Am I Speaking in Clichés? And Other Curatorial Concerns

There is no shortage of PhD dissertations, journal articles and theoretical tomes dedicated to the fact that museums are ideologically and physically fraught spaces (Bennett 1995; Crimp 1993; Foucault 1975). The typical response to this fact by artists and curators alike is to shift our focus by creating increasingly spectacular artworks and spaces, to the point where artworks, curatorial programs and architectural design simply aid in the Neoliberalization of space. This paper will instead argue for deceleration within art institutions, taking as its point of entry Canadian artist Janet Cardiff’s installation To Touch (1993). Multi-sensorial artworks that embrace banality and the everyday exist outside of the confines of accelerationist culture; they resist curatorial impetuses to both historicize and categorize while rejecting Neoliberal desires to go faster, be louder and act flashier. In the process, spatial ‘ordinariness’ is harnessed to create interstitial moments, wherein the quotidian becomes an unlikely site of quiet resistance.

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Walk into any major art institution in North America and you will likely experience an acute sense of déjà vu. If they are lucky enough to have gone through a major renovation in the past decade or two, their interiors will almost certainly contain a version of the following: soaring ceilings vaulted over grand staircases, obscured slightly by the glass or steel ribbons cascading down their façades—trends that conceal a proclivity towards conventionality. Architectural spectaularization elides the ways in which art institutions have evaded their responsibility to re-examine their interior gallery’s spatial and ideological fixities: medieval Byzantine paintings, typically located on the lowest levels, are necessarily followed by the slightly more popular and well-regarded
Renaissance artworks that, in turn, gradually bleed into modernist paintings and sculptures, which slowly dematerialize until, at last, the lofty heights of top floor galleries are reached; full of blinding white walls and impossibly high ceilings, it is the coveted space where postmodern and contemporary artworks are held. This narrative is problematic for many reasons, certainly, chief among them its unwavering commitment to Euro-centricity and historical linearity. But it is not often described in terms of what it has also become: impossibly tiresome. Fatiguing. Boring.

Museum fatigue is not a new concept. It was first identified in the early twentieth century by curator Benjamin Gilman (1916), who was interested in the ways in which viewing subjects reacted to museum displays. He interviewed and observed patrons in various galleries, only to find that

An inordinate amount of physical effort is demanded of the ideal visitor… not even the hardiest sight-seer will long go through with the contortions… needed for any comprehension of much of what we display to him. After a brief initial exertion he will resign himself to seeing practically everything imperfectly and by a passing glance (1916: 62).

To alleviate the problem of passive looking, Gilman recommended raising the height of both vitrines and wall hangings to thirty-eight inches to minimize bending, squatting and eyestrain, accommodations that suited the (presumed standard) height of the average male viewer (Gilman 1916: 71). His strategy not only privileges the eye above all other senses, it also encourages museums to tailor their displays and spaces to suit an abstracted ‘ideal’ body void of agency and subjectivity. Though initially understood as providing an improved viewing experience, the results
of Gilman’s study encouraged the standardization of curatorial practice, which has come to rely heavily on objective sight.

In 1925, the Carnegie Corporation and the American Association of Museums provided funding for psychologists Edward Robinson (1928) and Arthur Melton (1935) to travel to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts to flesh out Gilman’s anecdotal evidence (Posner 1992: 318). But because Robinson and Melton continued to define fatigue by its physical symptoms, they, like Gilman, posited that ‘fatigued’ actions originate from within the body of the viewer. Known within museum circles as the ‘visitor attributes hypothesis’, researchers studying the cognitive processes related to museum fatigue in the early twentieth century laid blame upon the patrons, who were presumed responsible for their own decrease in interest (Davey 2005: 18).

Clearly, this definition of museum fatigue is in need of reimagining. Rather than focus solely on visitor attributes, researcher Gareth Davey (2005) suggests that museum fatigue begin to account for the intersection between visitors and museum design. According to Davey, museum fatigue should be understood as “a collection of phenomena” that includes, but is not limited to, “visitor factors (such as cognitive processing, physical fatigue, and individual characteristics), factors in the environment (such as exhibit architecture and the museum setting),” and, most importantly, “the interaction between them” (2005: 20, emphasis mine). Davey’s expanded definition requires that visitors still meet the art halfway, so to speak. Nonetheless, his account of “wear-out” relates specifically to repeatedly viewing displays that are similar in both size and style (Davey 2005: 20).

However, most of the recommendations put forth by scholars to alleviate museum fatigue take on a strikingly neoliberal bent. We see this in Davey’s own suggestions when he proposes that museum staff “increase exhibit distinctiveness… Reduce mental effort required to understand
exhibits… Minimize distractions such as sounds, competition from other exhibit elements and novelty in the surroundings…[and] motivate visitors by correcting misconceptions” (2005: 20). In 2013, behavioural psychologists Stephen Bitgood, Todd L. McKerchar and Stephany Dukes likewise re-visited the findings of Melton and Robinson, this time framing their research to suit current behavioural economic theories. In their essay “Looking Back At Melton: Galley Density and Visitor Attention,” Bitgood et al. reduced time, effort and experience to commodities, assigning them a value “assumed to be the major motivational factor in engaged attention” (2013: 2). The notion that exhibits redefine themselves as consumptive experiences is a particularly insidious side effect of neoliberalism. Already standardized display practices are thus made even more uniform by a system that promotes distracted or cumulative looking: dialectical interpretations of artworks are rejected in favour of a singular narrative and, should an individual’s understanding of culture or history fall outside of the hegemonic one presented to them, they are ‘corrected’ through docents and didactic panels—though smartphone apps, virtual reality headsets and touch screens increasingly act as interpretive guides.

In the spirit of theorist Steven Shaviro, I argue that neoliberalism is an effective tool for control as it encompasses both “capitalist production (Marx), and governmentality (Foucault),” enabling it to manipulate subjects economically as well as bio-politically through pervasive acts of repetition (2015: 7). Indeed, Foucault might add that repetition is historical, its “schemata[s] of restraint” effected on ideological and social levels (1990: 128). As public spaces rapidly privatize and people are redefined as consumers, bodies are forced to adapt to homogenized spaces that do not take their unique needs into account. Spatial and visual repetition becomes an effective means by which to advance neoliberal market strategies because it standardizes acts of leisure-time, space and the body.
The result of neoliberal repetition is a pervasive, non-generative boredom that promotes indifference and disinterest. Subjects lack a willingness to engage deeply with their surroundings, their boredoms manifesting as an inability to imagine alternatives to our current socio-economic situation. In response, museums attempt to accelerate through the inertia by introducing more screen-like technology: increasing exhibit ‘distinctiveness’ and reducing mental ‘effort’ despite the fact that there is little evidence to suggest making museum spaces more entertaining assuages boredom or fatigue in any meaningful way.

‘Gallery fatigue’, unlike museum fatigue, deals more directly with boredom on an individual, as opposed to collective, level—a symptom of a larger problem related to (in)attention and our (in)ability to resist the trappings of neoliberal culture. Gallery fatigue is brought about primarily through the repetition of objects, by and large divorced from their original context; of narratives; of display practices and, lastly, of architectural and pedagogic techniques that tend to promote repetitive visual stimuli. In place of current strategies that accelerate this process, I argue that gallery fatigue can be alleviated through tactics that promote deceleration and generative boredom.

Repetition Within the Museological Body: Gallery Fatigue

The exhibition that many historians begin their analyses with, including Walter Benjamin in his unfinished *Arcades Project* [Passagen-Werk] (1927 – 1940) and Tony Bennett in *The Birth of the Museum* (1994), is London’s first World Exposition (1851). An industrial fair, it was held in a towering structure known colloquially as the Crystal Palace; constructed, as art historian Susan Buck-Morss points out, “out of the same iron and glass that originally had been used in the Passages”—those great Parisian shopping arcades filled with glittering objects, trendy women’s
fashions and bourgeoisie flâneurs (1991: 83). Photographs taken during the months-long event show throngs of people crowding through the Palaces’ sparkling gates to behold an unprecedented display of industrial products, images that portend the size and thickness of crowds jostling to see blockbuster exhibitions at art museums across North America, Europe and, increasingly, The Middle East and Asia. Patrons frequenting the fair would have observed multiple commodities situated in relation to one another despite their obvious differences in function, promoting capitalist fervour towards the commodity form and reinforcing the ideal of the modern museum as an architectural spectacle full of material goods.

Like the Crystal Palace, museums encourage the visual repetition of objects that are, furthermore, treated as disciplinary objects imbued with universal truths. Outside the gallery space, hyper-capitalist urban planning has similarly created cityscapes that follow similar, universalizing patterns—even ostensibly public space is designed to suit an ideal subject. It is therefore unsurprising that a passive boredom sets in as we walk through gallery spaces that purposefully promote sterility and sameness, not only on the level of the artworks, but also on the level of the sensing and feeling body.

As a potential antidote, accelerationist discourse promotes going beyond the pace we currently keep, pushing the limits of capitalism until the system implodes. In a politics of accelerationism, such a fate is usually brought about through the unabashed extraction of the earth’s natural resources and the exploitation of the working classes, though the blind adoption of Artificial Intelligence also plays its part. This type of nihilist thinking is hardly subversive, however; even avowed accelerationist Shaviro admits, “intensifying the horrors of contemporary capitalism does not lead them to explode” but merely offers us a kind of personal “satisfaction and relief, by telling us that we have finally hit bottom, finally realized the worst” (2015: 35). Thus,
instead of political acceleration, Shaviro calls for aesthetic acceleration. But what does aesthetic accelerationism look like from a museological, architectural, or curatorial perspective? Does accelerationism within architecture or exhibition design provide fleeting glimpses into the future as a means to upset the status quo? Or does spectacular design merely usher in a slick, neoliberal future?

Compared to anthropological and science-based museums, fine art museums have been slower to implement computational technology. Although audio tours have been in use since at least the 1960s, other forms of digital technology are usually exhibition specific. Debates pertaining to the adoption of certain forms of ‘tech’ are typically focused on the museum’s back-end, where concerns include website development, archival practices, and whether or not partnerships with conglomerates like Google, which launched Google Arts and Culture in 2011, are a viable way to connect individuals to artworks. The ability to make widely available art objects and spaces certain publics would otherwise not have access to is undeniably valuable. Indeed, the push to digitize collections is the positive side of technology in the arts, as online access has the ability to disrupt and democratize hierarchical knowledge systems.

While some cultural institutions have clung to their patrician roots, many more have careened in the opposite direction, becoming, in the words of Claire Bishop, “populist temples of leisure and entertainment” (2014: 1). In the UK, the Department for Digital Media, Culture and Sport (DCMS) has encouraged British museums to harness digital technology’s potential to transform audience engagement by introducing virtual reality headsets, upgrading smart phone apps to include museum-specific content and creating podcasts about certain paintings (Furness: The Telegraph). Matt Hancock, Secretary of State for Health and Social Care in Britain, claims that the DCMS’s main objective is to expand the British museum complex’s reach; embracing new
technology not only “cements [Britain’s] status as a creative powerhouse,” it also enables state-sponsored museums to enter into viewer’s homes (qtd. in Furness).

Though the Canadian government has not been quite as forthright in their plans to introduce technology in museum spaces, the government-aided Canadian Museum of Human Rights (CMHR) in Winnipeg, Manitoba, serves as an example of what happens when digitization is taken to the extreme. Its galleries incorporate a number of technological devices designed to incite interaction and learning: video touch screens, aural recordings, and projected images combine to suggest a more engaged viewing experience (fig. 1–3). However, I think it is important to question whether these tactics promote deeply involved looking or whether they merely encourage visitors to scroll quickly through the content presented to them. Juxtaposed against displays that encourage tactility and slowness, touch screens incite sporadic bursts of attention, a type of distracted viewing inherent to their design and function. Perhaps Jean Baudrillard said it best in Architecture: Truth or Radicalism when he stated that, through digitization, museums have become transposable, designed to siphon off people “into the immense, more or less interactive storage spaces… into places of passage, circulation, transit, rightly qualified as places of disappearance” (2014:20). Creating affective spaces that make room for different subjectivities is thus a way to resist neoliberal expectations by subverting neutral, hegemonic spaces that would have bodies and ideas simply disappear.

Decelerating Towards Perceptual Play

The studies headed by Gilman, Robertson, and Melton and, more recently, Davey, Bitgood, McKerchar and Dukes recommend that inattention and boredom be addressed through museum displays, which have become inundated with superfluous, entertaining details. With the museum
itself becoming more interactive, the envelope growing ever-more spectacular and the work increasingly transgressive and shocking, why are people choosing to spend their time elsewhere? Can an institutional or curatorial program exist that addresses gallery fatigue through generative boredom?

Contemporary capitalism thrives upon its ability to drive a wedge between our bodies and our environments. From architecture and hanging tactics to how visitors are directed through the gallery space (even the ways in which artists deliver institutional critiques), all of it already displays a repetitious character that is encouraged by technology, not challenged by it; such displays and museum spaces thus discourage spectators from inhabiting their own embodied emotions. But does accelerating through the repetition by encouraging more of it rid the world of its repetitious tendencies? I would argue that the ways in which such policies manifest themselves in the present moment—more automation, Artificial Intelligence, digitization and increased screen-time—merely distract from the reality that all our devices encourage a myopic world-view. Furthermore, it is difficult to ignore the fact that many digital spaces represent an ideal, neoliberal scenario: the institutions and their hegemonic codes not only remain, but penetrate more deeply.

The work of Canadian artist Janet Cardiff provides an entry point into thinking about deceleration within the gallery space and curatorial practice. Her multi-sensorial works pastiche together the ordinary and the extraordinary, making strange our linear conceptions of time and history. Cardiff’s kinaesthetic sculptures endeavour to provoke perceptual play and, in doing so, slyly question the socio-economic structures promoted by and through the gallery space, while her audio walks serve as an excellent example of how engaging the senses can be subversive. Begun during a residency at the Banff Centre for the Arts, the artist’s inaugural walk fundamentally “changed [her] thinking about art” (website; fig. 4). Subsequent walks have utilized increasingly
sophisticated recording techniques to achieve ever-more immersive experiences. *The City of Forking Paths* (2014), created in collaboration with artistic partner George Bures Miller, even incorporates an iPod Touch, which viewers use to guide themaurally and visually from Customs House in Sydney, Australia to Circular Quay and the area of the Rocks near Sydney Harbour Bridge (fig. 5). These walks thus start with the senses to probe how our bodies engage with the intangible, felt history of specific places—some of which is visible; most of which is not.

Cardiff and Miller’s installations likewise endeavour to create spaces that evoke strong emotional responses. *Opera for a Small Room* (2005) recreates a cluttered basement replete with phonographs, vinyl records and speakers (fig. 6-8). *The Killing Machine* (2007), on the other hand, depicts a dentist chair awash in garish, neon lights (fig. 9-10). All around it, mechanized arms poke and prod at an invisible subject, growing progressively more violent as the lights brighten and the music swells. The artist’s installations are rarely overtly political, though *The Killing Machine*’s gesture of vehemence can be read many ways, from a critique of the modern penal system to a warning against Fascist political rhetoric. Installations like these harness spectacle in order to make poignant political statements about institutionally and culturally sanctioned violence and the effects extreme isolation can have on the human psyche. Their tactile elements—the soft sheepskin laid across the chair and the buzz of the mechanical arms in *The Killing Machine*; the swelling music and the scratch of records in *Opera for a Small Room*—encourage the eye to linger and the ear to listen closely. However, both of these works exist within a paradoxical space. On the one hand, their flashy, dramatic features make their political statements more impactful; on the other, it is precisely those qualities that enable the audience to see the work as mere entertainment.

The first time I viewed Cardiff’s solo work *To Touch* (1993) at the Edmonton Art Gallery I would have been about seven years old. In my memory, a deeply scarred carpenter’s table sits in
the middle of a dark room, a spotlight illuminating its surface (fig. 11–12). You might walk up to it and not understand what to do, but perhaps you brush up against it, or someone next to you happens to touch it, and then the voices start. A chorus, if you run your hands over it, emitted from hidden speakers around the room, responding to your touch. A couple impart their shared fears and lusts as more banal noises break through their monotonous whispering. *To Touch* is tactile and visceral; it surprises and delights while simultaneously embedding discomfort deep into the psyche. Recorded using a binaural technique, the voices emanate from multiple locations, creating sensorial confusion. And yet the roughness of the table, the ability to feel its veins and scars, is grounding. The interstitial space that is activated as the banal and the fantastical meet elides the sensory divisions imposed upon us—ones that increasingly call for a separation between the minds-eye and the sensing body.

Many years later I revisited *To Touch* at the renovated and re-named Art Gallery of Alberta’s *90 x 90: Celebrating Art in Alberta* exhibition (2014). By now a seasoned museumgoer, I was prepared to engage with the work objectively. Instead, I was flooded with memories of my initial visit. *To Touch*’s engagement with sensorial and bodily pleasure (the feel of the rough-hewn table, the analog phone, the darkened room) is undeniably nostalgic, and yet the work itself does not neatly fit within a mythic past. The audio that plays as the table is touched or stroked quietly projects the minutia that makes up our daily lives: ringing phones and screeching cars interrupt hushed whispers regarding dreams, scars and intense sexual passions. Coupled with the work’s failure to produce a narrative—wisps of a story are told, but they are incomplete and, at times, incomprehensible—*To Touch* hovers between fever dream and reality. Pleasure is so often denied to us by the abstract capitalist forces working beyond our grasp or comprehension. Theorist Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi claims rightly that “capitalism has no desiring body” (2013: 6); how can it, when
the speed of capitalist expansion reaches beyond human measure? Thus the importance Cardiff places upon tactility has the ability to refute, in its own small way, the trend toward automation that would have us forget our fleshy bodies. At the same time, *To Touch* does not deny technology or its place within our society. It does, however, highlight its alienating effects. The ringing of phones and screeching of cars, even the ways in which the actors repeat the same phrases in different combinations, occupy an interstitial space where the breakdown between human and machine is felt.

It is important to note that modern museums do engage with the oftentimes profound and sensual sense of touch, usually through the building’s architecture. Unfortunately, impossibly smooth surfaces greet the hand—lacking depth or tactility, museum pillars, stairwells, and walls are spoken about with such hushed tones of devotion they become detached from reality. The reverence afforded buildings like the Guggenheim Bilbao, coupled with economic theories championing the ‘creative class’, ensures that major cities across the globe commission similar landmark buildings (Florida 2002). Continuous re-builds and re-designs thus bring each institution closer in kind architecturally, their ubiquitous sameness operating in kind with hegemonic neoliberalism. The spectacular displays and architecture feed an insatiable system whose only concern is profit. Any previous emphasis on tactility gives way to the use of materials that optimize speed: the eye moves quickly over burnished steel and tinted glass; as perspectival distance begins to collapse, objects and artworks transform into mere commodities.

Despite the fact that I disagree with many tenets of accelerationism, I think that its practitioners and advocates do have one thing right: we are all accelerationists now. Cardiff and Miller take great pains to be as technologically advanced as possible—many of their works utilize innovative audio, video and computational techniques to invoke the quotidian or mundane. Indeed,
even Cardiff’s *To Touch* does not shy away from technology. Nevertheless, their work uses this technology to bring about an aesthetic experience that relies upon individual, embodied introspection. Thus even as Cardiff presents us with artwork that has accelerationist components, she slows our sense perceptions down by asking us to pause, listen and touch. She uses the system we have all been straddled with against itself to advance, if not an entirely alternative narrative, at the very least a way of being that focuses on embodiment and lived experience; one that promotes radical introspection, wonder in banality, and generosity towards ours (and others’) hopes, fears and desires. If accelerating merely points us towards a dystopian future and operating outside of these systems simply reinforces the neoliberal impetus to subsume everything, perhaps the only other option is to thoughtfully decelerate—to actively seek artists and curatorial strategies that utilize the boring and the quotidian to fracture the institutional order from the inside, to register its points of crisis and to indicate where, and how, the breakthrough might happen.

**Notes**

i Alternative narratives that are allowed to exist are usually fleeting, reserved for interventionist-type exhibitions or artists.

ii Art historian Julian Jason Haladyn first introduced me to the concept of generative boredom in his book *Boredom And Art: Passions of the Will to Boredom* (2015), Winchester, UK and Washington, USA: Zero Books

iii According to the Department of Culture, Media and Sports, nationally sponsored museums in the UK saw a 20 percent drop in attendance in 2017 (Jones 2017). Statistics for Canadian museums are harder to come by, but in 2013 The National Gallery of Canada saw a 41.7 percent decrease in overall attendance (CBC 2013).

iv Andrea Fraser’s performance *Little Frank And His Carp* (2001) is a good example. In the video, Fraser can be seen listening to an audio tour guide that waxes poetical about the sensuous lines of a pillar and compares Gehry’s structure to a Gothic cathedral. Fraser takes the guide’s instructions to ‘run her hands’ over the limestone clad pillar very seriously, highlighting the absurdity of the guide’s prose by eventually rubbing herself against it as though attempting to bring herself to orgasm. All in all, a very accelerationist performance.
Works Cited


**About the Author**

Justine Kohleal is a Toronto-based curator and art critic. Prior to her appointment at The Power Plant she worked as an independent curator and arts writer in Edmonton, Alberta. Select past curatorial projects include [INTERFACE] (Fringe Gallery); *No Job More Dangerous* (dc3 Art Projects); *Intellectual Play* (dc3 Art Projects); and *Sounding the Alarm: The Poetics of Connection* (Art Gallery of Ontario). She acted as a curatorial assistant to Gerald McMaster and Denise Birkhofer at the Ryerson Image Centre for *The Faraway Nearby: Photographs of Canada from The New York Times Photo Archive* and to writer and curator Kari Cwynar for Duane Linklater’s installation *Monsters for Beauty, Permanence and Individuality* (Evergreen Brickworks). She has interned with The Smithsonian American Art Museum’s Luce Foundation Centre and with Public Programs at the Art Gallery of Ontario. Kohleal holds a curatorial M.F.A from OCAD University and a B.A. from the University of Alberta with a focus in Art, Design, and Visual Culture. Currently, her research centres on the intersection of space, the body/senses and boredom within performance-based art and curatorial practice.