as the visual dominates. We imagine how museum——space could be designed with greater intention as well as how through design we might open up——space that creates possibilities for different ways of engaging.

In embracing slower research and design processes we can begin to expose ‘blindspots’ in museums which prevent access to visitors with diverse needs. We begin to see how slowness as practice can help create space for thinking through complexities of inclusion by identifying augmenting the use of museum space, stripping back and creating space, rethinking how museum spaces——invite, welcome, include and care. Designing with the senses, for all senses is a slow and visceral process often escaping words. Contemplating sensation prompts the mind to wander abstract spaces——of memory and imagination evoking feelings of nostalgia and possibility.

7. FINAL REFLECTIONS IN THE MUSEUM GARDEN (CONCLUSION)

While this research is centred around designing for particular experiences, it doesn’t consider slowness to be an answer for everything, but rather part of diversifying the ways in which we engage with art and culture. I realise slowness may seem like a luxury to many designers and museum workers, but if we start to make——space for ‘slow’ gestures of listening deeply and designing with care in practice, perhaps museums can be of greater benefit to the wellbeing of both their staff and visitors. As the world grows heavier, we will need more places that can help us to recharge and restore ourselves, places to find inspiration and imagine new worlds. Public and community spaces such as museums already offer this solace to many, but there is much more to be done in making them more inviting and inclusive of everyone.

REFERENCES


