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**

Sept 20:     **Duration as Sensation and Performance as Intervention**

Sept 27:     **Art Transcending Sight**
*Labelle Prussin, Architect and Architectural Historian, guest discussant*

Oct 4:      **Sound in Art, Sound as Art**
Jonathan Sterne, “Medicine’s Acoustic Culture: Mediate Auscultation, the Stethoscope and the ‘Autopsy of the Living,’” in *The Auditory Culture Reader*, New York:

Oct 11:  A Question of Taste

Oct 18:  Touch and the Tactile
Jennifer Gross, Curator of Contemporary Art, guest discussant

Oct 25:  Connoisseurship of Smell: The Nose Knows

Nov 1:  Interoception, Visceral Sensations
Emily Coates, Lecturer in Theater Studies, Artistic Director, World Performance Project at Yale, guest discussant


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

Nov 15: Integration of the Senses
Daniel Mason, independent curator, Yale '08, guest discussant
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