

HEW LOCKE

David Sanderson, Beauty is in eye of the holder — ‘so let people touch art’, The Times, 29 December 2022



Hew Locke, *The Procession*, 2022, Duveen Galleries, Tate Britain, Photo by Anna Arca.

Cultural institutions should allow everyone to touch artworks instead of restricting the opportunity to the visually impaired, a prominent writer has urged.

Professor Georgina Kleege said “haptic art encounters” would entice visitors back to institutions because they “are something that cannot be done on a screen”. Very few British cultural institutions allow visitors to touch exhibits, and Tate museums only offers the tours to visually impaired people and their companions.

At Tate St Ives in Cornwall, for example, touch tours allow visitors to handle some of Barbara Hepworth’s renowned sculptures. The organisation said that since the pandemic numbers on the tours had continued to grow and it was working to ensure some “aspect of touch engagement” was available every day at Tate Britain and Tate Modern, its two London venues.

However, Tate said it had no plans to expand the programme, which was “specifically for people who are blind or visually impaired and their companions”.

Kleege, writing in Tate’s magazine for members, said museums were missing a trick, adding that enabling

visitors to touch sculptures led to increased engagement and enjoyment.

She said “touch changes everything”, adding that knowledge about the “tactility of the materials and observations about how the artist manipulated and shaped them” were the rewards.

“Frequently there are details of the artist’s craft that are not available to the eyes alone,” she writes, adding: “I realise that many will find my advocacy for touch tours for everyone to be unreasonable, even frightening . . . Change is challenging but the future of museums depends on attracting new audiences and providing them with novel aesthetic experiences that will make them eager to return.”

Kleege said museums should consult with conservators over which objects they will allow to be touched, as well as security guards and gallery attendants who could advise “on which objects in the collection already attract illicit touching”. Kleege, whose most recent book is *More than Meets the Eye: What Blindness Brings to Art*, was also critical of existing touch tours, which she said failed to make a distinction between “informational versus

aesthetic touch”. She said that while scale models, plaster casts and 3D printed facsimiles could provide information about “art historical concepts such as proportion, perspective and composition” they did not “provide any real interest or pleasure to touch”.

Emma Garrett, Tate’s senior visitor engagement and operations manager, said hundreds of people enjoyed their range of touch tours, adding that they offered the “opportunity to touch and discuss the composition, materials and histories of a number of iconic artworks from Tate’s collection”.

All participants wear conservation sculpture gloves in order to protect the artworks, she said. “Several artists have even given us extra materials and components from the making of their work to be used for this purpose. That currently includes a selection of materials from Hew Locke’s *The Procession at Tate Britain*,” Garrett added.

However, she said not every item was suitable for the tours, with traditional painted canvases deemed inappropriate even if a touch exploration of the “impasto” technique of thickly layered paint deployed by Vincent Van Gogh, Claude Monet and Jackson Pollock could be enlightening. “The artworks we select obviously need to be safe and stable to touch, as well as having shapes or textures which lend themselves to this experience, but the varied nature of Tate’s collection means that there are always lots of possible options,” she said.

Which of us hasn’t stood in front of a great work of art, glanced at a security guard — ooh, he’s turned the other way! — and wondered for a split second whether to prod the icy marble of David’s nether regions (Alex O’Connell writes).

I don’t, of course, I’m a good girl — but the force is strong. In the same way that we find it hard to walk past a shelf of cashmere jumpers without feeling the softness for ourselves, we want to touch art, in an empirical investigation: does it really exist? And for the same reason we shake hands and hug — we want to connect, get to know each other.

It also helps us to time travel. If we pick up a first edition of a favourite novel, we are making a link to its first readers. Likewise, when visiting the Cezanne exhibition at Tate Modern, we might have an urge to touch the apple with which the artist promised to “astonish” Paris, to share ground with the great man. NB: don’t, unless you want to get crushed.

Of course there are some works that beg to be felt more than others. No wonder there is a scheme at Tate St Ives to allow people to touch some of the works of Barbara Hepworth. Her tactile, bulbous sculptures scream “cuddles!” (I just hope they signed a consent declaration). I felt for (but didn’t feel) Lely Venus, the Roman statue of the crouching goddess leaving her bath, on display in the

British Museum. She had her marble bottom fondled so often that the piece was put behind barriers.

And I suppose that is the downside to Professor Georgina Kleeg’s ambitious bid to make art more touchy-feely for all, not just the visually impaired. It’s a nice idea, but most art is fragile and can’t withstand our physical lust. The tips of our hot little fingers carry sweat, oils and acids. People tend to think metals are tough and so a safe punt for a touch, but in fact they are particularly affected. Bar the obvious exceptions — the auto-destructive art of Gustav Metzger, perhaps — for us to have the desire to touch art it has to remain intact. So, in the great British tradition I advise repression, obedience and the following of official signage: “Do not touch”.