

## TOUCHING JEWELLERY: THE VALUE OF TOUCH FOR VISITORS TO CLINKPROJECT3: COLLABORISM

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### INTRODUCTION

The collaborative jewellery project *CLINKProject3: Collaborism* at Te Uru Contemporary Gallery in Auckland, New Zealand, explored ways that visitors to the gallery could be engaged with the jewellery. The project team members designed and offered three separate opportunities for visitors to touch the exhibits on 24 and 25 August 2016. Visitors could touch and try on jewellery made collaboratively by the project team; they could use the materials and tools provided to make their own pieces of jewellery; and they could pick up a pen or a lipstick and draw on a designated wall (referencing a jewellery-maker's workbook of sketches). Amongst other things, the project team hoped to challenge the "don't touch" message in galleries, and hoped that visitors would gain understanding about objects through touching them.

Classen has identified four major reasons for touching objects, including artworks, which were important for adult museum visitors historically: learning, enjoyment of objects, connecting with the makers and users of objects, and accessing power.<sup>1</sup> Using *CLINKProject3: Collaborism* as a case study, this article examines visitors' reasons for touching contemporary jewellery and considers the ongoing relevance of these four historical reasons for touching. A wide range of synthetic and natural materials was available for use. The jewellery pieces produced by the project team and by the visitors reflected both this variety of materials and the individuals' different skills and ideas.

Observation of the *CLINKProject3: Collaborism* visitors on 24 and 25 August 2016 revealed the extent to which visitors availed themselves of the opportunities to touch. Interviews with visitors were conducted in the gallery over the same period. Visitors were approached for interview if the researcher had the opportunity to speak with them. There was no attempt to ensure a representative sample of visitors, but very young children were excluded. No visitors declined to speak with the researcher. To ascertain the impact of touching and of interaction with the artists, one visitor in each group was asked an open question about what value there was for them in the opportunities for public interaction provided by *CLINKProject3: Collaborism*. Quotes are from notes made contemporaneously with the observations and interviews. Each visitor is identified by two numbers – the sheet number in the observation notes and the number of the visitor on that sheet.

## PERMITTING TOUCH

The current default position in museums and galleries continues to be the prohibition of touching by the visiting public.<sup>2</sup> Permission therefore needs to be expressly given where touching is permitted. Permission can be communicated, for example, through the way an exhibition is designed,<sup>3</sup> through showing how visitors could physically engage with jewellery,<sup>4</sup> or through having an effective facilitator.<sup>5</sup> Classen observes that visitors are accustomed to controlling their desire to touch;<sup>6</sup> they may therefore feel uncomfortable touching, even where it is permitted.<sup>7</sup> Or touch may be attractive in part because it involves crossing a commonly imposed boundary.<sup>8</sup>

Permission to touch, and encouragement to do so, was given verbally by the *CLINKProject3: Collaborism* team members in the gallery on 24 and 25 August. The gallery counted a total of 113 visitors to the gallery over the two days when the opportunities for touching were available at the start of the exhibition. From observation, and to a lesser extent also from interview, 42 of the 113 visitors (37%) are known to have taken one or more of the opportunities to touch, by touching or trying on jewellery, by drawing on the wall, or by making jewellery. Twelve of these were children and the remaining 30 were adults.

Thirty of these 42 visitors were interviewed, six children and 24 adults. Of the remaining 12 visitors who touched but were not interviewed, six were very young children and six were members of groups of visitors of which another member was interviewed. Another 21 visitors were interviewed who did not take any of the opportunities for touch.

Some visitors to *CLINKProject3: Collaborism* seemed to share the frisson of excitement to which Clintberg referred at being allowed to do something that is normally not permitted.<sup>9</sup> For example:

"There aren't many places where you would be encouraged to do this – a bit disarming ...." (3/10)

Overheard: "Fancy being allowed to do this and not being arrested." (4/1)

"Feeling a bit naughty, drawing on the wall." (6/2)

"Don't usually get to touch things in a gallery." (1/9)

The *CLINKProject3: Collaborism* exhibition continued after the team left the gallery, until 30 September 2016. During

this period, visitors had the opportunity to touch and try on jewellery made by team members and by visitors on 24 and 25 August. Permission to touch the jewellery in the exhibition was communicated by gallery staff to visitors on their arrival. During the last week of the exhibition, visitors were given the opportunity to take home an item of jewellery of their choice. The gallery reported that most of the jewellery was taken, mainly by adults.

## REASONS FOR TOUCHING

### Learning

The first of the historical reasons for touch identified by Classen<sup>10</sup> is learning about the traits of the objects touched – for example, by assessing their weight, texture, materials, condition and other physical qualities, including bringing objects closer to the eyes and turning them over. Candlin confirms that touch can still today be a valid means of acquiring rational knowledge about objects.<sup>11</sup> People learn from touching because the touched object is new and unfamiliar.<sup>12</sup> Some qualities of objects may be best discerned and appreciated from touch.<sup>13</sup> Clintberg recognises that individuals have different tactile skill levels, so will not all learn the same things from handling the same object.<sup>14</sup>

Two of the visitors to *CLINKProject3: Collaborism* expressly recognised that touch contributed to learning, and another two described learning about materials from touching and trying on jewellery. For example:

“Great, this type of interaction, lacking in a lot of exhibitions. Way of future to learn by touch and interaction with people who know what they’re doing, artists. Always wanted to touch.” (5/5)

“I enjoyed my fingers feeling what they were like, quite surprised at what was being used. Look and see things and think that would be nice as .... Feeds imagination by giving something to look at.” (1/1)

### Enjoyment of objects

The second historical reason for touching identified by Classen is that it enhances enjoyment of the objects touched, creating intimacy by physically connecting people with the objects.<sup>15</sup> In the words of Candlin, touch promotes “curiosity, investigation, desire and a love of objects”<sup>16</sup> and can evoke an emotional or imaginative response to the objects touched. Merely to touch may not be enough; we must handle the object to physically engage with it.<sup>17</sup> Touch with active movement contributes to the intimacy between a person and a piece of art.<sup>18</sup>

The art form that most seems to invite touch, and to be perceptible to touch, is sculpture.<sup>19</sup> People are more engaged when they reach out to connect with and explore sculpture by touching it.<sup>20</sup> As Wiggers has identified, contemporary art jewellery has sculptural qualities, and jewellery invites touch because of its relationship to a real or implied body which it adorns.<sup>21</sup>

Three visitors to *CLINKProject3: Collaborism* spoke generally about enjoyment. Two others commented positively about the opportunity to do something. Later visitors demonstrated their enjoyment by taking home one of the pieces of jewellery.

### Connection with people

While the second historical reason for touch connected people with the objects touched, Classen’s third historical reason for touch was to connect people with the creators and users of the objects;<sup>22</sup> touch enables visitors to bridge time and sometimes also space to experience intimacy with these others, including an increased appreciation of their skills and understanding of their lives. As Candlin observes, touching objects still gives visitors a “strong sense of connection and identification with the original users or makers.”<sup>23</sup> The ability to connect with the creator of an object through touching it may depend upon the nature of the creative process – for example, the degree of touch and skill required in creating the object. It is with handmade objects especially that touch is essential.<sup>24</sup>

The *CLINKProject3: Collaborism* jewellery was new and therefore did not afford visitors the opportunity to experience any connection with earlier users. Nevertheless, two visitors appreciated seeing other visitors' drawings on the wall:

"Enjoyed seeing what other people have done and think what else you could do." (6/2)

Although none of the visitors interviewed mentioned that touching objects gave them any sense of connection with the makers of the objects, because the team members were on site visitors had the opportunity to interact with them directly. Most of those who touched were observed to talk with one or more team members, and another 11 visitors interacted with team members although they did not also take the opportunity to touch objects. The artists themselves provided contextual information to visitors about their work and formed a community onsite that visitors could connect with through conversation and participation. The conversations observed and overheard between artists and visitors indicate that visitors appreciated having contextual information about the making of the jewellery. For example:

"Interesting to find out what they were doing. Nice to be involved ... It was fun." (2/4)

"It was great, never been in a gallery where can talk to people making things." (3/12)

"Good just to take your doubts, ask how they did it. Interesting to have them here." (4/4)

### Power

Classen describes the fourth historical reason for touching as accessing the supernatural power which some objects were perceived to have.<sup>25</sup> This was so even for paintings – for example, kissing a picture of a saint, or seeking inspiration through physical contact. Howes elaborates that this was done for the purposes of healing, to gain power or well-being.<sup>26</sup> Some visitors and/or museum warders still assume some objects have power for good, or for evil.<sup>27</sup> Pye agrees that today some objects are seen as having power that is transmitted through touch – for example, relics, good luck charms and lockets.<sup>28</sup>

Even without the transference of power; touching can have a therapeutic effect. For example, the therapeutic potential of touch has been explored for the elderly;<sup>29</sup> for patients,<sup>30</sup> and for refugees.<sup>31</sup> Pye identifies additional reasons for touch – regaining cultural identity and evoking memories of earlier events or places – which can also be therapeutic for some people.<sup>32</sup> None of the *CLINKProject3: Collaborism* visitors mentioned any expectation of accessing power or receiving any other therapeutic benefit as a result of touching the jewellery on display.

### Play

While a sense of play may enhance both learning and enjoyment of objects, it is suggested that play may be an additional and distinct reason for touching, to express creativity. Candlin has observed that the recent reintroduction of touch to museums is often intended primarily for visually impaired people, or for children, "as if materiality and touch becomes irrelevant once maturity is reached."<sup>33</sup> She associates touch with playing: visitors who touch statues of animals in the British Museum are pretending that the animals are real. It has been recognised that adults these days need to play, to slow down and temporarily escape from stressful conditions.<sup>34</sup> Playful activities, such as interactive art systems that invite the audience to play,<sup>35</sup> provide opportunities for people to exercise their imagination and creativity.<sup>36</sup>

Inviting visitors to engage in making art goes beyond touching objects made by others.<sup>37</sup> Art making facilitates learning about the materials and the art making processes, and additionally cultivates creative potential. McGee and Rosenberg opine that "[a]s we increasingly spend more and more time staring into screens, the opportunity for creative engagement that is physical, as well as social and intellectual, is more important than ever ...". In one interactive space, they report that "[a]rt created by previous visitors was on display to offer inspiration for those unsure of how to get started."<sup>38</sup>

Six visitors to *CLINKProject3: Collaborism* expressly associated touch with playing or being childlike. Seven more visitors appreciated the licence to get creative themselves by making or drawing with no expectations about what was produced. In this context, it seems that the visitors considered the freedom to touch and use materials, engaging both their imaginations and their hands, was something enjoyable in itself, not necessarily because of the connection with the objects or the learning that might result.

"Something quite nice, being able to pick things up and have a play." (1/9)

"To play with different materials, don't often get to play, to become a child again." (1/10)

"Adults being like kids is the way to go." (2/13)

"Just like being a kid really, being allowed to be a kid. Should be more of this, allowing people to do. We're not encouraged to do this, uptight, this is 'wrong!'" (3/10)

"Shouldn't be just for kids, permission to play." (5/6)

"Looked interesting/crafty, thought two-year-old would be interested." (1/9; both accompanying adults were also observed to engage in making)

## REASONS FOR NOT TOUCHING

Observations and interviews revealed that many visitors were not able to take any of the opportunities to touch because they were not aware of them. Two visitors noticed the jewellery but assumed they were not permitted to touch it:

"Thought it was interesting they'd left it there, anyone could touch it." (5/1)

"Admired but didn't know could try on." (5/5)

Some visitors were aware that touch was permitted, but reported a variety of reasons why they did not take any of the opportunities to touch. Lack of time prevented some visitors from participating (2/13-14, 7/1-3).

Two family groups (1/9-11, 4/6-8) did not want to encourage a young child to draw on the wall when that activity is not permitted at home. Another family permitted their young child to draw on the wall, but when asked about the value of the activity for him, a parent said, "might be bad if he starts doing it at home." (6/12). This was not an issue for families with older children who could perhaps appreciate that different rules might apply in different situations.

Five visitors were reluctant to take part for personal reasons, although some of these nevertheless enjoyed watching and even talking with the team members:

"Not an active participant, prefer to observe." (2/3)

"I'm an observer; but might come back." (4/9)

"Would need to stay longer or come back to get over timidity." (3/10)

"Didn't draw because not spontaneous." (4/4)

One of these visitors was known to the team to be a jeweller; so her comment suggests that the public nature of the activities may have been a barrier to participation:

"Little bit confronting to be interactive, not knowing what to do, if have done it right." (2/4)

## CONCLUSION

The design of the *CLINKProject3: Collaborism* project successfully incorporated opportunities to touch to engage visitors, with 37% of visitors taking at least one of the three opportunities to touch: touching or trying on jewellery, drawing on the wall, or making jewellery themselves. Some visitors were unaware of the opportunities and therefore unable to avail themselves of them, so the exhibition design could be improved in this respect. However, not everyone will want to touch; even where visitors were aware they had permission to touch, some members of the public preferred not to.

The four historical reasons for touching objects identified by Classen (2012) were learning, enjoyment of objects, connecting with others, and accessing power. This case study shows that the first two of these reasons for touch – for learning and to enhance enjoyment – were relevant to *CLINKProject3: Collaborism*. The opportunities to play and to be creative were also valued.

The third reason for touching was not relevant, because the presence of the *CLINKProject3: Collaborism* artists at the gallery on 24 and 25 August meant that connection with the creators was available directly. The visitors valued the opportunity to interact with the artists on site. Being new objects, the jewellery did not have prior associations; therefore, it was unsurprising that the fourth historical reason for touching objects – to access power, or more broadly for therapeutic benefit – was not mentioned by visitors in interviews.

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- 13 Gallace and Spence, "The Neglected Power of Touch."
- 14 Clintberg, "Where Publics May Touch."
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- 16 Candlin, "Touch, and the Limits of the Rational Museum."
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- 20 Driscoll, "Pictorial Essay B: Playing with Fire."
- 21 Wiggers, "Curatorial Conundrums;" Veiteberg, "Touching Stories."
- 22 Classen, "Touch in the Museum;" Classen, *The Deepest Sense*.
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