

Affective Epiphanies

The Aesthetic Relation of Stories in Museum Encounters

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Volume 6, Number 2, 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081986ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18432/ari29610>

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Publisher(s)

University of Alberta

ISSN

2371-3771 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Sinner, A. (2021). Affective Epiphanies: The Aesthetic Relation of Stories in Museum Encounters. *Art/Research International*, 6(2), 301–315.
<https://doi.org/10.18432/ari29610>

Article abstract

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AFFECTIVE EPIPHANIES: THE AESTHETIC RELATION OF STORIES IN MUSEUM ENCOUNTERS

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Abstract: This proposition explores the potential of a pedagogy of affect as an arts-based research approach to museum education at the university level. Such an approach is predicated on a continuous movement of situated stories as the heart of the learning encounter, generated relationally between object-body-space, or artwork-learner-museum. As a forum for deliberation, the purpose of this conversation is to consider how emotions, as the basis for teaching with caring and sensory awareness, bring vitality, aliveness, and feelings to the fore. This conversation explores affective epiphanies sourced from personal practical knowledge as an expression of arts-research-in-progress. By drawing on autoethnographic life writing, I explore an alternate approach to three museum collections that demonstrate how and why the aesthetic relation of stories operate as pedagogic pivots in ways that reconfigure conventional museum engagement. Rethinking museum education with an arts research perspective is an effort to advance how context connects affective systems of knowing relationally, and why embracing stories offers new pathways to understand museum education through more expansive learning approaches, inclusive of feeling.

Keywords: affect; museums; stories; encounters; pedagogic pivots

Museums have long made a critical pedagogic contribution to education. As we move towards more immersive arts-based methods of teaching and learning in the field of education as a whole, the ways we interact with museums may warrant further interrogation, in particular, how we experience public art meaningfully and how connections to public art unfold in relation to our aesthetic encounters. For instance, when I visit collections in major museums, I often contend with quickly feeling fatigued from the saturation of technical details, the repetition of information delivery, and the design of spaces that can generate a sense of restriction, that is, to view passively, consider and move to the next object on display in relative silence. Perhaps there are more diverse approaches for museum education possible, for as Prottas (2017) remarks, “sometimes the judgements of art history are not reflected in the interests and needs of our public” (p. 195).

In this conversation, I propose a shift to stories as part of the pedagogic intent of museum, and I consider how applying stories as arts research to our practice of teaching and learning may prioritize affective moments as epiphanies in museum encounters. Stories of museum encounters can also serve as an opportunity to engage an alternate “canon of museum education,” in an effort to evoke a sensorial imaginary (p. 195). The challenge however may begin in determining what we mean by affect, sensorial, epiphanies, and indeed stories. As Thrift (2008) states, “there is no stable definition of affect,” so for the purposes of this article, the definition of affect is contingent on the aesthetic relation between object-body-space and the moment the event unfolds (p. 175). Aesthetic relation, as a condition of intense sensory response during a museum encounter, highlights “affective epiphanies,” as moments when the felt-body has a sudden attunement to the relationality of artwork to self in the site specific museum, and becomes a fluid network of connections that change understandings. The impact of knowledge creation in such moments is contingent of the reception of the event, and on the relational understandings of the learner, rooted in personal histories, values, and beliefs that shape and reshape qualities of what I refer to as “geographies of self-in-relation.” In this way, a pedagogy of the affect offers another arts-based educational orientation to the museum experience by drawing attention to how artworks in museums evoke sensorial qualities.

To activate the sensorial, I adopt life writing to explore how museum encounters become pedagogic expressions of object-body-space movements. Personal narratives with visual art offer differing degrees of intensity and orientation that are driven by the experience of the event. For instance, I propose that if we locate our attentiveness from a traditional museum delivery of representation, observation, and chronological facts, to the fluid interactivity of object-body-space, we can mediate different ways of being that often remain in the background of traditional museum visits. Specifically, the application and role of stories and storying as pedagogic pivots in museum education brings the

visitor into conversation with works of art and the sites that house them, and like an emancipated spectator, to borrow intent from Rancière (2009), the visitor then has “both the capacity to know and the power to act,” recognizing that positionality is knowledge and our stories are “the labour of translation” that is “at the heart of all learning” (p. 2, 10). In this way, the vitality of stories as artworks in their own right brings another mindset to add to the existing curricular discussion of museums as sites of learning.

As a proposition to open spaces for more expansive dialogue about “responsibility” and the pedagogic potential of stories that reside in the object-body-space exchange, I revisit three unique sites as cases where “the museum as story” present an encounter that activate my aesthetic relation: the Rosengart Collection, Lucerne, Switzerland (visual arts museum); the Bayeux Tapestry in Bayeux, France (heritage museum); and the House of Terror, Budapest, Hungary (memory museum). Coming upon these venues on my travels was happenstance; the museums were not intended destinations, but a matter of proximity, as is often the case with our museum encounters as members of the general public. The purpose in drawing on these examples is not to offer an analysis of the museums per se, but to recognize why these sites are impactful and how that resonates with openings for the “distribution of positions” vital to teaching and learning, where pedagogy is not instruction, but “a form of consciousness, an intensity of feeling, and energy for action” (Rancière, 2009, pp. 12-14). Informed by the attributes of these smaller museum venues with unique purposes and collections, and with recognition of access and orientation at the forefront, this personal account focuses upon affective epiphanies, and does not presume other teachers and/or learners feel or experience similar receptions. Instead, it is in the diversification of responsiveness through arts research in which new possibilities may continue to reside.

With respect to potential criticism of the partiality of these three collections, the growing scope of issues of neutrality in relation to post-truth debates, and the agendas of art institutions in general, my efforts are less to draw out comparison or detail museum collections with which we are already acquainted, but to open an exchange on how stories of artwork-visitor-museum can complexify and entangle encounters. In an effort to convey the affective moment, akin to what Gugutzer (2019) describes as “atmospheric grip,” this article is intentionally written to encapsulate the responsiveness of the felt-body to each collection, drawing out the sensorial in-the-moment through story to attend to the “join situations” that are underway in the encounter of object-body-space (p. 195). Ioanes (2017) helps to unpack such betweenness further, suggesting that we “exert different kinds of force across the range of senses, in different spatial arrangements, and at different temporal speeds,” which extends in my experience to essence of nuance and texture in the moment (Ioanes, 2017, p. 58). In these examples, the specificity of each site and their collections suggest different affective modes are underway, and from this approach, we recognized that “every situation can be cracked

open from the inside” and “reconfigured in a different regime of perception and signification” (Rancière, 2009, p. 49). Sensibilities then may emerge by inviting a discussion and by provoking a key question: Is there an alternate pedagogy emerging in museums that offers new strategies for arts researchers and educators?

The impact of the museum encounter brings our attention to emerging discourses that propose object-body-space relations as the co-creation of knowledge, where in these cases, meaning-making forms with notions of remembrance at the Rosengart, recognition at the Bayeux Tapestry, and response-ability at the House of Terror. A pedagogy of affect is premised upon recognition that a historical consciousness is at play in these contexts when stories operate as networks of relations. Schaefer (2019) suggests that such “affects are the living matter of subjectivity,” and for me, when considered across, with and between distinctly different museums, we may have the baseline for deliberating more fully on the how artworks conduct the senses, and why individual responses are not as simple as the delivery of a linear model of museum education (p. 66). Hickey-Moody (2016) describes this process as the capacity to change and to be affected, where movements between object-body-space are “responding to the materiality of art” (p. 259) in the moment of the encounter, for “art works [can] create a new sensory landscape for their beholder” (p. 260). As Grever and Adriaansen (2019) note, the tensionality of our collective and individual historical conceptualization is a “process of becoming aware of any past in the present” that is “dynamic and constantly changing,” where stories of encounters emphasize the emotional connections that are created with an object (p. 184). Crow and Bowles (2018) suggest that empathy has been identified as a key impact factor and that museums have an “inherent strength” as “effective empathy engines helping people to understand the ‘other’ and reinforcing social bonds” (p. 342). Building on this position, I suggest that a pedagogy of affect has a wider sensorial aesthetic, binding artwork-visitor-museum to embrace moments with inspiration from “on the floor,” as Nevins (2018) suggests, evoking the mechanisms of storying in the act and action of engaging with museum collections. For German and Harris (2017), museum objects are “agile” tools that help advance “creative thinking and learning,” (p. 248) and perhaps most importantly, the recognition of an “array of ideas implicitly present in the materials, techniques, geography, chronology, iconographic content, physical history, ownership and display” suggest stories are a vital part of learning (p. 255). As we embark upon these possibilities, Hickey-Moody (2016) reminds us that “art as an affective entity must be considered a culturally active agent ... It can teach us to be different” (p. 263).

The Rosengart Collection: Artworks as Remembrance

With a traditional gallery design, the Rosengart Collection, (www.rosengart.ch/en/welcome), is a uniquely private venture that punctuates museum discourses because of the overarching personal story that is the rationale for a collection. This museum, as Angela Rosengart (2002) described, embodies the “unbridled pleasure” that came from enjoying the artworks of world-renowned European artists of the 20th Century in her family home. As the Collection demonstrates, it is closely entangled with stories of friendships, endearment and caring that bond artwork, people and places together – a process of mediation that is pedagogic in its exchange (see Hickey-Moody, 2016). As Rosengart (2002) stated, “We really wanted to surround ourselves with what we liked. Artists whose work was less close to our hearts are therefore missing. The thread that holds everything together is certainly the taste of the people who gathered these treasures together over six decades or more” (p. 7).

In the case of the Rosengart Collection, what evoked my affective epiphany was the realization this collection of fine art was a statement of love. Foremost in this collection is the warmth of family for the friendships with artists they knew. Fondness defines the stories of events, the story of her parents as art dealers in relation, and the stories behind and between the creation of artworks. This affective story is woven alongside moments with artists, artworks, and peoples and places in relation, interspersed with commentary and conversation noted from those encounters, all entangled with the artworks alongside traditional documentation of art history. Yet what makes this collection most intriguing are the insights only close relationships can reveal, and that authenticity underlies the intimacy of Rosengart Collection as a result. The artworks become living agents of change and central characters in this story of encounter. The overarching narrative of friendship with the makers of the artworks permeates the recesses of the building that now houses the Collection, foregrounding artwork with compassion, devotion, fidelity – all virtues that define a visit to this museum as a pedagogy of the affect. As Rosengart (2002) states, the collection is “not an anthology composed on art-historical lines,” rather “it is much more – the pictures manifest personal closeness to the artists and involvement in their work” (p. 15). The collection emphasizes a traditional sense of beauty, alluring landscapes of meaning, improvised sketches next to masterful works, and within this assemblage there is adoration, tenderness, passionate attachment, and sentiment in the atmosphere. This encounter is a wonderment of the heart.

The emotional engagement of the family with the works brings care and appreciation to the teacher-learner as viewer without instilling a sense of detached institutional procurement. We come to understand the art as a network of relations.

Collapsing the distance between viewer and artwork through personal stories evokes deeper connections to historical events, and encourages teachers like me to absorb more carefully and more fully the encounter. This encapsulates Savenije and de Bruijn's (2017) position that museums "can provide fertile ground" for the broad embrace of "historical empathy" among visitors (p. 833). With greater awareness of museums as personal, the encounter "in situ" opens potentially wider and deeper affective connections with viewer-artwork stories (p. 834). Such situated learning is an activation of an aesthetic relation predicated on personal narratives.

Overall the works suggest a defined familial connoisseurship of style, of character, of appreciation. These traits resonate in the museum in ways that make this particular collection noteworthy and from a perspective of affect, pedagogically inspiring. As I consider the absence of this collection in much of our literature, I am reminded that as educators we have an obligation to seek out difference and distinction in museums we then share with our students. In effect this collection is an assemblage of remembrance, where every detail is meticulously crafted with a warmth that can only emerge from the personal-in-relation to the historical. This is the lifework of the family, and an honoring of all their relations across generations where a custodial commitment as cultural curators is woven together in dedication to the public trust today – and that offers art researchers and educators another way of proceeding in.

The Bayeux Tapestry and Museum: Recognition of Bodies

Recognized by UNESCO as belonging to the "memory of the world," the embroidered triptych that is the Bayeux Tapestry (<https://www.bayeuxmuseum.com/en/the-bayeux-tapestry/>), is all about bodies, and it has been the subject of study for centuries. What is it about this work that captivates the curiosity so completely?

My interest in this work began in childhood, where I poured over the cover of an encyclopedia with a segment of the tapestry. From what I could garner, this was a very important piece of fabric, in some exotic faraway land that told a remarkable story. A story that even a child could appreciate in her own way. Carter (2018) highlights the importance of narrative in the development of preschool childhood and how visiting museums advances individual conceptual frameworks. I extend this premise to include life-wide, life-deep, and lifelong learning. This childhood experience defined my reception of the event as an affective epiphany when I finally visited this compelling tapestry some 45 years later.

In that moment of encounter, as the child-scholar lingering with stiches of time, I felt I was in the presence of something magical, wandering the length of the tapestry

and pausing to consider the depictions as best possible. There is an enchanting allure in such moments, in a Sedgwickian (2003) way, within the detail and intimacy, the substance of story, and too the feeling of wanting to touch that which cannot be touched. The one-way linear design of the space seemed tailored to the object, rather than the experience of the viewer, and yet the affective story of object-body-space is rendered by this particular “U” shape orientation, where the space defines the rhythm, pace and decorum that is both aesthetically enriching and delimiting at the same time. Ironically, the design of the display when viewing the tapestry adds to the ongoing debate of where it was meant to be shown, making a visit to the Bayeux Cathedral a required extension of this museum visit (see Norton, 2019). Interestingly, the Bayeux Tapestry has inspired “more than 30 tapestries” relating to “acts of occupation” as part of the “parody movement” where “intertextual strategies” further expand our engagement with the original and related works (Schmahmann, 2017, p. 339).

To encounter this epic artwork is an experience that harkens to Echarri and Urpi’s (2018) discussion of mindfulness and contemplation, and the importance of the “meditative gaze” and the “atmosphere created by” the artwork (p. 36). As a visual story of conquest, the narrative of the tapestry is a prime teaching tool for art in relation to the church, renderings of historical events, embroidery techniques, even the spirit of male bravado as students will quickly note given the seeming obsession with phalluses and the delimiting of bodies – intentionally humorous or not is ultimately to each to determine – and the list of descriptors continues. This work is a vital visual narrative. We can grasp the continuity of events from one scene to the next without necessarily needing textual explanation, in part because of what we sense is happening. The affective recognition in bodies in action guides us through facial expressions, body language, medieval dress, and the dynamic movements of armies underway during war.

Dolan and Holloway (2016) describe the value of such “emotional textiles” as “a discussion of fabric and feeling” that lends to affective epiphanies. In recognition of the “emotional histories of objects,” textiles it is argued hold “greater emotional potency” for features that range from texture, body proximity, and embodiment of collective identities (pp. 152-153). In turn, we are witnessing this tapestry in the presence of scenes; in essence, we are engaging in a performative pedagogy of historical implicatedness (Sedgwick, 2003). All these qualities suggesting sentimental attachments are part of our relationship to textiles, and how works like the Bayeux Tapestry remains inscribed on the collective psyche. This artwork embodies intensity, and the impact of the stories and storying extend beyond the museum experience to become part of the fabric of our emotional meaning-making and knowledge creation, or put another way, we each feel this artwork as a cultural agent differently.

The House of Terror: Response-ability of Space

As a memory museum, the House of Terror (<https://www.terrorhaza.hu/en>), is a controversial space and a flashpoint museum. As a counter-monument on the history of communist persecution, the House adapts elements and clichés of popular culture to dramatize the intense affect of stories (see Apor, 2014). The politics of this museum space gives us pause to consider, and we may find ourselves polarized in assessing the pedagogic impact and our “response-ability,” as Haraway (2016) defines it, to cultivate “collective knowing and doing” as part of “studying relations with relations” (p. 34). Our response and ability to respond is critical, given the undeniable intensity of these museum stories. Golańska (2017) unpacks such “dark attractions” and the host of issues that form in this zone of bodily responses that require taking into consideration the affective dimensions of the past in the present tense. In this example, the trauma affect may also serve as a critique of historiographical intent, that is, artworks as materials activate “deep memory,” that “seems to operate in different registers than the narrative (intellectual) memory, yet the two remain deeply interconnected” (p. 113). Dougherty (2017) offers an account of “swelling tear ducts” during his visit, with a gripping description of the “menacing” presence of installation art, such as a Soviet tank at the entrance looming over people. The symbolic tank is the first step to the dehumanization that overwhelms visitors as they witness in narrated first-person stories the unbound cruelty and the seeming ease with which people can torment and torture one another. The raw and unsanitized brutality documented in this space, literally in the walls, leaves a lasting imprint on the mind, body, and spirit.

However, Apor (2014) refers to the House as “one of the most notorious examples of abusing spectacular new media audiovisual technology to exhibit a politically and ideologically biased historical narrative” (p. 328). For Apor, this constitutes the “careless use of public history” (p. 328). Apor contests the pedagogy of collective memory employed in the design and display of objects, stories and spaces by noting the numerous points of creative to fictive renderings, and the dangerous historic imaginary that “consuming simplistic emotional versions of history” through “powerful visual narratives” has upon visitors (p. 329). Certainly the theatrics of this museum are exploited, and as Apor notes, specific stories of national consciousness are praised while others are minimized or missing entirely, which is problematic from historical, political, cultural, social, racial, and relational perspectives for museum practitioners.

As I experienced the House, I took time to observe the numerous classes of school students embarking into a space that in effect illustrates social and potentially familial histories. I considered where they stopped during the exhibition and how they responded to specific artworks. How might this experience serve as a foil in museum

education? Considering the position of Perez de Miles and Peck (2017), if the “exhibition as curriculum” extends to the “atmosphere,” (p. 61) then engagement with places and objects in social context can generate opportunities for more critical social practice in response to “different types of oppressions, trauma and human rights violations” (p. 62). But is that possible in this case? Leftwich and McAllen (2018) suggest history museums tell of the stories of people and in the process offer opportunities “to humanize us” by increasing empathy and advocating for social change (p. 395). Was this museum too like a movie or a video game for such transformative learning to take place? Uppin and Timostuk (2019) stress the role of historical empathy during museum encounters with a host of objects as it relates to war and civilian memories of occupation, violence, and repression in Estonia, where first-person stories encourage walking “in other peoples’ shoes” (p. 312). I wonder, were the stories of trauma rendered in the House reaching the humanity of students? The House of Terror is a prime example of affective epiphanies in the extreme and on that basis alone, it serves as a pedagogic prompt in museum education.

Apor (2014) describes the “hyper-reality” and the resulting stories as “effectively distancing them from the reality of the past in order to throw them into the surreality of the present” (p. 340). From a pedagogic perspective, the House is an opportunity to deliberate on the politics of space as a radical shift in museums that in the name of art manipulate sensory engagement by generating historical mythologies. In essence, the hidden curriculum underlying the storying of the event of object-body-space is a critical conversation. The distance between the authenticity of the event, that is, the way we experience the museum visit, is as important as deliberating the authenticity of the works housed in museums and how objects make us feel. After walking through this space, it is without doubt aptly named, for it is terrifying in mood, in endurance, and if we are not mindful in our response-ability, in message also.

Affective Epiphanies as Stories of Encounter

Kristinsdottir (2017) reminds us that museum education is a “contested arena” and the educator’s role is in “constant flux,” making the sustainability of museum education a field with “serious practical and theoretical challenges” (p. 424). As an arts-based approach, in my teaching of teachers I draw on these three exemplars to encourage more diverse museum encounters, to invite affective stories with art, and to embrace relational understandings with public art through a sensorial disposition. My goal in this conversation is not to suggest that there are new knowledge claims because of the vitality of these encounters, but to propose that through such encounters the sense of presence with art is a pedagogic activation, and that holds the potential for a different sense of purpose, degree of analysis, and compositional expression in our

connectedness of body-object-space. This resonates with Rancière's (2009) description of "an element in the construction of another narrative chain," where in these museums, the encounter can invite a more inclusive museum experience (p. 124). For those who like me learn with stories, there is a feeling of correspondence, "a sensual proximity" as Ahmed (2010) suggests, of body meeting object meeting space meeting flesh. Stories aligning with visual objects help to bring forward self-in-relation at the micro-level, or as Schaefer (2019) describes, "affect is a multiplicity that runs through every aspect of human experience" (p. 38). Through stories, we map sensorial connections with artworks, illuminating our "intimate complexity – their own unique topography of values, desires, memories and attachments" (p. 39). When this approach to teaching and learning is introduced, it changes how students engage with museums; their learning priorities change in their reception of the event, and their relationship to objects of art draw their attention differently when they have autonomy to explore with their affective sensibilities leading the way. Oftentimes, students articulate their experience in ways that align with Hickey-Moody (2016), where the emergence of "new lived sensibilities, or personal vocabularies, are often the products of artistic affects" (p. 262). This presents an opening to interrupt the prescribed and often static, collection-driven observational role that still defines many museums. Perhaps we can attend to the insights, movements and resistance of students to imagine museums for a new generation – a generation already seeking and embracing affect epiphanies – as the backbone for encounters predicated on geographies of self-in-relation.

Bell (2017) advances the importance of cultivating such affective dispositions in museums to stimulate "'sensing the past' through processes of imaginative, empathetic reconstruction," (p. 778) where aesthetic learning in museums is becoming "more accessible, engaging and positively challenging" (p. 785). As Burritt (2018) advocates, teaching with objects encourages a multimodal learning approach that encourages the affect, and this is key to teaching engagement and empathy. From these strategies, we can strengthen the curriculum by advocating for a disposition that instills aspects of a pedagogy of the affect when we experience encounters with art. Garner et al. (2016) suggest that the impact of the affective experience is not always immediate – as I have learned in my own journeys with museums. It is, as Garner et al. describe, "a specific form of transactional relationship for the museum visitor" that shifts how we perceive and experience the world around us (p. 343). Sometimes the epiphanies of our encounters are more deeply felt and more fully articulated over time, not necessarily in a single visit, yet even a brief visit may prove definitive, like a pedagogic pivot yet to be known, as we fold and unfold our stories across time and place.

As Jones et al. (2020) proclaim: "Great change is underway in museum space. It is an epistemological shift on a grand scale, occurring at the theoretical, methodological, cultural and institutional level," and in this regard, a pedagogy of the affect ruptures

established protocols and practices because of mindset, and the activation of relationality that is attentive and sensorial, as well as deliberative (p. 64). We are all stakeholders in our individual and collective historic consciousness with, in, and through public art. Ensuring accessibility, relevance, and the cultivation of remembrance, recognition and response-ability can actualize the values, beliefs and relationships inherent in the affective encounters of object-body-space. And perhaps that potential is ultimately the pedagogic power of stories as arts research in museum education.

Acknowledgements

This article was supported with an Insight Grant (Boyd White, McGill University, PI) from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

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