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Exhibiting Memory: Investigating the use of multi-sensory elements to communicate diasporic experiences in contemporary art exhibitions

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Exhibiting Memory: Investigating the use of multi-sensory elements to communicate diasporic experiences in contemporary art exhibitions

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Abstract

This dissertation investigates the use of multi-sensory and immersive curatorial strategies as a tool to communicate complex postcolonial identities in contemporary art exhibitions. Through analyses of four recent exhibitions – *Indigo Waves* (2022) at Zeitz MOCAA, *The Waiting Gardens of the North* (2023) at the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, (*ka) pheko ye – the dream to come* (2024) at Migros Museum, and *Sueño de la Madrugada* (2024) at South London Gallery – the study explores how engaging multiple senses can create liminal spaces that allow for the expression of hybrid, ambiguous cultural experiences. This enquiry can be broken down into these parts: multisensory elements are used as a curatorial tool, the tool is used to make immersive space, the purpose of that space is to encourage ambiguity, and the reason one would want to increase ambiguity is that it allows for a nuanced understanding of complex narratives, like postcolonial identity. Drawing on postcolonial concepts, affect theory and curatorial practice, this dissertation examines how multisensory approaches can productively unsettle dominant narratives and make space for layered perspectives on diaspora, migration, and cultural memory.

By advocating for exhibition models that embrace sensorial encounters/confrontations and ambiguity, this study contributes to ongoing debates about decolonisation in contemporary art institutions. It argues that multi-sensory curatorial strategies act as navigational and proto-linguistic tools for communicating the complexity of postcolonial identities and thereby fostering greater cross-cultural understanding.

Keywords: multisensory, affect theory, postcolonial identity, curatorial strategy, sensory art, cultural ambiguity, cultural memory

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Statement of Original Ownership

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. It is being submitted for the degree of Master of Arts by Research at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at any other University.



Lemeeze Davids

25th day of June in the year 2025

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“The smell,
new touch,
restarting of the senses,
absorption,
memory,
oh!
come what may,
what shall be,
will become,
will be
fistful of future,
apprehension.”

(Helio Oiticica, ‘4 August 1964’, in *Hélio Oiticica: Secret Poetics*)

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

"Though forced to touch and be touched, to sense and be sensed in that space of no space, though refused sentiment, history and home, we feel (for) each other."

Stefano Harney & Fred Moten, *The Undercommons* (2013)

Rationale

My prolonged research interest in understanding and working with contemporary artworks that are more than just 'looked at' was born out of a need to negotiate and communicate the subtleties of my own political and cultural identity. Terming these types of artworks (or exhibitions) as non-ocular-centric, I became interested in sensory material as an example of how one might encourage a museum visitor to interact with the artwork in more varied ways. By doing so, I hoped to produce a nuanced understanding of any topic an artwork might be engaging with.



Figure 1: Detail of a wooden spoon, (2019). Photo by Lemeeze Davids.

For my undergraduate research essay, I unpacked what it meant to craft an 'experience' within contemporary art exhibitions. I argued for the development of a curatorial model that mimicked the

procession and components of a meal (Davids, 2017), which is further detailed in my literature review. Following this research article that I wrote, I undertook an additional honours degree, where I conducted an object study on the wooden spoon and how, in being saturated with the past meals of its owner due to the absorbent qualities of wood (Figure 1), the spoon has the potential to become an 'accidental archive' of the user and the user's culture at large (Davids, 2018). Both of these academic texts foregrounded food, taste and temporality as vehicles to communicate and come to terms with my mixed culture of Chinese, Arabic, Indo-Malaysian, and South African culture. Therefore, at the time, the curatorial strategies I was focused on leaned toward smell and taste as the main sensory engagement. This, alongside my curatorial working experience in commercial galleries and non-profit museums, has led me to investigate, as the main argument of this dissertation, how sensory immersion can be a useful tool for artists, curators, exhibition makers and exhibition venues when dealing with complex topics such as decolonial, postcolonial and diasporic subject matter.

If one thinks about the usual experience presented in a Euro-American contemporary art museum, the idea to include more of the senses in an exhibition presents a challenge to the often sanitised 'white cube'[1] and 'cabinet of curiousity'[2] modes of encounter that hold a 'look, don't touch' policy. These rules of engagement serve the physical preservation of an artwork, but they also minimise the way the art object or situation can be experienced. The history of how we interact with contemporary art developed with the rise of public museums in Europe in the 18th/19th centuries after the popularity of these personal cabinets of curiousity, thus today, "burdened with imperial and colonial history, it [the museum] has been accused of being a white supremacist and racist institution" (Mersman, 2024, p.304). As art historian and theorist Hans Belting notes, "Art history became necessary, which, in turn, needed art museums to display art history's materials and results. The method and the institution emerged simultaneously and were both modern in origin and intention" (Belting, 2012, p.20). The clear emphasis on the visual over multi-sensorial interaction reflects certain cultural assumptions around art appreciation and the senses, which was crystallised in German philosopher Immanuel Kant's theory of 'disinterested pleasure', in which Kant argues

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[1] Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube* (New York 1984): an exhibition/gallery model designed to be a timeless, black space meant to mitigate the context of the outside world from interfering with the art display.

[2] A cabinet of curiosity (also: *Wunderkammer*) was a beginning model of modern museums, popular from the 16th–18th centuries. These collections comprised unusual objects, assembled by wealthy collectors to exhibit or boast rare items from their travels around the world. The model reflected European colonial expansion fantasies and was an early attempt to create a natural order and cultural world.

that there is a difference between aesthetic judgments of 'sense' (which are tied to bodily pleasure and interest) and aesthetic judgments of 'taste' (which are based on detached reflection) (Kant, 1987, p. lv)[3]. There was, and is, a privileging of detached reflection over involving the visceral body when it came to art because it was argued to decrease objectivity by involving unreliable, subjective senses. This Kantian view now shapes many cultural assumptions about how exhibitions should be engaged – primarily through sight rather than touch, smell, or other 'base' senses – which connects to how this dissertation challenges this now-traditional mode of encounter, questioning if classifying the other senses as 'base' or non-information was perhaps a premature assumption.

This way of thinking created a somewhat sterile encounter of art that has been increasingly challenged by artists and curators today, who advocate for more multisensory, interactive approaches to exhibition-making. The first case of a work like this that I came across in my tertiary education, was a well-known installation by Thai-American artist Rikrit Tiravanija, *untitled 1990 (pad thai)*, who cooked a traditional Thai noodle dish for gallery-goers and insisted that the work was not about the way his cooking station *looked* or *arranged*, but that the essence of the piece lay in the act of sharing and eating together – encouraging an aesthetic judgement of his work's social or relational elements (Bröcker, 2017, p.175). By engaging the senses, Tiravanija manages to open up a realm of the 'communal' and I found this to inspire my curatorial goals. In addition to these social factors, what also drew my attention was that the artist was interested in using food that resonated with his upbringing, a pad thai, something that created a strong sense of connection, familiarity, and comfort.

Encountering this artwork was not only the starting point for me and my research, but also part of a longer lineage of efforts to bring the 'world' into the gallery, ultimately beginning my interest in how sensory engagement in artistic environments could serve as more than just novelty. There was a possibility that it could function as a deliberate strategy for communicating complex cultural moments. By articulating his heritage through taste, smell, and communal experience, I found that Tiravanija demonstrated how a multisensorial approach might challenge existing exhibition formats, while resisting the oversimplification of his own cultural expression. This realisation led me to research how these types of strategies can be developed and implemented by artists and/or

[3] Ak. 306. The "Ak." references the page in the *Akademie Ausgabe* (1790) of the original works, the standard edition used in Kant's scholarship, which includes the original German text.

curators who are working with postcolonial and diasporic content, particularly as institutions increasingly grapple with their colonial origins and the resultant display language.

Aim

The core research aim of my project is to investigate how multisensorial curatorial strategies in contemporary art exhibitions can be a productive communication tool for complex postcolonial identities and decolonial initiatives. This becomes especially relevant with the rise of globalism and the resultant interest of museums in creating decolonial policies that acknowledge problematic display tactics. Through analyses of recent case studies of exhibitions, this study examines how engaging senses and the human body, beyond just visual elements, creates the potential for a more nuanced way for visitors to connect with and navigate varied cultural narratives.

For my main argument, I have utilised these postcolonial, art historical, and phenomenological fields of theory to develop curatorial strategies that are capable of holding nuanced identities with care, creating enjoyable experiences for the visitors, and constructing well-considered display tactics that do justice to the artists' visions for their projects. While my assertions remain grounded in critical theory, I have also included an account of my own practical experience of curating a multisensory exhibition to show that these ideas are also part of a real-world, current practice of curating and exhibition-making.

What I have considered in this project is how a curator and/or artist's decision to include smell, taste, sound, temperature, and more (as a compliment to, or as a replacement for, the act of looking) might productively change or add to the way visitors can interact with artworks – and thereby changing or adding to the behavioural identity of the 'viewer' to a type of 'explorer'. Leaning into the nature of the project, in this dissertation I have defaulted in referring to people who interact with artworks as 'visitors', 'guests', or 'explorers', as opposed to the language of 'viewers' which foregrounds sight as the predominant Kantian interaction.

For this project, I have decided to examine four case studies of recent immersive, multisensory exhibitions that deal with the subject of postcolonial identity navigation. These exhibitions are *Indigo Waves and Other Stories: Re-Navigating the Afrasian Sea and Notions of Diaspora* at the Zeitz MOCAA (Cape Town, South Africa, 2022), *(ka) pheko ye – the dream to come* at Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst (Zürich, Switzerland, 2024), *The Waiting Gardens of the North* at the

Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art (Newcastle, United Kingdom, 2023), and *Sueño de la Madrugada (A Midnight's Dream)* at South London Gallery (London, United Kingdom, 2024). Further detailed in my methodology, these exhibitions were selected because they are strong examples of incorporating multisensory strategies into a postcolonial-focused artistic presentation. This is coupled with the key criteria of me, as the researcher, having experienced the exhibitions in person. When dealing with an exhibition that exceeds the realm of the visual, my research observations are detailed from a first-hand sensory experience, as writing about these projects would be challenging if I solely relied on photographs and third-person descriptions.

I would also like to note that the London-based exhibition, *Sueño de la Madrugada (A Midnight's Dream),* is an exhibition that I co-curated at the South London Gallery via a one-year developmental curatorial fellowship called New Curators. The program, which hosted eleven fellows, was designed to provide real working experience in the curatorial field for those who come from lower socio-economic backgrounds and involved this practical component of curating a real-life exhibition with an established artist and institution. My goal including this exhibition is that I will be able to convey and unpack behind-the-scenes curatorial decisions within a multisensory art installation.

In addition to delineating how these sensory exhibitions provide multifaceted ways of engagement, this dissertation argues how these visceral elements and modes of exploring can help visitors process complex information surrounding difficult histories and narratives in a postcolonial world, where many identities remain fraught and layered. The art world may just about be coming to terms with what it means to make art in a globalised society that carries the heavy burden of colonial history, as Belting posits, "There is no common notion of art that necessarily applies to all societies around the world … precisely this recent explosion seems to threaten the survival of any safe notion of art, provided one still exists even in the West." (2012, p.16) This observation signals a shift in curatorial strategies and exhibition design in contemporary art museums. In this postcolonial moment, it may be that the traditional frameworks for displaying and interpreting art are no longer the default in a world where multiple cultural perspectives require representation.

Interdisciplinary concepts and approaches

In this dissertation, I will make use of several specific terms that would be useful to this study that may need to be explained and contextualised. 'Multisensory' is a word I have employed throughout,

and defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as “relating to or involving several physiological senses” (n.d.). In this context, I use it to describe objects, exhibitions or encounters that relate to more than sight, in that they employ sound, smell, thermoception (perception of temperature), touch, taste, spatial sensitivity, wind, and motion, amongst other modalities to construct an experience. This is not to negate the role of visuals in the aesthetic perception of artworks but rather to draw attention to how the engagement of more senses can potentially enhance a visitor’s experience.

Another keyword, which will be referenced consistently, describes a ‘postcolonial’ identity or related to ‘postcoloniality’. Postcolonial studies is an academic field which critically examines the political, cultural and socio-economic aftermath of historic and current colonialism (Quayson, 1998). In the context of this study, which is positioned within the field of Art History and Curatorial Studies, when I refer to postcolonial identity, I am pointing to a multifaceted sense of self alongside an ambiguous and conflicted cultural identity (Haq & Gielen, 2020). This type of identity is commonly experienced by individuals or communities in regions that were previously or are currently colonised. Some examples include South Africa, the Caribbean and Palestine, to name a few. It must be emphasised that this dissertation is grounded in contemporary art exhibition-making and curatorial studies, and therefore, I have engaged with postcoloniality as a socio-political subject matter that interests many artists today. In any case, this term will be adequately contextualised and defined to be utilised in this dissertation. I have referred to several other ideas relating to ‘postcolonial identity’ through the lens of theorists such as Homi K. Bhabha, Édouard Glissant, Stuart Hall and Edward Said, including cultural hybridity, historical trauma, systemic violence, heritage negotiation and diasporic experiences. These keywords and several other terms are further explored in the literature review, alongside an outline of the theoretical framework upon which my investigation stands.

As a South African curator with a hybrid cultural background spanning China, Indonesia, Yemen and Indigenous South Africa, my understanding of the selected case studies is informed by my subjective perspective and upbringing. In my family, food and recipes were a very important vehicle to understand the past and pay homage to those who came before us. In this logic, a different researcher might be drawn to other exhibition-making methodologies and priorities, which are based on their own socio-political, cultural and institutional position. Unpacked in my methodology section, I have aimed to maintain strong reflexivity and integrity regarding how my

subjectivity can be viewed as a productive tool. The decision to purposively select four case studies to examine was made to allow for greater attention to the details and revelations of each artistic presentation.

This dissertation is built upon several intersecting theoretical frameworks and bodies of scholarship. My literature review in Chapter 2 begins by examining foundational postcolonial theory, particularly focusing on works by seminal scholars Homi K. Bhabha (1994), Édouard Glissant (1997) and W.E.B. Du Bois (1903) that explore concepts of cultural hybridity, ambiguity, and "double consciousness" in postcolonial contexts. The postcolonial theoretical foundation is then connected to the history of interactive and participatory art practices, analysing Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* (1998) and the subsequent critiques by scholars like Claire Bishop (2004) and Hal Foster (2003) – which productively challenge social aesthetics. The review moves on to the field of sensory studies and psychophysics through works such as Erica Fretwell's *Sensory Experiments: Psychophysics, Race and the Aesthetics of Feeling* (2020), before examining Affect Theory through key texts like Gregg and Seigworth's *The Affect Theory Reader* (2010) and Sara Ahmed's work on the social and political dimensions of affect. My research through these theoretical frameworks culminates in building a vocabulary and toolbox to examine contemporary curatorial practices that engage with multisensory experience, looking at both theoretical approaches and practical case studies of exhibitions that have attempted to move beyond purely visual or 'ocular-centric' modes of engagement.

This interdisciplinary literature review reveals important gaps in connection between these fields, which in tandem, points to a gap in current scholarship around how multisensory curatorial strategies might be specifically deployed to communicate complex cultural narratives in postcolonial contexts. While there has been significant work done in each of these individual areas, there remains a need for research that examines their intersection and practical application in contemporary exhibition-making.

Chapter Outline

The four selected case studies are the primary foundation of how I have chosen to structure and break down the chapters within this dissertation. Following my literature review, the next chapter, 'A Sense of Warmth*',* introduces and discusses the concept of affect theory through the case study

of *Indigo Waves and Other Stories: Re-Navigating the Afrasian Sea and Notions of Diaspora* (Zeitz MOCAA, 2022), a group exhibition curated by Natasha Ginwala and Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, with Michelangelo Corsaro. In particular, my exploration has looked at multisensory artworks selected for the show, such as *Rampies Sny* (2022) by Thania Petersen and *eBish'* (2022) by Luvuyo Equaino Nyawose, which utilised olfactory and sonic elements. This chapter includes excerpts from an interview I conducted with one of the curators of the exhibition, Natasha Ginwala. Aligning with my research questions, some of the direct enquiries made to her included how the curators may have thought about the sensory elements/artworks as guiding forces when conceptualising the group exhibition and how the exhibition was received by its guests.

In the fourth chapter, titled 'The Garden of Discovery', I have chosen to unpack two presentations: (*ka) pheko ye – the dream to come* (2024), a solo exhibition by South African artist, Dineo Seshee Bopape, and *The Waiting Gardens of the North,* a solo exhibition by Iraqi-American artist Michael Rakowitz. Here, I have included my observations and experiences within both exhibitions, as well as reflections on how the utilised sensory elements may have assisted the artists/curator(s) to achieve the encounter they had envisioned, i.e. a communal safe space of exploration. The chapter explores a garden's display and spatial model, which encourages discovery, play, community, and refuge. These discussions are affirmed by an interview I conducted with Katharine Welsh, curator at the Baltic Center, who spoke to me regarding the decision-making in *The Waiting Gardens of the North.* Differing from the previous chapter, which looks at a group exhibition, this two-part investigation steers away from discussing artwork selection or the dialogue between two or more different artists/artworks and curatorial decisions around a central theme. Rather, 'The Garden of Discovery' chapter provides a perspective on how artists and curators collaborate and make curatorial decisions alongside each other to achieve a single and/or shared vision, inclusive of the multisensorial elements. These decisions might contribute to a model that infers the behavioural and social codes of how one might navigate a gardenscape, where visitors can spend a longer time enjoying, learning, and discovering - to explore through the senses.

In the following chapter, I have discussed *Sueño de la Madrugada (A Midnight's Dream)*, a solo exhibition by Dominican-American artist Firelei Báez at the South London Gallery. This exhibition accounts for my first-hand experience as a curator for an institutional presentation that follows the previously mentioned themes of postcolonial identity navigation and strategies of the multisensory.

As the predominant focus of this chapter, the main artwork of *Sueño de la Madrugada (A Midnight's Dream)* was a large-scale immersive environment that sought to transport the museum visitors to"alternate pasts and potential futures" (Baez, as cited in South London Gallery, 2024). The environmental installation took cues from the artist's childhood memories in the Dominican Republic, as well as mythological stories of underwater worlds below the Middle Passage[4], in the Atlantic Ocean. Peckham, the area wherein the South London Gallery is situated, is well-known as one of the centres of West African and Caribbean communities in London – a further point of connection. As I am one of the curators of this exhibition, I shared my working process in detail, but this is supplemented by an interview conducted with my co-curator on the program, Nikita Sena.

Although it may seem apparent, it is important to note that there is geographical distance in this study: Africa, the Americas, and Asia are three extremely different places with specific connections to one another, and although we may empathise with one another's socio-political climate, there is deep work to be done to understand another's postcolonial specificities, struggles and perspectives before attempting to equate them. For example, North and South America have a particular relationship with West Africa as well as the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal) via the Atlantic Slave Trade. In another context, South-Eastern Africa has another type of relationship with the Dutch, India and South East Asia. In this dissertation, I have unpacked case studies with subject matter ranging from all three continents, often with geographically overlapping material - England/ Middle East (Michael Rakowitz), Africa/South Asia (*Indigo Waves and Other Stories*), Caribbean/ West Africa (Firelei Báez), South Africa/Northern Europe (Dineo Seshee Bopape).

To ensure that these complexities are acknowledged, I have begun each chapter by contextualising the historical and sociopolitical entanglements that shape each one. Each chapter also begins with a 'sensory interval' which briefly describes the smells, sounds, temperature and other factors, as an entry point into each exhibition. Following these discursive chapters, I have included a final chapter which will synthesise and summarise the findings from each case study and their relevant curatorial strategies.

[4] The Middle Passage is a term describing the historical journey endured by West African slaves as they were kidnapped and forcibly transported across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas. This occurred from the 16th to the 19th century.

Summary of Findings

My research for this project has outlined and confirmed that multisensory curatorial strategies have the ability to serve as productive and generous tools in contemporary art exhibitions, bridging the intellectual and visceral (bodily) dimensions of complex postcolonial narratives. By engaging senses beyond the visual, these case studies have indicated that their audiences have moved through historical and cultural memories in an embodied way, which encouraged both an emotional and intellectual connection that was not mutually exclusive to one another. The use of soundscapes and olfactory elements in *Indigo Waves and Other Stories*, and *Sueño de la Madrugada (A Midnight's Dream)*, invoked the ambiguity of memory, while gestures like offering tea and ingestible ingredients, like in Michael Rakowitz's *The Waiting Gardens of the North* and Dineo Seshee Bopape's *(ke) pheko ye – the dream to come*, create spaces of collective care and reflection. This dissertation underscores the didactic potential of sensory tools for curation as an encouraging gateway to decolonial engagement that reimagines traditional, ocular-centric exhibition practices. By moving beyond the Euro-American prioritisation of passive viewing, these multisensory strategies can create immersive environments that communicate and involve visitors in the complex, layered narratives of postcolonial identities as we find presentation models that match our cultural needs. The affirming findings in this dissertation offer preliminary considerations and insights around a model for curators and institutions who are interested in adopting more inclusive and 'affective' approaches, prioritising embodied engagement as a means to navigate and represent hybrid cultural histories. Future research might further explore how these strategies can be institutionalised in museum policies as a practical guide, ensuring that multisensory curation becomes a cornerstone of postcolonial exhibition practices.

The significance of this dissertation lies in its ability to grow the current body of research within curatorial studies by examining historical and current trends of including multisensorial elements in contemporary art exhibitions. This contribution is particularly relevant in the context of art museums' recent widening interests in representing alternative histories and postcolonial identity and expressing a desire to resonate with the globalism inherent in our society today (Chambers et al., 2014). These four case studies act as examples of very recent contemporary art exhibitions that attempt to push the boundaries of traditional exhibition formats to create more immersive and stimulating experiences for visitors. My analysis of the exhibitions within this dissertation focuses on the curatorial strategies employed in each case study examining the exhibition as a whole

experience, as well as the intentions of the artist and curator in including sensory elements, and the impact that these decisions have on the institutions' audience engagement – which provides future insight and research opportunity into these types of display models.

While this research has provided an unpacking of theory and the selected case studies for curators, artists, and cultural institutions who are interested in incorporating multisensory elements into their projects, it should be noted that further research would be necessary to develop concrete practical recommendations into a working guide. Rather than attempting to provide definitive guidelines, this dissertation serves as an exploratory experience-based investigation of selected case studies, opening up a valuable avenue for future research into multisensorial institutional implementation strategies. The main point of significance of this study is in its expansion of the relationship between the discourse surrounding postcolonial identity negotiation and the sensate body, applied in the field of contemporary art and curatorial practice. By critically examining the successes, challenges and points of interest of these exhibitions, I have offered productive perspectives on how multisensory immersion can be effectively utilised to produce nuanced, accessible, and impactful art experiences. Ultimately, this dissertation contributes to the ongoing dialogue about the role of sensory engagement in contemporary art and its potential to foster layered connections between audiences and the complex narratives of postcolonial identities, advocating for exhibitions that counteract singular perceptions of cultural belonging.

Methodology & Theoretical Framework

This project employs a qualitative approach as its methodology. Qualitative research is defined as the collection of non-numerical data that focuses on human experiences and social phenomena – research in this vein is interested in asking the "why" and "how" about societal behaviours or concepts (Hammersly, 2012). As I am working through curatorial projects as case studies, qualitative research allows me to capture the nuanced experiences of space, memory, and cultural critique. Methods like thematic analysis, formal analysis and phenomenological inquiry are also relevant here to articulate how the exhibition operates as a decolonial gesture beyond static curatorial representation. Resultantly, this research can be distilled down to two main theoretical frameworks: phenomenology and decolonial thought. These frameworks have been specifically chosen to address the complex intersections of curatorial practice, cultural identity, and multi-sensory exhibition experiences.

Phenomenology is a philosophical school of thought and methodology that examines the structures of consciousness and direct experience as encountered from a first-person perspective – thus research in this vein involves the recording and analysing of experiences. Founded by Edmund Husserl in the early 20th century, this approach emphasises the systematic study of things as they appear in our conscious experience (Spiegelberg, 1982). As phenomenology prioritises lived experiences, it is a useful lens to address both the complexities of cultural identities (within the curator, artist, and audience) and the general 'feel' of an exhibition because, by nature, an art exhibition is designed as something to be experienced by other people – that is its purpose. Where that experience consists of educational goals or aesthetic liberties as the predominant aim, depends on the curator, institution and artist.

The second framework is decolonial thought. In the context of research methodologies, decolonial qualitative research can be seen as "centring concerns and world views of non-Western individuals, and respectfully knowing and understanding theory and research from previously 'Other(ed)' perspectives" (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). This methodology is important for my dissertation because my enquiry involves coming closer to unearthing/unveiling traumatic histories and their fragmented identities, sensitively and conscientiously. Research methodologies in the past have often been used to classify people and culture and then used to justify colonialism – as Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes in her introduction to *Decolonising Methodologies*, "research is not an innocent or distant academic exercise but an activity that has something at stake and that occurs in a set of political and social conditions" (1999, p.5). Therefore, I have also utilised this mode of thinking to resist a Western-led ontological hierarchy, which has dominated art historical fields in academia and to be aware of the role that 'research' itself has played in upholding Western modes of thinking.

As mentioned in the chapter outline, this investigation follows the model of unpacking four case study exhibitions. Although they feature different practices and have been presented in different parts of the world, they have been sampled purposively, which means that these four projects have been specifically chosen because they meet the criteria of my study. These criteria would be: that the selected exhibitions include or focus on multi-sensory immersion (more than one sense is purposively engaged, whether intentioned by the artist or curator) and that the theoretical

framework of the multisensorial exhibition that engages with themes of displacement, diaspora, fractured or hybrid identity and postcolonial navigation.

The four case studies also meet the criteria that I, as the researcher, would having visited these projects in person so that I may express my first-hand encounter as primary research. This is important because the nature of the study looks at exhibitions that have used communication methods that transcend words and images. I might be inclined to read about another's description of a smell or sound, but in this process, I lose a layer of information that resists words, so to speak. I find it more productive to conduct this investigation if I can write from a place of intrinsic experiential knowing, allowing me to describe a project from different angles and in-depth. Regardless of this methodology, I have communicated my exploration and the resultant findings through text and images, evident in this dissertation. To provide more sensorial information for the reader, I have mentioned that I have included 'Sensory Intervals', as pieces of point-form information that let the reader know what senses were being engaged in the exhibition, and how.

Three of the four chosen exhibitions are projects that I have not worked on, but experienced solely as a visitor: *Indigo Waves and Other Stories: Re-Navigating the Afrasian Sea and Notions of Diaspora* (2022) curated by Natasha Ginwala and Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Sedikung with Michael Corsaro, *The Waiting Gardens of the North* curated by the Baltic Curatorial and Learning team (with Michael Rakowitz), and *(ka) pheko ye – the dream to come* curated by Michael Birchall (with Dineo Seshee Bopape). The first exhibition is a group exhibition which is constructed around a thematic proposition and will provide insight into how the curators have worked in a multi-sensory fashion with a variety of artists with a theoretical vision in mind, and the following two case studies, grouped, are solo presentations which provide a sense of how singular artists work with a curatorial team to communicate their prioritisation of viewer immersion. The fourth and final exhibition in my case study selection is *Sueño de la Madrugada (A Midnight's Dream),* a practical project I co-curated, providing the additional facet of access and involvement with the direct curation of the multi-sensory experience. These exhibitions were selected as per the above criteria, but as may be apparent in the previous paragraph, their differences are: group exhibition vs. solo presentation and experience as a visitor vs. experience as a curator – which allows this dissertation to unpack different forms and arrangements of a multisensorial exhibition.

Having selected these case studies, I have analysed first-hand data gathered from my observations when experiencing the exhibition, this was based on a formal and thematic analysis of the exhibition and the related phenomenological data. Content analysis of the relevant curatorial statements and theoretical publications was included in the process, as a way to note both the intentions of the exhibition organisers and the critical theory engaged. These accounts were connected to theoretical and conceptual knowledge highlighted in my literature review and throughout the chapters of the dissertation. This methodology allows for the identification of key connections and patterns between the fields of postcolonial theory, sensory studies and affect theories.

Additionally, I invited some of the curators (or curatorial team) of the relevant case studies to take part in semi-structured interviews to gain a deeper understanding of the behind-the-scenes decisions when working with affect as a curator, as well as any challenges, insights or successes the curators faced during the production of the project. In my initial proposal, I suggested that I might interview the artists, but to focus this investigation more on curatorial decisions and the exhibition as a whole, I have made the decision to only interview the curators of the exhibitions, regardless of my impression of or ease of access to the practice of the exhibiting artist(s). The artworks and installation have been discussed, described and understood as I encountered them as a visitor or curator, and I have found that further insight from the artist did not need to be expanded. This is not to imply that the nature of the work is not important or that artists do not make curatorial decisions in conjunction with the institution (in fact the actuality of a work may influence how someone may think about presenting it), but rather that if elaboration is required, the study would benefit from the point of view of a curator, project coordinator or producer to keep the scope of the investigation focused.

In this dissertation, I operate from the understanding that making an exhibition is a subjective experience and that the data that I gathered from the interviews is based on specific projects and specific curators' ways of working. To circle back to the top-line methodology of decolonial phenomenology, I am interested in the sharing of these 'everyday' experiences that produce an ecology of qualitative insights – an "epistemological diversity and [redistribution of] power to non-eurocentric forms of wisdom, particularly voices that have been historically and presently oppressed" (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). By working through these diverse curatorial

perspectives rather than attempting to extract or assert universal principles, this dissertation acknowledges that meaningful knowledge can emerge from embodied experiences that resist standardisation under Western academic frameworks.

Following this, the interview questions were based on my core research aims but developed into a semi-structured conversation based on information that was shared in response. Some lines of inquiry followed specific details of the particular projects: for example, if there was one multi-sensory work, I would ask about it; or if there was a particular public program that was linked to the immersive nature of the specific exhibition, I would ask about that. All in all, each interview was context-dependent and sought to bring insight into questions about the curator's experience and whether they believed that sensory elements had the potential to act as useful tools for building generative communal spaces. The conversations also touched on how sensorial encounters may have been mobilised to conjure memory or connection, thereby contributing to a decolonial narrative of postcolonial identity negotiation. For all interviews, I have retrieved informed consent and approval of the quotes lifted via email from the participants. The interviewees for this dissertation were Natasha Ginwala (*Indigo Waves and Other Stories*), Katherine Welsh (Baltic Center for Contemporary Art) and Nikita Sena (co-curator, New Curators). Other candidates who are linked to the projects but not interviewed were not available to take part.

Previously acknowledged in the introduction, I would like to reiterate for the methodology that as a South African curator with mixed ancestry, I acknowledge that my subject position inherently influences my research approach, analysis and interpretation because I have an interest in marginalised narratives that I wish to see represented in contemporary art museums. However, within a phenomenological and decolonial framework, this positionality enriches the research. As established earlier, phenomenology values first-person lived experiences, while decolonial methodologies specifically prioritise "knowing and understanding theory and research from previously 'Other(ed)' perspectives" (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). My situated knowledge and that of the interviewed curators, therefore, provide a valuable interpretive lens that aligns with the study's theoretical underpinnings, and my self-reflexive acknowledgement of this positionality demonstrates the kind of critical awareness that strengthens qualitative research of this nature.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review outlines intersecting theoretical frameworks and practices that inform the development of sensory exhibitions in postcolonial contexts. By drawing connections across postcolonial theory, interactive art, sensory studies, affect theory, and contemporary curatorial practice, this review seeks to build a research foundation for understanding how multisensory engagement in exhibitions can communicate complex cultural narratives. Beginning with an analysis of my previous academic research that sparked this line of investigation, the review then expands to explore how diverse but interconnected fields collectively provide the basis for new possibilities in exhibition design and visitor experience. The following six sections map the theoretical vocabulary and critical ideas that shape this project.

Previous research topics



Figure 2: *Thank You for My Lunch* (Davids, 2017). Unfired clay, concrete and spices.

To begin this literature review, I would first like to establish the path to this specific research interest of the 'multisensory' as well as previous arguments within my academic career. My concern with multi-sensorial elements in art first arose during my BA (Fine Art), where I produced a sculptural installation, titled *Thank You for My Lunch* (2017), alongside a research article, *Re-Inventing the Meal: Investigating the Meal as a Gallery Model* (Davids, 2017). The installation was named after a message I wrote in my mother's birthday card when I was a young child - a food-

oriented sentiment that I thought was appropriate for a birthday. The artwork comprised a series of individually lit plinths on top of which various spices placed in unfired ceramic vessels sat (Figure 2), as well as the aroma of my paternal grandfather's *dhal* (turmeric and lentil) curry recipe which I prepared, cooked and removed from the space (to share with others outside). Despite having done the work myself, this project was primarily a curatorial experiment for me, which was detailed in the written component: *Re-Inventing the Meal (2017).* This was my first step into the field of curatorial studies, although it was housed within a practical fine art degree.

The research article looked at a curatorial model that prioritised visitor participation and temporality - where I wrote that "the meal is a participatory activity, that the meal has a temporal beginning and end, and that the meal is constructed in a single portion for consumption" (2017, p.22). The article's main assertion was that this model was arguably better than a 'white cube' curatorial impulse in which the artworks were isolated from context and sensorial interaction. On a few levels, this is a claim I no longer totally agree with, as I have conducted more research and understood that there can be meaningful encounters in both experiences, depending on the goals of the institution, its curators and the artist(s). However, I do believe that the sensorial remains a productive tool for affect and cultural memory – one can position a model as constructive or useful without ascribing it to the label of "better than".

Following this research article, I pursued an Honours degree in curatorship where I conducted an object study on the wooden spoon as an 'accidental archive' (2018) or an object that absorbs/ documents the history of Cape Malay food[5] in South Africa. This dissertation explored how history can resist final documentation, but more importantly, highlighted the value of emotional subtlety and political depth that could be found in the objects/situations of everyday life. Here, I began to think about palimpsest in ancestry and the consequences of colonialism, specifically within the context of my own identity as a South African of complex ancestry (China, Yemen, Indonesia…). As a curator, it was interesting to work with and care deeply about an object's story, directing my research to questions such as: What does it mean to record and communicate something that is not completely knowable? Why did the wooden spoon, the kitchen, and the recipe work so well as a metaphor for the negotiation of my own identity? I found and asserted that "[t]he ordinary archive embraces its subjectivity and does not masquerade itself as truth, but only seeks to tell a story"

[5] A cuisine derived from the circumstances of the European slave trade in the Cape region of South Africa. The cuisine combines recipes from South Asia, Indigenous South African substitute ingredients, and Dutch/English palates.

(2018, p.15) and where I concluded that the plurality of how we might experience an object/ situation adds to its richness.

I also found this object study helpful because it concerned itself with archiving and documenting, something intrinsic to parts of the curatorial profession. While I could focus on the act of exhibition-making alone, as I did for my first research article, the wooden spoon reminds me of how curators make records and select narratives in their work. Whether that archive exists as a physical collection or a digital rendition of exhibition history, the curator almost manifests a type of canon - which is not to overstate the importance of the curator's role but simply to acknowledge the potential influence.

Postcolonial Theory and Identity Politics

I briefly explained postcolonial studies in my introduction, but to understand the field of study further, one might take apart its root words: the suffix 'post-' means 'after', which places us in the aftermath of something, and the 'colonial' signals that this 'something' is the historic conquering and exploiting of other nations. Aptly, cultural theorist Stuart Hall, who is a key figure in postcolonial theory, notes that colonialism is "an essentially transnational and transcultural global process" that fundamentally reshapes how communities understand and share their histories (Hall, 1996, p.247). The 'post', at surface value, can point to the time after independence from the colonising power was gained, as many countries in the Caribbean, South America, Asia, and Africa achieved this separation from Europe in the late 20th century, and now all exist in the 'after' of colonialism.

Another way to look at the suffix 'post' is through cultural imagination and the manifestation of better futures. This would be true in places that are still under colonial rule or places that are still highly dependent on their ex-colonisers (in the form of Neo-colonialism[6]), who both may use postcolonial theory to imagine a life *beyond* this tense dynamic. In this way of thinking, the 'post-' is complex and we have to "consider the experience of colonialism not as a concluded chapter in global history, but as an intrinsic and indelible part of the contemporary world" (Chambers et al., 2014, p.2). Postcolonial theory and identity politics have been a frequent topic in museums today, more relevant than ever.

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[6] "Neo-colonialism is another form of imperialism where industrialised powers interfere politically and economically in the affairs of post-independent nations." (Rukundwa & van Aarde, 2007, p. 1172)

There has been an increasing desire to include the stories and perspectives from previously or currently marginalised groups of people, as well as to acknowledge the richness of narratives of our world beyond one perspective. As cultural theorist Homi Bhabha notes in his seminal text *The Location of Culture*, "Postcolonial perspectives […] intervene in those ideological discourses of modernity that attempt to give a hegemonic 'normality' to the uneven development and the differential, often disadvantaged, histories of nations, race, communities, peoples" (1994, p. 171). While the representation of different types of people and stories matters in order to inspire others, Bhabha also presents another point in this statement: that the inclusion of a variety of narratives combats the dominance of one type of story – not only in the art world but in society at large.

A recent postcolonial theory source I was interested in *The Aesthetics of Ambiguity: Understanding and Addressing Monoculture* (Gielen & Haq, 2020), a collection of critical essays that explores the use of cultural ambiguity as a tool for digesting and expressing socio-political identity in a postcolonial context. Ambiguity is a key idea within this dissertation, as it forms the foundation of what needs to be communicated through the viscerality of the sense. In his chapter 'Ambiguity and Liberalisms', Haq pessimistically begins, "We start from the relative failure of identity politics" (2020, p.36), where he then addresses the pitfalls of art and artists who push for representational borders in culture as an effort to combat social inequality and/or instil cultural pride, but instead often lean into the dogmatic delineation of one's origins. This anthology specifically unpacks the complexity behind the concepts of identity politcs: the 'monocultural' and 'multicultural', explaining that these terms are not necessarily opposing forces, but rather are reliant on one another to define themselves. Nav Haq and Pascal Gielen unpack what it means to live in a so-called multicultural society today, and resultantly, how artists and other cultural practitioners can use 'ambiguity' to produce a better understanding of the world we live in, as it is more reflective of the layered experiences we encounter in our day-to-day lives.

Haq advocates for both ambiguous identities and ambiguous situations, images, and artworks, referencing the work of psychoanalyst Else Frenkel-Brunswik, who developed a scale of 'Ambiguity Tolerance-Intolerance' in 1949. The psycho-social study presented the conclusion that those who were generally more tolerant of ambiguity and abstract thinking were likely to be more tolerant of the concept of the 'Other', while those who were closer to complete intolerance were

more inclined to order, safety, and the rejection of the unfamiliar (Haq & Gielen, 2020, p.38). The representation of ambiguous information thus becomes a social exercise in a political sense. Haq considers the German artist Joseph Beuys' work[7] , in this case, an example of an artist who was in a post-traumatic mindset after World War II, experiencing complicated feelings about his German identity and nationality. Beuys' complex messages manifested through the use of unconventional material such as blood, organic matter, honey, live animals, etc " –[Beuys] was seeking action for finding new dimensions and possibilities, and creative reconciliation in response to ideological status quo" (2020, p.42). The text engages his work as an example of how art can do the work of post-trauma and/or de-nationalistic expressions without being obvious or explicit in its message.

Haq's essay presents us with an understanding of how ambiguity can influence our sense of the world in social or political terms, as well as how contemporary art itself has a strong potential to create the necessary environment to uphold this ambiguity. Haq and Gielen's *The Aesthetics of Ambiguity* (2020) emerges from a longer history of postcolonial studies, which includes the seminal work of W. E. B. Du Bois, Homi K. Bhabha, Edward Said, and Édouard Glissant, to name a few, some of which I have already mentioned. Although a priority falls on citing recent, contemporary texts within this dissertation to include recent developments and ideas in the field, there are older key arguments that I will cite because they are either consistently referenced in recent sources or their direct ideas remain relevant to this study because they form a foundation of theory.

As Tanzanian scholar Bart Moore-Gilbert notes, "Postcolonial criticism and theory alike comprise a variety of practices … Many of these long predate the period when the term 'postcolonial' began to gain currency" (1998, p.5). As one of the first *proto*-postcolonialists, American sociologist and civil rights activist, W.E.B. Du Bois introduced the concept of 'double consciousness' which foregrounds the idea that an individual, who has experienced oppression under colonialism and/or slavery, may have a feeling of being 'in-between' or having to lean into ambiguous identity as a way to make sense of their world – "It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, the sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in an amused contempt and pity. One feels his twoness…" (Dubois, 1897). He explores how vulnerable citizens of the world can see the world in these two ways - through their

[7] Joseph Beuys (1921-1986) was an influential conceptual and performance artist whose ideas are particularly significant for their emphasis on direct audience engagement and the artist's conception of 'social sculpture,' which proposed that society itself could be shaped as an artwork through collective creative activity.

oppressor(s)'s eyes and their own – and the notion of 'truth' becomes more opaque, and some of the violence of the double gaze becomes self-reflexive. Du Bois' theories became a fundamental inspiration point for the postcolonial school of thought.

Another seminal writer in this field is Martinican theorist Édouard Glissant. Glissant is most well known for his essay, *Poetics of Relation* (1990), where he discussed the difference between a "root identity" vs "rhizome identity", influenced by the philosophical work, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980). The root identity is formed from a singular, historical origin, operating in a metaphorical linear and vertical manner – the way one might imagine a tree root. This type of identity claims its legitimacy through the stern preservation of this root and would be typically associated with colonial, racist and imperial cultures that seek to uphold their narrative as universal (and thus superior), tending toward fixed, black-and-white definitions of identity. This approach often attempts to eliminate other possible roots or origins. In contrast, the rhizome extends in all directions through multiple connections, operating non-hierarchically and spreading horizontally – mimicking the root of a ginger plant. In this assertion, identity is formed through multiple relationships with other identities, locations, and cultures, which in turn, embraces multiplicity and ambiguity and allows for simultaneous multiple belongings (Glissant, 1990). The latter concept remains key to my exploration of ambiguity and how information around identity can be communicated, processed and stored. For Glissant, the rhizome represents a type of organisational system of culture, both as a challenge and an alternative to the hegemonic 'singular root' (read: singular narrative), "a stock-taking all upon itself and killing all around it" (Glissant, 1990), but Glissant develops this further into what he has titled his text, a 'poetics of relation', "in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other" (1990, p.11). Building on these concepts, *Poetics of Relation* (1990) offers a Caribbean-centric perspective that advances ideas of "relation", envisioning cultural production as an ever-shifting network of connections and influences. The text introduces the concept of "creolisation" as a process of cultural mixing that produces new, unpredictable forms – a schismogenisis[8].

Influenced by Glissant and Du Bois, amongst others, Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994), which true to its title, tries to locate the essence of culture and identity in a world ruptured

[8] Schismogenesis, introduced by Gregory Bateson, is an anthropological concept that refers to the process of creating social divisions and differentiation within groups or societies. The term means "creation of division," derived from the Greek words for "cleft" (schisma) and "generation" (genesis).

by the legacy of colonialism. Several valuable terms emerge from this text, which I have referenced in this dissertation often, including “the realm of the beyond” (1994) and assertions linked to Du Bois that “the truest eye belongs to the migrant’s double vision” (1994). Both of these concepts allude to a state of limbo or ‘in-betweenness’, in which Bhabha issues a challenge of how to think beyond narratives of ‘origin’ identity. He brings up a specific South African example in Nadine Gordimer’s literature: that of so-called coloured identity and its tense relations to both black and white South African culture. *The Location of Culture* (1994) introduces these crucial angles to understanding hybridity and ambivalence within a "third space”, a place where various cultural identities can be negotiated and/or performed. Bhabha's main argument in this publication is that cultural differences can move beyond binary opposites. In turn, it suggests instead that both colonial and postcolonial identities exist in a state of constant flux, mutually influencing one another.

An additional seminal postcolonial text, which is often credited as one of the first essays on postcolonial theory, is *Orientalism* (Said, 1978). This essay transformed political and academic understanding of how Western culture has historically produced the “Orient” or the East, and specifically as a type of opposite to the “Occident” or the West/Euro-America, as it is more commonly known – “From the beginning of Western speculation about the Orient, the one thing the orient could not do was to represent itself. Evidence of the Orient was credible only after it had passed through and been made firm by the refining fire of the Orientalist’s work” (1978, p.283). The Palestinian cultural theorist's analysis demonstrates how Western art, literature, and academic discourse have perpetuated negative representations of the East acting as a reinforcement of colonial power structures and Western dominance (1978). In attempting to reframe the way we engage with aesthetics, to undo these negative perceptions, I think of Argentinian thinker Walter Mignolo’s ‘Decolonial AestheSis’, which postulates and encourages that indigenous, Afro-diasporic, and non-European artistic works/situations/expression are legitimate (and important) ways of knowing and experiencing the world, as he writes, “Decolonial aestheSis asks why Western aesthetic categories like ‘beauty’ or ‘representation’ have come to dominate all discussion of art and its value, and how those categories organize the way we think of ourselves and others” (Mignolo & Vázquez, 2013). Mignolo points out how Western aesthetics have doubled as a colonial tool for imposing European standards of aesthetic value while rejecting and marginalising non-Western modalities.

Together, these contemporary and historical thinkers provide the postcolonial frameworks and tools for my research, asking how culture, and therefore contemporary art practices, can negotiate questions of hybrid identity, representations of ambiguity, and political/social power in a postcolonial world – delineating a need for strategy. Their collective emphasis on hybridity and non-hierarchical narratives continues to influence how I have understood contemporary art within a postcolonial context, particularly as my research looks at how artists from formerly colonised regions challenge and reimagine complex identity dynamics and historical narratives in their work. Their seminal ideas, especially Bhabha's, remain a recurring reference lens through which this dissertation is positioned.

Interactive installation: its art history and its criticisms

After surveying my previous academic research and relevant seminal texts related to postcolonial theory as the grounding of my arguments, I would naturally introduce a particular curatorial lens that allows me to concentrate my arguments within the realm of exhibition-making. Looking at the art history of immersive or interactive exhibitions is important because there have been critical theories and influences that form a lineage of ideas that have been relevant to my research. Following on from post-colonial theory, it should be noted that there are many art histories across chronologies and geographies, and the most internationally recognised story of art we know today has many research gaps in its documentation and has been dominated by patriarchal Euro-American hegemony and its exoticisation/marginalisation of the rest of the world (Mignolo & Vázquez, 2013). While there is crucial past and current cultural work to acknowledge and centre historically marginalised art histories and cultural narratives, this dissertation engages with the Western art historical framework out of necessity, as it remains the dominant institutional context within which contemporary curatorial practice and cultural institutions operate. While acknowledging the deeply limited nature of this framework, engaging with it critically allows us to examine how its history influences exhibitions today, and how its problematic structures might be named and reformed from within.

Although this dissertation foregrounds the 'multisensory' in contemporary art, we first need to acknowledge that the inclusion of this material often came from the desire to craft sociable experiences. Within this Western art historical canon, Nicholas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* (1998) comes to mind when dealing with 'social aesthetics' within an artwork. This publication, marking a pivotal intervention in contemporary art theory, retrospectively identified an art historical

pattern emerging in the northern hemisphere in the 1990s, where artists began to take a defined interest in human relations as a medium and modality. *Relational Aesthetics* provide the framework for understanding this type of art practice. Examples of this include the previously mentioned *untitled (pad thai) (1990)* by Rikrit Tiravanija*,* and others such as Jens Haaning's *Turkish Jokes* (1994), where the artist publicly played recordings of Turkish jokes being told by immigrants in Oslo. Both works involved sensory components – taste and sound, respectively – and we can see the link between the communal and the sensory. Bourriaud's arguments and the resultant reception of the publication also take a temperature of how people have engaged with this type of art practice/ exhibition-making in the past, which was informative as a background for this study.

Bourriaud defines these 'Relational Aesthetics' as a creative practice that takes "as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space." (1998, p.5). His essay repositions artistic practice from focusing solely on the creation of material objects to the production of social encounters and situations that are intersubjective. Through analyses of artists like Rikrit Tiravanija and Jens Haaning, *Relational Aesthetics* (1998) articulates how, at that time in the 1990s, contemporary artists were less interested in traditional visual concerns, and moved towards creating what Bourriuad terms "microtopias", which are temporary communities, as within the timeframe of an exhibition or finite artwork, that hold their existing social order (1998). The text's significance to my dissertation lies in its ability to draw connections between object-based and experience-based art, offering me a critical vocabulary for understanding works that prioritise human relationships and social exchange over traditional artistic gestures, often through the modality of sensory or immersive encounters.

It is also important to acknowledge that *Relational Aesthetics* remains relevant to a certain time and geography – Euro-American in the 1990s – and that while its ideas and vocabulary around social relations in contemporary artworks are influential, parts of its assertions have been challenged and criticised. Art historian Claire Bishop engaged with Bourriaud's ideas in 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics' published in *October* magazine (2004), for removing this so-called socially-driven art out of its socio-political context, in addition to overlooking the financial and colonial forces that shape these allegedly autonomous social spaces. She noted, "An effect of this insistent promotion of these ideas … is often ultimately to enhance the status of the curator, who gains credit for stage-managing the overall laboratory experience" (2004, p.53). Bishop, amongst others such as

Hal Foster, has problematised Bourriaud's work for its lack of attention and failure to address the economic and colonial conditions that underpin these artistic practices.

For example, Bourriaud celebrates the 'autonomy' of relational spaces, but his framework potentially risks perpetuating a neoliberal type of agenda by neglecting systemic inequities that shape cultural production (and the world at large). In contradiction, it seems to both reject and perpetuate Brian O'Doherty's desire for a 'white cube' exhibition released from a worldly context (1984). This dissertation builds on Bishop's critique of *Relational Aesthetics* by examining how multisensory curatorial practices can foreground these inequities rather than obscure them. By integrating varying sensory modalities in artworks and exhibitions, these exhibitions create spaces where embodied experiences intersect with historical and political narratives, offering a more nuanced alternative to Bourriaud's relatively depoliticized framework. In the context of decolonial curation, I see these critiques as developmental and vital to my research.

Nevertheless, while holding these criticisms and their weight, *Relational Aesthetics* remains of great interest to me in the context of my dissertation, not only because it provides a historical and social pivot in the way we think about contemporary art experiences, but also because of the introduction of the concept of 'microtopias' or 'arenas of exchange' (1998). Even to largely critique it, *Relational Aesthetics* continues to influence discussions about participatory art, object-based evaluation, and the role of the visitor in artistic, exhibition and cultural production.

Historically, *Relational Aesthetics* would have been informed by other Euro-American 'social experiments' that emerged in the 1960s, such as that of the Fluxus group, who postulated that "Fluxus is not a moment in history or an art movement. Fluxus is a way of doing things, a tradition, and a way of life and death" (Friedman, 1998, p.viii), implying some kind of wholistic art/life mirror. Led by George Maciunas in New York, USA, key Fluxus artists such Allan Kaprow (and his 'Happenings'), Yoko Ono (and her instructional pieces), and Nam June Paik (and the inception of video art) pushed the boundaries of what they thought should be allowed into a gallery under the umbrella of 'art'. In Europe, the Situationist International and Dadaism would have been influential precursors to socially-driven art. Dadaism was an artistic movement in the early 20th century that was based on the principle of 'anti-art' and involved figures such as French conceptual artist Marcel Duchamp. Widely known for his 'ready-made' artworks that were existing everyday objects placed

into an art context, Duchamp shifted thinking within the Western art world by rejecting 'objecthood' as a necessary criterion for an artwork. The Situationist International and Fluxus group continued this line of thinking by embracing the creation of concept-led 'experiences' in the 1960s.

As I am dealing with those who experience both/current or historical marginalisation, I believe it is also important to situate the theoretical underpinnings of multi-sensory art within other geographies. The Neoconcrete movement, which emerged in Brazil in the 1960s, founded by Lygia Clark, Helio Otitica, and Lygia Pape, amongst others, foregrounded considerations of the body and the phenomenological through abstract/geometrical art (Brett, 2011, p.258) - to answer the question, 'What did it mean to be a *Brazilian* artist?' Encouraging the visitor to interact with their works, the Neoconcrete artists saw the ability to touch, smell, taste, and fully experience work, in conjunction with geometric abstraction, at the centre of their manifesto. One work produced in this period, for example, was Lygia Pape's *Roda dos Prazares (Wheel of Pleasures)*, which consisted of a circle of bowls containing brightly coloured liquids that visitors were instructed to taste. The liquids were flavoured with both pleasant and unpleasant things like salt, pepper, vinegar, and herbs, although no signage indicated which liquid was which, leaving the deciphering up to the taster. The colour does not correlate with the taste of the liquid, but in itself, it calls into question how we use visual information like colour to draw certain conclusions about the taste and smell of something.

Looking at recent publications, James Voorhies' *Postsensual Aesthetics* (2020) and *Beyond Objecthood* (2017) were texts that held relevance to my study. In *Beyond Objecthood,* Voorhies engages with Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* (1998) as a starting point for examining 'object culture' in art historically and today. Through Voorhies' arguments, I would postulate that Relational Aesthetics may also be applied to curatorial practice, even though it may have been conceptualised to name a pattern of art and artists during a specific moment in the 1990s. At the beginning of this project, I wondered whether one could reconfigure Bourriuad's relational aesthetics and implement a 'Relational Curating' when dealing with multisensorial exhibitions. As above, we already have a few key ideas emerging from Bourriaud's texts that are relevant to this dissertation: the arenas of exchange/microtopias and the foregrounding of socialisation as an inherent part of the experience (and not a byproduct of the exhibition opening.)

Voorhies asserts that relational aesthetics, as a publication and an idea, has possibly been misread by critics, who have connected text to explicitly 'participatory' or 'socially-driven' art, and according to Voorheis, often overlook any aesthetic considerations present in Bourriad's work (2017, p.8) – the sense of a DIY design. In *Beyond Objecthood,* Voorhies prefers to use the term 'apprehension' over 'participation' because "it connotes the act of intuitive understanding through perception…[and] suggests a durational quality of becoming." (2017, p.14). In his arguments, 'apprehension' conveys a relatively neutral finite encounter, while 'participation' implies that the visitor needs to be involved with the art world, to participate, in order for its form to be fully realised. As museum attendance numbers are an intrinsic factor in the sustainability of cultural institutions, it is possible that these participatory/immersive practices can translate into a spectacle for gain, and thus, it becomes a delicate act to balance artistic vision with joyful entertainment, especially in the age of social media and personal cameras – performances or situations that go 'viral' have the potential to raise visitor numbers.

In *Beyond Objecthood*, the 'On New Institutionalism' chapter expands on the history of the experimental exhibitions (as Voorhies calls 'New Institutionalism'), especially in the 1990s. In these productions, the role of the curator evolved from being the custodian of an art or museum collection and arranging displays of the objects to a role that incorporates crafting poignant experiences and advancing institutional policy. In some ways, the curator merges with the role of the artist, exercising creativity to produce "situations that reduce the emphasis on the presentation of the singular art object in favour of a more integrated engagement between art, spectator, and institution" (Voorhies, 2017, p.72). The third chapter is underpinned by French philosopher Jacques Rancière's theories and their implementation in contemporary curatorial practice. Rancière's concept of emancipatory art renounces imposed messages and explanations while refusing to direct audiences' perceptions. It provides a theoretical framework for understanding how exhibitions can function as sites of critical engagement rather than passive consumption. Voorhies references Rancière's thinking in *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (2004), which focuses on the way societies determine what can be experienced and who has the authority to speak about these experiences. *Beyond Objecthood* engages with these ideas to dissect how these roles of the artist, audience and curator function within an exhibition playing field, as well as to gain a deeper understanding of how multisensorial exhibitions can create an 'apprehension' – socially, intellectually, and emotionally based on systems of "cognitive consensual structure "(2017, p.140).

These political and cultural factors intersect with one another and delineate an important point of connection: here, themes of postcolonial identity navigation, cultural liminality and embodied memory emerge as relevant to this dissertation.

At its core, *Relational Aesthetics* remains "an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space" (Bourriaud, 1998, p.14), which provides a theoretical framework that supports the communal aspect of multisensory apprehension and discourages the creation of environments that are not meant to be accessed.

Bourriaud's thinking emerged in the context of the rise of 'the city' as a cultural phenomenon, as well as globalisation caused by travel and communication becoming more accessible because of technology (1998, p.14). However, it is also worth noting that the American art critic, Hal Foster, saw this practice as problematic in the way that it often blurred the delicate boundary between a curator and artist, as the artist generates experiences and the curator takes certain creative liberties – a negatively connoted "arty party". This criticism acts as a type of 'guardrail' in this type of practice, where a curator or organiser must always be reflexive and scrupulous in their intentions. Foster notes, "Sometimes politics are ascribed to such art on the basis of a shaky analogy between an open work and an inclusive society as if a desultory form might evoke a democratic community, or a non-hierarchical installation predict an egalitarian world." (2003). Here, the key takeaway to note is that this mode of curating is not without its criticisms and that it does risk the possibility of becoming a spectacle for spectacle's sake if a curator sees the 'relational' as a utopic precedent of what all art should be like.

Psychophysics & sensory studies

To retrace the ground covered by this literature review, I have established the nature of my previous research which developed my research interest. I have noted the postcolonial framework upon which the intention of the proposed curatorial struggles sit, and I have engaged with an art history of immersive and participatory installations, giving an insight into how curators and artists have previously engaged this subject matter. Now, as I am dealing with the senses in this curatorial investigation, sensory studies is another field that informs my research as a way to talk about the metaphorical/theoretical tools used in the curatorial projects mentioned in this dissertation.

Encompassing a large scope of theories and applications, sensory studies look at how sensate perception (or how we are affected by the world) influences identity, behaviour, and development.

Author of *The Sensory Studies Manifesto: Tracking the Sensorial Revolution in the Arts and Human Sciences* (2022), David Howes is a key contributor to the field of sensory studies and sensory anthropology. In his book, he details a 'new age' of aesthetics, where design proliferates our modern lives at every turn under commercialism (2022, p.143) and thus, in service of this boom of needing to be 'appealing', art and design are beginning to intersect with experimental sensory and sensual perception with more frequency. This has resulted in a "sensory turn" in social sciences, which is closely linked to the 'affective turn', (2022, p.3), which will be discussed in the next section. Howes lay the foundation of his framework by first noting the key shift of the use of the word 'aesthetics': "The origin of this mutation in meaning can be traced to the work of the eighteenth-century German philosopher Alexander von Baumgarten … [who] took over the term *aisthēsis* from the Greek and applied it to his new "science of sense cognition"…" (Howes, 2022, p.144). This transports us back to Kantian aesthetics.

Erica Fretwell's *Sensory Experiments: Psychophysics, Race, and the Aesthetics of Feeling* (2020) marries the two fields of sensory studies and postcolonial engagement. Her chapters are split into the five senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching. In between each chapter, she writes intermission sections that combine the two senses of the previous and following chapter, bleeding into each other as a segue. For example, Fretwell discusses 'colourful sounds' and 'mouthfeel', where she explores the bridges between two senses, sound + sight and taste + touch, that are not as separate as we imagine them to be. Grounding all of this sensory exploration in the lens of decolonial thought, Fretwell begins by discussing W. E. B Du Bois' 'double consciousness' (1903), "Du Bois's enduring account of double consciousness boldly claims what we likely take for granted: that feeling is part of what it means to "be a problem" […] For Du Bois to limn the perceptual reality of racial difference, a new conceptual framework for consciousness had to be built." (2020, p.2). This understanding exists at the centre of my thesis - where finding new strategies for crafting experiences may broaden thinking, feeling and interpreting on a non-hierarchial playing field.

With Darwinian and Freudian thinking included, Fretwell takes a historic dive into psychophysics – "an experimental science that tested people's subjective responses to auditory, gustatory, olfactory, tactile, and visual stimulation" (2020, p.2) – claiming that although psychophysics is often seen as a

"footnote to the history of ideas" (2020, p.3), it may also shape the way we employ the senses in creative practice. Reading *Sensory Experiments* (2020) also provides this investigation with a connection to empirical data and science, whereas I should pull from knowledge regarding psychology, art history, and postcolonial studies. It is also important to understand how we have previously thought about the hierarchy of senses.

Affect and Cultural Production

With sensory studies in mind, it is equally vital to understand the way the senses come to affect us and how. The affective turn "undermined the hegemony of reason in social and political life and has unleashed a torrent of speculation concerning precognitive triggers and affective intensities" (Howes, 2022, p.5). Finding a place of belonging in a post-apartheid South Africa and a post-colonial world gives rise to the search for the 'realm of the beyond' (Bhabha, 1994), as well as the search for the tools to access such a place. "Affect rises in the midst of *in-between-ness* in the capacities to act and be acted upon," writes Gregg and Seigworth in the introduction of *The Affect Theory Reader* (2010, p.1), posing a possible answer to the search for the beyond. Affect, which is the radiance or underlying experience of an encounter, as theorised by affect theorists such as Brian Massumi and Gilles Deleuze, operates in a pre-cognitive realm, influencing the perception of those *affected* before conscious thought processes intervene. In simple terms, it is about viscerally (and therefore emotionally) experiencing a situation before we have time to assign a language to what is happening. As there is a direct interruption or relation to a body, the affective dimension is still concerned with the intellectual processing of an experience, but it foregrounds how someone or something can be physically affected by it. Gregg and Seigworth further note, "affect marks a body's *belonging* to a world of encounters … but also, in non-belonging" (2010, p.2) - there is the implication that how we relate to an experience an indication can be both positive and/or negative, and that there is no assertion that the use of affect is inherently constructive. There is hope, within myself and others, that the use and inclusion of affect will produce better futures for museums and galleries, but it is important to remind oneself that it is simply a neutral tool.

Ben Highmore's contribution to *The Affect Theory Reader* (2010), *Bitter After Taste: Affect, Food and Social Aesthetics* (2010) aligns with the research I conducted that first piqued my interest around sensory experience and affect – that of food, taste, smell and their collision with the world of aesthetics. Highmore notes a turn to the affect in order to bring the visceral body into thinking about how we construct and *feel the* culture, "toward a materialism where a body would be

understood as a nexus of finely interlaced force fields" (2010, p.119). The word that draws my attention is 'interlaced', which contributes something important to my thinking: that, cognitively, the sense cannot (or perhaps with great difficulty) be separated. For example, while it might be helpful to focus on one sense, such as taste, this sense would be incomplete without absorbing aroma or contemplating the texture. The senses are entangled with one another, especially in individuals who experience synesthesia[9], and entangled with emotions and cultural/chemical phenomena too – getting chocolates and roses for a loved one, being woken up and energised by the smell of coffee, feeling nostalgic after recreating a family recipe, being disgusted by a taste similar to a familiar medicine, etc. Highmore's essay then goes on to deal with the term "aesthetics", as a cross-modal methodology that deals with the totality of sensory perception, as Erica Fretwell writes, "this wide-spread (but under-recognized and under-theorized) *intersensoriality* chimes with the original (mid-eighteenth-century) definition of the term "aesthetic." (2002, p.143). While often associated only with the visual qualities of an artwork or artistic gesture, 'aesthetics' can etymologically trace the term back to its root word in Greek, 'aiesthesis" – 'a term to refer to an experience of sensate binding, connectivity based on the senses…" (Bal, 2015, p.132) – once again, reasserting that this philosophical inquiry involved the whole body (and how it can be affected) in its origin but became overridden by the European fascist quest for sublime beauty, creating a hierarchy of senses.

Highmore segues into taste, both as a perceptive sense and as a predilection, a discernment. Speaking matters of taste, he writes, "Not only does food provide so many opportunities for the production of shame and humiliation in the face of social ignorance and squeamishness …, it intensifies such production because food is orchestrated around the body" (2010, p.126). Indeed, it is the thing that sustains and nourishes us, but also provides pleasure, disgust, entertainment, illness, social status, emotion, and cultural familiarity, amongst other things. As I had noted in my previous research around, the infamous aphorism 'you are what you eat' or 'tell me what you eat, and I'll tell you what you are' gives space to many layers of meaning on how 'taste' (and other sensory encounters) gives us away, so to speak.

[9] "a concomitant sensation especially : a subjective sensation or image of a sense (as of colour) other than the one (as of sound) being stimulated" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.)

To return to the core of my research, here, another interesting term arises: Schismogenisis. Coined by Gregory Bateson in 1935, it points to cultural development as the result of multiple communities or groups coming into contact with one another, resulting in transformation and/or deep-rooted violence. Highmore names this concept to explore the cultural phenomenon of the "vicarious eating" of 'foreign' food - in places such as the United Kingdom where there is a fierce love for Indian food, although most white British customers remain uninterested in South Asian culture at large. Or, to use a South African example, where 'Cape Malay' cuisine is fondly celebrated, though often not acknowledged to be borne out of slave kitchens when indigenous South Africans and South Asians made substitutions within their Dutch masters' requests and palates.

In the essay 'Happy Objects' in *The Affect Theory Reader* (2010), Sara Ahmed explores the complex societal dynamics of happiness, challenging traditional understandings of emotion as purely individual experiences. She argues that happiness is not simply a personal feeling but a social and political construct that shapes how bodies and relationships are oriented in space. Ahmed theorises that happiness functions as a form of cultural capital, creating normative expectations about what should make people happy and how happiness should be performed. She examines how certain objects, relationships, and life trajectories are considered "happiness scripts" - predetermined paths that society presents as routes to fulfilment. These scripts often reinforce existing social hierarchies, privileging heteronormative, middle-class, and traditionally structured life choices.

The text critically deconstructs how happiness is used as a regulatory mechanism, particularly in how it disciplines marginalised bodies. Ahmed demonstrates how queer, feminist, and racialised subjects are often told they would be happier if they conformed to dominant social norms, effectively using happiness as a tool of social control. Using a phenomenological and affect theory approach, Ahmed explores how emotions are not internal states but are produced through circulation between bodies, objects, and social spaces. Happiness, in her analysis, is not something one simply feels but something that is negotiated, performed, and strategically deployed within complex social networks.

Sensory and Immersive Curatorial Practices

Lisa Myers, in her chapter 'Digesting Institutional Critique' in the anthology *Curating Lively Objects* (Muller, ed., 2022), writes about the 'sensorial' as a tool for curators. In her methodology

for the exhibition, *Night Kitchen: Under the Table Top* (2012) at Ontario University, the sensorial is put to work as a means to an end. Myers notes that food not only references both cultural biases and class differences but can also elicit a range of human responses and meaningful engagements from its audience (2022, p.85). The themes of the presentation focused on the discourse around nationhood, bureaucracy & post-colonial crisis within a community of Indigenous people in Ontario, using immersive sound and heating installations, as well as serving guests curated menus that referenced the artworks and ideas within the show. Myers combines the aspects of migrant community/ancestral connection through non-ocular-centric exhibition design elements.

Following this closely, Anne Nieuwhof's master's thesis at Leiden University, titled *Olfactory Experiences in Museums of Modern and Contemporary Art* (2017), was an interesting exploration of sensory art within a public institution. In her dissertation, she looks at two exhibitions, Tate Britain's *Sensorium* (2015) and Van Abbemuseum's *Delinking and Relinking* (2015 - 21) – which are slightly different from the previously mentioned artist-led presentations. These are more focused on public engagement for the benefit of museum ticket sales/visitor numbers. Nieuwhof details the challenges that should be considered (on a more ground level), such as the containment and control of a smell or the obligation not to overwhelm sensory-sensitive visitors (2017, p.29). While previous sources have dealt with the meaning, philosophy, and cultural impact of the sensorial within curating, Nieuwhof's thesis was a refreshing reminder about the practical decisions that govern large parts of curating. Her thesis goes into the history of the relationship between smell (or gustation) and art, citing the Western canon of Surrealism, Dada, and Fluxus, and the shift where galleries/museums began to include cafes on their premises. Nieuwhof also points out a key concept where she notes the limitations of ocular-centric experience and language – what should happen to the feelings and sensations that we don't yet have language for? Can the indescribable be described by an equally indescribable experience?

Conclusion

This literature review has attempted to trace the intersection of multiple theoretical frameworks that collectively inform the development of my dissertation. Beginning with my own trajectory from exploring 'the meal' as a potential gallery model, to conducting an object study on a wooden spoon as an accidental archive, I have demonstrated how personal research interests can point to broader theoretical possibilities. The examination of postcolonial theory, including the foundational

concepts of double consciousness, the third space, and cultural ambiguity, establishes the critical framework for understanding how hybrid identities and cultural complexities might be communicated through non-hierarchical means. In terms of the physical and practical, the analysis of interactive installation art history, acknowledging its predominantly Western canon, reveals both the potential and limitations of relational aesthetics, particularly when divorced from socio-political contexts, while reading into contemporary curatorial practices demonstrates that the sensorial is not merely an aesthetic choice but a strategic tool for challenging ocular-centric exhibition models and creating more inclusive cultural narratives. The integration of sensory studies and affect theory provides the methodological foundation for understanding how and why multisensory engagement operates pre-cognitively, creating spaces for embodied knowledge and cultural memory to emerge.

Together, reading these interconnected fields suggests that multisensory curatorial practices in postcolonial contexts can offer possibilities for crafting exhibitions that can hold ambiguity, communicate complex cultural narratives, and create spaces of encounter that acknowledge the entangled nature of identity, memory, and belonging in our contemporary world. The research foundation established here points toward curatorial strategies that embrace the indescribable aspects of experience.

– Sensory Interval –

Indigo Waves and Other Stories: Re-Navigating the Afrasian Sea and Notions of Diaspora (2022)

Scent: fresh, bright, tangy, earthy, soft, herbaceous heart note

Temperature: body temperature, warm

Sounds: whispering voices, the sound of water

Taste: none

CHAPTER 3: A SENSE OF WARMTH – AFFECT IN *INDIGO WAVES AND OTHER STORIES*

"I am the sugar at the bottom of the English cup of tea."
(Stuart Hall, *Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities*)



Figure 3: *Indigo Waves and Other Stories: Re-Navigating the Afrasian Sea and Notions of Diaspora,* Zeitz MOCAA, 2022. Installation view. Photography by Dillon Marsh, courtesy of Zeitz MOCAA.

Indigo Waves and Other Stories: Re-Navigating the Afrasian Sea and Notions of Diaspora (2022) was first presented at the Zeitz MOCAA as a travelling group exhibition that traced the historical and contemporary connections between Africa and Asia through oceanic routes and diasporic movements (Gropius Bau, 2023). Curated by Natasha Ginwala, Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Sedikung, and Michael Corsaro with the Zeitz MOCAA curatorial team, the exhibition transformed the enclosed gallery spaces into a multisensory environment where smell, sound, and scale created an immersive experience for the museum visitors. For the rendition in Cape Town, the artists 'interlaced' in this sensory forcefield were Akinbode Akinbiyi, Ayesha Hameed, Cetus Chin-Yun Kuo, Cinga Samson, Hasawa, Luvuyo Equiano Nyawose, Malala Andrialavidrazana, Myriam Omar Awadi, Oscar Murillo, Sancintya Mohini Simpson with Isha, Ram Das, Shiraz Bayjoo, Sohrab

Hura, and Thania Petersen. Through the work of these artists from South Asia and South-Eastern Africa, *Indigo Waves and Other Stories* sought to explore themes of forced/coerced migration, cultural exchange, and collective cultural memory, all while challenging the traditional Western-centric narratives of trade and movement across the Indian Ocean, such as that of the Dutch East India Company which travelled through southern and east Africa and South Asia to establish an exploitative spice trade in the 17th century (Gropius Bau, 2023). Featuring excerpts from an interview I conducted with one of the curators, Natasha Ginwala, this chapter will examine how the curators' deliberate engagement with sensory elements served to materialise complex histories of displacement and connection, transforming normally abstract concepts of diaspora into tangible stories through bodily experience.

Upon visiting the first room of *Indigo Waves and Other Stories*, the most immediate element that struck me was its olfactory component – there was a scent. A subtly earthy and floral fragrance occupied the entrance space and seemed to create a sensory pathway through the exhibition, compelling me, and the visitors who accompanied me, to seek its origin among the other artworks. This sensation of the smell was affirmed by a review of *Indigo Waves and Other Stories*, “Museum exhibitions are rarely warm — neither in the degree of heat nor homely reception — but as I entered the second floor of the grain silos at Zeitz Mocaa, a sense of warmth engulfed me … the sweet and tangy smell of citrus” (Moloi, 2022).

The very first impression of the exhibition, as echoed in this review by Moloi, is one of the most well-remembered elements of the presentation, and Ginwala further justified this in her interview, stating that, “I was thinking about how to commence in a meaningful way so that you're kind of entering, but you're also departing from a certain threshold of the outside, but you're also transported into another space in a way” (personal correspondence, 2024). After stepping through this portal, the visitor was met with artworks made from an array of different media, from paintings to photographs to sculptural installations to moving image (video) works, which were mapped out by the curators to attempt to reconfigure how people think about the history of the Indian Ocean (Ginwala, personal communication, 2024). This threshold moment became a vital opportunity for the curators to signal this proposed shift in thinking to the visitors before they had the chance to register the first visual artwork.

After travelling deeper into the theoretical world imagined by the curators, the visitor would come across the suspected source of the olfactory intervention: South African artist Thania Petersen's installation, titled *Rampies Sny* (Figure 4). This was a sculptural installation that consisted of a series of sheer organza bags that contained dried citrus leaves, hand collected by the artist's family, sprinkled with essential oils, which were mounted individually on the wall in a large-scale grid. The artwork was placed further in from the entrance, but its subtle but persistent sensory presence as the threshold impression that one encounters demonstrated how curatorial strategies like this can employ non-visual elements to guide visitor movement. Additionally, it can create cohesive experiential narratives within exhibition spaces – additionally, how this smell seems to almost create an incentivised mission within a visitor to find the source, keeping them stimulated. This curatorial decision to incorporate scent as a navigational element effectively aligned with the exhibition's broader themes of navigation, movement, and cultural connection across the Afrasian seas, at large.

The main aim of *Indigo Waves and Other Stories* was to unpack a web of linkages between Africa and Asia utilising the Indian Ocean as a conceptual vehicle and starting point (Gropius Bau, 2023). While the Atlantic Slave Trade (and its ocean) has held extensive scholarly attention, research on colonial exchanges and violence in the Indian Ocean context remains significantly less developed. This provided the museums and institutions with a chance to tell an oceanic history that is less expected, and certainly less Eurocentric. *Indigo Waves and Other Stories* exhibition sought to orient visitors within this lesser-known narrative, and by doing this, contribute to a larger counter-mapping of colonial history, how we think about geopolitics beyond Western involvement and trade, and introduce an 'oceanic' way, a communal horizontality, of connection. By communal horizontality, I draw on Edouard Glissant's 'rhizomatic' thinking (1990) and argue this as an example of a flattened, non-hierarchical social experience where traditional power dynamics inherent in the sensory hierarchy between participating bodies, i.e. the artworks and artists in a group show, are minimised. This in conjunction with the oceanic themes suggests a fluid, non-linear way of thinking about connections (much like the flow of a tide), but also a rejection of territorial boundaries that are central to Western colonial perspectives - the ocean historically represented spaces beyond colonial control and rigid borders.

In speaking with Natasha Ginwala, I was interested in the choice of the Indian Ocean as a conceptual framework, and how the curators brought in an oceanic 'modus operandi' by thinking

“of exhibitions as ritual spaces … because [exhbitions] are about transforming and mobilising your imagination as well as your body” (Ginwala, personal communication, 2024). From this theoretical point, I thought about the relevance of a connection to the French art historian and writer Romain Rolland and his concept of the 'oceanic feeling' that links to the conjuring of rituals – the sense of spirituality. Rolland discussed this idea in his correspondence with Sigmund Freud on 5 December 1927, describing the 'oceanic feeling' as a feeling of something limitless, unbounded, dissolution of boundaries between self and universe: “By religious feeling, what I mean … the simple and direct fact of a feeling of 'the eternal' (which may very well not be eternal, but simply without perceptible limits, and as if oceanic)” (Vermorel & Vermorel, 1993, p.304). The connection between ritual and eternity brings forward *time* as a concept, which also came up in my interview with Ginwala, and which emerges as a theme in many of the other case studies to be discussed. The role of temporality seems to be interwoven with the body, and by association, its senses.

While Rolland may have framed the ‘oceanic feeling’ primarily in religious/mystical terms, his confidante Freud interpreted it through a psychoanalytic lens in his publication *Civilisation and its Discontents* (1930) as an alleged regression in the early stages of a person’s ego development. In other words, Freud saw this "oceanic feeling” — the sense of being at one with the universe — as a leftover from early childhood, believing that it was crystallised before one was able to fully develop a sense of self (ego) that is separate from the world, and as a result, there is an experience of ‘boundless’ connection with everything around us. Freud suspected and argued that the ‘oceanic’ might be a return to that pre-ego state, and the term has evolved to have broader philosophical and cultural implications. In the context of contemporary curatorial studies and *Indigo Waves and Other Stories*, this Rollandian sense of ‘oceanic feeling' would add another layer of meaning: Not only the dissolution of individual boundaries into a collective experience but also the possibility of experiencing connection beyond rational, structured ways of knowing – such as through sensory activities, alternative to looking.

This interplay between sensorial affect, the Rollandian oceanic feeling, and ritual space in *Indigo Waves and Other Stories* provides a framework for examining how contemporary curatorial practices can engage with these complex historical narratives. The curators’ deliberate selection of multisensory artworks – particularly the olfactory intervention of Petersen's *Rampies Sny* – demonstrates how non-visual curatorial strategies can facilitate deeper engagement with themes of diaspora and cross-cultural connection. By analysing the exhibition through the lens of affect

theory, examining its multisensory artworks, and considering audience reception, this chapter will explore how curatorial decisions around sensory experience can transform abstract historical concepts into tangible, embodied understanding. This curatorial approach aims to challenge a more traditional eurocentric narrative of the Indian Ocean trade relationships but additionally seeks to create new possibilities for experiencing and understanding exhibitions about diasporic histories through embodied thinking and ambiguous feeling.

The Role of Affect in Contemporary Curatorial Practices

In service of this communal horizontality, the deployment of multisensory modalities or artworks within *Indigo Waves and Other Stories* created an immersive experiential framework that engaged with the concept of affect. In my literature review, I described the psychological term 'affect' as the radiance of an encounter operating in a precognitive realm. What does radiance mean in this context? In many engagements with the concept of affect, there is often a disclaimer about how challenging the term is to describe accurately and generously – by that case, 'affect' as a word almost leans into its definition by virtue: an experience or force before we make sense of it, the feeling before cognitive or deep critical thinking. Engaging with this concept has led me to understand how affect operates at the heart of exhibition-making, where curators attempt to make coherent and impactful experiences for the people who encounter them. In connection with this, I most appreciated theorist Margret Wetherell's definition of affect as embodied meaning-making (2012).

Using the theoretical framework of affect theory, the role of the curator does not stop at assembling and contextualising art objects or situations, but the role also extends towards orchestrating 'radiant' environments that can engender particular states of feeling, intensity, and relationality within the visitor – these decisions come with responsibilities to care for the visitor, the artist and the work, at the same time. Curators who engage with affect theory might seek to create presentations and/or corresponding programming that elicits visceral, embodied responses which are later processed into linguistic or critical thought, much like *Indigo Waves and Other Stories* – be it through the selection and arrangement of artworks, the use of multisensory elements like sound and scent, specific types of content, or the intentional structuring of movement and interaction.

While multisensory elements or artworks can hold the potential of being powerful tools for generating affect, it is also good practice to understand that affective engagement in contemporary

art exhibitions is not exclusively achieved through multiple sensory inputs. A single-channel moving imaged (video) work or a series of watercolour paintings might also conjure equally powerful precognitive responses from the visitor through other means, like their subject matter, scale, or spatial arrangement. However, I would argue that what makes multisensory curatorial approaches particularly effective, as in the entrance room of *Indigo Waves and Other Stories,* is their ability to potentially bypass visitors' usual or traditional modes of art engagement – primarily visual and intellectual analysis – in order to create an instant and embodied experience that aligns with affect's precognitive nature. In the case of Petersen's *Rampies Sny*, the artist's decision to incorporate olfactory elements in her work, and then the curatorial decision to include it, served to amplify the exhibition's ability to generate affect, creating what Ginwala described as a "threshold" (personal communication, 2024) experience that prepared visitors for further engagement with the exhibition's complex reconfiguration of socio-political relationships in and around the Indian Ocean.

To contribute another angle to the definition of affect, through the language of theorists Gregg and Seigworth, the concept may also be described as a "momentary or sometimes more sustained state of relations" (2010, p.1), which may involve any number of 'bodies– ' human or non-human, living or static. Within a curatorial project, this framework suggests that what we may be endeavouring to create be called an aesthetic of relations or a relation of aesthetics. Here, I am not referencing Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* (1998), but rather taking the words as their original meaning. In this context, aesthetics refers to its fundamental meaning: the way we perceive and sense the world around us. Through this lens, exhibitions become sites where a visitor can learn or generate meaning through the connections felt through a visceral engagement of the body. These encounters can create a web of relations at both conscious and unconscious levels.

Hand-in-hand with the confrontation of these relations or experiences, an inner response is triggered in the visitor. As researcher Marzia Varutti explains in her dissertation, *The Affective Turn in Museums and the Rise of Affective Curatorship* (2022), these emotions arise as a secondary response: "emotions emerge from the recognition of being affected and the labelling of that sensation as an emotional state" (2022, p.62). This process highlights the sequential nature of the phenomenology of exhibitions and art spaces – first comes the immediate, bodily response to these relations, followed by the cognitive processing that transforms these sensations into the

recognisable. This once again, circles back to the olfactory response as the first impression of *Indigo Waves and Other Stories*, that "a sense of warmth engulfed" the viewer (Moloi, 2022).

The 'affective turn' in curatorial practice represents a departure from the logocentric (or based dominantly on meaning) emphasis on representation and interpretation in art exhibitions that have long dominated museological discourse (Vatturi 2022). Instead, this approach privileges the atmospheric, the relational, and the communal as key sites of curatorial intervention and artistic encounter. Affective exhibitions, like *Indigo Waves and Other Stories*, become less about the transmission of fixed meanings or ideas, even when focusing on a geopolitical history, and more about the production of sensory and aesthetic resonances, in their totality, that have the potential to destabilise established modes of perception. This is done by challenging the usual bodily comportments in contemporary art contexts, and thereby, this way of curating begins to foster new forms of collectivity and political imagination.

The consideration and integration of affect theory into contemporary curatorial practice, while useful, may raise some important ethical and/or practical considerations that warrant careful examination. Questions might arise around a curator's ability and responsibility to engineer affective encounters or include sensory artworks that are reliable and consistent, given the deeply personal nature of emotional responses that might occur within visitors of the exhibition, whether negative or positive. This challenge becomes particularly salient when considering the curator's responsibility for how these approaches might impact visitors mentally and psychologically, especially when the exhibition deals with sensitive historical content, such as the engagement systems of colonial violence and erasure like that presented in *Indigo Waves and Other Stories*. The difficulty of evaluating the audience reception of these ephemeral experiences also may present methodological challenges for both curators and researchers seeking to understand exhibition impact, which predominantly relies on the subjective descriptions of the curators, visitors and any data that the museum may or may not be willing to share.

Another discourse point that emerges when examining this approach with criticality is that of the potential association of affective curation or artworks with the desire to produce a 'spectacle', which was summarised in the literature review, under the discussion of Claire Bishop and Hal Foster's critique of Nicholas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* (1998), calling it an 'arty party'. Some scholars and critics, such as critical theorist Walter Benjamin and philosopher Guy DeBord,

had expressed concern early, that an overemphasis on emotional and/or sensory engagement in contemporary art might reduce exhibitions to entertainment, by prioritising an immediate impact over sustained critical engagement. This critique draws on a long lineage of cultural theory, from Walter Benjamin's coining of the term 'the aestheticisation of politics' in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936) to German philosopher Theodor Adorno's seminal critiques of the cultural industry (1944), and Guy DeBord's 1967 essay *Society of the Spectacle*. These critical theorists' concerns about the emotional and/or psychological manipulation of general through aesthetic means remain relevant when considering how contemporary museums deploy affective strategies, and it is valuable to hold the question of, "to what end?" when engaging with multisensorial approaches to exhibition-making.

However, the application of affect theory in contemporary curatorial practice can be conducted thoughtfully in exhibitions. *Indigo Waves and Other Stories* demonstrates how these strategies can serve deeper pedagogical and social purposes to address nuanced narratives and complex histories beyond mere spectacle or to achieve a propaganda-related goal. When sensorial elements are intentional, considered and implemented ethically, the affective in curating holds the possibilities of creating stimulating, meaningful encounters that enhance rather than diminish visitors' critical engagement with a historical narrative. As we will explore in the following sections, the specific multisensory artworks in I*ndigo Waves and Other Stories*, and the nuances of audience reception contribute to an understanding of how exhibitions can balance emotional arrest with intellectual interest.

Multi-Sensory Artworks in *Indigo Waves and Other Stories*

The introductory essay for *Indigo Waves and Other Stories* was published on the website of the second hosting venue, Gropius Bau in Berlin Germany. In the text, the curators state that "visitors are invited to experience fluid associations that open up like the tug and swell of tides … The project's perspective is one of perpetual hybridity" (2023). This liminality is reminiscent of that of Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the 'third space', a liminal cultural space where elements from different cultures intersect and interact, rejecting binary oppositions (1994) and becoming a site for the re-negotiation and re-articulation of hybrid identities and their histories. In a sense, Ginwala's explanation of the beginning of the exhibition "departing from a certain threshold of the outside" (Personal communication, 2024) perhaps signals what was intended for the visitor to step and be



Figure 4: Thania Petersen, *Rampies Sny* (detail), 2022, organza bags, citrus leaves smoked with frankincense, essential oils, dimensions variable. Zeitz MOCAA, Cape Town. Photography by Dillon Marsh, courtesy of Zeitz MOCAA.

transported into - the realm of the beyond. The affective potency of the multisensory artworks selected to be included in *Indigo Waves and Other Stories* serves to destabilise fixed notions of cultural identity, encouraging a more fluid and nuanced engagement with the complexities of postcolonial subjectivity.

As I mentioned as an example in this chapter, the most prominent and immediate example of an artwork that contributed to this strategy was Thania Petersen's *Rampies Sny* (2022). In my interview with her, Ginwala noted that she saw the work as "… a set of offerings. It's hundreds of packages which are offered to the audience" (personal communication, 2024). Although the visitors might not have been able to physically take the small sachets with them, they were able to inhale the smell and in that small bodily way, they would consume a part of the work in order to process it, thereby accepting "the offerings" of Petersen (and the curators) in an intimate encounter.

Earlier I discussed that the smell of this specific artwork had travelled well beyond its sight line, all the way to the start and finish of the exhibition, but it is also noteworthy that this means there was olfactory influence and interference in the zones of contact of the other artworks in the same room and adjacent ones – artworks that are different in content, media and aesthetics. For example, I have

now mentioned the beginning of *Indigo Waves and Other Stories,* by describing how it smelled – citrusy, fresh – but I have not mentioned what was in that first room physically: a series of photographic collages of geographic and economic material, composed by Madagascaran artist Malala Andrialavidrazana (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Malala Andrialavidrazana, *Figures* (series), 2015 - ongoing. Zeitz MOCAA, 2022. Installation view. Photography by Dillon Marsh, courtesy of Zeitz MOCAA.

I asked Ginwala about this challenge, whether, as the curators, the controlling of the aroma was ever something they grappled with or discussed. Informed by Anne Nieuwhof's thesis on including sensory elements in museums (2017), I was interested in what workaround methods the museum employs in order to actually 'curate' the aroma. Ginwala confirmed that there was no attempt to control or sustain the aroma and that the bleeding of artwork forcefields became a part of leaning into the 'fluid associations' they spoke about in the curatorial statements (personal communication, 2024). What does it mean to smell citrus leaves and look at atlas imagery? The visitor is thrown into the deep end and might begin to draw abstract associations around the trade routes of dried herbs and fresh produce, the wood of the ship and the money that has changed hands. The smell of Petersen's work acts as a text for the imagery of Andrialavidrazana's, as Ginwala asserted in our

interview, “the way that the senses innately function is that they support each other” (Personal communication, 2024).

Looking at another instance, Ginwala brought up the specific example of the artworks of Luvuyo Equaino Nyawose and Oscar Murillo (paintings can be seen in Figure 3), who were next to each other. Luvuyo Nyawose’s *eBish’* consisted of a large-scale photographic installation which depicts the leisure of black South Africans and their relationship to the beaches in the country, a space that had previously been restricted by the apartheid government where the best beaches were reserved for the use of white people only. The work included a soundscape, a whispering chorus of voices, which Nyawose recorded from family conversations on the subject as he conducted his research – reviews describe the soundscape as “tender” (Moloi, 2022).

Oscar Murillo’s *surge (social cataracts)* (2019–ongoing) works (Figure 3), on the other hand, make use of the purely visual modality of painting and collage to reference French Impressionist Claude Monet’s *waterlily* paintings and rethink bodies of water, hydrological processes, and coloniality as “an impairment of vision that still throws a dense cloud over humanity” (Gropius Bau, 2023). Interestingly, by this assertion in the exhibition texts, Murillo’s visual artworks still seem to challenge the sense of sight, by invoking the ideas of blindness about “coloniality is a social cataract” (2023). But to return to thinking about this sensory proximity, Ginwala postulated, “for instance, the information that you're smelling, it can also be heightened by the work that is in the vicinity of the image.” (Personal communication, 2024). When viewing these works together, it was impossible not to hear the gentle layers of voices of Nyawose’s work while looking at Murillo’s blurred paintings, perhaps at the same time as smelling Petersen’s work which lingered everywhere, and in that way the works are in relation, in commune, to produce a third meaning between them all – a ‘third space’.

One may argue that in any group exhibition, the curator(s) and their audience are drawing associations between two or more works as they travel through space. However, the key difference between a purely visual link and one that includes multisensory elements lies in the involuntary nature of sensory perception. While visitors can choose where to direct their gaze, how long to look at an artwork, or whether to engage with visual connections at all, elements like smell or sound insert themselves into the experience of "embodied meaning-making" (Wetherell, 2012) regardless of whether they are wanted, required or not – our bodies perceive, absorb and carry these sensations

with us as an “offering” (Ginwala, personal communication, 2024). This involuntary, but productive engagement creates a more immediate form of connection between artworks, as the visitor's sensory abilities become an active tool used to access the curatorial narrative. In the case of *Indigo Waves and Other Stories*, the welcoming presence of the scent from Petersen's *Rampies Sny* and the barely decipherable soundscape for Nyawose’s *eBish*’ installation created an invisible thread that connected self-standing works throughout the exhibition space, encouraging museum-goers to engage with the exhibition's themes of alternative history, cultural connection/hybridity and movement on both a conscious and unconscious level.

Not all the works in *Indigo Waves and Other Stories* were multisensory ones, as evidenced by the inclusion of Murillo's paintings, Malala Andrialavidrazana’s photomontages and other primarily visual works. The curators’ selection of works demonstrates that Ginwala and Bonaventure did not employ multisensory elements merely for novelty or the sake of spectacle, for example, to achieve high visitor numbers. Instead, their curatorial strategy reflects a more nuanced understanding of how different modalities can work in concert to communicate a history that exists in the margins and footnotes of what the larger public may consider to be the history of the Indian Ocean. The curators allowed the inherent qualities of each artwork – whether visual, olfactory, sonic, or multisensory – to contribute to the exhibition's broader exploration of Afrasian connections and oceanic histories.

This approach created what might have been called 'fluid associations’ in the curatorial statements (Gropius Bau, 2023), where the relationships between works could be experienced through multiple channels of perception, much like the fluid nature of the oceanic movement itself. The careful balance between the traditional visuality of art and multisensory installations served to create an environment where visitors could engage with the exhibition's themes through whatever means most resonated with them, while still maintaining the cohesive narrative thread. This strategy demonstrates how contemporary curators can thoughtfully deploy sensory elements alongside conventional artistic media to create exhibitions that are both intellectually rigorous and experientially rich.

Audience Reception

While comprehensive visitor and museum data for *Indigo Waves and Other Stories* could not be made available for this dissertation, several key factors inform my understanding of audience

engagement with this exhibition. The Zeitz MOCAA's location is within Cape Town's V&A Waterfront area – this is one of South Africa's most popular destinations for tourists – and this resultantly and significantly shapes its audience demographics. The museum, which was designed by London-based firm Heatherwick Studios, has achieved acclaim for its noteworthy architectural design, and this further suggests that a substantial portion of exhibition visitors were likely architectural aficionados who may have come to see the Zeitz both/either as an architectural feat or as a key contemporary art institution in South Africa. These incidental or intentional visitors would have been the ones experiencing these narratives of Afrasian connection from their diverse cultural perspectives. However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this analysis. Without access to comprehensive visitor data or systematic audience feedback, which could not be made available, conclusions about broader visitor reception must be drawn cautiously.

The only published review of the exhibition in its South African and European presentation is the brief text written by South African arts writer Nkgopoleng Moloi, particularly noting the conceptual and intellectual rigour of the curatorial arguments presented. Previously quoted, Moloi highlighted the exhibition's distinctive warmth and sensory impact, but also further noted that "[t]hrough this inquiry, the curators gesture at the possibilities of re-imagining and re-worlding" (2022). My own first-hand experience as a researcher, as well as personal correspondences from industry peers, visiting the exhibition aligns with this published account, particularly regarding the effectiveness of the multisensory curatorial approach in engaging visitors with complex historical narratives. However, having only one published review, which in itself is not all-encompassing or thorough, should be flagged as an indicator of impact.

Future research would benefit from more detailed demographic data and structured visitor feedback from the museum venues to better understand how diverse audiences engaged with the exhibition's multisensory elements and thematic content. My interview with Ginwala, my first-hand notes, and anecdotal expressions from my peers are limited data points.

Conclusion

In this context, the exhibition does not merely represent fractured identities but actively constructs an affective environment where these ambiguities can be experienced and 're-mapped'. The multi-sensory elements function as 'vectors' of affect, transmitting intensities that resonate with the lived experiences of individuals navigating these postcolonial realities. This approach aligns with recent

scholarship on affect theory in postcolonial studies, which posits affect as a critical lens for understanding the embodied and emotional dimensions of cultural hybridity and diaspora.

By blurring sensory boundaries in a manner analogous to the blurring of cultural demarcations in diasporic identities, the exhibition creates an interesting affective correlate to ambiguous and fractured selfhood and geopolitical history. This multi-sensory, affect-driven curatorial strategy not only renders complex theoretical concepts more accessible but also invites visitors to engage in a form of embodied cognition, fostering a deeper, more visceral understanding of the nuanced and often contradictory nature of identity in the postcolonial milieu. Through this affective engagement, the exhibition contributes to ongoing scholarly discussions about the role of sensory experience in shaping cultural memory and identity, particularly within the context of postcolonial and diaspora studies.

– Sensory Interval –

Michael Rakowitz: The Waiting Gardens of the North

Scent: green, wet sand, chlorophyll, Damascus roses, herbs, wood, rain, nutmeg, tomatoes

Temperature: warm

Sounds: Constant rain dropping on the glass ceiling of the Baltic

Taste: various spices, rose, warm water

Dineo Seshee Bopape: (ka) pheko ye - the dream to come

Scent: clay, star anise, water, fungi, soil, tar, rosemary, lavender and thyme, fecund notes

Temperature: very warm

Sounds: rain, ambient soundscape, abstract

Taste: blackcurrant, herbs, rye malt, hops

CHAPTER 4: THE GARDEN OF DISCOVERY – RAKOWITZ AND BOPAPE

Introduction

In this chapter, I will analyse two solo exhibitions presented in European art institutions, each featuring an artist whose nationality, cultural background, and thematic concerns extend beyond the geopolitical boundaries of the country in which their work is being exhibited.

Michael Rakowitz

In October 2023, I travelled up to Newcastle/Gateshead in the north of the United Kingdom to visit the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art. The institution's director at the time of its opening in 2002, Sune Nordgren, positioned it as "a meeting place, a site for connections and confrontation between artists and the public" (Marsh, 2004, p.100) – foregrounding the importance of community as a priority within this arts institution, distinguishing itself from more traditional British art museums such as the Tate and the Royal Academy of Arts in London, which have been historically driven by primarily intellectual and/or academic pursuits rather than communal or socially immersive experiences. Currently, the Baltic Center's website explains the vision of the institution as one that is inclusive of "… opportunities within and beyond Baltic's galleries where individuals and communities can explore different ways of seeing and thinking about the world" as well as "..deeply root[ing] inclusivity and diversity in all our practices, processes and actions so we may better reflect and support our local, national and international communities." (Baltic Center for Contemporary Art, n.d.).

One of the exhibitions that was on display at the time when I travelled there was a solo commission by Iraqi-American artist Michael Rakowitz, titled *The Waiting Gardens of the North.* The installation consisted of a live indoor garden where plants from various geographies were housed and tended to. Aesthetically aligned with Rakowitz's larger practice, the exhibition drew inspiration from an ancient Assyrian relief (668–631 BCE) from the North Palace of Ashurbanipal in Nineveh, as the artist recreated the relic and placed it in the centre of the room (Figure 7). As the Baltic team asserts in the published curatorial statement, "Rakowitz's ruined garden acts as a metaphor for the overlapping histories of displacement, war, oppression, trauma and adaptation, that people, cultural objects and plants carry with them" (2023). When I initially saw this exhibition, I noticed an important link that emerged between cultural memory, organic material and the care that goes into community building.



Figure 6: *The Waiting Gardens of the North* (detail) Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, 2023/24. Installation view. Courtesy of the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art

For the first part of this chapter, I was interested in looking at the sensitivity behind Rakowitz's inquiries and expressions through the form of a garden because it confronted the visitors with a sensory experience and had the curators working with multisensory materials. Additionally, *The Waiting Gardens of the North* also encouraged a rather specific way of moving through the space – as one does in a botanical garden, as in a mode of leisurely discovery. Although the exhibition design remained quite minimal and spacious with white walls, white cubic planter boxes and raw wood scaffolding (Figure 7), the reason it was immersive was because of the *sense* of being surrounded by all of these fruit-bearing plants, herbs, and tea leaves – and their verdant smell. The plants were positioned next to small plaques that detailed snippets of the traumatic realities of forced migration and food systems (Figure 6). One sign reads, "Around 100,000 Palestinian households depend economically on olive production, and uprooted olive trees cause an annual $12.3 million loss", directly drawing correlations between large political/economic factors and simplistic food like an olive.

Dineo Seshee Bopape

In July of the following year, I travelled to Zürich, Switzerland where a friend recommended that I visit the Migros Museum für Gegenswartkunst to see Dineo Seshee Bopape's exhibition, *(ka) pheko ye – the dream to come.* Dineo Seshee Bopape is a contemporary South African artist, born in

Polokwane, renowned for her large-scale, multi-part installation works, where she consistently reimagines the spaces she inhabits and the materials she interacts with. She was the selected artist for the South African Pavillion at the Venice Biennale in 2019 (Something Curated, 2023). Her multidisciplinary practice has been recognised for its engagement with themes of postcolonial memory, material, spirituality, ecology, and socio-political histories. At its core, her work is argued to be rooted in the exploration of haptic (touch-forward) and other sensory modalities, alongside its capacity to convey complex narratives related to place, identity, and collective memory.

Bopape's *(ka) pheko ye – the dream to come* installation was a constellation of objects sprawled across a large warehouse-like room in an irregular, seemingly random layout, suggesting that although the exhibition may have held individual works, it came across as being reliant on being read as a 'sum of parts' – the total constellation spoke in unison. These object 'parts' include clay flowers, speakers on tripods, tea supplies for the visitor, architectural elements made from earth, water bottles and plastic chairs, amongst other organic and found objects. Echoing this sentiment of webbed connections and a meandering journey through the space, the curatorial statement notes that, "The journey through the exhibition is a reference to a visit to a dream temple, and can be seen as a map through a process leading to an antidote." (Migros Museum, 2024). From the title of the exhibition, we can glean that the experience the artist is aiming for is one of an otherworldly nature. This statement further points to the fact that while Bopape is constructing a carefully considered environment, she is also considering the movement of the visitor's body as an essential element that activates the installation.

The use of a garden metaphor

Aligned with the overarching themes of my research for this project, artists and artworks such as Rakowitz and Bopape respond to one of my key research questions: How do multi-sensory elements serve as a curatorial (or an artistic) tool for accessing and constructing liminal spaces of culture that allow for the coexistence of fractured and ambiguous identities in the postcolonial context? In the context of these two exhibitions, a curatorial format emerges to answer this question, which I have called a 'garden of discovery'.

Throughout history, many artists have engaged with garden-making as an extension of their practice. This form, in its literal sense of an artist's garden, gained prominence during the Renaissance in Europe when artists like Leonardo da Vinci designed elaborate gardens for their

patrons. In the late 19th century, the Impressionist painter Claude Monet created his notable garden in a village in Northern France, which served both as a living artwork and the subject of his water lily paintings. A contemporary example of this relationship between art and gardens would be the garden design of the South London Gallery, England: the institution commissioned Mexican artist Gabriel Orozco to design the space in 2016, and he looked to the aesthetics inherent in his practice to "[introduce] a geometry of intertwining circles … which subtly maps a series of discrete spaces or notional rooms" (South London Gallery, 2016).

In terms of the 'garden of discovery' that I speak about in this chapter, it takes a less literal but related form, and I use it here to describe an ever-evolving temporal situation or space that encourages the visitor, through sensory motivation, to physically travel through the space to gain more context or understanding. Thinking back to *Indigo Waves and Other Stories,* we can see that the exhibition aligns with this description too – Thania Petersen's *Rampies Sny* which greets the visitor at the door and guides them around the other artworks. Natasha Ginwala explained that the flow of their exhibition and the consideration of the body moving through a sensory environment was curatorial prioritisation for the team: "I think of exhibitions as ritual spaces sometimes in a way, because they are about transforming and mobilising your imagination as well as your body." (Personal communication, 2024). The beginning of a string of theoretical connections emerges here, where it becomes apparent *how* the sensory elements are often utilised in exhibitions dealing with postcolonial and/or decolonial subject matter – in order to inspire the visitors to move through space more consciously and curiously.

As I delineate in the chapter, the exhbitionary form of a 'garden of discovery' may be able to offer artists and curators nuanced ways of exposition that engage with time, metamorphosis, community and organic material. Perhaps unlike a static exhibition like a painting or sculpture show in a traditional white cube layout, real gardens exist in a constant state of flux – shifting with a life cycle or requiring care and human touch to flourish -– this allows artists to explore themes of impermanence, community building, and natural transformation. Gardens also provide a multi-sensory experience that immerses and entices the visitors when they literally 'enter' the work, experiencing and discovering scents, sounds, textures, and even taste in the case of edible "gardens" like Bopape's and Rakowitz's.

It was of great importance to my study that these exhibitions, in addition to being inclusive of multi-sensory elements and diasporic, decolonial or postcolonial themes, were presentations that I experienced in person. This is a reiteration of my methodology so that it is clear that maintained speaking to and about the encounter directly, without using a third-party description as a primary source of knowledge. When dealing with sound, taste, smell, and thermoception (and other senses) there is only so much that one can glean from textual retrospection and installation photographs alone. Although this chapter may embrace its form of written words and images – visual means – I have attempted to undertake more generous descriptions of the selected exhibitions in order to provide multiple angles of entry into the subject matter and curatorial methodologies.

The Waiting Gardens of the North

"I offer a traditional Arabic greeting, familiar enough that we often forget the beauty of its meaning: *Ahlan wa sahlan. May you arrive as part of the family and tread an easy path as you enter.*" - Michael Rakowitz, a letter to the Baltic Center



Figure 7: *The Waiting Gardens of the North* (detail) Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, 2023/24. Installation view. Courtesy of the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art

As an introduction to his artistic practice, Michael Rakowitz utilises multidisciplinary media to engage with and unpack global socio-political and cultural narratives, especially around the geopolitics of the Middle East. In his previous works, he has drawn inspiration from his combined

heritage, Iraq and America, and the history of the countries' political relationships to investigate these intersections of history and memory, often focusing on the legacies of colonialism, displacement, and cultural erasure. As Newcastle/Gateshead has a notably large Kurdish community (Whyman, 2023), the choice of an Iraqi-American artist is not random.

Rakowitz is known for the meticulous research that goes into his projects, usually of a monumental scale and using symbolic, found materials (like date syrup cans, Middle Eastern newspapers, and even the reconstructed facades of destroyed buildings) to construct intricate sculptural installations and participatory projects, such as *The Waiting Gardens of the North*. Speaking directly to this, the main artwork in the exhibition at the Baltic Centre, which recreates an Assyrian relief, is collaged using various Afro-Asian food packaging. Rakowitz is known to imbue his work with a visceral, indexical quality – that is, a direct causal relationship between the artwork and what it represents – that speaks to these tangible realities of the histories and social issues he addresses. The packaging as the medium itself is vital – it's not only symbolising displacement and migration but is actually from specific regions outside of the UK, meaning it carries physical traces of the place and people involved in such journeys or removals.

Consistently demonstrating a deep commitment to the exploration of marginal histories, his installation at the Baltic Center caught my attention as a case study for this dissertation – particularly the visitors' spatial navigation of the exhibition which involved a sense of sensorial exploration and discovery. In addition to this being aligned with my research questions, through immersion and everyday material, his practice positions the art object as a means of bearing witness, where "heritage can be both a source of identity and a site of conflict, particularly when cultural signifiers are looted, destroyed and erased." (Baltic Center, 2023). Here, Rakowitz chooses to envision alternative futures in the face of entrenched systemic inequities and the ongoing legacies of imperialism. As a curator, what fascinates me is how a practice like this can connect with institutional goals such as heightened public engagement.

The venue of the Baltic Center of Contemporary Art holds weight in my decision to include this case study because the institution provides a very keen example of what a contemporary art site that is deeply invested in its community looks like. The centre operates as a safe space for the people of Newcastle and Gateshead, seeking to uplift, inspire and alleviate socioeconomic stress – and in 2022, was listed as England's first 'Gallery of Sanctuary' for the Baltic's care of forced migration

communities in northeast England (Whetstone, 2022). Director of the Baltic Center, Sarah Munro, asserted that this designation "brings to the forefront our ongoing commitment to welcoming and supporting sanctuary seekers" (Whetstone 2022), and this claim was backed by its many forays into community engagement, learning resources, faith-based events and support with food insecurity – that sit in conversation with, but ultimately, extend beyond the realm of art.

This case study in particular makes for a productive relationship (and investigation) between an artist and an art institution who both value difficult conversations around diaspora and cultural identity, but also are committed to a vision of sensory interplay.

Food objects as a medium

Drawing inspiration from historical accounts of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, *The Waiting Gardens of the North* included many fruit-bearing plants from the Middle Eastern region such as date palms, olives, figs, quinces, and African milk trees, while also being inclusive of locally grown herbs and plants with which the migrant community of Newcastle and Gateshead are familiar. In an online video filmed for the exhibition, Michael Rakowitz recounts the legend of how the Hanging Gardens of Babylon were built by King Nebuchadnezzar for his wife, Amitys, who longed for her home town, Media, and felt a sense of un-belonging in Babylon – "a garden to cure homesickness" the artist calls it in a public letter written for the exhibition (Rakowitz, 2023). It was this familiarity with food produce, natural beauty and the resultant recipes that were associated with the plants that inspired this exhibition and alleviated Amitys' unease in an unfamiliar environment.

The decision to design a garden for this commission prompt does not inherently connect to edible goods or produce, and so it must be acknowledged that the inclusion of food was intentional on the part of the artist and curatorial team, and not an incidental element. For this chapter, I interviewed Katharine Welsh, the curator at the Baltic Center who worked on the project with Rakowitz and asked her about the discussions around adding fruiting or edible plants to this presentation. She explained that "The garden was also important because cooking is so central to people's sense of identity and belonging." (Welsh, personal communication, 2024). By this, Welsh is referring to access to ingredients that asylum-seekers[10] in Newcastle and Gateshead grew up with or feel nostalgic towards, which presents one of the exhibition's main goals: "Our garden is meant to be

[10] An individual who has left their home-country because of political (or social) turmoil, persecution and danger, and is seeking protection in a different country.

harvested … for tea-drying, spice-grinding, distillation of tinctures, and cooking" (Rakowitz, 2023). There is a link between an individual's culture and the food they eat, and including such material in an exhibition "intensifies such [affect] production because food is orchestrated around the body" (Highmore, 2010, p.126) – this becomes a form of embodied meaning-making. Additionally, by citing Amitys' longing for home as well as her husband's solution, Rakowitz draws our attention to the fact that this cultural comfort of food is something that has an extended history.

On a practical level, it can be a challenge for curators to include food and edible substances in their exhibitions because it opens up additional health and safety concerns (and administration). Producers and coordinators must be considerate of allergies, appropriate food safety, the risk of pests and consistently replenishing that which is consumed or expired. Welsh noted that the Baltic Center had put up allergy warning signs in the space before one accessed the exhibition, as well as making sure that the plants did not include any common allergies such as tree nuts (Personal communication, 2024). It was also not a prerequisite for the visitors to ingest the plants, but rather the use of the plants was embedded in the public programming of the exhibition, such as in tea-drying and drinking, spice grinding and cooking.

This is an interesting limitation that creates responsibility when working with consumable goods because a purely visual presentation may have the ability to offend or upset a visitor if the content is not carefully moderated or contextualised, but a consumable art exhibition runs the risk of tangible health issues that can result in, at its worst case scenario, a loss of life, which raises the stakes of curatorial care and consideration. The inclusion of consumable plant life that needs to be harvested also introduces another sense: touch.

The Affective Power of Touch (Care)

When thinking of including multisensory elements in an exhibition, many exhibitions gravitate towards smell or sound as a spatial disruptor (or navigational compass), but another challenging and participatory option is that of touch. If you spend enough time in a traditional Western art museum or gallery, you will learn that in the modern white cube model as well as the museological 'Cabinet of Curiosity' impulse, above everything, one must not touch the artwork. The reasoning behind the rule is to preserve the original state of the artwork and avoid damage, ensuring that the artwork is accessible as long as possible for the pleasure and/or learning of others. A simple fingerprint can introduce moisture, salt and/or bacteria on a vulnerable substrate which accelerates its decay. In

addition to this, the public may not be trained in the structural handling of an artwork and may cause irreversible damage by force/trauma on purpose or by accident. So, museums and galleries demarcate boundary lines on the floor and arm their proximity alarms to avoid this interaction. It produces an interesting complication regarding affect, and here I think about phrasing 'touch-starved', to be in the condition of yearning for contact with others – comparative to hunger for nutrition. The desire to touch is innately human (Fretwell, 2020, p. 222), especially when we are met with an unusual visual experience, like an artwork, and are trying to acquire more information.

Unlike museums where visitors typically maintain this respectful distance, Rakowitz and the Baltic Center invited direct physical interaction with *The Waiting Gardens of the North* - visitors could walk through, sit within and physically engage with the space. Not only looking at visitor engagement, what I also found compelling was the idea that the garden needed to be cared for, tended to, and eventually harvested for use.

In the planning phases of the project, there was an encouragement for this type of interaction through the inclusion of plants, as the Head Gardener Nicola Bentham details, "We've went for evergreens, what we can use … with the Lamb's Ear, which the benefit is with the touch" (as cited in Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, 2023, 3:59), indicating that thought around sensory encounters was a priority for the organisers.

The practice of gardening itself offers artists a different kind of creative process - one that requires touch, patience, collaboration with natural forces and other people, and an acceptance of unpredictability. Gardens, as a larger metaphor, also allow artists and curators to explore questions of order versus chaos and control versus wildness. From the visitor's perspective, the installation may have offered a unique way to experience art that breaks down traditional 'touch-starved' barriers between the audience and the artwork. This creates a more democratic and accessible form of public art that changes with each visit and each visitor's chosen path through the space.

Curatorial Decisions and Artist-Curator Collaboration

In my interview with Welsh, I asked about the structure of the commission: why was the curatorial team looking for something like a garden to put in an institution? Why not a painting show or a photography exhibition that spoke to the same theme instead? The curator noted that the exhibition was funded by the IWM 14-18 NOW Legacy fund (led by the Imperial War Museums in the UK)

which engages with projects that focus on themes of war and conflict. In order to accept that funding with care and sensitivity for their local community, the Baltic Center dreamt up the idea of a garden installation that could double as a versatile space for activations and events (Welsh, personal communication, 2024). It was apparent, and important to note, that Michael Rakowitz was approached with this vision in mind, and that the concept of the garden did not come from the artist alone, although he made it his own – which Welsh corroborated in our interview (2024). Rakowitz's thematic interests and inclinations towards certain media made him an ideal candidate for the Baltic Center and the IWM to approach with this particular kind of commission.

In addition to this, the exhibition also emerged from a further collaboration between several local charities and socio-economic initiatives. This includes The Comfrey Project (a community-building organisation for the integration of asylum seekers and refugees in Gateshead), West End Refugee Service (a Newcastle charity supporting local asylum seekers and refugees), Scotswood Garden (a community garden promoting food system care and environmental learning), Dilston Physic Garden (a botanical garden for scientific research), Herb Hub (an initiative for herb cultivation), and Baltic's Language Café (the Baltic Center's monthly event for people to informally practice their English). The collaboration manifested in the programming around the exhibition and in the choice of plants. In the end, *The Waiting Gardens of the North*, although conceptually fleshed out and grounded by the artist, was a project for a community about those community's needs, made by said community.

Multi-Sensory Engagement and Time

Highly similar to the review of *Indigo Waves and Other* Stories, a review of *The Waiting Gardens of the North* opens with sensory impression as the focal point: "On entering … one is first overwhelmed by the sensations in play in the art: light and smell … the work makes its point by placing one first fully, bodily within the space." (Whyman, 2023). The 'garden of discovery' as an exhibition model offers an immersive sensory experience that engages visitors through multiple affective registers, creating what we might call a temporal phenomenology of encounter – in simple terms, it draws attention to the passing of time. A garden-based navigational experience, like in Rakowitz's installation at the Baltic Center, may dissolve the boundaries between visitor, artwork, and environment, allowing for a dynamic and evolving engagement with sensory stimuli, and counteracting modes of the traditional gallery.

From an affect theory perspective, gardens generate what theorists like Kathleen Stewart describe as "ordinary affects" (2007) - emergent sensory experiences that unfold through time and bodily encounters. The temporal dimension is crucial here: a garden exhibition is not a static display but a living, breathing environment that changes moment by moment, and in direct correlation with human care and interaction. Visitors can experience ongoing transformations - shifts in light, subtle movements of plants, variations in temperature and wind, and the gradual growth and decay of living materials. In *The Waiting Gardens of the North*, visitors are simultaneously engaged through sight (colours, forms, spatial compositions), touch (textures of leaves, soil, tea-making, spice-grinding), smell (botanical fragrances), sound (rain), and even taste (tea and spice workshops). This sensory multiplicity prevents passive absorption, instead inviting an active, embodied participation.

The temporal immersion in a garden exhibition creates what phenomenological philosophers might call a 'dwelling' experience (Zaborowski, 2005), where time becomes non-linear and processual – visitors move through space not just physically but temporally, and each visit becomes unique, with seasonal changes, plant growth, and environmental shifts creating perpetually new encounters. Such environments may have the ability to challenge traditional museum paradigms of display and spectatorship. *The Waiting Gardens of the North* fundamentally disrupts the notion of art as a fixed, controlled object, instead presenting experience as fluid, collaborative, and co-produced between human and non-human actors. Additionally, the slow, contemplative pace inherent in garden environments creates space for emotional processing and reflection. The Baltic invited migrant communities to pause, to observe subtle changes, to become attuned to the nuanced rhythms of living systems, and "wish to make [the plants] take root, whilst they wait, hopefully, to take root themselves" (Rakowitz, 2023).

This approach resonates with affect theorists' interest in how environments generate emotional landscapes. The garden becomes not just a site of display but a generative space where emotional states are continuously negotiated and emergent. Visitors don't just observe; they are absorbed into a living, breathing ecosystem of sensory and emotional stimulation.

(ka) pheko ye – the dream to come

> "It makes me wonder what the easiest way might be to speak to (an)other life form, and whether that life form is also a part of me. In a dream space, I feel it may be easier to speak, converse and heal."
> (Bopape, Interview with *Something Curated*, accessed 19 November).

My first encounter with Bopape's work occurred during the 2018 Berlin Biennale, Gabi Ngcobo's *We Don't Need Another Hero*, where Bopape created an architectural environment filled with rubble arrangements, suffused with yellow light. The artist played a 1976 recording of Nina Simone singing *Feelings* that echoed through the KW Institute for Contemporary Art's expansive ceilings. As in this case and many others, Bopape employs a range of mediums — including installation, moving images, sculpture, and soundscapes — to create immersive environments that affect the visitor and challenge conventional understandings of space, time, and the sensory experience, often leaning towards organic matter as material.



Figure 8: *(ka) pheko yes - the dream to come*, Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, 2024. Installation view. Courtesy of the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst.

Bopape's practice investigates how suppressed collective histories might be found in and 'liberated' through the material and the immaterial world – how does engaging with our ancestors encourage us to see history from different angles? As art critic Zoë Hopkins writes of her work, Bopape is asking questions rooted in the South African historical context of "what it means to live in a body

mediated by racism and its colonial roots, in a world marked by the ongoing extraction of land and people" (2023). The artist frequently incorporates elemental materials in her installations such as soil, water, plants, timber, foodstuffs and ash, evoking connections to land and ritual, "alluding to concepts of fertility, life and renewal" (Something Curated, 2023). The artistic interventions and environments crafted by Bopape are often characterised by her deep interest in and engagement with African cosmologies, mythologies, oral traditions, and ecological degradation, drawing from historical sources and contemporary discourses. Her installations often seek to destabilise linear narratives by inviting viewers to inhabit spaces of reflection (or dreaming, in this case). By employing abstraction and fragmentation, Bopape attempts to resist fixed interpretations, creating works that remain rhizomatic (Glissant, 1990), effective, and open to multiple readings and encounters.

As the focus of this chapter, Bopape's immersive installation, *(ka) pheko ye – the dream to come* presented at the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst in Zürich, Switzerland in 2024, aimed to conjure critical acts of "dreaming" and subconscious states through the integration of natural and sensory materials scattered about the exhibition venue, meant to produce an ambience of collective healing. Visiting the museum on a quiet summer afternoon in July, I would like to acknowledge that I had the unique opportunity to engage with the exhibition in solitude which would have strongly influenced my experience of the exhibition. There was a sense of quiet that may not have always been present.

Although physically absent, Bopape appears to project her presence into the exhibition, welcoming visitors through an intimate and symbolic gesture: the invitation to have a warm cup of tea before exploring the space. This first station (Figure 8), a semi-circle structure with low stools, hot water urns, empty cups and a tray of tea, is what you encounter when you initially walk into the gallery. Notably, there was also a set of instructions that encouraged visitors to serve themselves some "Raisibe Dreaming herbal tea by Dineo Seshee Bopape, produced by Frantsila in Finland," listing its ingredients as blackcurrant, great mullein, heather, rosemary, rye malt, and hops. The deliberate selection of these herbs underscores the artist's intention to extend the metaphorical act of dreaming through a carefully curated sensory experience. This tea station creates the impression of being greeted warmly by the artist herself. Seated on a low stool while sipping the herbal tea, I was able to

absorb the exhibition's atmosphere before venturing further, which slowed down my movement through the space and produced a relaxed, but intentional pace.

The rest of the exhibition consisted of several structures or stations, inspired by southern African architecture, that were made from earth and wood – low walls, curved barriers and enclosures, lapa-like domes – as well as scattered found elements like bottles of water, herbs, and plastic garden chairs. The walls also held flower-like shapes on them, rendered either in neon or painted on with slip clay. With no clear instruction or path on how to navigate the space, the visitor may have been led to wander around in search of something, as previously quoted, Bopape wanted the exhibition to feel like "an be seen as a map through a process leading to an antidote" (Migros Museum, 2024).

Understanding Smell (and Taste)

Smell has often been considered the basest of senses "too subjective even for a science of sense experience" (Fretwell 2020, p.133), yet it seems to be a key pathway into memory, looking at the often quoted Proustian sentiment: "…the smell and taste of things remain poised a long time, like souls, ready to remind us…" (1913) as the author recalls his childhood after eating/smelling a stale madeleine dipped in tea. In *(ka) pheko ye – the dream to come*, we are challenged to 'dream' more than remember – but in that dreaming, it is the artist's wish to incite a firing up of the visitor's brain in unique, rhythmic ways, to produce cultural healing, spiritual rest, and emotion in reaction to colonial history (Something Curated, 2024). Bopape concludes that smell and taste would be the best way to achieve her for her practice, and more specifically, this exhibition.

Fretwell recounts her physiological/sensory research, presenting and problematising the early 20th-century assumptions by Julius Bernstein, in that "olfactory nerves lead to the ancient core of the brain … which processes emotion and which rules "lower animals," validated smell as a sense bound to primitive animals" (2020, p.137) Two things to note here: one, that Bernstein makes the connection that the sense of smell is linked to the processing of emotions before it is processed as language, and two, that in Euro-American history, the olfactory sense seems to be easily dismissed and relegated to being associated with simple animals because of this exact weaker linguistic connection.

To address the former point that Bernstein makes, my research interest in smell and taste as a curatorial tool was piqued when I learned that in neurobiology, the human brain has a unique way

of processing olfactory information, largely due to the biological structures of our nerve pathways – as American neurobiologist, Sandeep Datta, asserts that, “You can think of the original brain as being a sense of smell plus a sense of navigation plus a sense of memory” (McDonough, 2024). Once absorbed by the receptors in the nose, this smell ‘information’ is sent to areas in the brain, which are associated with emotion and memory as if building up a map of experience (McDonough, 2024). This connection, therefore, seems to evoke strong emotional responses and memories when encountering familiar or strange, pleasant or unpleasant smells.

Referencing a study conducted in 2013 via the Dresden Medical School, Dr Sabrina Stierwalt, an associate professor working to make scientific topics more accessible, summarises that “the researchers … found greater brain activity associated with olfactory stimuli (like the smell of a rose) than with visual stimuli (like the sight of a rose)” (2020). While I don't intend to expand this project into the neuroscience field, as this is a humanities-focused study on curatorial practice, I felt it was important to briefly touch on these points. What is significant here is that the experience reaches the emotional/memory areas of the brain without passing through the usual relay station for all the other senses like sight and sound, making the experience of a smell inherently different from any other modalities. Ultimately, the museum model we know today was not built for multisensory artwork or its appreciation (Kjellmer, 2021 p.75), but in maintaining “disinterested aesthetics”, curators may be denying themselves neurologically diverse avenues of communication.

To return Bernstein’s statement, the latter claim that a developed or more sensitive sense of smell is an indication of a “lower animal” which is another complex socio-cultural aspect to unpack. There is an inherent racist bias here where the outcome of these c.19/20th-century European studies, opinion pieces and books seem to rest at the conclusion that “[o]lfactory sense-ability proves the developmental belatedness of savages and the modernity of white people” (Fretwell, 2020 p.138). The assertion is that the ‘civilised’ man does not need to rely on his nose for survival, and thus the sense becomes weakened pointing to the luxury of his life. Claims like these bear a similar essence to phrenology, the 20th-century pseudoscience of assigning personality traits based on the shape of one’s skull, because it can often be misused to support racist, sexist and/or other discriminatory ideologies, especially in the hands of colonialists, giving rise to the belief that there is a ‘natural’ superiority that one race holds over the other. Proponents often made these unfounded ‘scientific’ claims about civilisation and racial superiority, based on anatomical differences, contributing to highly problematic practices such as eugenics and colonisation.

In this sense we can understand part of the reason behind Bopape's use of olfactory and gastronomic elements in her work – this modality disrupts these historically entrenched socio-political hierarchies and cultural assumptions of the senses, inviting the visitor to reconsider the role of smell as a pathway to memory and a potent artistic/curatorial tool for contemporary art exhibitions. The ability to smell is far more than a 'primitive' sense relegated to the margins of intellectual and cultural discourse, instead, it can serve as a profound connector of ideas. This directly challenges the Kantian hierarchy of the senses, the 'disinterested aesthetics', wherein the sense of sight has long been privileged as the vehicle of 'pure' aesthetic experience, detached from the messiness of bodily sensation. *(ka) pheko ye – the dream to come* carries the potential to reframe behaviour and encounters in a contemporary art museum.

Yet, this positioning does not argue that the power of the olfactory is an inherently good or pleasurable experience for all exhibitions and visitors. For example, curatorial researcher Viveka Kjellmer details her experience in a specific exhibition in her fieldnotes, a precursor to her exploration of scent in the museum: "…I gag. My reaction is instantaneous … The experience is brutally physical, the smell fills the room, my nostrils; and subsequently my entire body with its presence" (2021, p.72). Aromatic elements have the capacity to provide just as much discomfort, as they do beauty – the tool is in the hand of the wielder. Following Kjellmer's description in comparison to the Migros Museum team's curatorial choices, we can see that the scent profile and the tea blend in *(ka) pheko ye – the dream to come* was composed to be pleasant and relaxing, even though it may be polarising in its herbaceous-ness.

Immersion and Liminality in Bopape's Work

Bopape's *(ka) pheko ye – the dream to come* presents an evocative exploration of memory, healing and the negotiation of postcolonial trauma through the careful orchestration of various sensory elements. I would argue that the multi-part installation actively resists the dominance of ocular-centric encounters in favour of a more multisensory engagement by using sound, smell, and even tea as key vehicles for meaning-making. This is not to say the artist does not pay attention to how the exhibition looks, as there are many visual choices made to produce a coherent constellation of works. These elements have been combined to create an immersive environment where the visitor

becomes both a witness and participant in Bopape's exploration, engaging with the layered

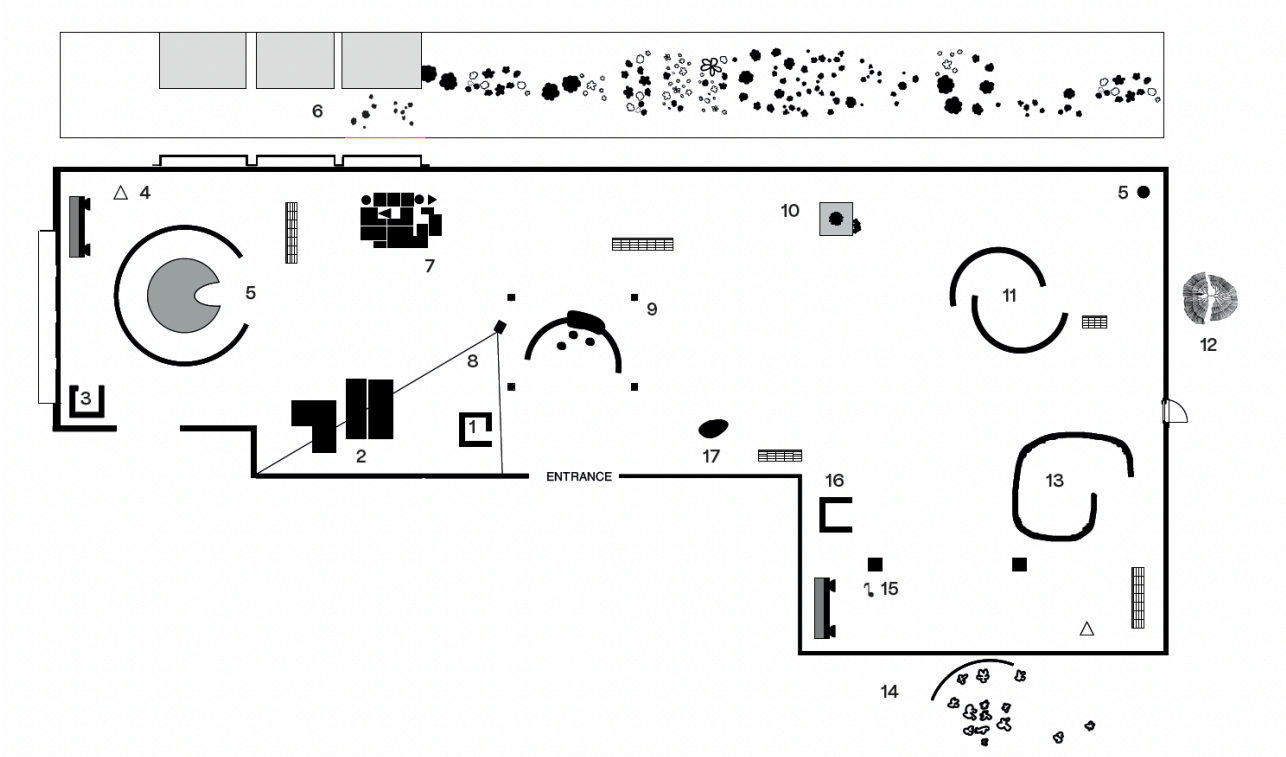

Figure 9: An installation key of *(ka) pheko ye – the dream to come,* Migros Museum für Gegenwartskuns, 2024. Courtesy of the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst.

complexities of the loss and recovery of a dream or a memory.

Sound, or the sense of hearing, plays a pivotal role in the exhibition which in turn, offers the visitor a non-linear way to engage with memory and history. Within the exhibition, there were a few points where speakers were displayed on basic scaffold-like structures, for example, at points 15 and 9 in the exhibition map (Figure 9). These speakers played an ambient soundscape, which was composed of a mix of abstract voices, resonant drones, and natural sounds like flowing water. By enveloping the audience in these multiple-channel sound installations, Bopape collapses the boundaries of time, space and the human body, evoking the sense of being inside of a memory or a dream — a realm where the past and present could coexist for the visitor in fluid dialogue, which is particularly significant when considering the suppressed or fragmented narratives arising from postcolonial subjects and places.

In terms of aroma, Bopape designed a specific scent for the room, "[c]ombining dark, grounding notes of tar and tall pine with clarifying rosemary, soothing lavender and dream-inducing thyme and rue", as the exhibition handout indicates (Migros Museum, 2024). Yet, the olfactory presence does not come from this alone, given that the artist utilised materials such as soil, star anise, and other

herbs to construct the various elements of the exhibition. As the curatorial statement indicates, “Soil is one of the recurring matters in the exhibition, as a repository of the universe's memories and potential and as a record of social, historical and political stirrings” (2024). This means that in addition to the ‘dreamy’ contrived scent diffusion, there are also incidental olfactory notes to further connect the body to cultural memory.

The use of smell is not arbitrary; in African spiritual traditions, certain scents, such as sage or frankincense, are employed in ceremonies for cleansing, protection, and ancestral communication (Mbiti, 1991). By infusing the space with these scents, Bopape attempts to bridge the spiritual and the physical – thereby inviting her ‘guests’ to engage with the work on a corporeal level. Much like in *Indigo Waves and Other Stories*, the scent becomes a medium of navigation through a memory that is both triggered and embodied, bypassing the intellectual and activating emotional responses. In the context of postcolonial trauma, Bopape’s intentional use and the curator’s intentional inclusion of sensory engagement served as a reclamation of rituals and histories that colonial systems sought to erase.

One of the most intimate and immersive aspects of the exhibition is the inclusion of the tea station, which I mentioned earlier was located at the entrance of the exhibition (Figure 8). The artist invited visitors to partake in herbal tea prepared on-site, transforming the gallery space into a site of gathering and healing. This gesture is profoundly symbolic, aligning with the idea of hospitality as both an aesthetic and political act. Sharing tea becomes a micro-performance of care, encouraging moments of reflection and connection among visitors. The choice of tea — often a blend of indigenous herbs — echoes the themes of grounding and resilience, reinforcing the ties between the land, the body, and memory.

Bopape’s sensory strategies work in concert to facilitate a deeper understanding of postcolonial trauma and recovery. Each element—sound, smell, taste—serves as an entry point into the histories and emotions that linger within the individual and collective psyche. The liminal spaces created by these sensory encounters mirror the in-between state often experienced by those navigating diasporic and hybrid identities, a key theme in postcolonial discourse (Bhabha, 1994). By fostering immersion, Bopape transforms the gallery into a site where the personal and the political intersect,

offering visitors the tools to process and reimagine their connections to history, identity, and healing.

In sum, (*ka) pheko ye – the dream to come* exemplifies how sensory immersion can transform curatorial practice, shifting it from a space of passive observation to one of active, embodied engagement. Through her integration of sound, smell, and taste, Bopape constructs a profound sensory ecosystem that not only represents but also enacts healing — a radical act of resistance in the face of postcolonial erasure.

Curatorial Decisions and Artist-Curator Collaboration

The collaboration between an artist and curator is always a dialogue, but when the artwork extends into multisensory realms, this relationship becomes even more dynamic and layered. In *(ka) pheko ye – a dream to come*, where olfactory, tactile, and auditory elements come into play, the curator must navigate the delicate balance between facilitating the artist's vision and ensuring that the sensory elements function cohesively within the broader exhibition framework and the museum's larger program. Bopape's multisensory installations demand a level of curatorial responsiveness that includes both the basic exhibition logistics and also expertise on how to mediate an experience that engages with the emotional, embodied, and communal. The curator for this exhibition was Michael Birchall, and while I aimed to include the curator's perspective for this case study, as I have done with others, scheduling constraints prevented an interview from taking place within the project timeline.

Sensory curation introduces unique challenges and opportunities. As Lisa Myers highlights in *Curating Lively Objects* (2022), incorporating sensory elements such as soundscapes, scents, or heat into an exhibition creates encounters that are not only physical but also culturally and emotionally charged. For a curator, this may mean taking on the role of what I might describe as an 'emotional architect', beyond normal exhibition organisation. The curator and artist must work together to calibrate these multisensory components, ensuring they evoke the intended affective resonance, such as 'dreaming' in the case of Bopape, while also considering practical constraints such as the intensity of a scent, the audibility of soundscapes in a shared space, and the wariness of creating a surface-level spectacle.

In Bopape's work, where the sensory often evokes themes of healing, memory, and rest, the curator steps into a role that requires acute sensitivity to the artist's intentions. For example, when Bopape incorporates scents or materials rooted in specific cultural or personal histories, the curator must understand the significance of these choices. As Erica Fretwell's *Sensory Experiments* (2020) discusses, sensory experiences are inherently tied to identity, emotion, and memory, meaning the choices around their presentation carry deep weight.

A curator in this context becomes a translator and mediator, charged with creating a space that allows audiences to encounter the work as a layered experience rather than as a mere exhibition of objects. This involves navigating the inherent power dynamics between the artist and curator. While the artist may lead the conceptual direction, the curator brings their expertise in spatial design, visitor flow, and institutional constraints. In this partnership, collaboration becomes a delicate negotiation where the artist's vision is amplified without being overshadowed by curatorial intervention.

By integrating sensory curation into a broader strategy, the curator not only supports the artist's vision but also reshapes how visitors engage with exhibitions. This mode of curation invites the audience to become explorers of their own embodied memories and emotions, fostering connections that transcend traditional viewing practices. Through this, curators like those collaborating with Bopape offer new models for understanding the potential of multisensory exhibitions to challenge colonial histories, redefine cultural narratives, and engage visitors on a profoundly visceral level.

Multi-Sensory Engagement and Time

In Dineo Seshee Bopape's work, time is not just a backdrop but an active participant in shaping the visitor's sensory experience. Unlike Rakowitz's explorations of temporality, which emphasise the layered unfolding of history and cultural memory, Bopape's temporal immersion invites visitors into a meditative state of presence. Her multisensory environments create a rhythm that slows down the pace of engagement, encouraging visitors to linger, absorb, and respond emotionally to the stimuli around them. The use of olfactory elements, tactile materials, and ambient sounds fosters an embodied sense of duration, allowing the experience to unfold gradually, much like the organic rhythms of nature she often references.

Bopape's approach to time is deeply introspective, offering a form of temporal refuge. In her exhibition, sensory stimuli are not overwhelming or didactic; rather, they are subtle invitations to attune oneself to the rhythms of the body and the surrounding space. For example, the ephemeral nature of scent — the way it disperses, intensifies or fades — parallels the impermanence of memory and emotion, creating a dialogue between the fleeting and the enduring. Similarly, auditory elements often mimic natural phenomena like rainfall or rustling leaves, encouraging an almost hypnotic sense of immersion that resists the rush of contemporary life.

What sets Bopape's contribution apart in this temporal discourse is her insistence on sensory engagement as a form of healing. The slowing down of time in her installations is not only about fostering reflection but also about creating a space for rest and restoration. The sensory elements — particularly smell — carry cultural and spiritual connotations that connect visitors to ancestral practices and rituals, grounding the experience in a temporal continuity that bridges the past and present. This distinguishes her work from Rakowitz's more narrative-driven temporal focus, offering instead an emotional and spiritual dimension of time as a lived and felt experience.

Bopape's work underscores the idea that time, when engaged through the senses, becomes a medium of transformation. By encouraging prolonged engagement, her installations provide a counterpoint to the fleeting, surface-level interactions often associated with contemporary art exhibitions. Visitors are not just asked to observe but to inhabit the work, allowing its multisensory elements to shape their internal rhythms and foster a deeper connection to themselves and the narratives embedded in the space. In doing so, Bopape redefines the temporal possibilities of sensory curation, positioning time as a catalyst for contemplation and emotional resonance.

– Sensory Interval –

Firelei Báez: Sueño de la Madrugada (A Midnight's Dream)

Scent: Eucalyptus, rosemary, decaying plants, processed sand

Temperature: warm, humid

Sounds: Chattering, London city noise, bird calls, water, insects

Taste: None

CHAPTER 5: THE THIRD SPACE – *SUENO DE LA MADRUGADA (A MIDNIGHT'S DREAM)*

> "What was formative was being able to say, 'I'm more than this thing you are presuming.' And then being able to say, 'Hey, what other spaces are there? What do I see, in fact, being enacted around me?'"
>
> – Firelei Báez, in conversation with Thelma Golden, *To breathe full and free* (2022, p.27)

Introduction

From September 2023 to September 2024, I attended a curatorial fellowship in London called New Curators, which aimed to provide a chance to obtain real-world curatorial experience for those who might otherwise not have the means to relocate to the United Kingdom. In addition to seminars, a component of this program was to curate an institutional exhibition in London, with a real budget, artist and venue. As the inaugural cohort of the program (consisting of eleven people[11]), the artist we were paired with was Firelei Báez, a Dominican-American painter known for colourful, mythological compositions. Her then yet-to-be-conceptualised solo exhibition, *Sueño de la Madrugada (A Midnight's Dream),* was the project that I was tasked with co-curating at the South London Gallery in Peckham, UK.

It is important to note that Báez was pre-selected by the program convenors, Mark Godfrey and Kerryn Greenberg, for ease of administration going into the project. The artist selection aspect was not something we actively had a part in – this is relevant because, in previous chapters, I have spoken to the curators about why these artists were chosen for specific projects and what kind of criteria they fulfilled. In the case of Báez, this part of the process was removed, but her vision for the project aligned well with the case study selection criteria of my dissertation, hence the reason I have chosen to unpack this as a case study. Báez remained generously open to our curatorial processes and exhibition design ideas so that the presentation became a generative exercise for us as young curators – of which Báez was deeply conscious, and encouraged our curatorial proactiveness and assertiveness.

[11] 2023-24 New Curators fellows: Carol Bedoy, Courtney Brown, Felix Choong, Lemeeze Davids, Rosie Fitter, Lucia Jurikova, Aditi Kapoor, Makella Ama Ketedzi, Rey Londres, Nikita Sena Quarshie and Amandine Vabre Chau.

Historical context

In terms of the content of *Sueño de la Madrugada (A Midnight's Dream)*, Báez's artistic practice centres on her early memories of the Caribbean and the associated detangling of postcolonial identity, in a place that holds significant colonial scarring from the British and Spanish invasions of the land. As this was the base of this project and her subject matter at large, qualifying this historical information for the contextualisation of this chapter is vital.

Báez's mother was from the Dominican Republic and her father was from Haiti (Sheets, 2020), which are two countries that occupy the singular island of Hispaniola, as it came to be known. As the second largest island in the Caribbean, the area was inhabited by the indigenous Taíno people before it was 'claimed' as Spain's first fixed colony when Christopher Columbus arrived in 1492 (Poole, 2011). The indigenous population was significantly affected by the diseases, such as smallpox, carried by the European sailors and merchants. Following this, the dwindling population of the Taíno was coupled with the Spanish interest in cultivating mass agricultural production on the island, and West African slaves were kidnapped and forcibly shipped to the Caribbean in the 16th century to supplement this aggressive labour demand (Time Magazine, 1965). This colonial dynamic went on for centuries. After the French established a colony on the west side of the island, effectively splitting it into two, they faced an insurrection in the late 1700s – the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804)[12] – which resulted in colonial independence from the French, and a new desire to take the eastern part of the island from the Spanish. Both territories went through many rebellions, clashes, and general political instability, until emerging as two separate nations: Haiti and the Dominican Republic[13].

In an interview for Cultured Mag, Báez expressed that she saw the island as "the Petri dish for modernity" because of the grand experiments endured in colonialism, economy, and cultural creolisation (Sheets, 2020). The artist grapples with these complex intersections of identity where indigenous Central American, European and West African cultures have endured a turbulent political and cultural climate, which has produced a layered, hybrid sense of identity in this region

[12] The Haitian Revolution was an anti-slavery, anti-colonial uprising that succeeded. The enslaved African population was led by Toussaint Louverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines, amongst others, to overthrow the colonial French rule on the island, abolish slavery, and name Haiti as an independent republic.

[13] The history of Hispaniola, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti is a layered and complex account that has occurred over centuries of colonial violence, war, and the struggle for freedom. I have offered this summary of key events in chronological order to provide context for Firelei Baez's work, but I do not claim to account for the full scope of the political, cultural and social happenings within Hispaniola's history.

of the world. As Glissant notes the psychological impact this has created in the Caribbean: "… the individual so possessed by the feeling of identity cannot, however, manage to return to his origins […] Then the individual enters the anguished world, not of the unfortunate psyche, but really that of psychic torture." (1989, p.23). Circling back to my initial research questions, *Sueño de la Madrugada (A Midnight's Dream)* works as a great example within this study because it deals with this "anguished" identity caught in the in-between, asking how we can translate this sensitive and traumatic history into contemporary art.

The goal of the exhibition, and Báez's practice in general, is to challenge and reconfigure this specific colonial history by attempting to open entirely new dimensions: "My works are propositions, meant to create alternate pasts and potential futures, questioning history and culture in order to provide a space for reassessing the present" (Báez, 2024). This provides a productive case study which engages with postcolonial identity and immersive sensory environments – but is connected to the other case studies too, as Dineo Seshee Bopape recalls a moment when a Haitian curator brought up the un-believability of how colonialism happened to come to Dineo's attention, and the artist pondered: "I'm trying to understand what being colonised meant or means—what it means to the people who lived through the different timelines or changes that were happening in their community and in the world at large." (Hopkins, 2023). This shows us that, in some ways, we are trying to work through similar questions despite different geographies and specificities around colonialism in the Caribbean and South Africa.

Exhibition and Curatorial Overview

For *Sueño de la Madrugada (A Midnight's Dream)*, we divided the presentation between the two buildings of the gallery, which are within a 2-5 minute walking distance of each other – one location was a repurposed firehouse with four domestically-sized galleries across three storeys, and the other was the first and main building of the South London Gallery, a large, double-height hall. The South London Gallery firehouse housed Báez's drawings, paintings and short-form studio videos, while the main space carried a rendition of her 'blue tarpaulin' works (Figure 10), which are site-specific environments that consist of large volumes of distressed blue fabric (usually tarp), foliage (either plastic or living) and layered soundscapes, amongst other varying elements. Not exactly aiming for the tone of a retrospective exhibition, we wished for the exhibition to encourage



Figure 10: *Sueño de la Madrugada (A Midnight's Dream)*, South London Gallery, 2024. Installation view. Photo by Above Ground.

meandering through the full spectrum of the artist's processes and expressions, whether it involved painterly intervention small-scale archival material or an immersive multisensory experience.

For this dissertation, although I may describe other works or details that appeared in the firehouse as contextualisation, my main focus is *Sueño de la Madrugada (A Midnight's Dream)*'s blue tarpaulin installation (Figure 10). While listening to Firelei Báez talk through her ideas for the main hall of the South London Gallery, I thought about Bhabha's 'third space', and 'the realm of the beyond': "[T]o dwell 'in the beyond is also ... to be part of a revisionary time … In that sense, then, the intervening space 'beyond', becomes a space of intervention in the here and now" (Bhabha, 1994, p.10). In these brainstorming sessions in late 2023, it was apparent to me that a part of Baez's practice involved the sense of playing the historian in an attempt to first dissect, and then reimagine this "anguished world", and its fraught identities, in order to instil an understanding of the past and a hope for a future. Interested in themes of joy, relaxation and love, Baez often spoke of creating an 'oasis' that existed outside of the world, and outside of time – where people could slow down and exercise their imagination in reconfiguring history.

Despite the double height and skylight of the main hall, Báez chose to make the space more intimate by hanging a double layer of the blue tarpaulin quite low as a ceiling. This effect was achieved by draping and fixing hand-distressed and laser-cut blue fabric lengths to metal wires bolted to form a grid across the open space (Figure 10, 11). The decision of the billowing low ceiling interacted with one's sense of space, creating a sense of intimacy and safety, instead of leaning toward the open, tall traditional museum space which is generously lit from above.

The fabric was intended to mimic emergency tarpaulin used to wrap damaged houses and structures after the destruction of a hurricane, invoking one of Báez's memories as a child when she was transfixed by the beauty of the dappled light that appeared through the weathered tears. The transportation of mind in the exhibition is thus twofold – for the artist, the revisitation of this traumatic yet exquisite memory is a relatively personal wish that she sought to achieve, and then on a public-facing front, we have a historical reference: though the tarp is synonymous with environmental devastation, it also can remind one of being under a starry sky of possibility, or the deep underneath rolling waves of the Atlantic Ocean.

The latter reference brings us to the mythos of 'Drexciya', a fictitious narrative of a free society under the sea, where the unborn babies of African women thrown overboard during the Middle Passage of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, were born with the ability to breathe underwater (Scales, 2021). The story of Drexciya was created by American electronic musicians James Stinson and Gerald Donald, drawing on themes of resilience and survival, transforming a horrific historical reality into a narrative of empowerment, although the myth has evolved past their musical practice and has continued to inspire many artists, scholars, and activists (Scales, 2021). The message of Drexciya suggests that these children, instead of perishing, evolved into a new aquatic race capable of thriving in an underwater world.

Under the Drexciyan tarp, the South London Gallery hall was further embellished with living plant life affixed to the walls – this was a departure from the previous rendition of Báez's blue trap installations, where the producers opted to use fake plants for logistical ease and aesthetic consistency. For *Sueño de la Madrugada (A Midnight's Dream)*, the plants were bought fresh from flower markets but were not placed in water or any life-sustaining mechanisms because we (first prompted by the artist) made the decision that the plants needed to dry and die over time to display a cycle of life – that death and decay was part of the conceptual aesthetics of the exhibition. Within

a group of eleven curators, this decision was not unanimous and needed to be discussed, as a few considered that it would *look* unpleasant once the plants died.

Speaking only for myself, I pushed back strongly against this argument for two reasons: first and foremostly, it was the artist's wish to represent life and death, and secondly, I did not consider 'aesthetic unpleasantness' a valid hindrance to an artistic statement – speaking plainly, I thought: Is the purpose of art to be beautiful, comforting, and entertaining? The discussion around this was stimulating and necessary, although linked to these bigger questions around art. I also argued that the use of real foliage introduced an olfactory component to the space, and resultantly, *Sueño de la Madrugada (A Midnight's Dream)* smelled earthy and green with more recognisable, relaxing notes from the eucalyptus and rosemary. Referencing both the UK and the Dominican Republic, some of the plants included were large monstera leaves, rosemary, aspidistra, eucalyptus, and rhododendron, amongst others. There were also small fans placed around the gallery to make the leaves (and parts of the fabric) lightly sway in the wind.



Figure 11: *Sueño de la Madrugada (A Midnight's Dream)*, South London Gallery, 2024. Installation view. Photo by Above Ground.

On the parallel long walls, there were large rectangular breaks in greenery and tarp, created to nestle two monumental paintings on laser-cut aluminium panels (Figure 11). These two-dimensional works featured another mythological reference and recurring figure in Firelei Báez's practice: the ciguapa. Originating from Dominican mythology, the ciguapa is described as a femme-bodied humanoid with extremely long hair and feet that face backwards, meaning that anyone who tried to follow its tracks, in ignorance, would end up going in the opposite direction (Mehri, 2024). In childhood, Báez's mother would often threaten her, that she would turn into a ciguapa if she did not sit still to have her hair 'tamed' – Báez adds that part of what she admired of this figure was that "[t]he only fixed things about her are that she has a lustrous mane of hair and her feet are backwards so she's traceless" (Sheets, 2020). As a result, the ciguapa here represents significant themes of feminism, suppression of cultural identity, and, as Mumtaz Mehri adds, "the dogged unknowability of the island and the secrets of its beating, untamed heart" (2024). The paintings' shapes depict multiple (backwards-facing) feet, which transform as the eye travels upward into palm trees being ravaged by the wind (or possibly, a hurricane, given the blue tarpaulin).

The final element of the immersive installation was a large LED-flex fixture that was displayed on the floor, embedded in dark sand (Figure 10). The glowing red lines form a synchronisation of two spiritual symbols: the sigil of Atabey, a Taíno supreme deity and maternal goddess of fresh water and fertility, and the heart-shaped veve (or sigil) of Érzulie, a fierce Haitian Voodoo spirit of beauty, femininity and sexuality. In her tour of the exhibition, Báez asserted that she wanted to bring an element of the fiery earth, of lava, in juxtaposition to the rolling sea and green plants.

Sueño de la Madrugada (A Midnight's Dream)'s main installation was a full multisensory experience of olfactory stimulation, the sensation of wind and warmth, the touch of the various plants, glowing light, and aluminium paintings – and will be the focus of my critical examination. As the rest of the exhibition was an entirely different venue, the two parts of the exhibition did not influence each other, nor was one part redundant if a visitor missed the other venue of the show. For this reason (i.e. that they were separate, standalone conceptualisations), I will only briefly mention that the South London Gallery firehouse contains four domestically-sized galleries, and in order of viewing, they held floor-to-ceiling mural-esque paintings on canvas, two constellations of delicate drawings/paintings on small-scale book pages, five aluminium ciguapa-shaped paintings, and a commissioned artist film.

Engaging the body

Báez made all of the above-mentioned artworks across both venues during a short residence at Hauser & Wirth, a commercial gallery in the English countryside in Somerset, a few weeks before the opening of the exhibition. When we went to visit her studio in May 2024, I described the then-proposed research of this exact dissertation while walking down a thin dirt path overgrown with pungent wild garlic – it smelled as if someone was cooking food nearby. My fingers smelled like this plant for an extended amount of time, and some of the fellows picked some to make a wild garlic pesto later. I may argue that sensory elements may have the potential to destabilise fixed perceptions of the audience and possibly evoke the ambiguity and fluidity inherent in postcolonial identities and decolonial strategies, but a more obvious observation of affective encounters is that



Figure 12: The author on a walk along the wild garlic path with Firelei Báez, Somerset, UK (2024). Photo by Firelei Báez.

they drive us to recall memories, and more often, memories of a specific place in a specific time in a specific condition. Some may call this journey into a memory, a 'Proustian moment'[14].

In conversation with Thelma Golden, Báez notes her strained relationship with memory, "…on a personal basis, as a person from the Caribbean, I grew up always being told that I didn't have a history, I didn't have a context" (Báez, 2022, p.27) and that creating these immersive installation artworks becomes a vehicle for Báez to access this denied historical past, or to make up a new history entirely, to access the realm of 'the beyond' through 'revisionary time' (Bhabha, 1994, p.10). Glissant's *Caribbean Discourse* also becomes relevant to this delicate point of connection between memory and identity: "…there is a contradiction between a lived experience through which the community instinctively rejects the intrusive exclusiveness of a single History and an official way of thinking through which it passively consents in the ideology "represented" by its elite. Ambiguity is not always the sign of some shortcoming." (1989, p.93). By transforming the South London Gallery, Báez was intending to create a liminal realm that exists outside conventional time and space.

I mentioned that in previous renditions of her blue tarpaulin installations, Báez (and the curatorial team) chose to use fake plants. In the case of *Sueño de la Madrugada (A Midnight's Dream),* it may seem that our inclusion of real, fragrant plants to present a cycle of life and death carried only a coincidence that it was also a sensory (olfactory) element. However, in the previous renditions of the installation, the absence of aroma caused Báez and/or the curators to add burning incense to the exhibition. The olfactory element was an intentional decision to aid the metaphorical transportation of the gallery visitors to another 'dimension'. *Sueño de la Madrugada (A Midnight's Dream)* emerges as a microtopia (Bourriaud, 1998), a 'garden of discovery', a 'third space' (Bhabha, 1994) - that is, a carefully constructed alternative space that challenges colonial historical narratives through sensory and mythological re-imagination.

Much like Bopape's *(ka) pheko ye - a dream to come,* the visitors' time and pace were considered and slowed down to a halt through the use of sensory media. Drawing on these Caribbean

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[14] After the French novelist Marcel Proust's *The Remembrance of Things Past*: a sudden, involuntary memory triggered by a sensory experience that vividly brings back a past moment or sensation with remarkable emotional intensity. It specifically references a scene where the narrator tastes a madeleine dipped in tea. This simple act unexpectedly floods him with a flood of childhood memories, revealing how a specific sensory input can instantaneously transport someone back to a long-forgotten moment from their past.

mythologies like the ciguapa and the Drexciya narrative, we were tasked to curate a speculative landscape that allows museum visitors to experience alternative futures or dimensions – on a practical level, this meant that we had to translate this esoteric goal sanctioned by the artist into a real logistic, curatorial strategy and we did so by engaging the body. To remove the visitor from (unconscious) Kantian aesthetic analysis where the artwork is communicating something firm that is either good or bad, the visceral senses counteract this because "with smell, so tied to individual emotion and memory, universal feeling is an impossibility. … the sense of smell could not move beyond the personal to the impersonal world of disinterested judgment" (Fretwell, 2020, p.129). The exhibition became a sensory proposition that invited audiences to dwell in a Bhabhaian "beyond," deconstructing violent legacies of singular histories by offering an imaginative route through memory.

The subtle scent of living plants that were allowed to die throughout the exhibition demonstrated the curatorial potential of olfactory experience to evoke memory and change over time. The decaying plants functioned as an ephemeral archive of life and loss, challenging aesthetic expectations, mirroring Claire Bishop's *October* critique (2004) of how participatory or immersive art can become a spectacle when lacking political or cultural depth. By embracing the inevitable decomposition of organic matter, Báez disrupts the tendency to preserve history in a sanitised, detached manner.

In reflecting on the potential of multisensory curatorial strategies to create and maintain this microtopia, it becomes essential to engage with the shifting poles between curatorial intention and audience agency. As a reminder, the term "micro-topia", originally conceptualised by Nicolas Bourriaud in *Relational Aesthetics* (1998), evokes a space of ephemeral community where social interactions take priority over material form, as in the case of *Sueño de la Madrugada (A Midnight's Dream)*. When curatorial practices foreground multisensory experiences, they may create these pockets of relational possibility, inviting visitors to become active participants in constructing meaning through their bodies and senses. This relational engagement is particularly strong in contexts of postcolonial and decolonial exhibition-making, where the layered histories of displacement and hybrid identities demand more than detached Kantian contemplation — they need an embodied methodology and a generous amount of ambiguity.

A critical consideration in the curating *Sueño de la Madrugada (A Midnight's Dream)* was trying to find a balance between structuring/controlling elements and allowing for the openness of interaction. The multisensory elements, including the decaying plant matter, the sand, the smell and the wind, were discussed with the artist and designed alongside the South London Gallery production team in order to elicit engagement resembling a childlike wonder without overly dictating the interpretation of the works. For instance, if we go back to the olfactory and auditory elements in *Indigo Waves and Other Stories* at the Zeitz MOCCA (2022), this appeared to offer visitors a visceral, sensate entry point into the exhibition's diasporic 'alternative' histories, but it did not prescribe a singular narrative. Instead, the curators welcomed each visitor's sensory memories and associations to coalesce with the curatorial framework, producing a plurality of these microtopias within the same space – accumulative knowledge creation. The productive tension between curatorial control and visitor agency is an opportune playing field for exploring how sensory strategies might have the ability to democratise exhibition experiences and, by doing so, decentralise the curatorial authority. This has the potential to empower visitors as co-creators of meaning, releasing them of the pressure of interpreting an artwork in the 'correct' way.

Equally important is the temporal dimension of multisensory microtopias. Unlike the static engagement typical of visual exhibitions, sensory strategies unfold over time, encouraging visitors to linger, explore, and even revisit their experiences – a similar dwelling experience (Zaborowski, 2005) that we saw in Rakowitz's exhibition. This durational aspect resonates with Sara Ahmed's concept of "affective economies," wherein emotions circulate and accumulate, creating shared affective states (2010). In *Sueño de la Madrugada (A Midnight's Dream)*, I found that the fleeting yet profound sense of community generated, especially amongst children who visited the exhibition, challenged the alienation often associated with contemporary museum culture and reimagines the exhibition as a site of communal care and solidarity. These have been common goals throughout the selected case studies.

Our curatorial decisions also extended to public programming surrounding the exhibition, and we attempted to include multisensory engagements that resonate with broader, geographically dispersed communities. We planned and conceptualised foraging walks and tea brewing in local parks with a queer collective, as well as movement and meditation sessions held inside the deep blue main installation, amongst the plants and their petrichor. The movement classes also included

scent diffusers and ambient sound activations like singing bowls. In an interview for my research, my co-curator for the project, Nikita Sena, commented that for the public programming, "from the get-go, we knew we wanted movement .. the thought of physical movement felt important" (Personal communication, 2024), affirming a commitment to involving the tangible body in our priorities. Just simply 'being' in the space, experiencing a sensation or a memory (or both), was a core part of Báez's conception of the installation, and so it was our job to find ways to bring people into an embodied, intentional state – without creating a didactic situation, which the artist was adamant to avoid.

By foregrounding the body, the senses, and the affective dimension of an artistic encounter, these types of exhibitions may hold the potential to challenge the Euro-American ocular-centrism of traditional museology. This opens both old and new ways of addressing the complexities and ambiguities of postcolonial artistic expressions. In doing so, this modus operandi might reaffirm the potential of contemporary curating to represent but also embody the hybrid, layered realities of our globalised world, grappling with the postcolonial moment and decolonial urgencies. Ultimately, multisensory microtopias, like *Sueño de la Madrugada (A Midnight's Dream),* represent a paradigm shift in curatorial practice. The aim is to transform exhibitions from static, disinterested displays of individual genius into dynamic social ecosystems where sensory engagement becomes a mode of knowledge production and relationality.

Curatorial Practicalities of the Senses

Due to my direct involvement in the curation of this exhibition, I have been privileged to detail some of the logistics and behind-the-scenes intricacies of such a project – as can be seen throughout this chapter. Although placing *Sueño de la Madrugada (A Midnight's Dream)* within a theoretical and conceptual framework is vital, the practice of curating spans more than intellectual underpinnings and also involves many practical decisions like the health and safety of the audience, sensory overwhelm, accessible navigation for wheelchairs, accessible seating, environmental impact/waste reduction and efficient display mechanisms – all of which were more pressing administrative issues we had to navigate as young curators, compared to our conceptual engagement with the artist's ideas. As curious and eager individuals, we all met Báez's level of artistic premise with excitement (and even contributed essays on her work to a catalogue[15]), but the

[15] Still to be published: *Firelei Báez: Sueño de la Madrugada (A Midnight's Dream)* (2025). New Curators.

real learning curve came from the practical implementation of putting this sensorial encounter together.

As mentioned in previous chapters, working with multiple senses within a museum context creates additional responsibility that rests with the curatorial/health & safety team because it increases the ways (or "vectors") that visitors can interact with various elements: instead of only looking at the artwork, we now have visitors touching, smelling and experiencing heat. This is also not to assert that you cannot smell the oil paint on a painting, for example, but rather to make it doubly clear that in *Sueño de la Madrugada (A Midnight's Dream),* these are intentional elements. In Chapter 4, Katharine Welsh, one of the curators of Rakowitz's *The Waiting Gardens of the North,* noted that the team were considerate of allergies and sensory overwhelm in particular – and this was something we considered too (Welsh, personal communication, 2024).



Figure 13 Hanging plants attached to a cork board, to test for how they dry and decay (2024). Photo by Lemeeze Davids.

When selecting the plants that would be included in the main installation, I researched and consulted with florists and experts so that we would not accidentally include high-risk organic matter (such as poisonous-to-touch plants) or flowering species that were more likely to induce

allergies. Additionally, because part of the concept of Báez's vision was to allow the plants to die in the space, we had to consider which foliage would lose the least amount of spatial volume when drying to avoid visual discrepancies after the plants were arranged while they were alive – harking back to an earlier debated point of the dying plants may be unpleasurable for a viewer to experience, we seemed to still factor that in, in the end, even though the concluding stance, encouraged by Báez, was that the death of the flora meant something beyond visual pleasure. For this dying process, I was personally responsible for conducting several tests months in advance to ensure that we chose the correct plant life. These are very practical concerns, but they became additions to curatorial responsibility when we were working with these dynamic or organic elements. Over the run of the exhibition, plants wilted, and their scents evolved into something more earthy like a forest floor. They evoke the regenerative possibilities embedded in cultural resilience – like a resurfaced memory, slightly changed. This interplay between decay and renewal underscores the exhibition's capacity to articulate the non-linear temporality of diasporic identities, where the past, present, and speculative futures coexist in dynamic tension, and it relies on experiential and aesthetic tension to do so.

In curatorial terms, the plants, even in their living state, acted as a sensory anchor, which grounded the visitors within an evolving and ambiguous narrative, encouraging them to stay a little longer. Unlike more static or 'disinterested' displays, the installation unfolds over time, requiring audiences to navigate shifting sensory cues and inspiring them to visit the exhibition again at a later date — to witness the fresh aroma of eucalyptus giving way to the earthy scent of decomposition. This progression resonates with Sara Ahmed's notion of affect as "a body's belonging to a world of encounters" (2010), emphasizing how visitors are drawn into an embodied relationship with the work and its conceptual links that bridge the intellectual and visceral.

The sensory dimensions of the main installation further act as triggers for emotional and embodied responses, which are capable of evoking socio-political connections to the personal. For instance, the decaying plant matter may evoke memories of loss or impermanence or cycles, while the immersive environment, offering an oasis-coded place for visitors, invites some reflection on broader themes of displacement and cultural hybridity. These affective encounters challenge visitors to consider how their sensory experiences are shaped by, and contribute to, the layered narratives of postcolonial identity.

However, *Sueño de la Madrugada (A Midnight's Dream)* was not without its challenges. As a public institution with free access, practical considerations, such as accommodating sensory sensitivities and ensuring accessibility, needed to be addressed to avoid excluding certain visitors. Moreover, the question of when multisensory strategies become reductively spectacular or commodified — possible novelties to boost visitor numbers (and thereby boost appeal to the government for funding) — was brought up and discussed amongst the other ten curators to uphold curatorial integrity. This required a commitment to aligning sensory elements with the thematic core of the exhibition – what the artist envisioned – ensuring that they serve as conduits for deeper engagement rather than distractions.

Additionally, the temporal evolution of the installation aligns with Bhabha's concept of the "third space" (1994), where hybrid identities are suspended, negotiated and performed. By situating visitors within an environment that is both decaying and regenerating, the exhibition disrupts binary notions of origin and belonging, instead offering a fluid, liminal space where new possibilities for identity and community can emerge. Through its integration of sensory cues and temporal dynamics, *Sueño de la Madrugada (A Midnight's Dream)* exemplified the potential of contemporary curating to move beyond static representations and into the realm of embodied, relational engagement. The decay of plant life became a curatorial strategy that bridges personal memory with collective history, inviting visitors to inhabit the complexities of postcolonial narratives in deeply affective ways.

Conclusion

By integrating sensory curation with postcolonial critique, Sueño de la Madrugada exemplifies how exhibition-making can move beyond static representation into an affective, participatory, and politically engaged practice. The interplay of material decay, immersive spatial design, and layered historical references transform the gallery into a living archive—one that refuses closure, instead insisting on the ongoing negotiation of memory, survival, and identity.

The curatorial strategies employed in *Sueño de la Madrugada (A Midnight's Dream)* utilised a multisensorial approach that aligns with Édouard Glissant's concepts of opacity and relationality (1990), by creating an exhibition environment that resists singular, fixed interpretations and

encourages interconnected, relational meanings. Opacity, as Glissant describes in *Poetics of Relation* (1990), preserves the right to not fully reveal oneself or one's culture, allowing postcolonial narratives to remain resistant to oversimplification. Beyond trying to code the space as one of rest, what was important to communicate was that the inclusion (and decay) of plant life exemplifies opacity, where visitors were allowed to engage with the work on an affective and intuitive level rather than seeking definitive explanations from generous museum texts. This layered engagement reflects the lived realities of hybrid identities, which cannot be reduced to monolithic stories.

Relationality is similarly embodied in the installation's emphasis on shared sensory experiences. Visitors navigated a space in communal dialogue with concepts of memory, displacement, and cultural ambiguity. By positioning visitors as participants in an evolving narrative, the exhibition exemplifies Glissant's vision of cultural connections built on mutual respect and understanding rather than assimilation or domination. The use of decaying plants, evolving scents, embodied public programming and mythological references situates visitors in a space where meaning is fluid and relational rather than fixed or didactic.

At the same time, these strategies raise significant ethical considerations. The representation of postcolonial histories through sensory curation necessitates a careful balance between authenticity and commodification. As above , the use of decaying plants and mythological figures invited reflection on the fragility and resilience of cultural memory in the Caribbean, yet it risks being reduced to spectacle if not contextualized thoughtfully. We, as the curators, attempted to navigate these tensions by ensuring that sensory elements are integral to the exhibition's thematic core.

Ultimately, Firelei Báez's *Sueño de la Madrugada (A Midnight's Dream)* illustrates the potential for multisensory curation to serve as both a method of decolonial resistance and a catalyst for relational engagement. By foregrounding the body and the senses, the exhibition challenges traditional museum paradigms, offering a model for how curatorial practice can honor the intricacies of postcolonial narratives while inviting visitors into a shared space of exploration and care.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

"People might say that we never experience things separately, they are always in fusion, and that is why 'the happening', which is a fusion of all sensory perceptions."
(Yoko Ono, *TO THE WESLEYAN PEOPLE*, 23 January 1966)

In his text on coloniality, semiotician Walter Mignolo asks, "How can museums become places of de-colonisation of knowledge and of being or, on the contrary, how can they remain institutions and instruments of control, regulation and reproduction of coloniality?" (2011, p.48). Attempting to answer this question through the exploration of these four case studies, the research that I have conducted on the use of multisensory elements in contemporary art exhibitions reveals how affect theory and sensory studies may serve as productive curatorial tools for postcolonial or decolonial exhibitions – to address and distance from the colonial origins of traditional museum display tactics. The presentations, *Indigo Waves and Other Stories: Re-Navigating the Afrasian Sea and Notions of Diaspora*, Michael Rakowitz's *The Waiting Gardens of the North*, Dineo Seshee Bopape's *(ka) pheko ye – the dream to come,* and Firelei Báez's *Sueño de la Madrugada (A Midnight's Dream),* highlighted an alternative modus operandi to the traditional (and predominantly visual) ways of engaging with art, by considering the role of our human bodies and their subjective sensate intelligence, in order to foster critical, ambiguous and communal interactions. The discussed curatorial strategies in this dissertation have attempted to challenge some of the established norms around contemporary curatorial practice in contemporary art museums today. There is a need for spaces within which difficult historical narratives and layered cultural identities are reimagined and, resultantly, rendered experientially accessible through visceral memory (the body).

Affective Exhibitions as Points of Engagement

Defined during the literature review and expanded using *Indigo Waves and Other Stories*, the concept of affect theory, applied in the realm of curatorial practice, highlights the potential of contemporary art exhibitions to function as more than simply spaces for viewing art. Instead, these environments have the potential to become phenomenological frameworks that engage the visitors (and their senses) on a precognitive, embodied level. By intentionally incorporating multisensory elements — such as smell, sound, heat, taste and touch – curators may create an immersive atmosphere where the museum visitors could respond viscerally to the stimuli, before processing their experience intellectually or linguistically. This approach aligns with affect theory's emphasis on the body as a site of meaning-making and emotional resonance.

Affect, as described by theorists like Margaret Wetherell, operates in the realm of "embodied meaning-making" (2012). In multisensory exhibitions, the visitors encounter sensory elements that may evoke specific emotions, memories, and associations – whether positive or negative – before these experiences are fully connected to language, ideas, or critical thought. For example, the olfactory radiance of Thania Petersen's artwork, *Rampies Sny* (2022)*,* in *Indigo Waves and Other Stories* struck many visitors upon their entry to the exhibition, generating what the curator, Natasha Ginwala, called a "threshold" into an alternative history (Personal communication, 2024). This experience created the opportunity for the visitors to prepare for a potential deeper engagement with the exhibition's geopolitical and cultural themes. The precognitive engagement, created by the inclusion of the smell at the beginning of the exhibitory encounter, appears to have bypassed the purely visual, eliciting an unusual, memorable connection – as can be seen in the opening remarks of the exhibition's review by Nkgopoleng Moloi (2022). This was also true for a review of Michael Rakowitz's *The Waiting Gardens of the North*, where Tom Whyman reviewed the presentation and began, "On entering … one is first overwhelmed by the sensations in play in the art: light and smell." (2023).

What we might consider 'traditional' or Kantian art exhibitions often rely on visual and linguistic analysis (that is, the 'visitor' becoming a 'viewer') as the primary mode of interaction, a disinterested interaction (Kant, 1987). Sensorial modes of curating challenge this current way of thinking by inviting visitors to involve their bodies and use their full sensory faculties to understand what is around them. This shift in curatorial goals might encourage, or provide a step towards, a democratisation of the museum experience, as individuals may engage with art guided by their instincts and feelings rather than potentially exclusionary art historical knowledge. For instance, the multisensory interplay in *The Waiting Gardens of the North,* where visitors could touch plants, hear the rain and smell herbs, and *(ka) pheko ye – a dream to come,* where visitors drank warm tea, both offered a relational experience that transcended traditional museum conventions and allowed their audience to feel more at home in a previously culturally inaccessible place.

Affective sensory environments can also foster relationality by creating ephemeral, hard-to-describe connections between visitors, artworks, and broader thematic narratives, allowing for a sense of ambiguity and encouraging subjectivity, which is vital for complex topics such as identity

negotiation. As Gregg and Seigworth describe, affect involves "a state of relations" that operates between bodies — human, non-human, static, or dynamic (2010). In *(ka) pheko ye – the dream to come*, Dineo Seshee Bopape's use of tea, both as an artistic intervention as well as a social experience, invites visitors to slow down and constructs an opportunity for sensory connection and immersion aligned with the exhibition's themes of healing and dreaming. This shared affective resonance contributes to a sense of collectivity, even in my first-hand experience, which was as an individual, I felt as if I was a part of a larger ritual.

While multisensory environments hold great potential for engaging audiences, they also introduce a series of ethical considerations for curators. Emotional and sensory encounters can be somewhat unpredictable and deeply personal, making it essential for the curator(s) to anticipate diverse responses to the stimuli. For example, curators must consider how to manage potentially overwhelming sensory elements, such as a smell or sound that might be difficult to contain, to address the needs and limits of neurodiverse or sensitive audiences and ensure that affective encounters do not re-traumatise visitors engaging with sensitive historical content. As the museum remains a public-facing institution that is designing/creating publicly accessible experiences, it becomes the responsibility of the curator(s) to ensure the well-being of their guests while also contending with challenging topics that they feel are important to confront in their exhibitions. As I was dealing with well-established institutions, the case studies I examined in this dissertation all accounted for this responsibility, and I did not experience discomfort or come across accounts of discomfort in my research. Future research would benefit from specifically examining a less successful attempt at multisensory immersion.

By being cognisant of affect theory and multisensory elements in a contemporary art exhibition, the curators can design experiences that have the potential to resonate deeply with visitors, while not compromising on the artists' visions, fostering a meaningful connection to the themes and histories that are engaged through the artworks. This multimodal approach, not exclusionary of how the exhibition looks as a visual experience, redefines the role of the curator and positions the museum as a dynamic space for embodied learning and collective engagement.

Tea, Tea Bags, and Fluid Associations

A generative thread between the case studies examined in this study, which was not apparent at the time of selection, was that many of the exhibitions utilised tea as an effective but controlled way to engage with their visitors. Thania Petersen's organza bags in *Rampies Sny* (2022), which generated an olfactory radius, used the visual language of a tea bag, while both Bopape and Rakowitz actively offered tea to their 'guests'. Bopape constructed the flavour profile of the tea blend to speak to her aim to conjure a sense of dreaming (and its resultant healing qualities) and instructed the visitor to drink before wandering around the exhibition, but just as easily as it is offered, a visitor was able to opt out of this experience as well as have all the ingredient information at hand. Rakowitz, on the other hand, allowed the community to harvest their own tea ingredients from the garden and then prompted workshops around tea-drying, and tea-drinking sessions as part of the public programming around the exhibition (Welsh, personal communication, 2024).

An aspect of these tea-based interactions is their ability to create an ephemeral yet deeply personal bridge between the visitor and the exhibition, a moment of respite, allowing for a ritual of engagement that is neither prescriptive nor passive. Unlike static displays that rely solely on visual interpretation, these artistic initiatives invite participation through an act that is simple and familiar – drinking tea. Through Bopape's introductory sensorial ritual, Rakowitz's communal harvesting, or Petersen's subtle visual and olfactory cues, tea seems to function as a conduit for layered associations — between history and the present, between hospitality and agency, and between ritual and casual interaction. This interplay of structure and openness exemplifies how multisensory curation has the ability to generate fluid associations while encouraging dynamic modes of engagement with the exhibition's themes.

The concept of fluid associations refers to connections that are not fixed or rigid or told as truth but instead are flexible and capable of shifting depending on context. This underscores the potential of multisensory approaches in curatorial practice, whereby sensory immersion can create interconnected and subjective experiences for viewers who have varying degrees of familiarity with the exhibition's subject matter or aesthetics. By blending these sensory modalities, curators could enable visitors to engage with artworks and narratives on multiple levels – the body, the mind, and memory. This encourages relational connections between colloquial and specialised knowledge and between the self and others in the space, that extend beyond individual works. The use of fluid

associations is both informed by, and resonant with cultural hybridity, social ambiguity, postcolonial identity, and the movement of geopolitical histories across borders.

In static exhibitions that primarily rely on sight and language, works of art are often presented as objects that represent and imply individual genius, fragility or high value by encouraging limited interaction between the artworks and the visitors (who might damage them). In addition to this separation between visitor and artwork, these works are also separated from the other artworks – and although they may be interpreted alongside those in proximity in the case of a thematic group show, this 'cross-contamination' of meaning is contrived. Rather, traditionally a work is appreciated as whole as itself. Multisensory curatorial strategies disrupt this compartmentalisation by encouraging these sensory interactions across the full exhibition. As in *Indigo Waves and Other Stories*, the scent of Thania Petersen's *Rampies Sny* permeated the entire venue space, creating an aromatic thread that added a layer of meaning when the viewer was engaging with other works – like looking at Oscar Murillo's paintings, for example (Ginwala, personal communication, 2024). The review of the exhibition notes a multifaceted flow of connections and warmth, where the citrusy aroma of Petersen's work influenced their interpretation of adjacent visual and auditory pieces (Moloi, 2022). I would assert that the sensory "bleeding" of these works is one of the most important findings I came across during this project, as it introduced a way of working with sensory objects/elements, that reinforced the exhibition's overarching themes of hybridity and interconnected histories, that was fundamentally different to how curator might treat a ocular-centric painting.

"[E]mbodied meaning-making" (Wetherell, 2012) occurs when sensory experiences provoke precognitive responses that later develop into critical thought. For example, the auditory elements in Luvuyo Equaino Nyawose's *eBish*' installation, which featured a soundscape of family voices, complemented the visual aspects of Oscar Murillo's paintings, *Surge (social cataracts*). Together with the consistent smell of *Rampies Sny*, these three separate works created an immersive affective experience, deepening visitors' engagement with the themes of history, memory, and the sensory landscapes of postcolonial identity – and encouraged fluid, subjective associations. By weaving these sensory elements throughout an exhibition, curators can construct relational narratives that resonate on both conscious and unconscious levels.

Circling back to the inclusion of tea, the multisensory curatorial approach in *(ka) pheko ye – the dream to come* exemplified this relationality. Visitors were invited to sip this tea blend which was made with carefully selected herbs. In line with Bopape's goals, these elements worked in concert to stimulate a sense of 'dream-like' discovery and encouraged visitors to draw connections between their personal sensory experiences and the broader themes of healing/dreaming. The fluid give-and-take of these sensory modalities appears to mirror the hybrid, layered identities often explored in postcolonial and diasporic narratives. Just as sensory elements bleed into one another, cultural identities in our globalist society exist in a state of flux, shaped by overlapping histories and geographies. In *Indigo Waves and Other Stories*, this fluidity provided a loose navigational framework, where the smell guided the visitor, in order to explore the complex histories of migration and cultural exchange in the Indian Ocean.

The openness aligns with the proposed postcolonial curatorial aims to destabilise dominant narratives and offer alternative perspectives in contemporary museum spaces. In *The Waiting Gardens of the North*, the use of plant smells (rose, nutmeg, green coffee), and tactile elements in a garden setting promoted the construction of personal associations based on the unique history and background of each viewer. Drawing on personal memories and emotions, the garden engaged with the themes of displacement by the selection of the foliage, but also attempted to remedy the social issue by promoting community-building values.

Sensorial artworks and elements potentially offer curators, who are working with postcolonial or decolonial subject matter, a means of creating interconnected, immersive experiences that resonate deeply with their audiences, whether curating a group exhibition or working with an individual artist. Sensorial exhibitions have the ability to translate the fluidity of their thematic content. Enriching the visitor experience, curators have the opportunity to expand the possibilities for curatorial practice, positioning the sensory as a useful tool for exploring hybrid identities, cultural memory, and the movement of postcolonial histories.

Ethical and Practical Considerations in Sensory Curation

One of the main findings that appears throughout this dissertation is that integrating sensory elements demands rigorous ethical and practical scrutiny. Multisensory curation introduces unique, necessary responsibilities to ensure that guests' experiences are generative and interesting rather

than overwhelming or dangerous, and most importantly, that sensory choices align with the exhibition's or artist's thematic intentions, and that they are not 'add-on' elements designed to produce a spectacle.

Multisensory elements engage people through visceral senses and involve their bodies in the production of meaning, potentially triggering strong emotional, medical or psychological responses. This is especially significant when exhibitions, as in my case studies, address traumatic or sensitive topics, such as postcolonial histories. In *Indigo Waves and Other Stories* and *The Waiting Gardens of the North,* the curators carefully designed an atmosphere where visitors could navigate the specific complex histories of colonial or diasporic violence without being overwhelmed. However, the challenge lies in anticipating and mitigating unintended reactions to sensory stimuli, such as discomfort caused by strong smells, jarring sounds, or claustrophobic spatial design.

Ethical curation involves recognising the diversity of visitor experiences and accounting for varying thresholds of emotional and mental tolerance. Here, the curator may walk a fine line of being in charge of someone's wellbeing. Reasonable responsibilities may include providing content warnings, quiet zones, optional engagement, or alternative pathways for individuals who might find certain sensory inputs distressing. Sensory choices often carry cultural or symbolic meanings that may be interpreted differently across audiences. For instance, the herbs and spices used in *The Waiting Gardens of the North* were familiar to Middle Eastern (and specifically Kurdish) migrant communities in Newcastle, however, the curators had to ensure that these choices were not reductive or tokenistic, avoiding the appropriation of cultural symbols for the sake of novelty or spectacle, on behalf of the museum.

Operating in a public institution, multisensory curation must accommodate and be cognisant of a wide range of abilities and needs, including those of neurodiverse and disabled visitors, individuals with sensory sensitivities and people with mobility impairments who need space to move. This requires careful planning to ensure that sensory elements enhance, rather than hinder, accessibility. As my own interpretation and experience, *(ka) pheko ye – the dream to come* included a tea station that slowed the pace of visitor movement and encouraged mindful participation, but the curatorial team seems to have ensured seating, clear navigation, and space/height for wheelchairs (Figure 8).

Sensory materials, especially organic ones, introduce variability into the exhibition space. In *The Waiting Gardens of the North* and *Sueño de la Madrugada (A Midnight's Dream)*, plants were allowed to decay naturally, reflecting the cycles of impermanence and migration, but also referencing themes of care. Conceptually aligned, Rakowitz's approach required constant monitoring to ensure that the plants' state remained well-maintained. Something to note is that this likely incurred additional staff labour and external collaboration with landscaping specialists, which would have to be preemptively included in the curatorial budget. Similarly, olfactory elements, like the citrus scent in *Indigo Waves and Other Stories*, can be difficult to control in terms of intensity and duration, necessitating adjustments throughout the exhibition run (and travel/translation to the German venue) – a staff member regularly applied the essential oils to the installation each day.

Regarding health and safety, sensory elements can also introduce specific risks, such as allergens, pests or mould in olfactory or haptic displays or hazards from loose materials, which will need to be accounted for in a health and safety report. For *Sueño de la Madrugada (A Midnight's Dream)*, I selected plant species that posed a minimal allergic risk and avoided using flowering plants that could trigger allergies – consulting with flower sellers. I also conducted tests in the curatorial studio to determine how the plants would decay over time, ensuring they would not compromise the exhibition's aesthetic or visitor safety (regarding pests). Using organic materials and multisensory elements can have environmental implications, especially when items like plants, food, or water are sourced, maintained, and disposed of. Ethical curation entails minimizing waste and considering the environmental footprint of these materials. For example, the Baltic Center collaborated with local gardening organizations to source plants sustainably (Welsh, Personal communication, 2024) and repurpose them after Rakowitz's exhibition, reflecting an ethos of care for both the environment and the community.

The ethical and practical dimensions of sensory curation are as complex as the critical and conceptual elements. Although the inclusion of multisensory elements creates additional responsibilities for a curator, prioritising accessibility, sustainability, and cultural sensitivity can create affective environments that are both impactful and considerate of diverse visitor needs.

Temporal Immersion and Liminal Spaces

The notion of temporal immersion within multisensory curation can refer to the capacity of exhibitions to engage visitors through the sense of time: a creation of experiences that unfold over a certain period and evolve through bodily interaction. By disrupting linear and static modes of display that promote a sense of timeless genius, sensory environments invite visitors to inhabit liminal spaces – dimensions where past, present, and future intersect – which can be seen in Firelei Báez's intentions for *Sueño de la Mdrugada (A Midnight's Dream)*. These spaces align with postcolonial and diasporic themes, emphasising history outside of the recognised canon and the dynamic processes of cultural and personal identity formation, which ultimately connect to conceptions of Bhabha's 'third space' (1994).

Unlike traditional ocular-centric exhibitions, which often prioritise controlled visual displays, multisensory environments are inherently ever-shifting and shaped by changes in light, sound, smell, and movement. In *The Waiting Gardens of the North* and *Sueño de la Madrugada (A Midnight's Dream)*, the integration of living plants emphasised temporality and cycles of life, as visitors witnessed the natural cycle of seasonal growth, decay, (and in Rakowitz's presentation) blossoming and renewal. Similarly, in *(ka) pheko ye – the dream to come*, the act of sipping tea influences the personal tempo of the visitors with the rhythms of the exhibition. This deliberate pacing encouraged a deeper, more intentional engagement with the work, reinforcing the exhibition's thematic focus on dreaming as a source of political introspection.

Temporal immersion often incorporates elements of ritual, inviting visitors to enact or observe sequences that structure their journey through the space. This is something that Ginwala mentions trying to invoke: "I think of exhibitions as ritual spaces … because they are about transforming and mobilising your imagination as well as your body" (Personal communication, 2024). In *Indigo Waves and Other Stories*, the olfactory and auditory cues acted as a sensory guide, subtly orchestrating how visitors moved and experienced the exhibition's different zones. The beckoning citrus scent of *Rampies Sny*, for example, created a threshold that marked the transition from one part of the exhibition to another and reinforced the idea of journeying through layers of alternative history and identity. By embedding sensory rituals — such as the act of smelling, listening, or tasting — multisensory exhibitions encourage a cyclical engagement, where visitors are prompted

to revisit themes and narratives, deepening their understanding over time – much akin to the cycles one may understand from everyday life.

Liminal spaces or Bhabhaian spaces can be sites of transition, construction and transformation, where established identities and histories may be suspended, allowing for the potential for new ambiguous ideas to emerge. Multisensory exhibitions leverage these thresholds to immerse visitors in a vague "in-between" state. As in *Sueño de la Madrugada (A Midnight's Dream)*, Firelei Báez used blue tarpaulin to create a low-hanging ceiling, simulating an intimate undersea environment inspired by the Drexciyan mythos. This liminal space transported visitors into a speculative, timeless oasis, challenging linear narratives of colonial history and inviting them to imagine alternative futures/pasts.

Liminality in multisensory curation also involves a suspension of conventional time, allowing visitors to inhabit "the beyond." (Bhabha, 1994). This state, where past and present converge to shape new realities, was evident in *(ka) pheko ye – the dream to come* and *Sueño de la Madrugada (A Midnight's Dream)*, where the exhibition's sensory elements evoked both ancestral memories and speculative healing. The multisensorial dimensions, paired with spatially ambiguous structures, encouraged visitors to dwell in a timeless state of discovery and remembrance, reflecting the exhibition's themes of cultural memory. It must be noted, though, that curators must anticipate the varying tempos at which individuals engage with multisensory environments. For example, in *The Waiting Gardens of the North*, some visitors might linger to interact with the garden, while others might move more quickly and never return for various reasons. When constructing an exhibition that evolves, the curator must be aware that not everyone has the patience, circumstance, resources or memory to visit an exhibition twice. I thoroughly enjoyed Rakowitz's presentation at the Baltic and Dineo's at Migros Museum, but I did not return to either because I did not have the resources to travel to those cities again within the exhibition run.

Exhibitions that rely on evolving materials or time-sensitive elements face other practical challenges, such as maintaining sensory integrity over the exhibition's duration. In *Sueño de la Madrugada (A Midnight's Dream)*, the decision to allow plants to decay introduced a natural temporal dimension, but it also required ongoing maintenance to ensure the space remained engaging because as the plants dried, they decreased in size, affecting the aesthetic quality of the

installation. Liminal spaces often resist clear interpretation, which can be both a strength for the conceptual underpinnings of an exhibition and a challenge for a curator or exhibition designer. While this openness aligns with postcolonial aims to destabilise dominant narratives, it may leave some visitors disoriented or disconnected. Curators must strike a balance between offering interpretative frameworks and preserving the fluidity of liminal engagement.

Temporal immersion and liminal spaces redefine the museum as a site of continuous transformation and discovery. By emphasising dynamic, process-oriented experiences, multisensory exhibitions invite visitors to inhabit the "in-between," fostering deeper engagement with themes of identity, memory, and resilience. These approaches challenge conventional curatorial paradigms, positioning the visitor as an active participant in the exhibition, instead of a passive viewer.

Final Reflections

This dissertation has explored the inclusion of multisensory elements in curatorial practice can serve as a useful tool for navigating and representing postcolonial identities and cultural ambiguity, which becomes increasingly relevant in our globalised world. Drawing from phenomenology, postcolonial theory, and sensory studies, I have demonstrated that sensory engagement enables a generative connection between museum audiences and the layered narratives embedded in diasporic experiences.

The case studies revealed varied approaches to multi-sensory curation: the olfactory and sonic pathways of *Indigo Waves and Other Stories,* the tactile and community-building explorations in *The Waiting Gardens of the North,* the counter-historical temporality in *Sueño de la Madrugada (A Midnight's Dream),* and the ritualistic ingestion that influences pace in *(ka) pheko ye – a dream to come*. In each case study, multisensory immersion allowed for the re-imagining of cultural memory and identity beyond the ocular-centric traditions of Euro-American exhibition formats. Notably, the interplay of smell and sound in *Indigo Waves and Other Stories* exemplified how affective strategies can transform and help one navigate through abstract histories of displacement into visceral, familiar experiences for visitors – both in a physical and metaphorical way. Similarly, the spatial intimacy of *Sueño de la Madrudgada (A Midnight's Dream)* evoked a communal safe space, inviting audiences to linger and reflect on the complexity of colonial histories.

These examples underscore the potential of multisensory curatorial strategies to deconstruct hierarchical narratives and realign curatorial practice toward inclusivity, especially when dealing with this subject matter. However, this modus operandi also highlights practical challenges, such as balancing sensory overwhelm with accessibility and avoiding spectacle-driven goals.

Ultimately, this dissertation advocates for a curatorial approach that emphasises experiential encounters and cultural dialogue. While my research has focused on four specific exhibitions, it opens pathways for future research into how multisensory strategies might be systematically incorporated into institutional contemporary art practices. By situating postcolonial identity within the realm of embodied experience, multisensory curation provides a vital method for fostering empathy, disrupting normative perceptions, and creating exhibitions that resonate with the complexities of our global, interconnected present. Future engagement would include developing practical discussions or guides from this research.

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