Towards the Other: 
Instances of the Grasp and Caress within the Museum 

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“Contact” and “touch” reveal compellingly paradoxical impulses that give shape to the contemporary museum. As products of the Enlightenment, museums are structured around traditional paradigms of scientific-rational distance, ocularcentrism, and entrenched power hierarchies resulting from the unambiguous demarcations of subjects (privileged visitors and/or curators) as fundamentally separate from objects (exhibited others on display). Interestingly, modern museums like the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) have seen significant shifts within the last decades towards more reflexive curatorial practices that attempt to incorporate interactive and “immersive” exhibits. The contemporary museum, thus, becomes a site where the colonial tendency to emphasize difference between subject and object comes up against the newer (though not necessarily antagonistic) urge to construct a “touchable” and penetrable other through the intervention of science and technology. This paper will examine how, through the regulation of contact between seemingly disparate bodies, the museum meticulously choreographs the visitor’s encounters with otherness, in such a way that colonial discourses are mobilized anew through the museum’s most recent emphasis on tactile encounters.
Touch presents such a crucial entry point into the museum because it encapsulates two essentially contradictory urges in the subject-object dynamic. As represented through Levinas’s theorization of the grasp, touch firstly speaks of self-consciousness as a violent procedure that seizes and appropriates the object of knowledge. In the museum, this can be witnessed in the many ways the other’s body is “fleshed out” and its difference exoticized and/or sublimated through both discursive and technological manipulation. However, it is also possible to counter this account of authoritarian seizure with Levinas’s equally commanding account of the caress, a touch that subverts the hegemony of the subject by positing an ungraspable other. Drawing upon both concepts, this paper argues that while touch primarily functions in official museological directives to reassert subject supremacy, it nonetheless suggests the heterodoxical possibility of dialogical exchange and subject/object collusion.

GRASPING

In her examination of what she terms the “rational museum,” Fiona Candlin writes that paradigms of touch in contemporary museums, rather than being revolutionary divergences from precursory Enlightenment models, are instead exactly linked to its lineage of the empirical discovery of an external
nature. This connection between rationality and touch recalls the work of Levinas, whose ethical philosophy posits the fundamental correlations between *Auffassen* (understanding) and *Fassen* (gripping). Levinas argues:

A certain grasp: as an entity, being becomes the characteristic property of thought, as it is grasped by it and becomes known. Knowledge as perception, concept, comprehension, refers back to an act of grasping. The metaphor should be taken literally: even before any technical application of knowledge, it expresses the principle rather than the result of the future technological and industrial order of which every civilization bears at least the seed. The immanence of the known to the act of knowing is already the embodiment of seizure.

Far from neutral contact, the grasp is a violent intending-toward and forcible appropriation of the object at hand. In other words, it is an endeavouring to transform this other into “property of thought.” This process of coming into knowledge/subjectivity through the other is equated, quite literally, with seizure—or the possession and procedural objectification of the thing seized.

At the ROM, Levinas’s grasp manifests itself physically in the various interactive technologies which suture the visitor into the position of privileged ethnographer/excavator. One particularly pertinent example of the startling correlations between tactile engagement and the seizing of otherness is in the museum’s new “Teck Suite of Earth Sciences Galleries: Earth’s Treasures.” Opened in 2008 with a ten million dollar donation from

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Teck Cominco Ltd., Canada’s largest diversified mining, mineral processing and metallurgical company, the suite includes three galleries centered on laudatory explications of the role and contribution of mining in Canadian history.

At the Teck suite, the museum visitor is encouraged to slip into the role of miner or excavator through her/his spatial, tactile, and ideological engagements with the museological terrain. This cross identification is facilitated effectively through the use of interactive technologies, which are abundant in the Teck suite, boasting of various video exhibits and forty interactive touch screens placed in front of each mineral display panel. These devices allow the visitor, at the touch of the finger, to attain information regarding each mineral’s name, location, chemical formula, and source (donator), and also to zoom in to attain a closer look at the object on display. This uncannily mirrors Levinas’s description of grasping, whereby “the obscure context of whatever is thematized is converted by reflection, or intentional consciousness, into clear and distinct data.” According to this model, the museological other embodies alterity transformed, its unspeakable otherness “converted by reflection” into submissive and discernible components. Through the tangibility of the touch screen interface, the subject is encouraged to control the flow of information, the

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positioning of the object, and thus, the ways that this object is penetrated visually, statistically, and cognitively, etc. In other words, Levinas’s violent grasp functions here to render the object into a set of properties or “secrets” to be divulged.

Through its use of mediating technologies, the Teck suite carves out a narrative of touch as natural (or naturalized) discovery, but interestingly, sets this up against a backdrop of mining—or the active pillaging and ravaging of resources. Two digital projections at the front of the suite introduce visitors into the Teck exhibits by crafting kindred genesitic chronicles. The first projection recounts the creation of the solar system, and takes the viewer on a journey from planetary formation, to an asteroid’s terrestrial collision, and finally to the discovery of two young children who wonder upon its gem-like fractures on a beach in present day. This tale of serendipity and “accidental” discovery is contrasted with its companion—a second digital projection illustrating the process whereby minerals are mined by Teck from various locations around the globe (lazulite from Yukon, Azurite from Arizona, Crocline from Afghanistan, etc.) and then deposited safely back at the ROM for display. The first project seems rather preoccupied with diminishing the iniquitous connotations of active seizure undertaken by the industrial and museological enterprise through a creative tale of magnanimity on the part of the universe (for essentially depositing these treasures in our backyards). Interestingly, this postulation of the
passive miner/ethnographer is decidedly upturned in the second narrative, which speaks unabashedly of the vigorous engines of Teck and the ROM which set off to pursue their objects with great assiduity.

Examples of the interactive and narrativizing technologies illustrate how the Teck suite uses interactive technologies to naturalise the mining of objects or “resources.” This firstly happens through the tactile engagement with the objects on display—or, rather, their digital interfaces. Through these compensatory screens, visitors become embroiled in slightly modified versions of metallurgical exploitation through the extraction, purification and transformation of the objects (i.e. from ore into “precious” objects of knowledge, and economic and cultural capital). Furthermore, the Teck suite employs an ideological structuring of the violent “grasping” of the other as necessary in the pursuit of knowledge and edification. Here, the visitor is manifestly encouraged to explore the object, and conjointly guided into believing their grasping—or the ethnological excavation and subsequent curatorial structuring—as natural and inculpable.

The Teck example also brings to “light” Levinas’s crucial argument regarding the grasp as analogous to the violence of seizure by vision and light. For Levinas, “light makes possible...this enveloping of the exterior by the inward, which is the very structure of the cogito and of sense. Thought is
always clarity or the dawning of a light.”⁵ The ROM’s popular diorama, the Bat Cave, is one instance particularly evocative of Levinas’s claim that light structures cogito and sense. Upon entering the cave—a simulation of the St. Clair cave in Jamaica—the visitor is plunged into darkness. Initial disorientation gives way to slowly emerging awareness as the eyes adjust, and the ears pick up on aural cues that contextualize the setting. A recognizable melange of water dripping, crickets, and the echoey flutter of wings place the visitor in a cave. The visitor sees the winding route set ahead, and embarks upon it carving a tentative path through the dark. On either side of the visitor, intricately constructed dioramas emerge from the contrasting murkiness of the cave, lit by gentle pools of orange and yellows and drawing one’s attention to the nocturnal creatures which inhabit the cave. Through this strategy of illumination, Donna Haraway’s characterisation of the museum diorama—as that “window onto knowledge” allows the perceiving subject to “articulate the content of the story” necessarily at the expense of the silent other on display.⁶ The cunning dispersals of light thus guide the visitor’s physical and cognitive journey from darkness to comprehension. The diorama becomes precisely Haraway’s “visual technology,” through which the male subject undergoes a regime of ocular initiation, and is encouraged to direct his gaze toward a feminized

nature. In this striving against the perils of blindness, the privileged gazer remains an “unseen eye (I),” who in turn discerns the ever-visible captive object.

Rather than pit vision against touch, it is imperative to explore the efficacious synchronization of both senses within the museum. What becomes apparent is that these two techniques can be effectively mobilized towards kindred ends, and moreover, that touch often facilitates visual apprehension. Within the museum, tactile contact, aligned with ocularcentric modes of perception, guides our bodies more effectively (and affectively) than unaided scopic regimes would alone. In the Teck suite, for example, it is indeed the “technologically extended hand” which fetishizes the palpability of the perceived object, and renders it visually and cognitively apprehensible.

The grasp—which, along with light and sight, functions to allow the subject to seize the object—cannot be figured as magnanimous contact; by contrast, it is a mode of hegemonic contact employed in the service of reasserting subjectivity as superlative. This model of touch emphasizes alterity as difference to be reigned in through technological and discursive intervention, and in this way, the other’s body becomes that of the sacrificial site continually inscribed, surveilled, writ-large, shrunk down, dissected,

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7 Ibid, 52.
8 Ibid.
tamed, and ultimately ravaged. By offering the chimerical solidity of boundaries, grasping reassures the subject with rational knowledge and its steadfast attendant: ontological certainty. The grasping subject differentiates animate self from inanimate object by her/his triumvirate abilities to: utilize dead tools, revive the inert object, and flood this object with renewed meaning and significance. Seduced by her/his own apparent "transitivity and motility of touch"—a touch that magically brings the dead object to life while guising its execution in the first place—the subject thusly constructs fantasies of her/himself as self- and other-determining.

**COLLUSION**

It is at this juncture that we must subsequently explore the potential of moving *beyond* hegemonic models of touch, through considerations of subject contingency. To begin to do this, we turn to Levinas’s *caress*, which, contrary to the grasp, is a touch that contains the potentiality of *more than* touching. Levinas describes:

> The caress is a mode of the subject’s being, where the subject who is in contact with another goes beyond this contact. Contact as sensation is part of the world of light. But what is caressed is not touched, properly speaking. It is not the softness or warmth of the hand given in contact that the other seeks. The seeking of the caress constitutes its essence by the fact that the caress does

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not know what it seeks. This ‘not knowing,’ this fundamental disorder, is the essential.\textsuperscript{10}

By characterising the caressed as the object paradoxically \textit{not} touched, Levinas emphasizes that this model of contact doesn’t look to sublimate the thing with which it comes in contact, for it is compelled through an \textit{unknowing} desire which subverts the possessive drive. Unlike the grasped, the caressed other is neither completely superseded nor subsumed under a colonizing eye/hand/mind. This not-knowing, neither-possessing form of engagement certainly defies the self/other hierarchy established by earlier postulations of the grasp.

To be sure, opportunities for caressive exchange are not officially structured into the ROM’s curatorial directives. As Levinas contends, “what the caress seeks is not situated in a perspective and in the light of the graspable;”\textsuperscript{11} this makes it rather antithetical to the entire museological enterprise. Nevertheless, it remains possible to trace occurrences of the caress precisely \textit{within} the gaps, or in the haphazard moments \textit{between} the violence of light and apprehension. It is helpful to return here to the \textit{Bat Cave} example, but this time, dwelling more languorously on that moment of initial disorientation which greets the visitor upon entrance. Passing intervals of dark between the cave’s lit dioramas also function in much the same way.


It is these ephemeral moments of darkness—prior to the realignment of the eye and mind, prior to the body’s eventual resumption of the pursuit at hand—which most effectively encapsulate the potential of caress as “allegory of night” or “disorder of light.”¹² Collectively, these patches of dark comprise in metaphoric total Plato’s Cave, as that expectant juncture before the inevitable dawning of light. Furthermore, these moments of unstructured or pre-structured desire, where the body is willingly submerged in the immersive landscape, belie the ways in which the subject, even if temporarily, foregoes one’s own authority by making leaps to conjoin with the body of the other. As bodies (of visitors) pause through these fractional instances of dark, with “unseeking” hands and straying bodies brushing up against each other and gently colliding, the pursued object remains obscured—or is at least temporarily suspended in the crucial absence of light. It is as if the ethical disorder wrought by Levinas’s caress can be hazily enacted merely by accident, without forethought, in the brief temporal and spatial stretches, before confusion is inevitably guided into contact.

This paper has hitherto centred on the subject’s capacity to move/grasp/seize; but in this section, the naturalized hierarchy of subject/object is subverted by reconfiguring touch in its metaphorical and

affective capacity, and positing the *other* as similarly capable of *touching* or *moving*. In the museum, this figure of being moved is mobilized through the visitor’s sensation of being overwhelmed, of her/his body and language failing in the presence of the towering, sublime other. This anxiety in the face of the other results, on the one hand, in the consequent need to articulate, contain, and “bring into light” its unspeakable alterity. On the other hand, the ungraspable other, erected at the height of visibility, also becomes the hallowed object, upon whose alter the subject unwittingly and compulsively lingers. As sepulchral monuments, museums articulate precisely these confoundingly contradictory desires to pay tribute to the object, all the while reinstating the subject’s own authorial supremacy. Paleontological reconstructions, for instance, become the mammoth embodiments of reverence toward the sublime, as well the paradoxical urge to stave off submission and exercise discursive hegemony through habitual rearticulation.

A generous account of being moved, insists that the moved body is also an undeniably susceptible body—one hazarding corporal and syntactical submissions and the disintegration of its own boundaries. This vulnerability of the moved body can be found in Susan Stewart’s argument that “to be in contact with an object means to be moved by it—to have the pressure of its existence brought into a relation with the pressure of our own bodily
existence.”13 What is fundamental here is the notion of reciprocality—or the idea that the object not only touches or penetrates the subject, but also that something in the subject is fundamentally moved and altered in the exchange. Being moved—in both its bodily and figurative capacity—thus expresses the subject’s willingness to submit corporally (body becomes penetrable), and syntactically (language becomes penetrable). This unfolds in such a way that gaps are left upon the body and text, precisely for the other to then inscribe and fill in. Openings and fissures upon the skin allow for the other to flesh the subject out, in the end making the endeavour one of mutual movement and entanglement rather than the mere exercise of dominance and violence upon the object’s body.

CONCLUSION

The initial thrust of technological and discursive touch at the ROM works to encourage and make possible the invasive re-articulations of otherness—that seemingly innocuous surface onto which the subject’s own alterity is projected in order to be sublated. However, by articulating the visitor’s ultimate desire for contact, and the other’srequiting ability to move and touch, museological encounters also point to a more hopeful horizon beyond the violence of the grasp, and the tenuous boundaries between subject and

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object. In its most promising manifestation as caress or collusion, contact forges the material and discursive bridging of both bodies in such a way that both refuse to be completely subsumed.

This discussion has furthermore alluded to the fact that, while contemporary natural history/science museums such as the ROM advertise with increasing tenacity their interactive or tactile exhibits, opportunities for truly anti-hegemonic modes of touch remain deficient. The general sparseness of examples specific to the ROM points significantly to the fact that the reciprocal model of contact, and the corporal and linguistic generosity it engenders, is still the anomaly within the museum setting, and when it does occur, does so in predominantly unsanctioned instances of aporia and unruly chance. Rather than mandating further official models of touch, however, remediating curatorial initiatives should instead consider allowing for even more generative fissures and gaps to be woven materially and discursively into the museological landscape. These “contaminating” spaces between knowing, between light, between apprehension and penetration, allow for ethical encounters between subject and object to occur, precisely because they prioritize movement over seizure, rupture over closure.