Q&A

The Sensational Museum

Embracing the Mind Shift

How are museum professionals in other countries approaching accessibility? In this issue, editor Jeanne Normand Goswami sat down with Drs. Charlotte Slark and Sophie Vohra of the Sensational Museum to discuss how this innovative project has approached integrating multisensory accessibility into UK museums – in visitor experiences and collections management alike. The following is a condensed and edited transcript of our conversation. You can also listen to the unedited audio here.

Dr. Charlotte Slark, Research Associate, University of Westminster, is an interdisciplinary scholar who uses both social science and humanities methodologies to examine museums as institutions. She came to academia from the heritage sector and has experience working both back and front of house in museums. She is interested in challenging structural inequalities throughout the heritage sector.

Dr. Sophie Vohra, Research Associate, University of Leicester, is an academic and professional public historian. Her academic background and interests include community, history, identity, material culture, and memory. She has worked across a number of roles in different types of organizations in the UK heritage sector since 2012. She strives to dismantle intersectional inequity and champion and support lasting change.

Jeanne **Charlotte, Sophie, thank you both for giving us your time today. I'd love to start by asking you to describe yourselves to our readers, and then to introduce us to an experience you've had recently at a museum, either for work or for fun, that really hits all of the notes for you in terms of an accessible, multisensory experience.**

Sophie I'm Dr. Sophie Vohra. I am a postdoctoral researcher for the Sensational Museum, based in the School of Museum Studies and with the Institute for Digital Culture at the University of Leicester in the UK.

I went to Centro Pecci, in Prato, Italy, quite recently, and there was an installation called *Smisurata*, which was curated in collaboration with Ibrahim Kombarji, and it was about the concept of scale and how we experience scale, and how this idea isn't neutral; it's personally and culturally defined. So, it aimed to disrupt our understanding of scale and to encourage people to think beyond just sight; to think about movement, smell, touch, proximity, and presence, and to evoke memories.

Kombarji and Centro Pecci had worked with universal design expert Loolgehnet Teklé to support and enhance the accessibility of the installation. One of my favorite parts was that they had interpretation panels and labels that were about eight-feet tall, and I could read them from across the room, which was really novel and wonderful. They had dual language interpretation in Italian and in English. They had braille. They also used embossed images of distinct parts of the installation so you could touch the visual. And next to those, they had textured panels using similar materials to the installation, so you could feel it. I found this so compelling because it didn't scream, "This is for access reasons!" and, instead, just supported people diving into different ways of knowing and experiencing the art.

Charlotte I'm Charlotte Slark. I am one of the research associates at the University of Westminster. I'm in the psychology department, but I am not a psychology person. I work with the incredible Alison Eardley, who originally comes from psychology.

I have a bit of a cheat answer because I'm currently traveling around the UK visiting the exhibits created by our pilot museums. So, everything I've seen in the last month has been a Sensational Museum project, and all seven have been co-created with a pan-disabled group of co-creators, and they've all created multisensory exhibits. The care that's gone in from both the co-creators and museums has resulted in some really, truly accessible exhibits.

As an example, *Sensing the Past of Peru* is an exhibition at the Museum of Archeology and Anthropology in Cambridge, and they have taken a 1,400-year-old Moche pot from Peru, and they have used this one object to focus on how to tell its story in a multisensory way. For anybody who's never experienced a Moche pot – I was one of them up until recently – they're incredible. They are made from terracotta and look like two grapefruits joined together that have some kind of animal on it. So, the one in this exhibition has a macaw, and when you fill it with water, and you move it around, it makes a whistling

Fig. 1. A terracotta replica of a Moche pot which allows you to feel the texture and surprising warmth of the material that was used to make the pot 1,400 years ago.

sound mimicking the animal that it's portraying (fig. 1).

Obviously, you can't let museum visitors just touch a 1,400-year-old pot. So, they needed to find a way to communicate the story of this pot in an accessible way.

That meant that if you didn't have access to vision, you'd get an idea of it; if you didn't have access to sound, you'd get an idea of it. So, they've created a multilevel multisensory experience: There's audio description that describes the pot at the beginning. Then there's a video of the curator filling the real pot and moving it around and making the noise, and it has captions describing the sound. And then at the end, there's audio description of what was happening in the video. There's British Sign Language. There's also a braille transcription. You can listen through headphones. You can choose to listen through a QR code, because there are some people who absolutely do not want to use headphones that other people have used.

And then there are two models – and the really important thing is that these two different tactile objects have been carefully created for two very different roles (fig. 2). The co-creators were really interested in communicating what the pot felt like, because they were really surprised that the terracotta was actually quite warm. So, we've had one model made out of terracotta. And then we have a model that shows how it works, how it produces the noise. This model is a cross section that's made out of plastic, because it didn't need to be terracotta, because what was important was being able to see or hear the water sloshing, and to feel the shape of it (fig. 3). It's an incredible way of telling the story of this pot in a way that is accessible to you, whatever access you have to sense perceptions.

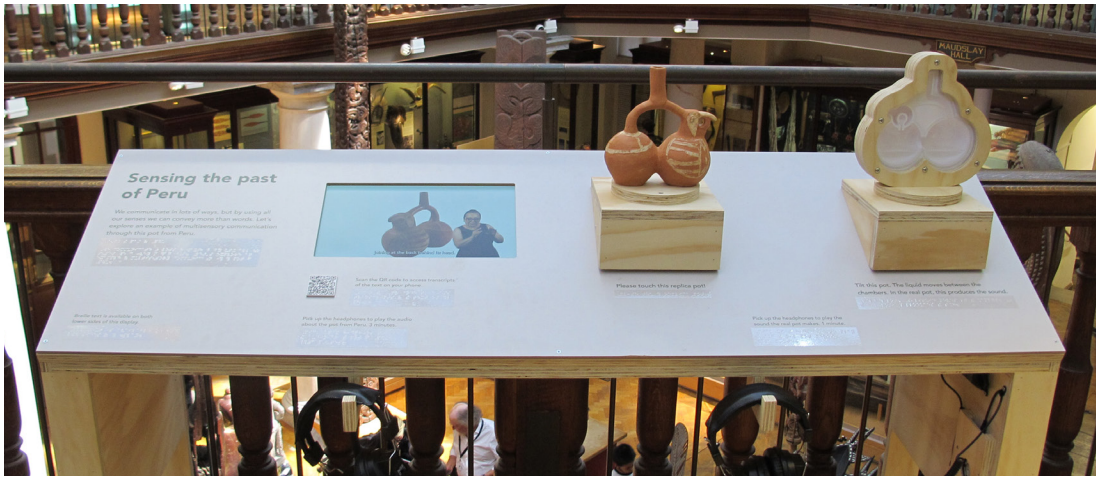

Fig. 2. One of the Sensational Museum's pilot projects in *Sensing the Past of Peru*. A table-like structure holds a video and two replicas of a Moche pot. Two pairs of headphones are on hooks at the edge of the structure.

Fig. 3. A visitor bends down to get a closer look at a cross-section tactile of a Moche pot, which he has lifted to move the water inside.

So often we think about multisensory, and we might only be thinking about adding sound or adding a tactile, and it's very interesting to hear your examples where it's clear that it needs to be both/and. It's about giving as many types of access as possible in order to create this layered experience. I want to use that to segue into what the Sensational Museum is. I know, Charlotte, you started talking a little bit about the pilot projects, so I wonder if we can take a step back, and speak more broadly about the project as a whole and your specific roles within that?

Charlotte The Sensational Museum is funded by a UK organization called the Arts Humanities Research Council. We are a two-and-a-half year project that's coming to the end of our funding, which cuts across multiple universities. So, University of Westminster, where I am, University of Leicester, where Sophie is, Royal Holloway, University of London, which is where our principal investigator, Hannah Thompson, is. At the Sensational Museum, what we really do is use what we know about disability to make museums better for everybody. So, the ethos of the Sensational Museum is that no one sense is necessary or sufficient. And by that we mean that you shouldn't have to have access to one sense to be able to engage with what is in a museum. And like you say, and it's all about *and*; it's about giving people options, and about giving people equitable alternatives. So, if they can't access sight, having really good audio description, or having a really good tactile that communicates what the object is doing, rather than just, "this is what it looks like." We use the idea of disability gain, which is the idea that by putting in provisions for people who are disabled, or thinking actively about people who are disabled, everybody benefits. So, if you're thinking about audio description, a lot of people don't actually know how to look at objects or artworks in a museum, even if they have full access to sight, and audio description can massively improve that experience for a wide range of people.

The project is split into two strands: Collections and Communication.

Sophie So the Collections strand, which I've been working on with Professor Ross Parry at the University of Leicester, has been looking at the object or collection item throughout its lifespan, in the back-of-house space – the information that we hold on it – and thinking more specifically about the digital spaces that we use to support that. So, we've been trying to open up the types of information that are fed into the system and how we think about their usefulness, and what their purpose is, and using multisensory as a tool to think more critically about access and whose voice is in that system, which feeds quite nicely into what Charlotte's been doing on her strand.

Charlotte My strand is about communication – thinking about how collections are communicated in the galleries. So, for my strand, working with Professor Alison Eardley, we've created a multisensory interpretation toolkit which guides museums through co-creating multisensory, accessible interventions in their museums. And this is

what we've piloted across seven museums in the UK. They've all installed multisensory interventions in their galleries, and we're currently evaluating those to share that data, and to show why it's important, how it works, and to help encourage other people to fund these kinds of things in their own museums.

I have two follow-up questions. One is for Sophie. I'm wondering if you could give an example of a collection object and the type of information that may have traditionally been captured about it within databases, and then talk through the ways you're encouraging people to think differently, or the type of information that you might want to capture in addition to that? And then, Charlotte, could you speak a bit more about this evaluation piece and how you're planning on looking at efficacy?

Sophie Systems have been a really interesting place for collections information. It became a place primarily to take stock of what organizations hold. And in doing so, it started to push this sense that somehow everything that's in the data is objective and truthful, and that is where the visual comes in – that idea that the visual is objective. And because of this, visual information is oftentimes the only information that is recorded about collection items. And it can be quite sparse: it may include dimensions, or colors, or maybe materials, and there might be an image attached, and that might be the extent of the access that the system supports. And, more often than not, it only includes one voice in those descriptions.

And what we try to do, using the concepts of multisensory and access, is to say, if we start thinking beyond the visual – using that information, but actually even thinking about it in new ways – can we start to build up a more nuanced reading of these collection items that goes beyond this assumed objectivity to something that highlights that people's interactions with and conversations with and readings of collections are very personal and culturally contingent?

If we take a sewing box, for example, a basic description might be that it's a wooden sewing box with a metal handle, and it has a certain number, and there might be an image of that. Then, through the Sensational Museum's processes of rethinking, we ask about some of the broader sensory readings of this sewing box: Can we can tell that the wood has a certain grain? That it goes a certain way? That it feels different to touch it on the bottom because it's not sanded to the highly varnished finish of other parts of the exterior? Can we then open it up and find a velvet lining inside?

And then, can we go one step further and say that it matters how you interpret this? What's your experience of this object? What are your sensory and emotional responses to it? So, you could say, for example, this sewing box reminds me of something that I had at my grandparents' house. It has that very distinct musty smell when I open it up, and I have a memory from one time when I stuck my hand in to grab a piece of silky ribbon, and I poked my finger on a needle, and that really hurt. And I remember crying so much. That is still giving you things that

are true and real for people and saying that there is room in the system for this. And it then starts to break down that hierarchy of knowledge and allows us to think more critically and more interestingly about what we have.

So far, there's not really space in the system to do that. There are parts of collections management systems that could make room for these types of reflections, but oftentimes there's a huge lack of confidence in working with multisensory and thinking in those ways. What we've tried to do is encourage people to think in new ways about multisensory concepts. In particular, on my side of the project, there are kind of 10 senses that we go through to help people build sensory literacy and sensory confidence, which would then allow them to start to have these conversations with the collections in new ways. So, the mindset change has to be as important as the systems that are there to support it, because even if those boxes are there, it doesn't mean that somebody is going to fill them out.

Charlotte In terms of evaluation and the process and the advocacy work we're doing – we've evaluated every stage of the project. We want to make sure that everything that we've done so far, we've evaluated and fed into the next stage. But for the pilot, and in terms of the museums and what they've been making, we want proof of concept. We want to know that it's worked, and we want to know what didn't work. That's really important so that we can then share that and inform best practice.

Then, in terms of how this gets used going forward, people who work in museums, generally speaking, are really passionate. They care. They want to do this kind of work. They want to make things accessible. They want to help as many people as possible get excited about their collections. However, that's not always the case for directors, trustees, funding bodies, who are looking at it with much more of a business lens. So, you've got to prove to them that it works, that it brings people in, increases your visitor numbers. We have a lot of targets in the UK, particularly for accessibility, so we want to be able to provide some of those stats – proof that this work is worth doing, that we know that it works, that we know that it will make an impact. So, we're trying to create advocacy tools. We're trying to create something that people who are looking to do this process in their own museum can take to their funders, can take to their directors, and say, Look, yes, it's a bit of extra work. Yes, it's going to cost us extra money because we're paying for these really cool things. And yes, we need to embed it really early into the process. But look at what can come from it. And that's the way you get things done.

Charlotte, let's stick with your strand for a minute. You've used the word co-creation quite a bit in everything that you've talked about. Understanding that this is about disability gain, and the idea that these multisensory experiences are truly benefiting everyone and giving everyone better access to the collections within museums, I wonder if you can tell us more about the partners you've

worked with, both from the disability community and the museum community?

Charlotte The toolkit was co-created with a group of disabled and nondisabled museum professionals, academics, consultants – a wide range of people with lived experience. But when it came to what was happening in the pilot museums, we were very much asking the museum professionals, some of whom identified as disabled themselves, some who didn't, to work with groups of people from local communities who all identified as d/Deaf, disabled, and/or neurodivergent. So, we wanted to have as wide a range of lived experience as possible, while understanding that you can never have one of everybody represented. And not only that, but even if you do, that's going to still be a personal experience.

There's no one homogeneous experience of disability. But you can, by having more people at the table, get a much wider range of voices, of experiences, and it really helps enrich what you're going to get. So, this meant that curators were able to bring their experience and their expertise and then hear back from other people about what they thought.

So, in the *Sensing the Past of Peru* example that we talked about earlier, there's no scent in that, because the co-creators were really passionate that they did not want scent. They were really clear that they had had bad experiences in the past or that they didn't want something that would bleed into the galleries. So, we don't have scent, whereas some of our other museums do incorporate scent because co-creators thought it was important. By talking to people with lived experience, it allows you to get a better and deeper understanding of how people want to engage and how they don't want to engage. And it allows you to come across things that you would never have thought of unless you've got that personal, lived experience.

Sophie, I want to tie everything Charlotte was talking about back around to your strand of the project. I was struck with what you were talking about earlier, about building sensory literacy. I'm wondering if you've seen any promising ways forward, or tips or tricks, for museum professionals who want to try and make sure that this type of sensory information is captured in our systems, so that each time we want to create a visitor experience, we don't have to start from scratch?

Sophie Our website includes a number of tools and guidance materials. We have a whole section called Sensational Thinking that takes you through a few core concepts around sense. There's a lot of information there that I think many people may not have encountered before or not had to consider. And our hope is that heritage professionals across organizations and roles will find use in this.

Oftentimes, this type of storytelling or sensory work is assumed to be the work of educational or interpretation teams, not necessarily because others – in collections or registration or curatorial – are unwilling, but because that is not how they've been trained.

We had eight organizations pilot our systems and guidance materials, and quite a few of them said that it was a process of unlearning what they'd been taught about what should be in the system. And one of my favorite things to throw out there is lots of things are a construct: There is nothing that says that you have to record your collections in a certain way, but it's ingrained through their training as to how they're supposed to talk about collections and what the value of that is. Our tools are there to disrupt people's thinking around that.

And I think what was most interesting is that when we were testing this, we had a couple of people who worked in education and interpretation, and we had a number of curators, and people that worked on the collection side. And we have two sections within our demonstrator to record those kind of sensory readings. The first is evaluative: What senses are there? What can you notice? And the second is evocative: What does it evoke in you to engage with this sense? Those working curatorial and collections-based roles found the evaluative far easier to do. They could sit there and go, this is this sense, and I can find that. And you know, this is how it relates to that. But they found the evocative stuff really hard. And the flip of that was true for people working in education and interpretation. They said, I can story-tell my thoughts about this collection item, but trying to give you a definitive answer about a sensory system – I don't feel confident enough doing that.

So, we hope that the tools that we've created can start to break down what people assume their role or their responsibility is when inputting information into those systems. And to do that, we need to move away from these silos and boxes of who works in what department in our organizations. There are some big organizations in the UK, the big national museums, that will have departments that are specific to collections or interpretation or conservation, but there are also lots of people who have to work across purposes. So really, the work is already there, but we need to start integrating our thoughts and knowledge and how we bring this stuff together and see ourselves as a unit.

The collections management system then becomes a repository of all the different work that's going on across an organization, rather than just being reserved for people in collections management, in registration, in curatorial or conservation. And so, I hope the digital space can become an example of how people connect with one another in these organizations, and then we can replicate that in the physical spaces of our institutions. And I think, as Charlotte was saying, we can learn things from co-creators that we had never noticed before, but we're not even starting that process with our colleagues in the same building sometimes. And so actually, by bringing people together, we can have a much richer conversation and record that in our systems to allow for a much more interesting set of reflections on what we have and what cultural heritage can offer.

I'm wondering what's next for the Sensational Museum and how you hope this research and your findings help to build upon accessible practice, both in the UK and more broadly?

Sophie What we've created is a legacy of materials that we hope will continue to encourage people to start thinking and behaving in different ways. So, we have our website, as I mentioned, which has a number of things, including past materials from the project. There are a lot of resources there, as well as guidance materials and Sensational Thinking pages to work with. There's also a link to the demonstrator of the collections management modules that we developed.

And I hope that these are the types of things that people around the world can work with. On top of that, we have a couple of publications coming out. We have a book which will be written primarily by colleagues on the project, which looks at the thought processes behind what we've done, as well as more practical pieces on the process of how we've tested and evaluated, etc.

And another, which will be really exciting – there's an organization in the UK called the Group for Education in Museums, and they will be hosting a case study publication for us. There'll be short pieces from different heritage organizations across the UK, talking about engaging in this type of work, which we hope will be useful for people to understand how they might be able to implement that in their own work.

Charlotte I also want to mention that everything that Sophie has mentioned, all the books, they're all open access. And we are working on a toolkit, which is going to be live – by time this is published, it should be live on the website. The toolkit has five modules: four internal modules, which are about changing mindsets and getting yourself ready for co-creation. And then there's a process you can follow for co-creating your own multisensory display, exhibit, gallery, rehang, massive redevelopment – it's scalable. It's a way that you can use that process yourself.

Also, people can visit our pilot projects in the UK. And it's really important to note the impact this work has already had on our pilot museums. Pretty much every single museum that we've worked with are involving their co-creators in another project going forward. We have some that are on access panels for massive redevelopments. We've got some that are co-creating things in the future. We've got some that are involved in other ways, but they're also embedding what they've done with us into what they're planning for the future.

So, we have a couple that are going through a massive interpretation redevelopment that are embedding audio description into everything that they do. People are involving scent. They're making sure that the color schemes they're using are accessible. So, there's an incredible legacy that we're already seeing which shows how powerful something small – doing the internal workshops, playing with Sophie's demonstrator, going through the resources on the website – can be. It's a way to start thinking about your sensory experience a little bit differently. All of these things have a really powerful impact and can feed into your everyday practice.