

ACTIVITY REPORT 2021-2022 OF THE "SENSORY MEDIATION"¹ SIG

By Anne-Sophie Grassin, SIG coordinator



Preamble

In museums and art centres throughout the world, we measure constantly the effects of a crisis in sensitivity to artworks. The average observation time in front of an artwork has been reduced to a few seconds and not many visitors are able to establish an elaborate synthesis of what they have encountered during their visit to the museum. Art is therefore no longer fully experienced, it is often consumed quickly and badly, often leading to a loss of meaning, and, for some visitors, a feeling of illegitimacy that thwarts the encounter with the work and the depth of the aesthetic experience.

However, it is also in this simultaneously troubled and teeming context that the museum institution is continuing its ongoing transformation, now capable of inventing a real "sensory turn" as an antidote to recreate links and meaning in the face of artworks. Indeed, never before have we spoken so much about sensory experiences in the museum. A renewal of mediation is at work as the museum evolves and adapts to the contexts and challenges of society.

Initially explored through experimentation with sensory approaches aimed at transmitting academic knowledge through the senses to specific audiences, a more "sensitive" cultural mediation has been developing since 2015.

1 / The term "sensory mediation" is not restricted to the strict sensory dimension.

End of 2021: the creation of the Sensory Mediation SIG

1. Bringing forth the relevance of a dedicated Special Interest Group (November 2021)

In this context, Anne-Sophie Grassin, a member of the CECA for 10 years, an elected member of the Board of Directors of ICOM France, deputy head of the public service of the Musée de Cluny (Paris), and also in charge of sensory mediation programmes, contacted Marie-Clarté O'Neill in November 2021, submitting the relevance of setting up a special interest group dedicated to sensory mediation, with a supporting presentation. The initial principle of a SIG dedicated to sensory mediation was to study in depth this new phenomenon, which appears both as a craze for sensoriality in the museum and as an element participating in the renewal of mediation and cultural action programmes; all of this to be carried out by a group of professionals and doctoral students with knowledge of the subject.

2. Forming a group, talking to each other (December 2021)

Following several professional meetings, Anne-Sophie Grassin has put together a group of 9 museum professionals. 6 French institutions and 1 Canadian institution are represented:

- The Musée de la Marine in Paris (Lucie Aerts, Head of Public Services)
- The Fabre Museum, Montpellier (Marion Boutellier, Head of Public Services)
- The Mille Formes Art Centre for 0-6 year olds in Clermont-Ferrand (Sarah Mattera, director of the centre)
- FRAC MECA Nouvelle Aquitaine, in Bordeaux (Vanessa Desclaux, head of the attention centre and Morgane Gouzien, reception and mediation coordinator)
- The Musée de Cluny in Paris (Anne-Sophie Grassin, deputy head of the cultural service and public policy; in charge of artistic and sensory programming).
- Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (Charlène Bélanger, responsible for research, innovation and digital programs in the Department of Education and Wellness and Louise Giroux, responsible for educational programs in the Department of Education and Wellness)
- Véronique Andersen, an independent mediator, between Besançon and Paris.
- Fabienne Ruellan, mediator at the Musée des Beaux-arts de Quimper, took part in the first three sessions of the 2022 project.

The positions and missions of the representatives are varied and complementary, and allow them to explore sensory mediation thanks to a range of expertise, within art institutions of various sizes.

At the launch meeting on 4 February 2022, each member of the SIG received a three-page presentation document, including areas of reflection and proposed objectives.

This group is intended to be extended to other countries of the French-speaking world.

2022: set the guidelines and draft the first areas of work for the SIG

The Sensory Mediation SIG met 9 times in 2022, from February to December, i.e. once a month, on Fridays, from 4 to 6 pm, on the zoom.us platform.

This collective work made it possible to meet the first objective of the SIG: to define sensory mediation.

1. Define objectives

- Objective 1: To define sensitive and sensory mediation

The first objective of this SIG is to define sensory mediation in the museum. It is therefore necessary to identify this term. To do this, we have drawn up a list of major questions:

In relation to the artworks and their status

Do all works allow for sensory mediation? What modes of intervention? What is the status of the work? Should the work be processed like data or lived like an experience? How does sensory mediation exist with artworks?

In relation to transmission

What is being transmitted? Should sensory mediation transmit knowledge through the senses, the kinesthetic, the imaginary, the emotional—or does it give access to an "other" experience (which should be defined) and which is sufficient in itself? Is it a question of bringing out different interpretations linked to the works?

Intellectual/strictly cognitive approach versus sensory approach

Should they be opposed or brought together? Knowledge can come through the body. Does sensory mediation aim to transmit and bring out knowledge through other lenses or does it allow another experience? A mnemonic approach was briefly mentioned, depending on what it serves (its intentions), but it is the tool of the intellect or the imagination.

Knowledge versus experience?

Is the goal to produce language or to be satisfied with the feeling?

Is an experience knowledge?

Does one experience knowledge?

Is the objective of mediation to create an experience for the visitor or to understand the work? To affirm sensory mediation in relation to other, more intellectual, mediations. To feel more than to know.

Obstacles to sensory mediation

To define the value of sensory mediation, what it challenges in museum practice. To identify the institutional issues.

What does it shake up? What are the resistances and difficulties?

Multidisciplinarity or the exploration of related fields

Is this term 'sensory' used with other practices? For example, aesthetics, phenomenology, pedagogy, cognitive sciences... Putting our knowledge of sensory mediation into perspective with other fields related to museology in order to reposition the issues and objectives. Borrowing concepts and frameworks for reflection.

- Objective 2: To provide a scientific framework for the development of tools for professionals to develop sensory mediation programmes in museums.

2. Define a working method

A theme for each session

Each session of the SIG Sensory Mediation has a theme. However, as some themes are very rich, they can occupy several sessions. In order to promote the progression of the reflection, work in sub-groups is recurrent during each videoconference meeting.

Concrete case studies

The exchanges showed that the starting point is concrete cases, real-life experiences, in order to explain approaches to sensory mediation. It is imperative to frame the case studies (description and analysis of a project related to the theme of the session).

The form of the case study is up to the presenter (whether or not to show a PowerPoint, to propose an experience to describe one of the points/aspects of the project).

An analysis tool for sensory mediation examples

Over the course of the sessions, a tool for analysing sensory mediation examples was devised, serving as a uniform basis for analysing sensory mediation examples in museums.

A theoretical framework

Theoretical anchoring is essential. A first bibliography (to be expanded, structured and standardised) has been transmitted and shared on a specific Drive. Each session can start with a theoretical point (presentation of an initial bibliography, presentation of a particular work, or summary of a conference or subject): 5 to 10 minutes by 1 person.

"The body in the museum" is a first topic that was agreed upon in session 2 as a topic for sessions 3 and 4.

3. Defining sensory mediation

At the end of the first quarter of 2022, after five initial working sessions, the Sensory Mediation SIG has arrived at an initial definition of its central theme.

Sensory mediation is centred on a holistic approach to the visitor. This approach considers the individual visitor as a whole human being, capable of experiencing an artwork not only through intellect but also through the body, emotions, sensations, imagination and sensitive intelligence.

The sensory dimension is only one part of sensory (or 'sensitive') mediation.

Sensory mediation is at the service of an encounter with the work; it serves an experience of appropriation and infusion of the artworks.

Sensory mediation is based on "embodied cognition", the knowledge of the artwork is experienced, it passes through everything that makes up the individual; it is the thinking body.

Finally, sensory mediation implies a plurality of modes of transmission that are not exclusively cognitive. In this respect, sensory mediation increases the possibilities of interpreting works, precisely because it multiplies the registers and approaches. Four approaches have been defined:

- The sensory approach leads the visitor to an exploration that calls upon the senses. External senses, which are well known, such as sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste. And the internal senses, less well known, such as equilibrioception, the sense of balance; thermoception, the perception of temperature; proprioception, the perception of the body's position in space; and the perception of all sensations.
- The kinesthetic approach mobilises the body and movement in space. Mediation here presupposes bodily participation that goes from wandering to greater involvement, even to a form of incorporation, to experience the work through gesture and movement.
- The emotional approach uses emotions as a vector, inviting the visitor to evoke emotions in relation to the work (surprise, joy, fear, disgust, etc.)

- The imaginary approach invites us to divert, invent or recreate new images by projecting ourselves and imagining situations. We understand the work because we "visualise" it.

This definition is the result of initial work done during each of the 5 sessions on the lexicon specific to sensory mediation, on the key terms that belong to this field of mediation. About twenty items were chosen, discussed and defined by the group. These words were the subject of work that led to a diagram.

First of all, the **holistic** dimension of the visitor is taken into account, at the heart of this encounter with the work that sensory mediation allows. This holistic approach considers the **body**, the **senses** (internal and external), the **imagination** and the **emotions**. It is the "embodied cognition", the "thinking body".

Then, sensory mediation is a set of possible **devices**, built on **formats**. These formats question, among other things, the **role** of the **visitor**, who is more of an actor, the place of the **mediator** (reduced or sometimes absent), the place of the **artist** (who can be associated), and the important part of the visitor's co-construction in order to "enter the work".

They encourage a **process**: increased **attention** to the work, **interactions**, a relationship with oneself, with others and with the **artworks**, in the service of **learning** aimed at **appropriating** the works.

Sensory mediation therefore embodies a paradigm shift in the way of considering the **encounter** at work.

At the CECA France conference at the Museum of Jewish Art and History on 4 July 2022, a first 2-hour workshop was proposed. It served as a basis for the workshop at the 26th ICOM General Conference in Prague on 25 August 2022.

These two 2-hour meetings allowed the initial work of the Sensory Mediation SIG to be tested and put into perspective.

- Title: "Sensory mediation: the thinking body, a holistic approach to the visitor."
- Content: After describing the paradigms of sensory mediation, this workshop provides an opportunity to reflect on the change of means represented by the sensory approach to art, intended for all audiences. Through a series of experiments (through touch, the body, and the imagination), this workshop will allow participants to experience a renewed relationship with artworks. This workshop then invites the participants to design sensory mediation cards, based on a corpus of artworks and a plurality of modes of address.
- Assessment: This workshop was a success. It is clear that the French language did not hinder the registration, follow-up, and participation of the 13 participants, coming from Quebec, Taiwan, Argentina, Ivory Coast, Spain, Switzerland and France. They were cultural mediation professionals and doctoral students, all particularly motivated and dynamic in their experimentations with the questions and hypotheses of the Sensory Mediation SIG, thanks to a series of activations through touch, the body, and the imagination.

2022-2023: shaping the future

1. Invited professionals

At the 6th meeting, after a two-month summer break, on the occasion of the re-entry of the Sensory Mediation SIG on 16 September 2022, commitments were made to initiate Year 2 of the SIG.

On the one hand, the monthly sessions in 2023 will feature, as often as possible, an external guest whose activity is linked to the group's subject: sensory mediation. Current academics, doctoral students, museum professionals, artists and mediators will be invited, one by one, to present a 20 to 30 minute mediation or research project. The objective of this opening to other specialist discourses is to nourish the questions, enrich the definition as posed during Year 1 in 2022, and develop the scientific relevance by calling upon related university disciplines (cognitive sciences, education sciences, museology, others).

2. Specified objectives

On the other hand, the group is considering further refining the objectives set in February 2022, in order to define more concrete deliverables (collective publication, colloquium, other). This aspect is currently under discussion. The group is at work.

3. An annual face-to-face meeting

Finally, there is a plan to meet once a year face-to-face for more embodied and lively working sessions, conducive to reflection in the field, in museums and art centres.

In summary: some figures

The SIG Sensory Mediation 2022 is...

- 9** professionals
- 4** museum institutions / **2** art centres
- 9** working sessions of the Sensory Mediation SIG
- 18** hours of group work
- 20** key terms and 1 diagram to build a first definition
- 2** workshops open to all
- 21** participants in total

Annex :
The workshop at the 26th general conference in Prague, in pictures

