

**Multisensory Immersive Exhibitions as Sites for Social Emotional Learning**

BY

LAUREN LEVING  
B.A., Tulane University, 2011

THESIS

Submitted as partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts in Museum and Exhibition Studies  
in the Graduate College of the  
University of Illinois at Chicago, 2017

Chicago, Illinois

Defense Committee:

Therese Quinn, Chair and Advisor

Claudine Ise, Art History

Allison Peters Quinn, Hyde Park Art Center

For Sabina. Think of this as my artistic contribution to *who cares for the sky?* You are an inspiration to us all.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Claudine Isé for being the best advisor I could have imagined and for our early Buzz meetings even though neither of us are morning people. Your guidance, brilliance, and humor carried me through this program.

Thank you Therese Quinn for being such a supportive Program Director. You are passionate about your students and our biggest advocate. You are kind-hearted and generous, providing us with the resources we needed to accomplish our goals. Your passion is unmatched.

Thank you to Allison Peters Quinn for providing me with this incredible career opportunity, for welcoming me into HPAC's beautiful community, and of course, for answering my endless questions. Over this past year, your role has been so much greater than one of just a boss. You are my mentor, and more importantly, my friend.

Thank you Laura Durava for your unwavering support and for your optimism. For as long as I can remember, you have been there for me, with root beer floats and hugs, and whenever I needed a homework break. xo

Thank you Janis Gail Cohen. You accompanied me on every single research trip and never once complained about museum burnout. Even from far away, I know I can always count on you. Thank you for always picking up the phone.

Thank you to Ariel Gentalen, my voice of reason, and Emily Kennedy, my fantastic copy editor. I'm lucky to have found you both.

Thank you to my parents for giving me life. And for laughing at my jokes even when they aren't funny.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>CHAPTER</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1 Problem Statement.....	1
1.2 Research Goals.....	10
1.3 Guiding Framework.....	12
1.4 Literature Review.....	14
1.5 Research Methods.....	23
2. ALEX DA CORTE, <i>FREE ROSES</i> AT MASS MOCA.....	26
3. NICK CAVE, <i>UNTIL</i> AT MASS MOCA.....	38
4. WOLFGANG LAIB, <i>WHERE HAVE YOU GONE—WHERE ARE YOU GOING?</i> AT THE PHILLIPS COLLECTION.....	51
5. SABINA OTT, <i>WHO CARES FOR THE SKY?</i> AT HYDE PARK ART CENTER.....	58
6. CONCLUSION AND FINDINGS.....	65
APPENDICES.....	70
Appendix A.....	70
Appendix B.....	71
CITED LITERATURE.....	72
VITA.....	75

## LIST OF FIGURES

<u>FIGURE</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
1. Dr. Emilie Sitzia, Illustration from <i>Narrative Theories</i> .....	7
2. Random International, <i>Rain Room</i> , LACMA, 2015 .....	8
3. Allan Kaprow, Recreation of <i>Environment</i> at Hansa Gallery, New York, 1958 (later named <i>Beauty Parlor</i> ), Milan, 1991.....	13
4. Kurt Schwitters, <i>Merzbau</i> , Hannover, 1937.....	16
5. Alex Da Corte, <i>Free Roses</i> , MASS MoCA, 2016.....	30
6. Alex Da Corte and Joseph Beuys, <i>Lightning with a Stag in its Glare</i> , MASS MoCA, 2016.....	32
7. Alex Da Corte, <i>Free Roses</i> , MASS MoCA, 2016.....	34
8. Nick Cave, <i>Until</i> , MASS MoCA, 2016.....	42
9. Nick Cave, <i>Until</i> , MASS MoCA, 2016.....	44
10. Nick Cave, <i>Hy Dyve in Until</i> , MASS MoCA, 2016.....	48
11. Wolfgang Laib installing <i>Where have you gone—where are you going?</i> Phillips Collection, 2013.....	52
12. Wolfgang Laib, <i>Where have you gone—where are you going?</i> Phillips Collection, 2016 .....	57
13. Sabina Ott, <i>Who Cares for the Sky?</i> Hyde Park Art Center 2016.....	59
14. Sabina Ott, <i>Who Cares for the Sky?</i> Hyde Park Art Center 2016.....	62

## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

EJ	Excellent Judges
HPAC	Hyde Park Art Center
LACMA	Los Angeles County Museum of Art
MASS MoCA	Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art
SEL	Social Emotional Learning
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development

## SUMMARY

This thesis examines artist created immersive exhibitions situated within contemporary art institutions and the ways they foster social emotional learning (SEL). SEL is equated to life skills including critical thinking, coping with stress, emotion regulation, effective communication, and self-awareness. For the purposes of this thesis, I define immersive art exhibits as exhibitions conceived and produced by living artists and that are multisensory, engaging at least one sense in addition to sight.

By using four specific exhibitions as case studies: *Free Roses* by Alex da Corte at MASS MoCA, *Until* by Nick Cave at MASS MoCA, *Where have you gone—where are you going?* Wolfgang Laib's permanent installation at the Phillips Collection, and *Who cares for the sky?* a 2016 exhibit by Sabina Ott for Hyde Park Art Center, my research aims to prove that immersive exhibitions cultivate SEL and cultivate critical thinking abilities. In addition to scholarly research, I conducted visitor surveys at these sites and spoke with MASS MoCA Curator, Denise Markonish, Phillips Collection Deputy Director for Curatorial and Academic Affairs, Klaus Ottmann and artists Nick Cave and Sabina Ott.

Employing the findings from the above-mentioned case studies and supplemental research, this thesis concludes that large-scale immersive exhibitions that shift away from traditional artifact-and-object-centric display practices function as an effective style of visitor engagement. Furthermore, they successfully foster Social Emotional Learning, especially because the human brain has evolved to most efficiently learn through multisensory practices as they best approximate the ways we acquire knowledge in natural environments.

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Problem Statement**

Using visitor surveys from site visits to Nick Cave's art installation *Until* and Alex Da Corte's *Free Roses* at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA), Wolfgang Laib's *Where have you gone – where are you going?* at the Phillips Collection, and observations in Sabina Ott's *who cares for the sky?* at Hyde Park Art Center (HPAC), as well as interviews with Cave, Ott, MASS MoCA Curator Denise Markonish, and the Phillips Collection's Deputy Director for Curatorial and Academic Affairs Klaus Ottmann, my research aims to understand the ways in which audience learning in immersive art environments differs from education in more traditional, discursive exhibitions, and how social emotional learning (SEL) is fostered within these multisensory exhibits. For the purposes of this thesis, I am defining "immersive environments" as contemporary art exhibitions that are conceived and produced by living artists, and that are multisensory, meaning that they engage at least one sense in addition to sight. Using the above-mentioned monographic case studies, I suggest specific ways in which institutions can provide ideal spaces for experiential learning and critical thinking, thereby promoting individual interpretation that is not mediated by the institution.

Throughout this thesis, I discuss interpretation and learning, both of which, in this text, I consider to be modes of self-education that do not require the generation of concrete, art historical knowledge in order to be considered successful. Experiential learning and SEL are forms of visitor education that draw on emotional engagement, physical reactions, and past knowledge as ways to interpret artwork. Using these methods, each audience member may arrive at a conclusion unique to her understanding of the outside world. This thesis aims to show that



these individual modes of self-education that emerge from SEL and experiential learning are not only valid but serve to resist the authoritative structure of the institution, which oftentimes views “right” and “wrong” as binaries.

This type of unmediated interpretation of contemporary artwork is beneficial because it allows visitors to enter the museum setting without feeling pressure to construct meaning based on the perspective of the institution, or even the artists themselves. Oftentimes, publics are resistant to entering art museums, plagued with anxieties about not having enough knowledge of art history to understand the work displayed and feeling insecure about their abilities to comprehend the information presented in didactic texts. Promoting SEL within contemporary art institutions has the potential to reduce this tension by making space for self-guided learning and encouraging experiential methods of knowledge reception.

Furthermore, this body of writing has the potential to be advantageous to museum educators and visitor experience staff members. Though this text centers on immersive environments, the research conducted can also be applied to more traditional museum exhibitions and projects outside the scope of multisensory installations. Educators can use this knowledge to better understand and employ subjective versions of learning. Arts education, and especially contemporary arts education, needs to include space for visitor interpretation that occurs without the museum’s intervention.

Museums were originally created to collect, study, and showcase material culture deemed historically important to a widespread public. The oldest standing museum, the Musei Capitolini, was founded in 1471 by Pope Sixtus IV to house the bronze sculptures that he donated to the Roman people. As history develops, so do large-scale institutional collections that use objects to

provide audiences with a synoptic glimpse into the past. Today, the Musei Capitolini displays these bronze sculptures, as well as Italian coins, jewelry, and works from the medieval and Renaissance periods (Musei Capitolini, 2006). While the focus of the collection has expanded to incorporate works from multiple periods in history, the mission of the Musei Capitolini remains the same: to display historically relevant artifacts as a method of audience education.

Traditional artifact-and object-centric display practices like those of the Musei Capitolini are still widely utilized in contemporary museums, which frequently exhibit works on walls and pedestals with corresponding text to explain what the objects are and why they are meaningful. Best practices regarding the communication of textual information are constantly in flux: the most rigid developing in Great Britain in 1857, when the House of Commons passed a law that required all art, scientific, and historical objects to have an accompanying didactic panel to convey information to the public (Schaffner, 2003, p. 157).

Numerous contemporary museum practices, including conventional methods of collection and display, are attributed to the Europeans. However, in 1925, Archeologist Leonard Woolley speculated that the first museum was developed in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. in the Babylonian city of Ur by Princess Ennigaldi-Nanna to house the collection of her father, King Nabonidus. His artifacts, many of which were already considered ancient at that point in time, were organized and labeled by the Princess as a way to educate young priestesses within the family's empire (Lewis, 2000). It is unknown from where the King's interest in history stems, but his desire to preserve the past is the first on record, used, like the Musei Capitolini's, as a popular method of education that remains a model for teaching many centuries later.

For hundreds of years, museums have been framed as an authority. These earliest

museums have set the standard for the way objects are presented and dictate user experience, and the majority of traditionally structured institutions aspire to achieve this same standard today. Contemporary art spaces increasingly strive to dismantle classical modes of display by showcasing experimental immersive environments, and, in that pursuit, have the potential to tap into alternative forms of learning. This thesis will argue that, in contrast to artifact-and object-centric museum exhibits that adhere to the best practices of the moment, artist-created immersive environments within institutional settings break away from the conventional format by completely encompassing spectators and creating multisensory experiences. These installations optimize the learning process by fostering critical thinking and encouraging audiences to use their prior knowledge to make meaning of the work presented as a form of social emotional learning, or SEL.

In a study conducted by Dr. Serhat Arslan in the Department of Educational Sciences at Sakarya University in Turkey, he explains SEL as, “having a capacity to define and regulate one’s own emotions accurately, improving problem solving skills, and a skill to establishing good relationships with the people around” (Arslan, 2016, p. 276). He continues by citing a 2015 UNICEF article that equates SEL to life skills, which are:

defined as critical thinking, coping with stress, emotion regulation, effective communication, and self-awareness in order to cope with social problems, prevention of social differentiation and injustice, expression of oneself, decrease of prejudice against different viewpoints and thoughts, and increase of understanding (Arslan, 2016, p. 277; UNICEF, 2015).

While many contemporary art institutions offer educational programs, including art-making classes, curator-led tours, and lectures by arts professionals, little research has been conducted regarding the importance of SEL and the ways artist-created environments use multisensory

techniques to increase learning on individual and communal levels.

In her article “Narrative Theories and Learning in Contemporary Art Museums: A Theoretical Exploration,” Dr. Emilie Sitzia, an associate professor in the Department of Literature and Art at Maastricht University in the Netherlands, and a frequent art, literature, and museum studies writer, states that artist-created immersive environments within cultural institutions aim to foster experiential learning, “[mobilizing] the visitor’s sensations and imagination by integrating them into universes that encourage the reception of the exhibition’s messages” (Sitzia, 2016, p. 2). In this way, viewers are no longer merely spectators, but become participants in a performative setting that draws upon senses other than sight (which is oftentimes the sole sense utilized in art museums).

The idea of museum visitor as participant is discussed in detail in *The Participatory Museum*, a book written by the current executive director of the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History, Nina Simon. She defines a participatory cultural institution as, “a place where visitors can create, share, and connect with each other around content” (Simon, 2010). The case studies examined in this thesis can be considered participatory exhibitions because through multisensory techniques, they encourage audiences to engage with one another, as well as with the artwork on display. Beyond being a fun activity, a visit to an immersive exhibit promotes educational skills including SEL, which Simon argues, are usable outputs that benefit spectators through the acquisition of knowledge and simultaneously assist the institution in supporting its role as a social place (Simon, 2010).

Immersive exhibitions do not usually replicate natural habitats, but they do rely upon the multisensory interactions which psychologists Shams and Seitz believe to be the most productive

methods of knowledge acquisition, a concept to be further outlined in Section 1.4 of this thesis (Shams and Seitz, 2008, p. 1). According to Paul Duncum, art education theorist at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, knowledge is developed through a combination of senses; meaning is dependent on the way these elements interact with one another (Duncum, 2004, p. 252). For example, an image of a child being led by her parent paired with upbeat music conveys a different message than if the picture were backed by a somber soundtrack.

Multisensory, immersive exhibitions interweave components that play to specific senses, and therefore compel audiences to participate in a fully developed experience from which they can make meaning. Humans employ *a priori* knowledge to understand the emotions evoked by visual imagery paired with audio. *A priori* information, as defined by German philosopher Immanuel Kant, is universal knowledge based on reasoning; visitors to immersive exhibitions use *a priori* knowledge to make meaning within the space, but they leave with *a posteriori* knowledge, or information gained from a particular experience, which is, in this case, any information attained as a result of time spent inside of said multisensory installation (Kant, 1781, reprint 2007).

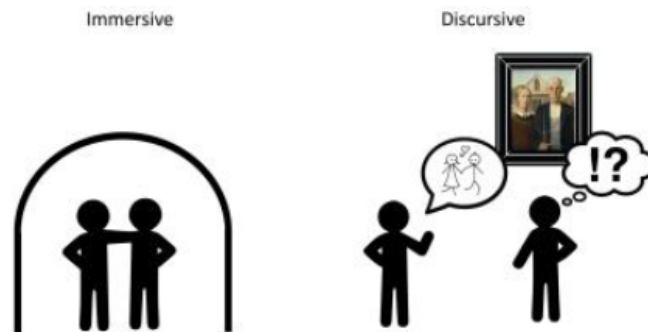
In the introduction to “Narrative Theories,” Sitzia quotes Roland Barthes, who states that narrative is universal:

Narrative is present at all times, in all places, in all societies; indeed narrative starts with the very history of mankind; there is not, there has never been anywhere, any people without narratives; all classes, all human groups have their stories... (Sitzia, 2016, p. 1; Barthes, 1975).

Using this quote as a guiding framework, this thesis defines narrative as the autobiographical story of the spectator, shaped by upbringing, past experiences, and *a priori* knowledge, which are all drawn upon to construct meaning. An artwork’s narrative is the story its maker communicates, or attempts to communicate, through the final product that is featured in a

museum or gallery.

In discursive exhibitions—exhibits that stay true to the traditional object-centric format and rely upon sense of sight and the ability to read interpretive placards—the narratives of the artwork occur in parallel with the narratives of the viewers. Within these exhibits, audiences view a single work and move on to the next. As Sitzia explains, each artwork has its own narrative, detached from the narratives of the works on either side of it and separate from the narrative of the viewer, whose personal experiences and history rarely, if ever, merge with those of the exhibited work. For example, when a museumgoer views the acclaimed Grant Wood painting *American Gothic*, her autobiographical narrative remains separate from the story told by the picture. The two narratives do not become one. However, within immersive exhibitions, spectators are placed directly inside of the artist-created narrative, in effect becoming the subject of the artwork (Sitzia, 2016, p. 7).



(fig 1, Illustration from “Narrative Theories,” Sitzia)

During a trip to Random International’s *Rain Room*, situated within the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), spectators walk through an environment of constant raindrops that pause only when the exhibit’s technology senses the human body. *Rain Room*

responds to the visitor's presence, centering her within the narrative of the exhibition. The experience of viewing the falling water, in combination with the surround sound of the droplets as they hit the floor, the light scent of fresh rain, and the stark absence of the water's touch—as the motion sensors leave the skin dry—creates a multisensory spectacle that places the audience at the heart of the exhibition (LACMA, 2015). Here, multisensory learning is supplemented by SEL: visitor movements and decisions become key in shaping this piece. One visit to *Rain Room* or a similar exhibition becomes immediately integrated into the spectator's autobiographical narrative—a moment in time that creates a memory—and cultivates an experience that creates *a posteriori* knowledge that can be drawn upon in the future.



(fig 2, *Rain Room*, Image from *The Los Angeles Times*)

This concept is in line with Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art Curator Saara Hacklin's idea of the, "embodied experience...[in which] it is not possible to perceive the world without one's body: we cannot step outside the world and observe it from the outside, as we are already in it" (Hacklin, 2016, p. 4). Hacklin discusses the embodied experience within her article, "To Touch and Be Touched: Affective, Immersive and Critical Contemporary Art?"

which she wrote in preparation for *Kiasma's Collection Exhibition 2016-2017*, an exhibit focusing on the benefits of touch within immersive, multisensory museum exhibits.

Because the immersive environment becomes part of the visitor's own narrative, this firsthand point of view enables audiences to feel comfortable drawing upon prior knowledge to make meaning within these multisensory exhibits. Thus, these exhibitions promote interpretation as opposed to mere reception of didactic information, as has so long been standard for museumgoers. Multisensory exhibitions place the public in a role that encourages a subjective, emotional connection with the work, more so than a discursive experience, presented from an institution's perspective, that might suggest a singular, "correct" form of engagement (Sitzia, 2016, p. 7).

The full body experience occurring within immersive exhibits is a participatory technique that strengthens a spectator's museum visit through interactivity. The environment itself is what Simon terms as a "social object"—"the [engine] of socially networked experiences, the content around which conversation happens" (Simon, 2010). In *The Participatory Museum*, she writes that social objects are personal, active, provocative, and relational, which are all characteristics of the multisensory, immersive exhibitions that are written about in this thesis. The act of interpreting the work, as well as the interpersonal engagement that occurs within these spaces, boosts participation, active critical inquiry, and dialogue—and, therefore SEL.

According to Sue Allen, author of "Designs for Learning: Studying Science Museum Exhibits that Do More than Entertain," exhibitions must be motivating during the entirety of an interaction in order to be an effective teaching tool. This means that within each element of an exhibition, the visitor needs to be simultaneously entertained and challenged—thinking critically



and connecting prior knowledge to the work presented—in order to remain focused. Artist-created immersive environments achieve this goal by incorporating multisensory activities and engaging in the narratives of audiences who come from varying backgrounds, including those who enter the museum with previous art historical knowledge seeking to further their education, as well as those who see their visit primarily as a leisure activity (Allen, 2004, p. 1).

Using *Until*, *Free Roses*, *Where have you gone—where are you going?* and *who cares for the sky?* as case studies, my research investigates methods of museum audience engagement created by multisensory elements. These exhibitions provoke critical thinking, which in turn promotes interpretation that is not shaped by the museum’s perspective. Spectators are free to use outside knowledge to make sense of the exhibition, interacting with the work on a personal level, and honing SEL techniques in the process.

## 1.2 Research Goals

Multisensory immersive environments enable a shift away from the authoritarian viewpoint museums often assert over audience interpretation. Within these sites, visitors reference their individual and *a priori* knowledge, relying on self-education rather than feeling they have to depend on institutional interpretation to manage communication and guide their reception of the work (Walsh, 2016, p. 5-10).

Mark Wigley, professor and dean emeritus of Columbia University’s Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation, and author of “Discursive versus Immersive: The Museum is the Massage” writes that being engulfed in a multisensory and immersive exhibition is, “an opportunity to give visitors a sense of being detached enough from the world to reflect upon the world” (Wigley, 2016, p. 3). In a sense then, these exhibits become vacuum-like.

Audiences are still enacting their individual narratives (which, according to narrative theory, are inescapable), but being separated from the outside world allows for a type of decoding in which visitors are bringing in prior knowledge to decipher the contemporary art in front of them.

According to Sitzia then, “the immersive exhibition can therefore be an efficient model to trigger emotions that promote and engage the visitor with cognitive learning...[and] has the potential to achieve both the learning of affective and cognitive information” (Sitzia, 2016, p. 8).

The benefits of SEL in cultural institutions remain underexplored. Analyzing *Free Roses*, *Until, Where have you gone—where are you going?* and *who cares for the sky?* this body of writing aims to demonstrate the importance of engaging multiple senses within art exhibitions as a way to strengthen audience learning. While many contemporary art museums place a strong focus on visitor experience, their methods are short reaching, working to educate the public but rarely stepping outside of the singular, institutional perspective. Little attention is devoted to studying the ways individuals learn by bringing in their personal outside experiences as a way not only of decoding the elements of an artwork, but interpreting its various possible meanings.

It can be argued that the methods of certain institutions actively prevent self-education. For example, the “treasure hunts” given to children during field trips pose questions that set them on specific paths to find objects and, ultimately, to come up with answers and content that the museum deems important. Rather than allow students to pave their own way throughout a space, institutions use their positions of power to tell visitors what to see and how to see it, and therefore, determine which objects are worth engaging.

This resistance towards the value of SEL was exemplified during my visit to *Pixel Forest*, Pipilotti Rist’s solo exhibition at the New Museum in New York City. Upon arrival, I

was directed to begin on the second level and work my way up to the fifth floor. This initial encounter situates the New Museum as an authority, uninterested in letting spectators shape their own journeys. During this same visit, I met with a staff person from the curatorial department who helped with *Pixel Forest*'s development. She was unconcerned with alternative forms of learning, thwarting the notion of SEL as beneficial and instead advocating for visitor understanding directed by the artist's interpretation. She also repeatedly equated immersive environments to spectacles, stating that museumgoers only attended these exhibits for a photo op and, in her opinion, will likely not return for a second viewing. However, though these exhibitions—*Free Roses*, *Until, Where have you gone—where are you going?* and *who cares for the sky?*—do contain spectacular elements, they go beyond surface-level wonderment, making room for imagination, self-guided interpretation, and conversation. Because visitors have the ability to make their own meanings within these exhibits, I believe they are more likely to revisit the institutions in which they are situated, as this is an explicit method of engagement that shows consideration for the audience. Unlike the New Museum, rather than merely focusing on furthering the artist's interpretation of their own work, museums that are accepting of individual interpretation break away from the idea of institution as elitist. They have the potential to reframe the way education is viewed, placing greater value on SEL, an essential component of individually structured museum learning.

### 1.3 Guiding Framework

It is important to note that site-specific immersive environments within cultural institutions are not newfound phenomena. *Poème Électronique*, a collaboration between Edgard Varèse, Le Corbusier, and Iannis Xenakis for the 1958 Brussels World Fair, is thought to be the first completely immersive exhibition, combining music, video, and architecture to form a total

work of art (Mitchell. 2010, p. 101). Allan Kaprow's *Environments* came on the heels of this piece, the first created just one month later in November 1958, at Hansa Gallery in New York City. This exhibit was created to completely engage visitors, incorporating them into the work. Within the gallery, Kaprow created a new architectural framework, using a grid of wires to craft a faux ceiling, several inches lower than the original, from which he hung plastic sheeting, Scotch tape and cellophane. He utilized post World War II consumer goods to create walls that divided the gallery space, which he then filled with garbage. Kaprow pushed the overwhelming feeling of this *Environment* one step further by implementing a time-released spray of pine-scented deodorizer to permeate the space. The artist's aim was to blur the lines between art and life: "The environment as a space for the eye had been abandoned for an embodied experience" (Kaizen, 2003, p. 95).



(fig 3, Allan Kaprow, Recreation of *Environment*)

In Brian O'Doherty's germinal text, "Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space," he likens the gallery to the picture plane, bringing viewers inside of the artwork. He states, "The gallery space 'quotes' the tableaux and makes them art, much as their representation

became art within the illusory space of a traditional picture (O'Doherty, 1976, reprint 1988, p. 49).” In this sense, the spectator is no longer merely just that when she is engulfed in an immersive environment. Instead, she becomes another object within the space, and thus part of the artwork itself, a concept directly agreeing with Sitzia’s aforementioned “Narrative Theories.”

As stated earlier, though these installations have existed within the realm of contemporary art for at least the past 50 years, relatively little research has been conducted in regards to how these environments encourage self-education. Art historical theories that reject the notion of the traditional white cube space as the ideal setting for display, as well as more current studies comparing and contrasting immersive and discursive exhibitions, provide a foundation for my research. Site visits to a select few exhibits (first cited in Section 1.1) that meet the previously defined criteria of artist-created multisensory immersive environments have also been used to inform my studies.

#### 1.4 Literature Review

The museum studies field is not short on literature discussing education in cultural institutions and art historical texts about immersive environments, and there have been a plethora of scientific studies on the benefits of SEL (in particular, how it is necessary in K-12 schooling). However, there has not been much research examining how emotional learning specifically is fostered through art installations, or any literature that provides an analysis on the relationships between these exhibitions and human psychology. My current research aims to fill these gaps and to enlighten the reader on the ways immersive exhibitions promote SEL.

Exhibition display practices and the white cube space are frequently written about, perhaps most famously in the aforementioned O'Doherty article, “Inside the White Cube.” Here,

he chronicles the history of the ideal, white-walled gallery, which he compares to a house of worship:

A gallery is constructed along laws as rigorous as those for building a medieval church. The outside world must not come in, so windows are usually sealed off. Walls are painted white. The ceiling becomes the source of light. The wooden floor is polished so that you click along clinically, or carpeted so that you pad soundlessly, resting the feet while the eyes have at the wall. The art is free, as the saying used to go, “to take on its own life...” Unshadowed, white, clean, artificial—the space is devoted to the technology of esthetics. Works of art are mounted, hung, scattered for study. Their ungrubby surfaces are untouched by time and its vicissitudes. Art exists in a kind of eternity of display, and though there is lots of “period” (late modern), there is no time. This eternity gives the gallery a limbolike status...Indeed the presence of that odd piece of furniture, your own body, seems superfluous, an intrusion. The space offers the thought that while eyes and minds are welcome, space-occupying bodies are not...Here at last the spectator, oneself, is eliminated. You are there without being there... (O’Doherty, 1976, reprint 1988, p. 15).

The author remarks that though the white cube was originally conceived as a way for viewers to focus solely on the art before them, “We have now reached a point where we see not the art but the *space* first” (p. 14). Though this text was first published in *Artforum* in 1976, many of the issues O’Doherty presents remain relevant. He states that the artworks within the space “frame” the gallery, rather than the other way around, which is exemplified by exhibition practices in which curators place art that adheres to the architectural structure of the institution. Later, O’Doherty goes on to solidify his point, discussing Marcel Duchamp’s *Mile of String*:

It crisscrosses, changes speeds, ricochets back from points of attachment, clusters in knots, wheels new sets of parallaxes with every step, parceling up the space from the inside without the slightest formal worry. Yet it follows the alignment of the room and bays, erratically replicating the ceiling and walls. No obliques plunge across the central space, which becomes fenced in, casually quoting the shape of the room. Despite the apparent tizzy of randomness, the room and what is in it determine the string’s peregrinations in an orderly enough way (p. 72).

Within discursive exhibitions, this notion is still true today. For example, the majority of the

exhibitions at the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City, except perhaps, for *James Turrell*, in which the artist explores the perception of light and space in a site-specific installation, follow the curvature of the institution's stark white walls. The Guggenheim primarily displays artwork in a discursive format, framing the architecture of the institution, rather than experimenting with the structure as a way to frame the work.

O'Doherty briefly touches on immersive environments, using the term “surrounded spectator.” While he points to examples like Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau*, an ever-changing walk-in collage comprised of found objects and tokens from friends located in the artist's home, and Allan Kaprow's *Environments* (referenced in Section 1.3), he does not discuss the educational benefits of these spaces, nor those of the discursive exhibitions about which he comparatively writes. Without ever using the word “narrative,” “Inside the White Cube” does imply that spectators assume differing roles in these two settings. However, it does not address the ways a viewer's autobiographical narrative, while inside an immersive environment, encourages SEL.



(fig 4, Kurt Schwitters, *Merzbau*)

These installations provide a necessary space for interpretation, seamlessly entering the

visitor's self-narrative, enabling them to draw on *a priori* knowledge as a method of artwork decoding, and thus shaping the learning experience in ways that are potentially more meaningful to individuals than a mere digestion of art historical facts.

Chapters from *Manual of Museum Exhibitions*, a traditional textbook edited by Barry Lord and Gail Dexter Lord, supplement the theoretical readings included in this literature review. The bulk of the information I extrapolated comes from a chapter authored by Yves Mayrand, "The Role of the Exhibition Designer." While he does not speak specifically about immersive environments, Mayrand does devote a large portion of his section to the concept of the "Museum-Visitor Interface," remarking that, "a good exhibition eliminates this invisible frontier between the spectator and the medium—it becomes an interface between the visitor and the content of the exhibition" (Mayrand, 2002, p. 406).

Additionally, *Issue #4: Between the Discursive and the Immersive of Stedelijk Studies*, the online journal published by the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, includes information discussing the differences between discursive and immersive environments. This collection of essays and academic papers on best practices in the twenty-first century art museum was taken from the 2015 conference of the same title, which was co-organized by the Stedelijk Museum, the University of Aarhus, and the Louisiana Museum in Humlebaeck. While many of the articles provided information invaluable to my thesis, including those of Saara Hacklin and Mark Wigley, Dr. Emilie Sitzia's "Narrative Theories" has proven to be the most beneficial thus far in my research and her essay is used to further demonstrate that artist-created immersive environments create multisensory experiences that foster SEL.

Sitzia brought narrative theory to my attention, explaining how immersive exhibitions are



experienced as a part of the visitor's self-narrative, while the narratives of discursive exhibits parallel that self-narrative. Additionally, Sitzia investigates immersive environments using transformative learning, emotional learning, and experiential learning frameworks, detailing that these exhibits are designed with the intention of creating knowledge in the form of experience. She writes that, "The immersive exhibition can...be an efficient model to trigger emotions that promote and engage the visitor with cognitive learning. In theory, the immersive model...has the potential to achieve both the learning of affective and cognitive information" (p. 8). The author also cites educational theorist David Kolb's theory of experiential learning, coming to the conclusion that, "The immersive exhibition design, being anchored in the body of the visitor and integrated in the visitor's narrative, allows for a more hands-on experience. The immersive model of exhibition covers active experimentation and concrete experience" (p. 10).

Furthermore, during Sitzia's study of immersive exhibitions through the lens of transformative learning, she references the ten phases of transformative learning developed by sociologist Jack Mezirow, which are as follows:

- Phase 1. A disorienting dilemma
- Phase 2. A self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame
- Phase 3. A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions
- Phase 4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change
- Phase 5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
- Phase 6. Planning of a course of action
- Phase 7. Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
- Phase 8. Provisional trying of new roles
- Phase 9. Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
- Phase 10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's perspective

Using these phases, Sitzia concludes that immersive environments, "[have] the potential to

facilitate/enable some phases of transformative learning, such as the creation of a disorienting dilemma (Phase 1), creating space/time for self-examination (Phase 2), allowing for the exploration of options for new roles (Phase 5), providing space/time for the provisional trying out new roles, and the building of competence and self-confidence (Phases 8 and 9)” (p. 9).

Mezirow’s phases of transformative learning can be compared to the Excellent Judges (EJ) framework created by a group of museum exhibitors and led by Beverly Serrell in response to the “Standards for Museum Exhibitions and Indicators of Excellence” that was developed by the Standing Professional Committees of the American Association of Museums (Quinn, 2006, p. 98). The EJ guidelines assess the excellence of exhibitions from a visitor-experience perspective and state that an exhibition should be:

1. Comfortable—both physically and psychologically
2. Engaging—entices visitors to pay attention
3. Reinforcing—providing visitors with opportunities to be successful and feel intellectually competent
4. Meaningful—offering personally relevant experiences for visitors

The EJ criteria that an exhibition has to be reinforcing and meaningful are in line with phases 2 and 9 of the ten phases of transformative learning and the requirement of engagement relates to Sue Allen’s stipulation that an exhibit must be motivating throughout the entirety of the audience member’s visit (outlined in Section 1.1). However, the Excellent Judges guideline that an exhibition must be comfortable remains up for debate, contrasting Megan Boler’s theory of discomfort, which is discussed later in this literature review (Serrell, 2006).

Dr. Serhat Arslan’s “Social Emotional Learning and Critical Thinking Disposition,” a scientific article published in *Studia Psychologica*, compares SEL with critical thinking capabilities, concluding the former assists with development of the latter, and finds that both are

necessary tools for learning. Arslan's research utilizes anonymous questionnaires from 289 university students who responded to questions about their own learning styles based on the Social Emotional Learning Scale, a five-point scale to measure SEL needs. By asking questions about peer relationships, task articulation, and self-regulation, the study found that greater learning occurs when multiple senses are stimulated (Arslan, 2016, p. 279). While the participants in Arslan's study were university students ranging from 17 to 30 years old, the benefits of SEL are relevant to people of all age groups, and especially in immersive exhibitions, in which visitors can use critical thinking skills and problem solving to dissect the components of the work in order to arrive at their own conclusions.

Building on this psychological framework, I examined the benefits of sensory immersion in regards to learning. In "Benefits of Multisensory Learning," Ladan Shams, a psychologist at the University of California, Los Angeles, and Aaron R. Seitz, a psychologist at the University of California, Riverside, performed a motion detection study on two groups of adults to examine the benefits of multisensory learning. The first group was tested using visual (unisensory) training while the second was tested with auditory-visual (multisensory) training. In this study, greater learning was found amongst participants in the multisensory group. The psychologists note that these findings are logical because the human brain has developed to learn best in natural environments, which are, by definition, those that require the use of multiple senses. Thus, the human brain is trained to utilize all five senses during the educational process—basically, any acquisition of new information. In contrast, learning in a unisensory setting is not an optimal process. Immersive exhibitions like *Until, Free Roses, Where have you gone—where are you going?* and *who cares for the sky?* are similar to natural environments in that they engage multiple senses and therefore produce greater SEL than exhibits catering only to a single sense

(Shams and Seitz, 2008, p. 1). Shams and Seitz do not reference the visual arts in this article, but rather they comment on the overall educational benefits of multisensory experience.

Furthermore, in “Multisensory Emplaced Learning: Resituating Situated Learning in a Moving World,” an article by Vaike Fors of Halmstad University, Åsa Bäckström of Stockholm University, and Sarah Pink of RMIT University, and published in the University of California’s *Mind, Culture, and Activity* journal, the authors comment on what they have termed “sensory-emplaced learning,” which is defined as an informal learning process based on the relationship between the mind, body, and environment. Focusing on how emplacement is enacted, they state that it, “becomes an informal learning process that is constantly related to social interplay” (Fors, Bäckström, and Pink, 2013, p. 180). Giving the example of skateboarding, this research comments on how the senses work together in the learning process. Rather than feeling the vibrations the skateboard wheels cause, case study participants talked about how they listened to them. The authors agree with Duncum’s argument that learning occurs through a stimulation of multiple senses at once, writing that, “not only does the sensory route to knowing involve listening, it is rather a full-bodied emplaced experience” (Fors et al., 2013, p. 181). Though the examples put forth in this text are not within art institutions, the findings can be translated to site-specific immersive environments. Learning within these exhibitions is a bodily experience, using the senses to gain knowledge and to interpret this newfound information through the critical thinking process.

Though the studies published by Shams and Seitz, and Fors et al. do not explicitly research museum education, literature that reflects the importance of multisensory learning within cultural institutions does exist. Naomi Reden’s unpublished thesis, *Sensory History and Multisensory Museum Exhibits*, discusses a theory of immersion, but focuses on performativity

and activating artifacts within multiple genres of museums, including natural history, living history, and scientific history. In fact, she devotes little attention at all to art museums. While Reden offers interesting possibilities to enliven the museum, art institutions are surprisingly absent from her research (Reden, 2015).

After completing the bulk of my literary-based research and conducting the majority of my interviews, I noticed a key theme of discomfort within museum exhibitions. In order to better understand the feelings of unease experienced in these situations, I read Megan Boler's *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education*. "Chapter Seven: The Risks of Empathy" and "Chapter Eight: A Pedagogy of Discomfort" have been crucial in understanding how unease can be beneficial to social emotional learning. Boler outlines how empathy can be possibly detrimental as it is more self-reflexive than a call to action, but at the same time, is deeply necessary in education. While Boler's ideas directly oppose those of the EJ framework, she makes a strong case explaining the ways discomfort can boost SEL, remarking that feelings of discomfort can promote self-reflection and social-awareness, leading to greater learning potential. Boler writes about these concepts as pedagogy in traditional academic spaces but this thesis will situate her ideas in the contemporary art museum setting, describing the ways uneasiness caused by multisensory experiences encourages critical inquiry within immersive artist-created exhibitions (Boler, 1998).

My thesis aims to translate the scientific and pedagogical information from "Benefits of Multisensory Learning" and *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* into the context of the art museum. Additionally, this research will analyze the pertinence of the aforementioned institutional-centered texts in regards to art institutions and evaluate the educational advantages of multisensory immersion within artist-created environments. The literature cited in this review proves that engaging multiple senses is an essential component in fostering SEL, which though is

currently underexplored in contemporary art museums, has the potential to greatly benefit these institutions by enabling them to tap into alternative ways of visitor learning as method way of expanding audiences.

### 1.5 Research Methods

In addition to deeply researching art museum best practices, institutional histories, and exhibition design, as well as key bodies of literature that investigate the benefits of multisensory learning and SEL, I also conducted site visits and interviews, which were the results of a university-funded research trip. The exhibitions used as case studies—*Free Roses*, *Until*, *Where have you gone—where are you going?* and *who cares for the sky?*—were selected based on my ability to travel to these locations, as well as the importance of the museums as experimental institutions. MASS MoCA has a history of working with artists to realize their most ambitious projects. Additionally, at the time of my travel, the museum had two multisensory immersive environments on display. This provided the ability to compare the ways multisensory techniques were implemented multiple exhibits housed within the same institution. I also felt it was necessary to visit the Phillips Collection, a collecting and therefore more traditional museum. *Where have you gone—where are you going?* is a smaller installation, centering visitors as the sole objects and creating an ambience drastically differing from those of *Free Roses*, *Until* and *who cares for the sky?*

I began my trip to MASS MoCA by interviewing Denise Markonish, a curator at the museum, in order better understand the institutional aims of *Until* and *Free Roses*. At the completion of this interview, I surveyed 30 visitors to *Until* and 30 visitors to *Free Roses*, spending a day immersed in each exhibit. I approached these museumgoers at the main entrances

of the exhibitions, asking them to take part in a short, recorded but anonymous five-minute interview once they had finished their visits. I felt this was the best way to ensure a no-pressure situation: if spectators returned to me, they would sit for an interview, but they could also simply leave the exhibition without feeling any obligation to participate.

I asked each visitor the same eight questions during my site visits, spanning the spectator's engagement, learning experiences, and comfort and discomfort, all of which can be found in Appendix A of this thesis. I also found it beneficial to speak to museum attendants, who, throughout the course of a day, rotate throughout MASS MoCA's exhibitions. Often unseen or ignored, these guards are underappreciated yet invaluable resources who oversee the exhibits from installation to deinstallation. They offered unique insight, discussing their experiences with visitors, as well as what they deemed successes and failures of the work.

Before visiting the Phillips Collection, I watched a video of Wolfgang Laib installing *Where have you gone—where are you going?* to better understand his process (Phillips Collection, 2017). During my site visit, I spoke with the Phillips Collection's Deputy Director for Curatorial and Academic Affairs, Klaus Ottmann, who helped bring Wolfgang Laib's permanent installation to fruition. Ottmann has worked with Laib multiple times, and he was therefore able to discuss this work in relation to the artist's practice and personal life. He also described personal observations of visitors within the Wax Room, which, after the completion of our interview, I supplemented with my own. I interviewed 25 visitors using the same questions and methodology used at MASS MoCA, and asked Ottmann similar questions to those I posed to Markonish, Cave, and Ott, adjusting them slightly to fit the context. These questions can be found in Appendix B.

After completing my research trips, I spoke with Maria Celi, Director of Visitor Experience at the Dia Art Foundation and the Dia: Beacon, as well as Marissa Reyes, Associate Director of Education for the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. Though not specifically referenced in this thesis, these conversations provided me with a stronger educational framework and helped me to gain a fuller perspective about the intentions of education and visitor engagement within contemporary art museums. Additionally, I interviewed both Nick Cave and his partner, Bob Faust, who assisted with the call-and-response element of *Until*, which granted me insight into the artist's thought process during the fabrication of an immersive environment.

Before I began my position as the curatorial fellow at Hyde Park Art Center, I saw *who cares for the sky?* as a visitor. The exhibition closed before my research commenced, so I was unable to conduct visitor surveys. However, I recalled audience observations I noted while in the space. In addition, I have extensively studied Ott and her body of work, which enabled me to write Section 5 of this thesis. I also spoke with HPAC staff members about the exhibition and Ott, always generous with her time, sat for an interview to fill in the gaps in my research.

In the following sections, I weave together the results of my interviews, research from the scholarly publications discussed in my literature review, and visual descriptions of each exhibition to demonstrate how *Free Roses*, *Until*, *Where have you gone—where are you going?* and *who cares for the sky?* cater to multiple senses to foster SEL within contemporary art museums.



## **2. Alex Da Corte, *Free Roses* at MASS MoCA**

MASS MoCA is an immense complex originally built by Arnold Print Works in 1905 as a textile production plant. Keeping in touch with the campus's rich history of innovation and experimentation, MASS MoCA, in its current iteration, officially opened in 1999 to showcase large-scale contemporary artwork unable to fit inside traditional museum galleries, working with artists to realize their most ambitiously scaled projects. Curator Denise Markonish sees the institution as a platform to reintroduce seasoned artists and highlight younger artists to a widespread public. As the institution's mission states:

If conventional museums are protective boxes, MASS MoCA strives instead to be a dynamic open platform—a welcoming environment that encourages free exchange between the making of art and its enjoyment by the public, between the visual and performing arts, and between our extraordinary history factory campus and the patrons, workers, and tenants who once again inhabit it. That is, we strive to make the whole cloth of art-making, presentation, and participation by the public a seamless continuum...invigorating, enjoyable, and inclusive. We want you to feel at home here, whether it's your 100<sup>th</sup> visit to a contemporary art museum, or your first (MASS MoCA, 2017).

With its minimal use of didactics, MASS MoCA aims to move away from the classical white cube structure Brian O'Doherty discusses in "Inside the White Cube," giving visitors the opportunity to become the surrounded spectator, to step inside of the artist-created narrative in order to develop their own opinions. "We give people permission to get lost here, to explore, to wander, to wonder," and by curating massive immersive environments, it is Markonish's hope that visitors will, "make meaning of the work in their own way, learning that their own experiences are valid and that they don't need to listen to what the museum tells them," which she states during our December 18, 2016 interview in response to a question about how MASS MoCA differs from more traditional institutions (Markonish, 2016, personal communication).

Because of the complexity of MASS MoCA's exhibitions and the intensity of the labor it takes to install and deinstall them, the majority of exhibits remain on view for at least eight months. As it is situated in North Adams, a remote part of Massachusetts located in the Berkshires, the lengthy display time enables the museum to reach a widespread audience, the majority of whom travel specifically to the city to see MASS MoCA's offerings. For those who live nearby, it provides an opportunity to visit an exhibition multiple times, finding new elements during each visit, and gaining a stronger understanding about the work that it takes to produce such detailed shows. Even spectators who only have the opportunity to see an exhibit once leave ruminating on the work they just saw, a testament to MASS MoCA's goal of showcasing thought-provoking artist projects, one being *Free Roses*, Alex Da Corte's solo exhibition at the institution and his first major museum survey.

Seven of the 30 people I interviewed within *Free Roses* said this was not their first time seeing the exhibit. One visitor told me she returned to the museum specifically to revisit the exhibition, remarking, "There's always more to see and more to notice," while her friend, a first-time visitor to MASS MoCA, said the exhibit would take her some time to process, "When I go to museums, I don't think much of [the exhibitions] while I'm there but when I'm outside looking at the world, I can see what [the artists] are making a point about" (Anonymous interview, 2016, personal communication). By provoking contemplation and enticing audiences back to the museum for multiple visits, Da Corte's work encourages critical thinking, a key component of SEL which Arslan defines in "Social Emotional Learning and Critical Thinking Disposition" as, "a self-regulated process of reasoning that is defined as an individual making a judgment of conclusions by questioning, affirmation, approval and correction..." (Arslan, 2016, p. 277). Another interviewee said that Da Corte's use of household items made her reflect about

her purchases. “I just kept thinking about the things I buy... I buy too many plastic things. [*Free Roses*] has this sort of consumerism feel to it. It reminds me of a Target,” she commented while immersed in the installation (Anonymous interview, 2016, personal communication).

While many of the interview responses in *Until* (detailed in Section 3) connect the exhibit to moments in American history, visitors to *Free Roses* spoke more about their feelings—grappling with their emotions and how to digest them within the space. Da Corte uses sight, scent, sound, and the desire to touch to create a multisensory learning experience, taking advantage of the familiarity of everyday items to cultivate feelings of unease. He pairs harsh neon lighting with larger-than-life reproductions of consumer goods, and stages his Surrealist films in patterned rooms, playing with scale and design in an undisputed nod to Pop art (particularly Claes Oldenburg) to overwhelm and disorient the viewer.

In *The Participatory Museum*’s chapter “Social Objects,” Simon specifically pinpoints dramatic lighting, like that used in *Free Roses*, when discussing provocative exhibition design as a way to generate conversation and critical thinking. Lighting effects provide exhibitions with emotional power, which she believes increases social use, writing, “when visitors encounter surprising design choices or objects that don’t seem to go together, it raises questions in their minds, and they frequently seek out opportunities to respond and discuss their experiences” (Simon, 2010). The participation that stems from the juxtaposition of objects is a form of interpretation that fosters self-education within the exhibit.

While Da Corte does not specifically use his work as a way to develop SEL, the artist is interested in evoking emotions within visitors that parallel the moods he has created. In a 2015 interview with *Interview Magazine*, he remarks that as an artist, he aims to:

make a space vibrate in terms of strange energies or something in the room. You have to physically build that into a space, but then it has to recede... The manifestation of these things we're talking about—romance, noir—they're sort of unidentifiable, but there's a mood. But how do you share a mood without it being melodramatic or overly theatrical or explicit? (Da Corte, 2015)

Da Corte's surrealist style of making fuses fantasy and reality, playing on visitor feelings and testing the ways the ambiance he constructs manifest in his audience's reactions to the physical space.

Interpreting research conducted by Shamz and Seitz, *Free Roses* is a beneficial educational environment because its multisensory elements engage visitors with various learning styles. Some people consider themselves visual learners, while others are auditory learners (Shamz and Seitz, 2008, p. 5). Da Corte's work offers a style for every museumgoer. The researchers also say that beyond the ability to cater to learning styles rooted in a single sense, "multisensory training is demonstratively more effective at an individual level." They examine this concept by looking at Montessori schooling, which uses multimodal practices of learning and "dual coding." People typically remember 10 percent of what they read, 20 percent of what they hear, 30 percent of what they see, and 50 percent of what they hear and see. But, "The principle 'dual coding' indicates that information entering the system through multiple processing channels helps circumvent the limited processing capabilities of each individual channel and, thus, greater total information can be processed when spread between multiple senses (Shams and Seitz, 2008, p. 7)." This reaffirms Paul Duncum's idea that audiences absorb more knowledge when they learn using multiple senses so though some viewers may consider *Free Roses* overwhelming, its ability to captivate audiences using multisensory techniques is conducive to SEL.

There are many entrances to *Free Roses*, but the majority of spectators climb up the main staircase that leads directly to the exhibition's centerpiece, a 100-foot long, 30-foot tall gallery. A dimly lit rainbow of neon glows above—yellow, pink, green, and blue—shining down upon a grouping of large-scale dioramas. Though Da Corte considers the work in this room as a single piece, each “scene” addresses a separate subject matter and can be thought of as an individual work of art. This grid-like layout, lined with lush carpet squares, creates the feeling of being inside a warehouse full of abandoned theater sets (MASS MoCA, 2017).



(fig 5, Alex Da Corte, *Free Roses*)

These dioramas detach museumgoers from the world outside of the institution, situating them within a fantastical alternate reality that toys with the ability to process the easily recognizable, and forces visitors to question prior knowledge, morphing MASS MoCA's exhibition space, “into environments filled with ghosts of consumer desires, memories, and stories, long passed and uncannily familiar” (Russeth, 2016). In one scene, a stuffed Akita revolves around its circular track, the same breed of dog that witnessed Nicole Brown's murder. In another, a target-shaped sculpture sits next to a dark carpet, which in this lighting appears as if it is a black hole spectators could disappear into with one missed step, recreating the ending scene of *Looney Tunes*. In a third, Da Corte recreates Salvador Dalí's *Mae West Lips Sofa*.

Accompanied by sinister lighting, these works dredge up buried memories, demanding audiences question the information fed to them by the media, that which they once accepted as fact.

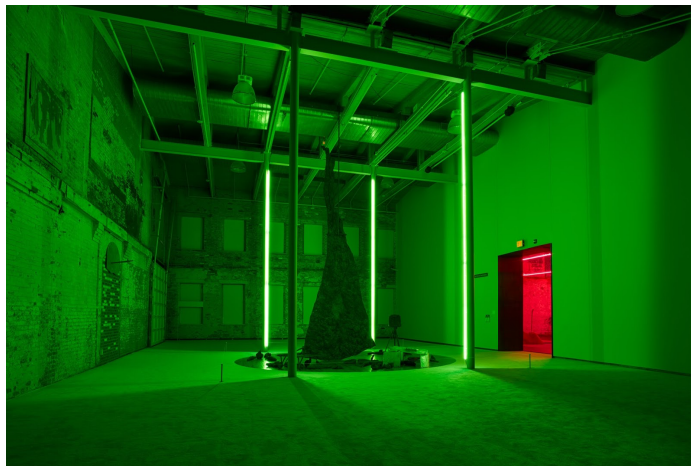
While the neon lighting creates an ambiance that encourages discomfort, visitor unease is not solely rooted in the physical. Seeing physical manifestations of familiar items most frequently viewed through a screen is jarring. This act evokes feelings spectators associate with these objects, forcing audience members to come face-to-face with an uncomfortable reality in Da Corte's curated world. The artist hopes critical inquiry emerges from this unease, during a 2013 interview with *Interview Magazine* commenting that, "I think there's an increased fascination with things that we see on the Internet or on film; we trust these images but then we also question them. What is behind that door? What is being fed to me? Then pulling that out into a physical space, making that digital world tactile" (Da Corte, 2013). His work is an unmediated account of technology, removing the screen so that viewers see these recognizable, albeit distorted, objects with their own eyes.

*Free Roses* is an environment akin to that depicted in *Alice in Wonderland*, falling in line with Mark Wigley's belief that museums allow for a type of immersion that spectators wouldn't necessarily want to be a part of anywhere else. He remarks that museums, "work with the fantasy that you can disconnect from the world to hesitate in order to reconnect differently" (Wigley, 2016, p. 3). Da Corte's satirical interpretations of consumer goods are inescapable, and for the brief moment that museumgoers are removed from the outside world, secluded within this exhibit, they are provided with an opportunity to reflect upon contemporary Western culture, themselves, and the often-unnecessary products society takes for granted.

A noxious green light emits from a cave just north of the main gallery, somehow drawing

the crowd in while simultaneously repulsing them, opening up to Joseph Beuys' sculpture *Lightning with a Stag in its Glare*, which has been on display at MASS MoCA since the museum's opening in 1999. Here, Da Corte plays with neon, the faint scent of mint, and a softly playing soundtrack to completely transform the atmosphere of the space. One interviewee states, "The back room feels like a weird, bizarre place that you don't want to be in, but I stayed there the longest (Anonymous interview, 2016, personal communication)." The response from a MASS MoCA museum attendant was in line with this opinion. Her favorite work in *Free Roses* was this collaboration with *Lightning with a Stag in its Glare*. "I like what [Da Corte] did incorporating the Joseph Beuys. He seamlessly integrated that work with his own elements and I love that there's a smell in there and the soundtrack. They all really work together." However, she also felt the strongest feeling of uneasiness here, which she doesn't believe is:

necessarily mutually exclusive from it being my favorite part. I think the discomfort is part of it. The green is a sickly green. The soundtrack is very ominous and it's very cold in that room. That's not on purpose but it feels like it might be. Also, the Beuys is really challenging for people. It always has been. He's very conceptual so I think those elements combined make it uncomfortable but I like that. It's not just like, 'Oh! A cool hamburger!' The discomfort makes you think more (MASS MoCA attendant, 2016, personal communication).



(fig 6, Alex Da Corte and Joseph Beuys, *Lightning with a Stag in its Glare*)

The guard's final words ring true. It is not uncommon to hear museum professionals, especially those working in the field of contemporary art, suggest that a feeling of unease is beneficial to the viewer, directly refuting the Excellent Judges requirement that comfort makes for an excellent exhibition. But why and how? Boler's *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education*, discusses the ways emotions are shaped by and expressed within educational settings. She devotes an entire chapter, "A Pedagogy of Discomfort," to the ways uneasiness strengthens knowledge. Boler defines a pedagogy of discomfort as, "both an invitation to inquiry as well as a call to action," later writing that it invites viewers to:

engage in critical inquiry regarding values and cherished beliefs, and to examine constructed self-images in relation to how one has learned to perceive others. Within this culture of inquiry and flexibility, a central focus is to recognize the ways emotions define how and what one chooses to see, and conversely, not to see (Boler, 1998, p. 176).

This concept directly connects to Da Corte's alteration of *Lightning with a Stag in its Glare*, urging audiences to push past their initial reactions and question the reasons behind these feelings. Here, discomfort manifests physically. The cool temperature and menacing green neon add to the uneasiness Beuys already seeks to evoke with his conceptual bronze sculpture and the excremental forms scattered beneath it, encouraging critical inquiry and the social emotional learning by which it is shaped. Through active questioning and the act of making judgments based on logic, spectators use the process of SEL to analyze and recognize their feelings within this installation, interpreting the work and drawing their own conclusions (Arslan, 2016, p. 277).

The entryway on the opposing side of the main gallery space opens to a series of small alcoves, two dizzying screening rooms, and a third carpeted area with novelty emoji lanterns that leads into yet another screening room, and then into a final chamber—galleries as nesting dolls.



In the first screening area, candy cane stripes line the walls and crisscross the floor. They even adorn a low-seated pedestal topped by comically large hoagie that is situated directly across from a projection of Da Corte's esteemed *Chelsea Hotel #2*. The second screening space is similar, instead using shades of blue to envelop the spectator. Beyond the carpeted gallery and its emojis, *Easternsports*, a four-channel video installation by Da Corte, Jayson Musson, and Dev Hynes, plays on freestanding walls, adding another element of immersion through the use of enclosed space, oranges scattered on the ground, and a citrus scent that permeates the small chamber. The final "nesting doll" features objects in the middle of the gallery but in order to reach them, visitors must first dodge a rapidly circling bat revolving just above their heads.



(fig 7, Alex Da Corte, *Free Roses*)

By nature, filmmakers hope to successfully create a sense of immersion, suspending reality by throwing their audiences into the work, consuming them in the story. However, film alone is unable to generate the kind of multisensory environment that is most adept at fostering SEL. The narrative of a film remains separate from that of the viewer. We will never be the characters in a movie, just as the moment in time in which the movie is set will never converge with our own timelines. Da Corte recognizes the limitations of moving image, using

*Easternsports* to initially captivate spectators through the familiar vehicle of sight and sound, but also to envelop them within a site-specific installation that activates multiple senses, shifting the visitor's roles from outsider to active participant. These surrounded spectators sit on folding chairs, conscious of their bodies within the space: their eyes are constantly following the subtitles that jump from screen to screen and their ears are at attention as they listen to the dialogue. The oranges strewn haphazardly on the floor provide the public with the opportunity to engage with the sense of touch while also emitting a pungent citrus smell that fills the room.

In "Multisensory Emplaced Learning," Fors, Bäckström, and Pink suggest that the five senses are not separate channels of experience, but instead work together to produce multisensory, social emotional learning. Da Corte's *Easternsports* gallery is an atmosphere for this multisensory emplaced learning because it uses multiple methods of engagement. Knowledge is *a posteriori*, "produced as part of the event of place" (Fors et al., 2013, p. 174). The spectator's senses and critical thinking abilities are activated within this immersive environment, causing the experience to become integrated into her self-narrative, which, according to Sitzia, impacts the meaning-making process, and therefore influences SEL (Sitzia, 2016, p. 6).

Furthermore, Da Corte's work meets much of the criteria detailed in Jack Mezirow's ten phases of transformative learning and encourages critical reflection, a key tool used by the interviewees referenced above to make meaning within *Free Roses* (p. 9). Because there is no main entrance, simply a more frequently traveled route to arrive at the *Free Roses* exhibition, Da Corte's work meets the characteristics that describe phase one: the creation of a disorienting dilemma. Viewers cannot be certain where the exhibit begins and where it ends. There is not a correct path, nor is the work laid out in a linear fashion, leaving museumgoers to "choose their

own adventure,” and decide which room to visit first. The artist’s many screening rooms also create a dilemma for audiences. For instance, viewers watch *Chelsea Hotel #2*, initially confused at the projection, but gradually making sense of the ways the environment in which they are surrounded links to the film. The red striped walls allude to the plastic patterns seen in the video while the oversized hoagie opposing the projector mirrors the sexual innuendos Da Corte explores through food.

The second phase from Mezirow’s guidelines, developing a space for self-examination, encourages spectators to put the work into personal context. Da Corte utilizes consumer goods as a way for audiences to relate to the artwork, while simultaneously exposing them to alternative uses. Inside the gallery housing *Easternsports*, oranges roll haphazardly on the floor. Rather than being thought of as sustenance, they are spheres of color with a citrus scent triggering thoughts of springtime, and as one visitor said, “It’s December in bleak New England and it’s nice to have that olfactory sensation” (Anonymous interviewee, 2016, personal communication).

A viewer’s ability to build competence and self-confidence, phase nine of Mezirow’s stages, is also exemplified within *Free Roses*. The opportunity to understand the meaning held within a piece of art is a success, which in turn builds self-assurance. By placing household objects and recognizable art historical replicas in a new context, the artist entices viewers with a comfortable familiarity but concurrently challenges their powers of recollection, raising questions like, “Why do I recognize that dog?” and “Which artist was the original creator of this lip couch?”

Da Corte fluidly incorporates elements of sight, sound, smell, and touch, combining them in a variety of ways to ensure audiences are, as Sue Allen’s text “Designs for Learning says,”

motivated throughout the entirety of their visit. *Free Roses* juxtaposes visual stimulation with sound from the artist's films and the soundtrack used inside the room containing *Lightning with a Stag in its Glare*, as well as the organic scents of citrus and mint to disorient spectators. This exhibition puts into practice ideas discussed in the research of both Boler and Sitzia via Jack Mezirow's ten phases of transformative learning, which detail the pedagogy of confusion and exemplify multisensory immersion as an SEL-cultivating technique that engages spectators and provokes critical thinking.

### **3. Nick Cave, *Until* at MASS MoCA**

Similar to *Free Roses*, *Until* by Nick Cave is an all-encompassing installation in which visitors step into an artist-created narrative to construct meaning based on emotion, and, in this case, draw conclusions from prior knowledge of often-overshadowed moments in American history. *Until*, which Cave has been working on with Markonish since 2012, is his most ambitious project to date. It delves further into the subject matter explored in his *Soundsuits*, the wearable sculptures for which the artist is best known, while going one step further to address a question he has spent much time contemplating: Is there racism in heaven?

Cave's *Soundsuits* use colorful fabrics, fur, sequins, and numerous other mediums to camouflage the body. The costumes intend to mask the wearer's race, gender, and class so that viewers are forced to see the work without judging the person inside (Jack Shainman Gallery, 2016). The first of these *Soundsuits* was crafted in 1991 as commentary on the Rodney King beating, as a way for Cave to process his feelings as an African-American man during this time and respond to the violence being perpetrated on black bodies. Because little has changed since that time—killings of black men in America still permeate the media and our country—Cave has continued to produce his *Soundsuits*, over 500 of them, in the wake of these senseless murders, in memory of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, Michael Brown, and countless other victims (Kelly, 2015).

During the conception of *Until*, Markonish told Cave that, without using any physical *Soundsuits*, she wanted him to expand upon their idea—to dig deeper, to go bigger. While the installation maintains the basic elements of a *Soundsuit*—vibrant colors, defined textures, and the sounds that the materials produce during movement—it magnifies their scale and places visitors

into what Cave and Markonish both describe as the, “belly of the *Soundsuit*” (Markonish, 2016; Cave, 2017, personal communication). *Until* elaborates upon the issue of racism, but as an immersive exhibition, and gives visitors a deeper understanding of the inner workings of Cave’s artistic mind, placing them inside a narrative of his own creation, which has the potential to arouse emotion and thus SEL. As this thesis has previously detailed, forming a connection within an immersive work of art is an essential component of education. Sitzia reiterates this point, explaining that, “emotional (re)action is key in the process of meaning-making, and therefore learning” (Sitzia, 2016, p. 8). Furthermore, because *Until* is rooted in American history, it gives audiences a context in which to situate the work.

While in the exhibition, SEL is strengthened by prior knowledge, activating past traumas—both of personal encounters with prejudice and of stories of violence seen in the media. People typically hold onto emotionally laden memories because the human brain deems them meaningful information. In the same vein, it is not uncommon to forget moments and stories thought to be insignificant. However, in the article “Emotional Learning Selectively and Retroactively Strengthens Memories for Related Events,” researchers Joseph Dunsmoor, Vishnu Murty, Lila Davachi, and Elizabeth Phelps conclude that memories once thought of as unimportant can be recalled if a future, related event triggers them. The article identifies this as retroactive memory enhancement, which is defined as an instance when, “inconsequential information can be retroactively credited as relevant, and therefore selectively remembered, if conceptually related information acquires salience in the future” (Dunsmoor et al., 2015, p. 345). Simply put, faint or forgotten memories can become stronger if a future event gives it context.

SEL occurs within *Until* because the exhibition brings to the forefront suppressed or subconscious memories of violence, conjuring empathy, a part of the educational process that

cultivates tolerance (which is to be discussed later in this section). The environment becomes a space in which the public can contemplate other instances of bigotry they have faced, using this information to make meaning of the artwork around them, while also better comprehending the narrative Cave is putting forth. These stories are well known, providing audiences with a common ground. Learning becomes a shared practice. Only one wearer can enter a *Soundsuit* at a time, but *Until* is created as a collective experience in which multiple visitors can engage during a single moment.

As explained in the introduction to this thesis, citing Ladan Shams and Aaron Seitz's "Benefits of Multisensory Learning," the human brain is trained to function and learns most effectively in natural, multisensory environments. Human beings do not exist in isolation. We are not solitary creatures, but rather are constantly interacting with others around us, thus it can be concluded that social emotional learning is effective as a communal experience. This relates psychologist Lev Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which he defines as, "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1930, reprinted 1987, p. 79)." Framing this in more manageable terms, what one is able to presently do in collaboration with another, she will be able to do independently tomorrow.

Dr. Serhat Arslan strengthens the arguments of Shams and Seitz, and Vygotsky in "Social Emotional Learning and Critical Thinking Disposition" by detailing the five dimensions of SEL as Self-Awareness, Social Awareness, Self-Management, Relationship Skills, and Responsible Decision Making. He defines social awareness as the ability to understand others' feelings and respect varying opinions, and also highlights that strong relationship skills require the ability to

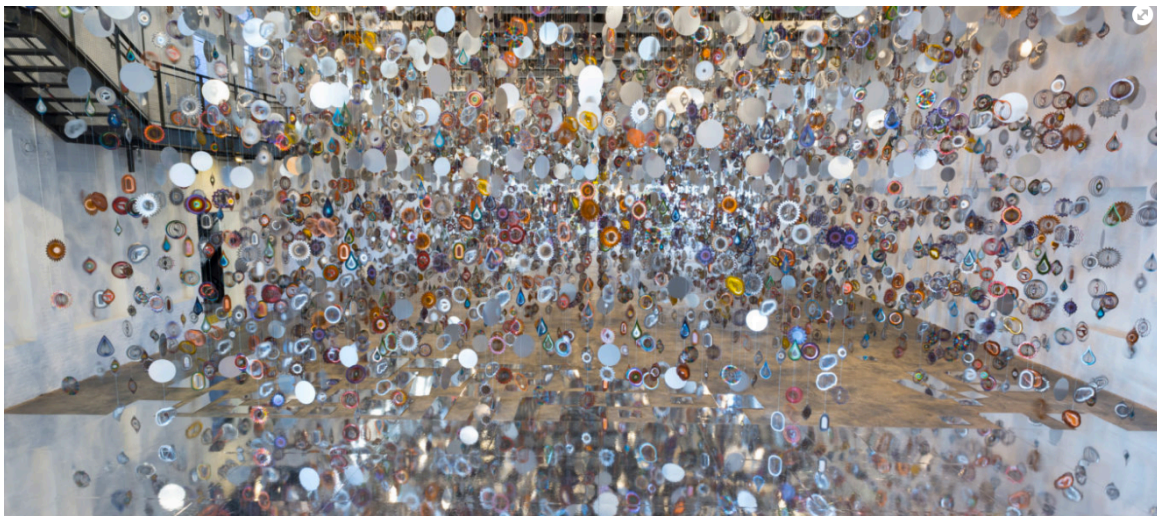
use emotions to communicate in an effective manner (Arslan, 2016, p. 276-277). Navigating *Until*, as well as other immersive exhibitions, requires this proficiency. Visitors are not alone when traversing Cave's environment, as they would be when entering a *Soundsuit*. They are inside of the artist-created narrative, experiencing the exhibition with a community of museumgoers around them. It is not necessary to enter the space with prior understanding of the brutal occurrences that inspire Cave's work, and because of this, the exhibit prompts visitors to talk amongst themselves, decoding the work through active discussion and critical thinking. In the context of ZPD, the spectator who enters *Until* with little knowledge of the history surrounding violence committed towards African-American men, historical moments around which much of Cave's artwork is centered, raise questions while in the presence of others. During this interaction, fellow audience members have the opportunity to fill in the spectator's gaps in knowledge, assisting in the problem solving process to increase SEL.

By design, the many nooks and crannies of the exhibition space that encompass Da Corte's *Free Roses* provide visitors with the opportunity to decide their own routes when viewing the work. While Gallery 5, MASS MoCA's largest gallery and the area of the institution that encapsulates *Until*, is laid out in a more linear fashion, audiences still find themselves with an open invitation to wander. Yves Mayrand explains the importance of an exhibition's design in "The Role of the Exhibition Designer," stating that the museum space is designed for movement. Because Gallery 5 is expansive, it is unlikely that spectators will experience traffic jams while exploring *Until*, despite the fact that the exhibit is constructed linearly. The path encourages visitors to explore at their own pace, while experiencing the continuous narrative Cave has shaped (Mayrand, 2011, p. 409).

There is a small side entrance leading into Gallery 5, but the majority of visitors enter the



space through a set of double doors connected to the gallery that contains *Free Roses*. Here, museumgoers cross the threshold and step onto an elevated landing in which they catch glimpses of the entirety of the exhibit. They have an opportunity to read the single didactic panel explaining the concept of *Until* before descending the staircase into a forest of shiny metal ornaments. Upon first glance, these 16,000 colorful wind spinners slowly revolving on their strings are unassuming, but that quickly changes as viewers take a closer look (MASS MoCA, 2016). Cutouts of bullets, guns, and targets pepper the audience's field of vision, confronting them as they hike through this dense sculptural landscape, which Markonish says, “seduce[s] you but then punch[es] you in the gut” (Markonish, 2016, personal communication).



(fig 8, Nick Cave, *Until*)

Spectators realize the violent imagery hidden amidst the beauty—Cave’s metaphor for contemporary Western society—and experience a wave of empathy even if they’ve chosen to bypass the didactics, unsure at whom their feelings are directed. While Megan Boler discusses a pedagogy of discomfort in the pages of *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education*, referenced in Section 2 of this thesis, she also spends time detailing the benefits and shortcomings of empathy

and its relationship to learning within her chapter “The Risks of Empathy.” The author analyzes empathy as an educational tool used in medical and legal studies, as well as a vehicle to bridge societal and cultural differences. Following this explanation, she poses the question, “Who...benefits from the production of empathy?” going on to answer that empathy is part of a learning process that nurtures open-mindedness and teaching critical thinking as a method for social change and personal growth (Boler, 1998, p. 155). Boler states:

I see education as a means to challenge rigid patterns of thinking that perpetuate injustice and instead encourage flexible analytic skills, which include the ability to self-reflectively evaluate the complex relations of power and emotion. As an educator I understand my role to be not merely to teach critical thinking, but to teach a critical thinking that seeks to transform consciousness in such a way that a Holocaust could never happen again (p. 156).

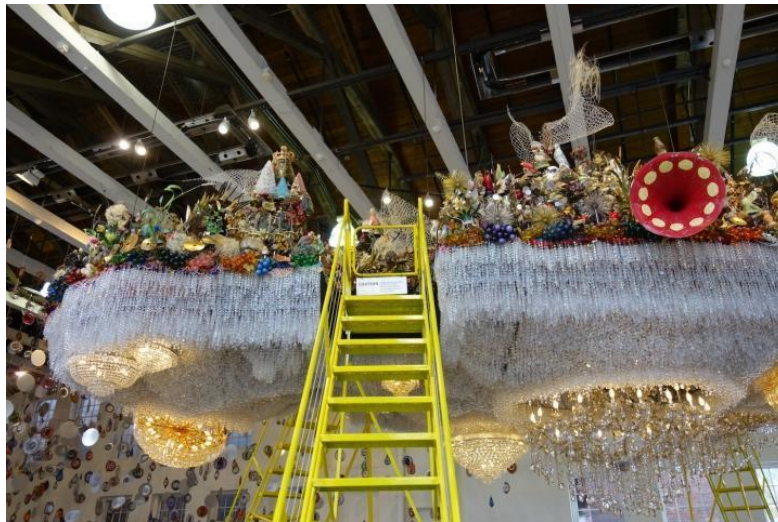
Cave seeks to achieve similar goals, using disturbing symbolism to disorient spectators, urging them to place this imagery in the context of everyday life. With his practice, which elicits feelings of empathy and therefore fosters SEL, he strives to inspire change. In a phone interview I conducted with the artist, he discussed his hope of *Until* instilling compassion in his viewers:

The next time you hear of an individual being shot by police, this exhibition will light up in your head. Sometimes it takes a while for something to sink in but sometimes people react quickly because they are consciously aware. They question their roles, what they can do to be more proactive. I’m hoping that when you’re driving home, there’s conversation in the car. If you’re by yourself, you’re thinking about [your experience in *Until*]. I think that’s all we can do. We can only put it in [the visitor’s] face in hope that it makes a connection (Cave, 2017, personal communication).

Cave employs his work as a tool to challenge racial prejudices, using empathy to connect with his viewers, which in turn has the potential to jumpstart active dialogue and inspire change.

Visitors were observed lightly touching and blowing on the ornaments as they weaved

through them to reach the other side, which opens up to reveal a large crystallized cloud. If only for a moment, there is an opportunity for respite. From below, spectators see what appears to be simply an ornate chandelier. Ten miles of crystals dangle above their heads, encircling 24 chandeliers that produce a soft orange glow. Four lemon yellow ladders lead to the top of the cloud, revealing a dense garden abundant with thousands of ceramic flowers, fruit, and animals, and 17 black-faced lawn jockeys. As with the wind spinners, these statues reflect the prejudice embedded in contemporary culture, symbols of societal ugliness masked in opulence (MASS MoCA, 2017).



(fig 9, Nick Cave, *Until*)

During the development of *Until*, Cave and Markonish discussed the idea of common ground and the ways this piece in particular has the ability to foster collective experience amongst strangers. At the top of the ladders, visitors see one another from across the cloud, making eye contact, and returning to the ground to share a moment (Markonish, 2016, personal communication). This encounter prods at the concept of commonality. Fors, et al. see mutual experience such as this as participatory education, leading to the development of collaborative

skills. Again, learning is not a solitary practice, but rather it, “is *lived* and enacted by people in a social, historic, material environment” (Fors et al., 2013, p. 171). The authors go on to explain that education is shaped by the environments with which we interact. Sitzia’s “Narrative Theories” furthers this argument by stating that narratives construct our reality (p. 6). When audiences enter *Until*, they find themselves inside Cave’s curated narrative, interacting with his built environment, which is designed to place spectators in dialogue with the work, the history which inspired it, and with other visitors.

Audience participation is crucial in *Until*, and Cave and Markonish developed the exhibit to highlight the importance of contemporary art’s engagement with the public. Because racial prejudice and violence are inescapable in the world today, both felt that the exhibition needed to be designed as a call-and-response, emphasizing the importance of each visitor’s individual perspective and providing a space in which they can bring in their personal experiences and knowledge to interpret the work. This effect is achieved through shared encounters, like the moment two strangers make eye contact while standing on the ladders, but also through public programs developed to support *Until*, which are held inside of the exhibition.

Many of these related events are designed by local organizations including “Venable 8: Three Lessons on Gun Violence in the Classroom,” a course produced by the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts and Common Folk Artist Collective. Additionally, during MASS MoCA’s February Free Day, a crowd of almost 4,000 attended a workshop hosted by Northern Berkshires for Racial Justice, which encouraged a dialogue around the questions, “How do you consider yourself a messenger in your community?” and “Who are the helpers in your community that you see doing good work?” Poet, educator, writer, and editor Ted Thomas is currently leading a six-week creative writing workshop geared towards high school students and

elderly members of the community that discusses stereotypes, violence in America, and racism, using *Until* as a conversation starter (MASS MoCA, 2016).

Nina Simon labels events such as these as “provocative programming” (Simon, 2010). The call-and-response activities held within *Until* provide visitors with social experiences that increase learning within the space. These programs do not just cultivate SEL, they also foster concrete knowledge taught by cultural producers who encourage community building, active participation, and dialogue as methods of problem solving within the exhibition.

During our phone conversation, Cave discussed the ways *Until* and the corresponding events within the space foster the shared learning process, responding to my inquiry about his intent with a series of rhetorical questions and a thoughtful concluding statement:

How does a 12-year old talk about his fear towards his law enforcement when it’s supposed to secure him and make him feel secure? How do we get [visitors] to come together under the crystal cloud to talk about these emotions? How do we build reassurance and bring a level of understanding? How do we use work as a vehicle for change? How do we turn tragedy into triumph? The beauty of it all: there are people that go through the exhibition who are racist. There are people who are not. Collective experience, regardless of individuals communicating with each other amongst themselves, is a shared experience (Cave, 2017, personal communication).

*Until* is a tool for critical thinking. It is a prompt that promotes engaging dialogue between audience members so that they connect their *a priori* knowledge with the work in front of them in order to interpret Cave’s meaning and form their own conclusions.

Past the crystal cloud, millions of multicolor plastic pony beads form a netted mountain elaborately woven with designs of rainbows, smiley faces, and peace signs, to which one visitor stated, “It reminded me of an African landscape. It reminded me of the motherland” (Anonymous interviewee, 2016, personal communication). A second interviewee remarked that,

at first, the designs seemed innocent, but her pleasure quickly faded when she discovered the beads formed a fencing that didn't seem as bright and happy as she had initially perceived it to be. The exhibition's ominous undertones challenge viewers to think deeply to reveal further meanings, a concept in line with Boler's argument that education is never neutral: it always maintains a political or social agenda. A pedagogy of discomfort cultivates SEL by encouraging museumgoers to reject what can easily be taken at face value, and to use analytical inquiry to decode the artist's implicit, oftentimes uncomfortable, agenda (Boler, 1998, p. 208). Furthermore, a pedagogy of discomfort promotes self-reflection, emboldening visitors to contemplate their unease to determine the reasons they are experiencing these feelings. Within *Until*, much of this distress is grounded in the historical and its influence on present day.

The exhibit continues into a screening area, darkly lit with dizzying water-like projections swirling on the floor, and surrounded on three sides by *Hy Dyve*, a video installation with footage of Cave dancing in a chicken *Soundsuit* and clips of larger-than-life eyeballs paired with an exaggerated blinking sound that emits throughout the black box space. Viewers observe their surroundings while seated on a bench in the middle of the projections, but the feeling of distress the work produces makes it difficult to stay in the room for long. The interviewee who compared the netting to an African landscape found this section of *Until* to be the most uncomfortable due to past memories it evoked for him; notably, he commented that the film caused him to think about the 2009 act of violence at Fruitvale Station in Oakland, CA, in which Oscar Grant III, an unarmed African-American man, was shot in the back by a white police officer while he was lying facedown on a subway platform. The interview participant further remarked that his time in this area of *Until* caused him to think, "not only about the perpetration of violence, [but also about] being the victim of violence and what I hope goes through



someone's brain when they commit an act of violence" (Anonymous interviewee, 2016, personal communication).

In this work, Cave uses sight, sound, and touch to disorient the viewer, a style of multisensory learning that plays on emotion and develops SEL. The moment of temporary blindness before the visitor's eyes adjust to the darkness heightens the need to depend on additional senses. However, in this space, the reliance on sound is not at all comforting. The harsh soundscape of the film—the incessant blinking eyes—is anything but soothing. The hard, wooden bench for viewers to sit on perpetuates the feeling of discomfort and, after the visitor's eyes have adjusted to the lack of lighting, she immediately notices that *Hy Dyve's* chicken *Soundsuit* is encapsulated in glass next to her—limply at the base of the vitrine, rather than upright as they are traditionally displayed—an unsettling discovery that calls at death and adds to the ominous atmosphere of the room. As Boler writes and the above interviewee experiences, the ambiance presses spectators to evaluate their feelings of distress as they unavoidably recall memories of violence.



(fig 10, Visitors inside *Hy Dyve* installation during *Until's* opening reception)

A small doorway in this screening room opening up to a crudely fabricated staircase is the only route to access the final component of Cave's built environment. The top of the stairs leads to a lofted room featuring a silver and blue Mylar waterfall with black text spelling the title of the work, *Flow/Blow*. Acting as the culmination of the exhibit, this piece suggests, "a moment of cleansing and respite" (Smee, 2016). Though the appearance of the blue Mylar merely alludes to water, its rustling movement, caused by hidden fans behind the installation, reinforces the feeling of a waterfall. In Naomi Reden's unpublished thesis, "Sensory History and Multisensory Museum Exhibits," she explains this concept using a quote from Pam Locker's text *Basics Interior Design 02: Exhibition Design* in which she states:

The echoing sound of dropping water will make a recreated dungeon feel cold and wet, whilst the sound of seagulls and laughter is reminiscent of a day at the seaside. Like light, ambient sound effects and soundscapes evoke atmosphere and feeling that enhance the narrative (Reden, 2015, p. 20).

This statement of multisensory memory retrieval further supports the idea Duns Moor, et al. put forth that argues that past recollections are enhanced by current events. Building upon prior knowledge strengthens SEL and assists audiences in meaning making when in artist-created immersive environments such as *Until*.

Nick Cave conceals messages of violence within the beauty of *Until*, juxtaposing sight, sound, and touch to conjure emotional responses from spectators. The subtle symbolism of hostility masked in candy-colored ornaments and beading promotes critical inquiry and memory retrieval as ways to draw conclusions within the exhibition. One of the dimensions of SEL outlined by Arslan—that of self-awareness—promotes Megan Boler's idea that it is necessary for visitors to evaluate their own feelings of unease while in *Until*. A woman visiting with her two daughters reported that Cave's work felt like a call to action. She stated that the racial



prompts encouraged contemplation and demanded progress, “I found [the racial imagery] to be an interesting way to move forward. That’s kind of what it feels like. A process” (Anonymous interview, 2016, personal communication). During a separate interview, another visitor commented that, “[*Until*] forces you to think about human relationships. Not only black and white. That is obviously the undertone of the exhibit, but it’s more than that. With the guns and everything, it’s [about] the violent relationships that people have” (Anonymous interview, 2016, personal communication). SEL’s dimension of social-awareness situates these emotions in a widespread context so that visitors are better able to understand the reasons Cave has devoted his career to making work guided by racial tensions, while the dimension of self-management aims to inspire change within oneself and thus with the surrounding world, a goal the artist hopes to achieve using this exhibition as a vehicle to do so. These processes, which arise from being immersed in the multisensory realm of *Until*, produce SEL and cultivate a heightened sense of awareness of the world, as demonstrated through the interview responses (Arslan, 2016, p. 277).

#### **4. Wolfgang Laib, *Where have you gone—where are you going?* at the Phillips Collection**

The Phillips Collection in Washington D.C. is a non-traditional institution situated in a Georgian Revival-style house that features many small galleries connected by lengthy hallways and winding staircases. Artwork is hung throughout the halls, creating an effect reminiscent of French salons of the seventeenth century that took place in homes of patrons and acted as gathering spaces for criticism and discussion. The Phillips Collection was founded by Duncan and Marjorie Acker Phillips in 1921, becoming America's first museum of modern art. The space prides itself on staying true to Duncan Phillips' founding principle of creating an intimate museum acting as an "experiment station," a key phrase multiple staff members reiterated during my site visit (Duncan Phillips, 1926). The Museum's mission statement remarks that it is an environment for innovation, collaboration, and engagement with its audience, and is always receptive to new forms of participation with the public (Phillips Collection, 2017).

The majority of the Phillips Collection's permanent collection is comprised of two and three-dimensional works of art easily accommodated within a white cube setting. Wolfgang Laib's *Where have you gone—where are you going?* or the Wax Room, as it is better known to the public, is the museum's first permanent installation since the Rothko Room in 1960, which consists of four paintings by Mark Rothko and a single bench for visitors to sit and contemplate them. This Wax Room is Laib's response to the Rothko Room and is the Phillips Collection's only multisensory artist-created immersive environment. Laib believes entering a wax chamber is walking into, "another world, maybe on another planet and in another body," and because of the small size of *Where have you gone—where are you going?* it is best experienced solo or with one other person, creating a meditative and intimate encounter, similar to Rothko's intentions when using painting as a medium (Phillips Collection, 2017). Laib purposely limits his

commentary on the work, choosing to leave it open for visitor interpretation. In an interview for *Art in America*, he speaks generally about his artwork, saying, “It’s not very important what I feel is behind the work. It is what it is. It’s not even important what I have to say about it” (Laib, 2013). He instead hopes that the Wax Room encourages spectators to think deeply about art as a vehicle for change, stating, “I find that art is always much more important than politics. There are wars, and the kings do this or that, but I think art and culture has much more impact on the changing of humanity” (Laib, 2013). By minimizing comments about his work, Laib allows for unguided conversation to occur. He fosters personal inquiry amongst visitors who must use their own judgments to make sense of the work, and hypothesize its meaning without direction from the artist or institution, two essential elements of SEL.

To create the chamber, which was completed in 2013, Laib utilized the museum’s kitchen to melt 440 pounds of beeswax at the same temperature so that it would liquefy at a consistent color. Over the course of a week, the golden wax was then applied to the walls of the space with a Spackle knife, a spatula, a heat gun, and a warm iron (Ottmann, 2017, personal communication; Phillips Collection).



(fig 11, Laib installing *Where have you gone—where are you going?*)

The Wax Room is nestled in a seven-by-six-foot space with ten-foot-tall ceilings on the third floor of the institution, reached only after climbing the first staircase, walking through the second floor to yet another set of stairs on the opposite side of the museum, and then down a hallway connected to numerous small galleries. The chamber is empty: save for the beeswax, nothing adorns the walls. The viewer, entering Laib's narrative, becomes the sole object. In the pages of "Inside the White Cube," O'Doherty discusses how the context of the artwork is the gallery. The space itself, rather than the artwork, is a transforming force. By being placed within the gallery walls, the objects become art. Beeswax alone does not constitute a work of art, but when it is melted onto the walls of an institutional setting, the spectator's mind adjusts to view it as such (O'Doherty, 1976, reprint 1988, p. 45). Rejecting the conventions of traditional muralists and painters, Laib expands the understanding of what painting is and can be.

Keeping with the concept of visitor as object, Mark Wigley, in "Discursive versus Immersive: The Museum is the Massage," writes that in immersive environments, the frame of the gallery within the institution disappears and becomes part of the whole object, as do the spectators: "the visitor is framed just as much as the work" (Wigley, 2016, p. 6). His thought, that, "the most important gesture of the immersive exhibition is you enter the museum in order to leave the museum behind and enter the work," is a crucial notion when discussing immersive environments as narratives in which visitors enter (p. 3-4). The blurring of boundaries between the institution and the artwork that a visitor experiences within installations like Laib's supports Sitzia's idea that by entering artist-created narratives, spectators gain SEL through firsthand experience, expanding their *a posteriori* knowledge (Sitzia, 2016, p. 2).

The Wax Room is lit by a single, dim light bulb, adding to the peaceful atmosphere of the golden exhibit. O'Doherty writes that modernism ignores the light fixtures within the gallery

space—“The ceiling lost its role in the ensemble of the total room,”—but Laib’s installation calls attention to it (O’Doherty, 1976, reprint 1988, p. 66). The Phillips Collection Deputy Director for Curatorial and Academic Affairs, Klaus Ottmann, remarks that visitors often comment on the bare bulb, saying that it activates the beeswax and is reminiscent of the gilded backgrounds of pre-Renaissance paintings (Ottmann, 2017, personal communication). While Alex Da Corte uses lighting as a contrast to his objects to evoke feelings of confusion and unease, Laib uses it to accentuate the golden hue of the beeswax, playing on visitors’ recollections of art history to shape social emotional learning within the chamber.

For visitors who do not know about the installation’s existence before experiencing it, it acts as a surprise, enticing spectators with the faint, sweet smell wafting down the hallway. Scent is a key component in multisensory learning, thought to be essential in memory recall. Naomi Reden highlights this when citing a 2009 study conducted by sociology professors Dennis D. Waskul, Phillip Vannini, and Janelle Wilson who asked participants to journal about their olfactory experiences over the course of two weeks. The authors detail their findings in “The Aroma of Recollection: Olfaction, Nostalgia, and the Shaping of the Sensuous Self,” writing that scent brings about nostalgia and triggers memories of past experiences. Members of the study associated smells with specific people and places, thus contributing to social emotional learning. The results of this research can be connected to the Wax Room, which engages the museumgoers’ sense of smell to encourage SEL through memory retrieval (Reden, 2015, p. 13).

While interviewing people about their experiences in *Where have you gone—where are you going?* a beekeeper reported that she was excited to enter the space with her eyes closed, letting her nose be her guide. The smell of the wax transported her to the bee colonies she keeps in her backyard, remarking that she felt as if she was inside of their hives. “I was in their home.

Instead of being on the outside, I felt like I was on the inside of that world,” and then as if she was speaking directly to the bees, “This is what it’s like to live in your world; this is what it smells like to be you” (Anonymous interview, 2017, personal communication).

Laib hopes that the golden hue, scent, and intimate size of the wax chamber work together to shape a meditative experience for visitors, which, by definition promotes self-awareness and self-management, two of the five dimensions of SEL according to Arslan (Arslan, 2016, p. 276-277). This process of contemplation within an immersive environment impacts transformative learning, determined by phases two, five, and nine of Jack Mezirow’s ten phases of transformative learning, which are self-examination, self-exploration, and the building of self-confidence, respectively. In “Narrative Theories,” Dr. Emilie Sitzia explains that these stages are crucial for the development of SEL and help gauge the success of exhibitions such as *Where have you gone—where are you going?* (Sitzia, 2016, p. 9). Unlike *Free Roses* and *Until*, which cultivate unease and reinforce Boler’s theory of discomfort, *Where have you gone—where are you going?* supports Beverly Serrell’s Excellent Judges framework, as the meditative aspect of the work cultivates the comfort listed as a key component. Furthermore, the Wax Room is engaging, giving visitors space to arrive at their own conclusions, making them feel intellectually competent, and thus has the potential to be a meaningful exhibit. This installation meets the EJ criteria, and therefore, according to their framework, is considered to be an excellent exhibition (Serrell, 2006).

While touch panels of beeswax are currently not available for visitors, during Ottmann’s interview, he spoke about the benefits of activating this additional sense within the Wax Room. Touch is an essential way of acquiring knowledge, especially for the visually impaired, who rely on feeling, rather than sight, to make sense of the world around them. The ability to touch in

museums helps visitors to understand the work presented. To prove this, Reden uses the example of the New England Aquarium's *How Cold is the Water?* exhibit, which invites guests to put their hands in water to understand the freezing temperatures in which penguins live (Reden, 2015, p. 24).

Similarly, being able to touch the beeswax on the walls of *Where have you gone—where are you going?* would give audiences a better sense of the methods Laib used to apply the material, as well as a more in depth understanding of bees and their naturally-produced substance. Ottmann agreed with the suggestion to incorporate a touch panel within the installation, which currently has a “Please Do Not Touch” sign on its exterior wall. Multiple blocks of the beeswax are archived, rather than kept in storage, to ensure that future employees of the Phillips Collection will never purge the material during periods of cleaning and reorganization, so the addition of a touch panel is a realistic option, which would reduce barriers to accessibility for visually impaired museumgoers (Ottmann, 2017, personal communication). The possibility of including the element of touch to the exhibit enhances multisensory learning because in combination with the meditative silence, sweet scent, and golden hue, the feeling of the room better approximates the beehive that the beekeeper interviewee quoted above felt as if she was inside. This multisensory technique boosts SEL, and, as Shams and Seitz argue, “produce[s] greater and more efficient learning,” strengthening self-guided interpretation as a method of decoding contemporary artwork (Shams and Seitz, 2008, p. 1).



(fig 12, Wolfgang Laib, *Where have you gone—where are you going?*)

Like Cave and Da Corte's immersive environments at MASS MoCA, *Where have you gone—where are you going?* expertly plays on the audience's natural desire for a multisensory learning environment, though at a much smaller scale. However, the magnitude of the room does not minimize the potency of this exhibit. Rather, it better serves Laib's response to the Rothko Room in that it creates an intimate, meditative experience for visitors that would not have the same effect had it been installed in a large gallery. Though research shows that the benefits of museum learning are comparable between spectators who visit alone and those who visit in a group, a study conducted by Jan Packer and Roy Ballantyne entitled "Solitary vs. Shared Learning: Exploring the Social Dimension of Museum Learning" notes that solitary visitors engage in deeper personal reflection, which is ideal in Laib's Wax Room (Packer and Ballantyne, 2005, p. 187). The tiny environment can be compared to the habitat of the bees that produce the wax, a personal space that draws upon multiple senses to erase the boundaries of the gallery, placing visitors in the role of object—or in this case, the honeybee—to transform the space into a human-sized hive.



## **5. Sabina Ott, *who cares for the sky?* at Hyde Park Art Center**

Chicago's Hyde Park Art Center differs from MASS MoCA and the Phillips Collection in that while it also showcases numerous thought-provoking exhibitions during the year, it is an institution that places a strong focus on arts education and community outreach. The building is constantly bustling with exhibit visitors, clay-covered students, and artists who are a part of HPAC's residency program.

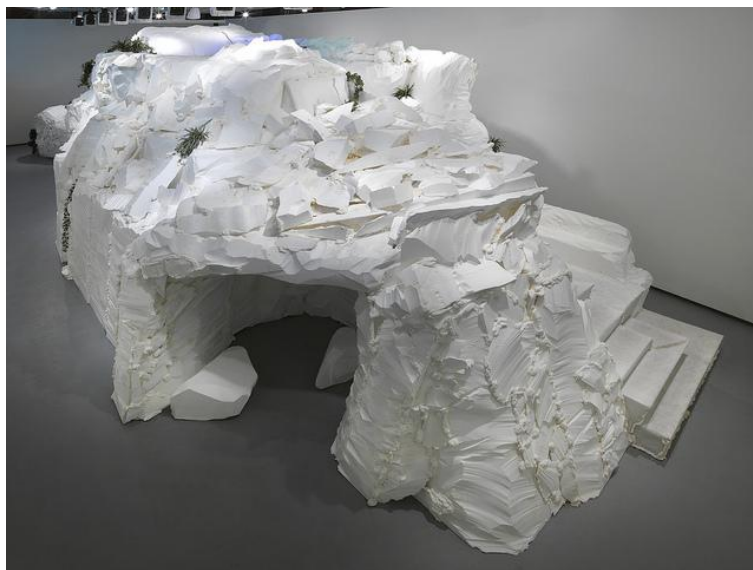
The esteemed Jackman Goldwasser Residency is a yearlong appointment that provides a single selected artist with studio space and a solo exhibition marking the residency's culmination. In the spring of 2016, 2015-2016 Jackman Goldwasser Resident, Sabina Ott, developed *who cares for the sky?* a site-specific installation akin to a contemporary version of Kurt Schwitter's *Merzbau*. Though set in the Art Center's largest exhibition space, Gallery 1, *who cares for the sky?* became the exhibition structure, simultaneously an artwork in itself while also showcasing the work of others. There, Ott used her practice to shatter the concept of the traditional white cube space as an ideal site of display O'Doherty's text aims to dismantle.

Inspired by Gertrude Stein's *The World is Round* (1938), the writer's only children's book, Ott created an 8,000-cubic-foot mountain using polystyrene, industrial spray foam, plywood, and paint, explaining her inspiration, "I chose to focus my work on Stein's tale in the hopes that the narrative's innocence, persistence, fortitude, and discovery will come through in the installation and connect with the Art Center's multi-generational audience" (Ott, 2016). In this exhibit, learning manifests as a childlike exploration that engages the public's senses of sight, sound, and touch.

At the ground level, grottos and caves are carved into the polystyrene. In one, an ambient video plays while a second acts as a small passageway, inviting spectators to grip onto the foam

and climb through, rekindling adolescent memories of time spent on the playground and in makeshift forts. A tunnel spans the width of *who cares for the sky?* which is populated with artwork by over 100 artists, the majority of whom are Chicago-based. Ott's environment unites them all, showing audience members a glimpse into the tight-knit community of arts professionals in the city and reinforcing her nickname as the "artist mother of Chicago."

Ott's inclusion of selected artist friends did have the potential to trigger alienation, creating the feeling of "insiders" and "outsiders," but she sought to avoid this by incorporating work by anyone who asked to participate. To deepen visitor engagement, *who cares for the sky?* might have gone a step further by asking guests to take or leave a token during their trip to the mountain to ensure that each individual felt like an "insider"—a model of institutional participation that aligns well with Nina Simon's "Participatory Museum Chart" (Simon, 2010). However, this oversight did not appear to detract from the success of the exhibition or reduce enjoyment while inside of the space.



(fig 13, Sabina Ott, *who cares for the sky?*)

A staircase leads to the top of the mountain, where a secluded nest of beanbag chairs awaits, situating visitors at eye level with the Art Center's Jackman Goldwasser Catwalk Gallery, and enticing them to make themselves comfortable, sit, and watch the large-scale video that is projected into the space. A perpetual, anxious soundtrack, a collaborative piece between Ott and sound artist, Joe Jeffers, floods the gallery, following viewers as they explore. The ambient sound that radiates throughout the space supplements the visual component of *who cares for the sky?* and assists the development of SEL among those experiencing the exhibition. In "Sound Facilitates Visual Learning," a study by Shams and Seitz, and Robyn Kim, a psychologist at the University of California, the researchers further supported their previous studies that auditory-visual sensations lead to more efficient learning. The psychologists conducted tests on 15 subjects, ages 19-24, using visual stimuli in the form of moving dot patterns and white noise audio stimuli. The participants whose learning was studied using audio-visual stimuli retained more information at a quicker rate than those who were tested with a unisensory component (Seitz et. al., 2006). Drawing connections from this investigation, it can be concluded that visitors to Ott's installation achieved greater levels of SEL due to the combination of audio and visual artworks than had they been immersed in a unisensory installation.

Hyde Park Art Center focuses on fostering community, bringing together people of all ages through education, offering child and adult art-making courses, programming specifically geared towards teenagers, and countless lectures and workshops in conjunction with their exhibitions. *who cares for the sky?* not only engages these audiences as individuals, but also brings them together, taking advantage of the Art Center's community-driven mission to cultivate a space in which visitors feel at ease posing questions to those they do not know. As on

the top of the yellow ladders in Nick Cave's *Until*, strangers converse at the peak of the mountain and, together in close confines, admire the artwork curated by Ott in the ground-level tunnel. The artist's work becomes integrated into the individual narratives of spectators, as does their shared encounter, during which they have the potential to learn from one another. The visitor-developed narrative is essential in the meaning-making process, and also heightens recall ability. When assimilated into a self-narrative, the spectator is more easily able to remember the exhibit's content and the discussions that occurred inside of the space (Sitzia, 2016, p. 7).

Further building on the desire for communication within *who cares for the sky?* the collaborative pieces—Jeffers's soundtrack, the projected video, which Ott produced with assistance from Jeroen Nelemans, and much of the visual work in the tunnel—are abstract. In an interview with Ott, when asked why she chose to build a mountain, an unmistakable figure that includes many moments of abstraction, she states, “[I] picked something that has so many meanings on purpose,” leaving room for visitor interpretation (Ott, 2017, personal communication). While Stein's book was the inspiration behind the exhibition, Ott also mentions the sport of mountaineering and the mountain as a point of spiritual contact, “places you go to talk to God or places [one] goes to conquer nature,” she remarks (Ott, 2017, personal communication). The essence of the work allows for interpretation and provokes critical inquiry, which is necessary to achieve SEL and highlights the importance of its relationship with ZPD, which is strengthened by peer education occurring inside of the exhibition. By providing direction, the individual with more knowledge aids in fostering the development of the visitor who is less familiar with the work. This collaboration promotes educational advancement by taking assistance from others and closes the gap between the second viewer's learning potential

and actual knowledge—not only a characteristic of ZPD but also a fundamental tool of SEL (Arslan, 2016, p. 281).



(fig 14, Sabina Ott, Interior of *who cares for the sky?*)

While the artwork of Da Corte and Cave drawn upon in this thesis heightens viewer discomfort, *who cares for the sky?* hopes for the opposite. Instead, it plays on the Art Center’s desire to create a welcoming and community-engaged arts institution, especially through its use of tactility, to maximize comfort and encourage visitors to stay as long as they desire, which as with *Where have you gone—where are you going?* is in line with EJ’s framework of excellence and refutes Megan Boler’s pedagogy of discomfort. Touch is an essential sense within *who cares for the sky?* The spray foam is a stark, textural contrast to the smooth, white polystyrene, almost demanding visitors to run their palms across the mountain’s surface as they traverse the exterior. Blocks of polystyrene are also used as seating in the grottos that house the films, while the same soft fabric of the beanbags at the mountain’s apex line the stairs leading to them. “The material showed the traces of the people in it. [The polystyrene] was always breaking down so people

were making their marks in it,” evidence of visitor activation that Ott considers a sign of the exhibition’s success (Ott, 2017, personal communication). Furthermore, the pieces made by others pepper the tunnel, dangling from the ceiling, tucked in the nooks and crannies of the foam, and hung just inches from where the polystyrene meets the cement floor, without any “Do Not Touch” signs in sight. Here, tactility is used as a method of engagement that has the potential to increase visitor learning.

In a study presented at the J. Paul Getty Museum Symposium, “From Content to Play: Family-Oriented Interactive Spaces in Art and History Museums,” Museum Access Consultant, Andrew Alvarez, discussed his research at the Wolverhampton Arts and Museums Service and the Bilston Craft Gallery which demonstrates the claim that the ability to touch increases time spent within the exhibit, as well as knowledge of it. In an essay entitled “Please Touch: The Use of Tactile Learning in Art Exhibits,” he remarks that, “investigat[ing] an object through touch increases attention to learning and time spent with it, thereby increasing the chances of understanding and retaining information about the work” (Alvarez, 2005, p. 1). Alvarez goes on to explain that tactility heightens comprehension, thus enabling spectators to more easily make sense of the work and recall details of their visits. The presentation concludes that:

Not only can touching promote learning and understanding about art by providing a closer and more direct experience, it can also work to help us challenge and understand some of our own visual preferences and illusions that may otherwise remain unnoticed. This is a first step towards appreciation of form and the interpretation of abstract works... touch is a non-illusionistic sense, and helps us to rethink our ways of seeing (p. 2).

In addition to being an educational tool, touch assists audiences in the forming of opinions and also creates awareness and calls attention to details that may be overlooked during the unisensory process of looking.

Tactility, sound, and sight all work in unity in *who cares for the sky?* to create a sense of wonderment and as a method of encouraging audience interpretation, which go hand-in-hand with developing SEL. This multisensory experience cultivates art appreciation, while also building visitor knowledge through physical engagement, critical inquiry as a way of decoding, and the opportunity to converse with others while in the space as a mode of problem solving.

## **6. Conclusion and Findings**

Large-scale immersive exhibitions created by artists that shift away from artifact-and-object-centric display practices function as a style of visitor engagement and an effective—and affective—way to foster social emotional learning. The research conducted by Ladan Shams and Aaron Seitz proves that the human brain has evolved to most efficiently learn through multisensory practices because they best approximate the ways we learn in natural environments. Applying this understanding to the case studies used in this thesis, *Free Roses*, *Until*, *Where have you gone – where are you going?*, and *who cares for the sky?* it has been found that these exhibits promote critical thinking within visitors and better facilitate in their meaning-making processes. Immersive installations have the potential to be more conducive to learning than discursive exhibitions because while immersed, visitors are free to use *a priori* knowledge to shape and extend their autobiographical narratives. Rather than solely focusing on the facts presented, these installations provide spectators with the opportunity to further their social emotional learning through communication with others, a key aspect of ZPD, and through the activation of multiple senses.

However, while the focus of this thesis has been the ways multisensory, immersive art exhibitions encourage critical inquiry and cultivate SEL, the takeaways can also be applied to museums that primarily showcase more traditional, discursive exhibits. This research highlights the importance of emotional education, self-interpretation, and individual methods of making meaning within contemporary art institutions, which museum educators and visitor staff members can use when developing curriculum and designing programming to engage visitors. By making slight adjustments to current educational models, placing more attention on the way each individual interprets contemporary art, cultural educators have the potential to create a more



welcoming atmosphere, reducing the pressure visitors may feel to seek conclusions in the way they might believe the institution desires them to. This shift away from an authoritarian structure can increase audience enjoyment, strengthening participatory elements Nina Simon believes to be most effective in the learning process, and may also lead to an uptick in museum attendance.

Using scholarly research detailed in the literature review and throughout this thesis, I have gained a better understanding of the ways humans most effectively learn. As art education theorist Paul Duncum points out, engaging multiple senses is an essential part of human nature that helps with the interpretation process. Appealing to multiple senses while in contemporary art and cultural institutions, visitors are able to dissect and make sense of the work, drawing upon prior knowledge and past, possibly forgotten memories, triggered by smell, exemplified in *Free Roses* and *Where have you gone—where are you going?* Similarly, audio-visual techniques are more adept at engaging audiences than unisensory methods, and as in Sue Allen's findings, keep museumgoers more motivated throughout the entirety of the exhibition. Touch, the fourth and final sense engaged in immersive exhibitions (as none of my case studies, and the majority of art exhibitions, do not cater to the sense of taste), helps viewers understand not only the materiality and the methods of creation used by the artists, but also assists in information retention and an articulation of personal preferences. When combined, these senses cultivate SEL, which leads to critical inquiry and potential developments in social awareness.

Multisensory elements work together to create surrounded spectators, to use Brian O'Doherty's term, and that experience promotes self-reflection. By becoming a surrounded spectator, a visitor willingly enters the artist-created narrative. This experience of *doing* rather than simply seeing is also integrated into the self-narrative. Museumgoers leave with a story to tell—a *posteriori* knowledge—rather than with a memory of an image or an object they

observed. Being inside of an immersive environment shifts the visitor's perspective as she becomes a character within the work, which encourages analytical thinking and thus self-awareness, social awareness, and self-management, three key dimensions of SEL. These dimensions are similar to phases two, five, and nine of Jack Mezirow's ten phases of transformative learning: self-examination, the exploration of new relationships, and the building of self-confidence, which Sitzia explains are essential to the transformational learning process that occurs during immersion.

During my initial interviews and research trips, I had not yet honed my thesis to focus on the benefits of SEL and the latter's relationship to immersive art environments. Given the opportunity to revisit these institutions and perform follow-up interviews with the audience members I'd spoken to, my questions would have been different and geared towards better understanding the impact of SEL within contemporary art exhibitions. Throughout this process, I also learned how to create more efficient questions through reading scholarly articles, many of which included their methods and the questions they asked participants. The results of my surveys were largely anecdotal—which I believe is necessary as my research is based on individual interpretation. However, I wish I had been able to develop a separate set of questions that would have greater proved—or disproved—my hypothesis through a quantitative approach. I also wish I had the time and resources to create a more formal research study, using a group of infrequent museum visitors, and having them visit preselected immersive and discursive exhibits so that I could compare the results.

Despite the faults in the survey structure, the findings still proved to be invaluable and the interviews I conducted in *Free Roses*, *Until*, and *Where have you gone—where are you going?* reinforced the social emotional learning process. One visitor of *Where have you gone – where*

*are you going?* from New York City told me that the installation induced self-reflection, but also made her contemplate the outside world. She stated that:

There's something very organic and comforting about the room. I think [those] living in New York City lack physical interaction with the world out of necessity but also because [our senses] are bombarded. We don't often get stimulus from nature. I am constantly looking for settings where I can hold space, where I can find peace and quiet and where I can sink into myself and be very physically present. Laib's Wax Room provided that almost instantaneously. There was no effortfulness [sic] in it. And to layer that more intellectually, [this chamber provides] a relationship with food and our bodies, honey being something people ingest as a natural sweetener that is also very good for the skin and to help cope with allergies. This helps bring in an agricultural aspect. The relationship with healthy, good food has been dwindling in our globalized community. Coming back down to earth is the intellectual takeaway, but my favorite element is feeling at peace. That is the best and most rewarding moment I had (Anonymous interview, 2017, personal communication).

Multisensory, immersive art exhibitions cultivate thoughtful self-examination, while also encouraging visitors to leave their insular mindsets in order to think about the external world in which they are situated.

Furthermore, using critical inquiry to think about emotions and why they are being experienced while in an immersive environment assists visitors in better understanding their feelings, both inside and outside of the exhibition. Feelings connect the present to past memories and the histories of others, showing that, like Megan Boler writes in *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education*, education benefits from moments of empathy and discomfort. Empathy, an emotion stimulated in *Until*, has the ability to jumpstart social change. The visitors to this exhibit are consumed by the references to violence, and the emotions evoked while immersed have the potential to inspire activism, exemplifying Vygotsky's belief that the arts have the potential to, "incite, excite, and irritate" (Vygotsky, 1971, p. 252). Similarly, the discomfort created in *Free Roses* urges audiences to think deeply about the superfluous, about unnecessary consumerism,

and potentially, the effect this waste has on the environment. Rather than ignore or avoid these emotions, if we as humans are receptive to them while inside of these installations, it is easier to draw conclusions, relating them to everyday life, and make meaning of the artwork, thus successfully cultivating SEL.

Immersive, multisensory exhibitions can be a great asset to museums because of their ability to successfully arouse emotions. In addition to educational programming, these installations can be a resource to develop socially conscious visitors as a method of propelling social change. Because of the engaging nature of multisensory exhibits, institutions can use them to diversify their audience bases, possibly creating a new sector of art lovers by diminishing the authorial voice and prioritizing the visitor, showing museumgoers that their interpretations and methods of making meaning are not just valid, but valuable.

## APPENDIX A

### **Visitor Interview Questions**

1. Location:

Mid-Atlantic (NJ, NY, PA)

Midwest

New England

Southwest (AZ, NM, TX, OK)

South

West

International

2. Profession:

Are you a student?

Do you work in the arts?

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

3. Are you a frequent visitor of art museums? How many times per month, year, approximately?

4. Have you visited this space/exhibition before? [For no, ask “Was it what you expected?”]  
Why did you visit?

5. What was the most comfortable part of the exhibition and what was least comfortable?

6. What did you find most engaging about this exhibition? Why? What was least engaging and why?

7. Since there aren't many labels with facts or explanations of artwork, visitors have to make sense of the space themselves. What is the most interesting conclusion you came to or valuable thing you learned from this exhibition?

8. What, if anything, could improve your experience within the exhibition?

## APPENDIX B

### **Interview Questions for Institutions and Artists**

1. What is gained by your particular institution when you present artist projects that take the form of large-scale immersive environments? What do you think art museum institutions in general have to gain by creating spaces for these sorts of large-scale, immersive environments?
2. Do you have certain expectations about what visitors might learn or take away that differ from more traditional exhibitions taking the form of discrete objects (paintings, sculptures, video screens) displayed thematically in a white-cube space (with interpretative labels)? In other words, do you hope that visitors will learn or make sense of their experiences differently when they are in these kinds of immersive environment spaces? Do you hope that they might interact with each other differently? Is the goal for visitors to create their own meanings in spaces where exhibitions cannot be quantified through objects with labels?
3. To what extent do you think that your immersive environmental artwork is wholly or partly “authored” by those who visit it? Are you hoping for this type of interaction and creative exchange between yourself, your artwork, and the people who visit the museum institution – and if so, why? If not, why not?
4. For curators/directors: What type of summative evaluation has your institution conducted in order to measure the impact of these types of artist-made environments on visitors? Have you asked visitors about their reactions to the artwork, what they think the artwork is about, what they may have learned from it, etc.?

## CITED LITERATURE

- Alvarez, A. (2005). *Please Touch: The Use of Tactile Learning in Art Exhibits*. Presentation, J. Paul Getty Museum Symposium.
- Allen, S. (2004). Designs for learning: Studying science museum exhibits that do more than entertain. *Science Education*, 88(1), 17-33.
- Arslan, S. (2016). Social Emotional Learning and Critical Thinking Disposition. *Studia Psychologica*, 58(4), 276-285.
- Boler, M. (1991). *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* (1st ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Duncum, P. (2004). Visual Culture Isn't Just Visual: Multiliteracy, Multimodality and Meaning. *Studies In Art Education*, 45(3), 252-264.
- Dunsmoor, J., Murty, V., Davachi, L., & Phelps, E. (2015). Emotional Learning Selectively and Retroactively Strengthens Memories for Related Events. *Nature*, 520(7547), 345-348.
- Free Roses*. (2016). *Massmoca.org*. Retrieved 25 May 2017, from <http://massmoca.org/event/alex-da-corte/>
- Hacklin, S. (2016). To Touch and Be Touched: Affective, Immersive and Critical Contemporary Art?. *Stedelijk Studies*, (4).
- Kaizen, W. (2003). Framed space: Allan Kaprow and the spread of painting. *Grey Room*, 13, 80-107.
- Kant, I. (2007). *Critique of Pure Reason* (1st ed.). London: Penguin.
- Kelly, E. (2015). Nick Cave's Soundsuits: An Artist's Take On Racial Profiling In The US. *All That Is Interesting*. Retrieved from <http://all-that-is-interesting.com/nick-cave-soundsuits>
- Laib Wax Room*. (2017). *Phillipscollection.org*. Retrieved 25 May 2017, from <http://www.phillipscollection.org/collection/laib-wax-room>
- Lewis, G. (2000). History of museums. In *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Encyclopedia Britannica.
- Lord, G., Lord, B., & Mayrand, Y. (2001). *The manual of museum exhibitions*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, U.S.
- MASS MoCA | Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art. MASS MoCA*. Retrieved 25 May

- 2017, from <http://massmoca.org>
- McKinnis, S. (2015). Alex Da Corte's Haunt. *Interview Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/alex-da-corte-die-hexe-luxembourg-dayan>
- Mitchell, B. (2010). *The Immersive Artistic Experience and the Exploitation of Space*. London.
- Musei Capitolini. (2006). *Museum history*. Retrieved 26 February 2017, from [http://en.museicapitolini.org/il\\_museo/storia\\_del\\_museo](http://en.museicapitolini.org/il_museo/storia_del_museo)
- Nick Cave. *Jackshainman.com*. Retrieved 25 May 2017, from <http://www.jackshainman.com/artists/nick-cave/>
- O'Dorherty, B., McEvilley, T., & O'Doherty, B. (1988). *Inside the white cube: The ideology of the gallery space*. Santa Monica: Lapis Press.
- Packer, J., & Ballantyne, R. (2005). Solitary vs. Shared: Exploring the Social Dimension of Museum Learning. *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 48(2), 177-192.
- Pink, S., Bäckström, Å., & Fors, V. (2013). Multisensory Emplaced Learning: Resituating Situated Learning in a Moving World. *Mind, Culture, And Activity*, 20(2), 170-183.
- Rain Room. *Lacma.org*. Retrieved 25 May 2017, from <http://www.lacma.org/rainroom>
- Quinn, T. (2006). Exhibits through the "Other Eye": How Popular Education Can Help Us Make Museums that Push. *Journal Of Museum Education*, 31(2), 95-104.
- Reden, N. (2015). *Sensory History and Multisensory Museum Exhibits*.
- Russeth, A. (2016). The Year in, and Beyond, the Galleries of New York: A Relatively Concise Chronicle of Highlights and a Top 10 List. *Artnet News*. Retrieved from <http://www.artnews.com/2016/12/19/the-year-in-and-beyond-the-galleries-of-new-york-a-relatively-concise-chronicle-of-highlights-and-a-top-10-list>
- Sabina Ott: who cares for the sky?. (2017). *Hydeparkart.org*. Retrieved 25 May 2017, from <http://www.hydeparkart.org/exhibitions/sabina-ott-emwho-cares-for-the-sky-em>
- Schaffner, I. (2006). Wall Text. In *What Makes a Great Exhibition?* (1st ed., pp. 154-167). Philadelphia: Philadelphia Exhibition Initiative.
- Schiffman, A. (2013). Art, Power, and the Sandwich. *Interview Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/alex-da-corte-bornasammak-as-is-wet-hoagie/>
- Seitz, A., & Shams, L. (2008). Benefits of Multisensory Learning. *Trends In Cognitive Sciences*,



12(11), 411-417.

Seitz, A., Kim, R., & Shams, L. (2006). Sound Facilitates Visual Learning. *Current Biology*, 16(14), 1422-1427.

Serrell, B. (2006). *Judging Exhibitions: A Framework for Assessing Excellence* (1st ed.). Walnut Creek, Calif: Left Coast Press.

Simon, N. (2010). *The Participatory Museum* (1st ed.). Santa Cruz: Museum 2.0.

Simonini, R. (2013). Beauty and the Bees: Q + A with Wolfgang Laib. *Art In America*. Retrieved from <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/interviews/wolfgang-laib-moma>

Sitzia, D. (2016). Narrative Theories and Learning in Contemporary Art Museums: A Theoretical Exploration. *Stedelijk Studies*, (4).

Smee, S. (2016). Nick Cave goes big at Mass MoCA. *Boston Globe*. Retrieved from <https://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/art/2016/10/13/nick-cave-goes-big-massmoca/FxYlOeFlrLuMvwofS012II/story.html>

Stogner, M. (2011). The Immersive Cultural Museum Experience – Creating Context and Story with New Media Technology. *The International Journal Of The Inclusive Museum*, 3(3), 117-130.

Walsh, V. (2006). Redistributing Knowledge and Practice in the Art Museum. *Stedelijk Studies*, (4).

Until. (2016). *Massmoca.org*. Retrieved 25 May 2017, from <http://massmoca.org/event/nick-cave-until/>

Vygotsky, L. (1987). *Mind and Society* (1st ed.). Boston: Harvard University Press.

Vygotsky, L. (1971). *The Psychology of Art* (1st ed.). Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press.

Wigley, M. (2016). Discursive versus Immersive: The Museum is the Massage. *Stedelijk Studies*, (4).

## VITA

NAME: Lauren Leving

EDUCATION: B.A., Art History, African Diaspora, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA, 2011.

M.A., Museum & Exhibition Studies, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, IL, 2017.

HONORS: Museum & Exhibition Studies Travel Grants, University of Illinois at Chicago, 2016.

EXPERIENCE: Hyde Park Art Center, Curatorial Fellow, Chicago, IL, 2016-2017.

University of Illinois at Chicago, School of Art & Art History, Mutual Interpretations Coordinator, Chicago, IL, 2016-2016.

Mongerson Gallery, Publications Intern, Chicago, IL 2015-2016.

KM Fine Arts, Registrar, Chicago, IL, 2012-2014.

University of Illinois at Chicago, Gallery 400, Development Intern, Chicago, IL, 2012.

Michalopoulos Gallery, Assistant Gallery Director, New Orleans, LA, 2011-2012.

G.R. N’Namdi Gallery, Intern, Chicago, IL & Paris, FR, 2009.

PRESENTATIONS: Moderator, “Centering Social Justice within Museum Studies Graduate Programs,” American Alliance of Museums Annual Meeting, St. Louis, MO, 2017.

Presenter, “Multisensory Immersive Exhibitions as Sites for Social Emotional Learning,” Museum & Exhibition Studies Graduate Symposium, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, IL, 2017.

Moderator, “Digital Canvas,” Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago, IL, 2016.