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FROM BODY TO BODY

Architecture, movement and meaning in the museum

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Abstract

This chapter considers the role of bodily experience in the visitor's engagement with the objects and spaces of the museum. Drawing on the phenomenological writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–61), as well as recent research in neuropsychology and philosophy on so-called embodied cognition, the chapter puts forward a theoretical framework for what might be called 'interpretive exhibition design' – the use of space, setting and the active engagement of the visitor in the creation of more meaningful and memorable encounters with museum objects. The first part of the chapter describes several recent examples of 'interpretive' exhibitions at the Royal Danish Library in Copenhagen, showing a range of ways in which architectural space can be deployed as a tool for visitor engagement – transcending some of the inherent limitations of traditional text-based interpretation methods. The central section of the chapter draws on a range of historical and emerging research on the role of bodily movement in the ongoing processes of perception and cognition, in order to develop a more effective understanding of the interpretive potential of immersive 'viewing' conditions available within museums and exhibition spaces. The final part of the chapter considers the role of the visitor's bodily movement within the various viewing practices identified in recent research in museum studies. This includes the current revival of interest in embodied, sensory engagement alongside the increasing significance of materiality.

Introduction

This chapter emerged from a research project titled *The Prism of Sustainability*, carried out in 2014–15 by a group of four Danish museums: National Gallery of Denmark (SMK); the Medical Museion; Trapholt Museum of Modern Art and Design; and the Royal Danish Library, Copenhagen. With government funding from the Danish Culture Agency, each organization was able to appoint an international research advisor to work alongside the local project leaders. Hence the co-authorship of the current chapter between Jonathan Hale (professor of architectural theory, University of Nottingham) and Christina Back (exhibitions

designer, Royal Danish Library). Exhibition staff at the Library were keen to extend their knowledge regarding the potential of the architectural 'staging' of the exhibition environment as a tool for interpretation by drawing on new thinking on the role of the body in the perception of architectural space. The work at the Royal Danish Library carried out within the *Prism* project also involved the design and implementation of two new public exhibitions. One of these was also used as the basis for an in-depth audience evaluation, and this is separately described in Chapter 23.

Exhibition as installation

The intention in this chapter is to explore the broader theoretical context out of which the initial collaboration developed – essentially a dialogue between exhibition designer and architectural theorist based on a shared interest in the bodily and spatial aspects of the museum experience. The project also aimed to build on an existing design approach already deployed in a successful exhibition programme at the Royal Danish Library, which – since 2008 – has also included a number of collaborative projects involving external artists. In each case the artist was part curator and part designer, working closely with the in-house team to explore the possibilities of the exhibition as an artistic medium in its own right. The semi-permanent exhibition of 'Treasures' from the Library's rare book collection, devised by the Russian artist Andrey Bartenev and installed in 2012 (Plate 27), shows the emergence of one of the central principles of the team's approach: the use of the staging of the exhibition as a mode of spatial – rather than textual – interpretation. Bartenev's contribution towards this idea was to create a vibrant and immersive, pop art–inspired environment, in which the historic books and manuscripts could be gradually discovered. By using a combination of over-scaled and brightly coloured 'super-graphics' along with a number of carefully placed sculptural objects – such as a stuffed polar bear and a series of portrait busts – the visitor would be magically transported into the virtual space of the texts on display. While the books themselves were not always immediately identifiable amid the visual onslaught of multi-coloured 'background' elements, there was an intention to encourage more detailed exploration of the texts via the information presented on a series of fixed tablet computers.

The strategy adopted within the 'Treasures' exhibition can also be seen emerging in a parallel series of temporary installations sited within the main exhibition spaces in the basement of the Library over the period from 2008 to 2014. Broadly speaking, the approach could be described as following the principles of 'installation art', where the emphasis is placed on communicating with the viewer through the overall effect of the space itself, rather than individual objects set off against an apparently neutral background, as is the case with the typical 'white cube' model (O'Doherty 1999). Alongside this there was also the idea of adopting a theatrical metaphor, treating the exhibition design as a form of scenography, and thereby transforming the act of curating into one of 'staging' an exhibition in the literal sense. In this way the visitor is invited to contemplate their own role in the viewing process, even to the extent of becoming an 'actor' in the 'performance' of the exhibition visit, as opposed to a passive spectator.

To assist in beginning to explore the potential for a more performative notion of exhibition making, in 2008 the theatre artist Robert Wilson (perhaps most famous for his operatic collaboration with Philip Glass, *Einstein on the Beach*, from 1976), was invited to guest curate an exhibition of artists' sketchbooks, including examples from painters, poets,

playwrights and architects from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. Setting a pattern that would later be seen in the 'Treasures' installation, Wilson set out to create an immersive environment that would transport visitors into a kind of virtual 'dreamscape', a darkened space where a series of unexplained objects were dramatically emphasized with theatrical lighting (Plate 28). The central element giving visual structure to the space was a double row of bright red plastic swings – the kind of thing one might expect to find hanging from a tree in a garden or a children's playground, but not normally inside an exhibition space. The main exhibits were partially concealed within display cases built in to the four perimeter walls, requiring the viewer to peer in through a series of circular 'porthole' windows. Some windows revealed sketchbooks and others inscrutable objects, while some contained miniature landscapes which suggested a view into the mental world of the artist or writer; all of which seemed to offer a variety of metaphors for interpreting the books themselves. The slightly surreal and dream-like atmosphere implied that the visitor had entered a highly ambiguous space, where the book becomes a kind of portal into the process of creative thinking.

The other important element of Wilson's approach was to set up the space as a kind of challenge to the typical visitor: presenting the exhibition as a field of opportunities for action, or 'tasks', to be taken up by the viewer as an active participant. In this way, the act of viewing engaged the fully embodied experience of the visitor, who thereby became an active player in the spectacle being witnessed by the other visitors. A more recent example of an exhibition that also took a 'task-oriented' approach to structuring the visitor experience was 'The Original Kierkegaard', part of a programme of events in 2013 celebrating the Danish philosopher's 200th birthday. This time the show was staged by the Library's in-house design and production team, but like the exhibition already discussed above, this one also adopted some of the key conventions of installation art. By dividing the larger space into a series of individual rooms accessed from a central corridor the immediate impression on entering the exhibition was of heightened curiosity about what to expect inside (Plate 29). Each of the rooms was themed according to an episode from the philosopher's life – sometimes a single publication, a significant event or a characteristic of his personality. The visitor was invited to piece together a story by visiting each of the spaces in turn, drawn in to the process of discovery by a combination of features both familiar and unexpected. The wood-paneled doors along the central corridor suggested a familiar domestic interior, but these turned out to be strangely over-scaled, with handles placed at shoulder height. This slightly surreal, 'Alice in Wonderland' feeling continued inside each room, where the display cases of books and papers were each set within an individual 'theatrical' staging. Dramatic lighting, sound effects, and distinctive finishes such as artificial grass and mirrored floors helped to confound the initial impression of intimacy and calmness. Some of the spaces suggested that the visitor might even be a witness to the act of writing, as if these rooms were in some way similar to those in which the philosopher himself might actually have worked.

In the Kierkegaard exhibition, the rooms themselves were at least as important as the individual objects. By creating a contrast or contradiction between the initial visual impression of the space and the subsequent embodied exploration, the visitor was invited to interpret the rooms metaphorically – perhaps even to imagine themselves on a journey through the mental space of the writer. This emphasis on the interpretive power of the scenography, or three-dimensional spatial staging, also had another advantage: relieving what could otherwise have turned out to be a rather monotonous display of printed texts and papers.

An earlier exhibition at the Royal Library which took a more literal approach to the use of space was one that attempted to explain the institution itself by exposing the inner workings of the building. In this show, which also involved a collaboration with the Danish performance artist Kirsten Dehlholm ('Hotel Pro Forma'), visitors were invited to go on a journey to visit six of the specialist departments of the Library. This was achieved by a combination of methods, including opening up direct views from the exhibition gallery into the normally sealed-off 'backstage' spaces as well as projecting videos of library staff onto the six freestanding concrete columns that form part of the permanent structure of the building. By using these cylindrical forms to 'stand in' for the person representing each of the six departments, the installation also restated the anthropomorphic connection between column and body familiar from the history of Classical Greek and Roman architecture (Rykwert 1996). Passing in front of the six 'personified' columns and underneath a directional loudspeaker, the visitor could hear each person talking about their day-to-day experience of working in the various parts of the Library.

Installation as interpretation

In their shared emphasis on the interpretive function of the architecture of the spatial setting, each of the exhibitions described above borrowed to some extent from the conventions and language of installation art. As the Danish art historian Anne Ring Peterson has recently written, installation art could be said to occupy the space between the worlds of 'image and stage' (Petersen 2015). As a specific genre of artistic activity installation art first emerged as part of the early modernist avant garde, specifically perhaps in the experimental *Proun Room* installation created by El Lissitzky in 1923. By wrapping a series of relief sculptures around the internal corners of a gallery, Lissitzky created a kind of three-dimensional painting large enough to walk around in. As the art historian Claire Bishop has suggested, commenting on Lissitzky's own writings, he appears to have inaugurated a new genre of artistic activity in order to subvert the normal constraints of Renaissance perspectival painting. In opposition to the single ideal viewpoint at the centre of the painter's cone of vision, Lissitzky instead argued that 'space does not exist for the eye only: it is not a picture; *one wants to live in it*' (Bishop 2005: 81). Bishop also highlights an important political dimension to this kind of immersive bodily experience. By questioning what were already seen as complacent and unthinking bourgeois viewing conventions, it was hoped to create a newly 'reactivated' museum visitor who might take this sense of awakened agency back out into the world.

A related but inverted movement to bring the everyday world into the realm of the gallery might also be identified in that other significant anticipation of the emergence of installation art, the 1938 International Surrealist Exhibition in Paris organized by Marcel Duchamp. Here the opulent interiors of the Galerie des Beaux-Arts were almost completely obscured by a combination of black paint, low lighting and ceilings hung with dusty coal sacks filled with newspaper. Nestling among the artworks were other ambiguous elements, such as Louis XV–style beds with rumpled linen and a garden pond with planting devised by Salvador Dalí. Opening night visitors were given torches to illuminate the objects on display, as if to exaggerate the sense of nocturnal wandering within a mystical Freudian dreamscape.

So alongside Lissitzky's activated viewer as a political agent in the outside world, Duchamp's dream wanderers are likewise encouraged to 'take control' – this time of the psychological world inside their own heads. Both of these examples provide evidence of one of the key

lessons to be drawn from the experience of installation art: the idea of the viewing subject as an engaged participant, as a politically – and not just an aesthetically – active agent. Bishop also draws attention to Lissitzky's emphasis on the importance of the moving body in the viewing experience, which anticipated the pioneering work on embodied perception by the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–61). This work also had a formative influence on artists of the 1960s and '70s (Potts 2000: 207–34), particularly those responsible for the kind of formal experimentation that gradually saw the merging of traditional forms like sculpture and theatre in the new medium of performance art.

Perception and action

In his major work *Phenomenology of Perception* (published in French in 1945 but only translated into English in 1962), Merleau-Ponty laid out a new framework for thinking about the body not simply as an *object in* space but rather as the *origin of* space, at least of 'lived space' as it exists for human beings rather than some post-rationalized mathematical abstraction. By this he meant that it is only by virtue of our own material embodiment – the fact that we are ourselves material things that occupy three-dimensional space – that we can have any understanding of the world of objects arranged in space around us. In other words, it is only because we have experienced 'from the inside' what it feels like to be an object that we can have any sense or 'feeling for' the space and the objects we encounter. One of the most commonly overlooked characteristics of perception is the somewhat paradoxical fact that when we think we have perceived something what we have actually experienced is the relationship *between* our bodies and the thing that we have encountered. For example, if I pick up a tennis ball and squeeze it to test its springiness, what I have experienced is not simply some objective quality possessed by the 'ball-in-itself'. Rather it is a certain degree of resistance that the ball offers towards the squeezing movement of my hand, in other words, what the ball 'feels like to me'. The philosopher David Morris has more recently described this way of understanding perception as 'the crossing of body and world' (Morris 2004: 4–6), which also serves as a reminder of its broader philosophical significance. If all perception begins in this kind of ambiguous state of continuity between the body and the world, then the sense of ourselves as existing independently of the people and things around us must be some kind of illusion. In other words, our emerging sense of the distinction between 'self and other' must be based on a more primal state of 'con-fusion', that is, literally, a state of being 'fused together' with the world of things and others around us that is in fact our natural condition.

Merleau-Ponty's later, unfinished and slightly more obscure writings extend this idea even further into deeper philosophical territory (Merleau-Ponty 1968). In coining the term the 'flesh-of-the-world' to describe this shared fabric of material embodiment (both bodies and things), he provides an opportunity for us to infer at least two significant consequences. The first is *phylogenetic*, relating to the evolutionary emergence of the human species, which must have involved a gradual emergence of the kind of self-consciousness that sets us apart from other living beings. The second is somewhat closer to home and relates to our individual *ontogenetic* emergence, the process by which – from birth onwards – we again become gradually aware of ourselves as 'independent' self-conscious entities. Both of these points suggest that we should understand the self not as a pre-given whole, but rather as an achievement that we strive towards – a continuous, ongoing and ever-unfinished project. Ongoing, because at each moment, for example, as we open our eyes on the scene in front of us we are again

offered the challenge of making sense of what we see, and likewise deciding how much of what we are seeing 'belongs to us' and how much belongs to the world. Numerous examples of optical illusions, such as those created by the Lotto Lab, provide powerful evidence of just how often and how easily we can be mistaken in these judgements (Lotto 2017).

Another example of the fluid nature of the boundary between the self and the world results from the skillful use of manual tools which can act as 'prosthetic' extensions of the biological body. Merleau-Ponty's most powerful illustration of this effect involves a blind person navigating by using a white cane. In this case the sensory surface of the hand extends out to the tip of the cane which, with practice, gradually becomes 'invisible' to the user and literally 'incorporated' into an extended definition of the body. As Merleau-Ponty writes, in this case it is the acquisition of a 'habit' or skill that allows the re-combining of body and tool to take place:

> Habit does not *consist* in interpreting the pressure of the cane on the hand like signs of certain positions of the cane, and then these positions as signs of an external object – for the habit *relieves us* of this very task. . . . the cane is no longer an object that the blind man would perceive, it has become an instrument *with* which he perceives.
>
> *(Merleau-Ponty 2012: 152–3)*

Another inference that could be drawn from this scenario relates to the phylogenetic process of emergence referred to earlier. As more recent thinkers such as Bernard Stiegler have suggested (1998: 152–3), the early experience of tool use among non-human primates could perhaps have been the spur towards an emerging self-awareness – what psychologists refer to as 'meta-cognition'. In other words, it could be that the experience of technology actually inspired a process of self-reflection, a dawning awareness of the biological body as also providing a set of tools for reaching out and engaging with the world.

It is important to remember that these early experiences with simple stone tool technologies would also have taken place within a social and cultural context. It is therefore likely that a form of social or group cognition preceded the kind of individual self-awareness that we take for granted as adults today. The importance of this wider context in the healthy development of self-cognition also appears in the concept of environmental 'affordances' as described by the American psychologist James J. Gibson (1986: 127–43). Gibson suggested that our primary mode of perception is functional rather than formal, in other words, things appear to us not so much as 'what they are' but rather as 'what they can do'. Or rather, in Merleau-Ponty's terms, they appear as 'what *we* can do *with* them', according to the possibilities and limits of our own embodiment. The key idea is that the world appears to us in primary perception as a field of opportunities for bodily interaction. As Henri Bergson also nicely summarized: 'The objects which surround my body reflect its possible action upon them' (Bergson 1988: 21). The fact that the world we encounter is already socially and culturally structured should also remind us that while we are drawing on the philosophical resources of phenomenology we are not granting any special privilege to so-called subjective experience. We should think instead of 'self' and 'world' as emergent properties of – or abstractions from – what we typically refer to as 'human experience', as it begins in this in-between realm of what Merleau-Ponty called the 'flesh of the world'.

One further implication of this idea that the world is first encountered as an arena for action, is the fact that the use of tools also transforms our perception of potential affordances.
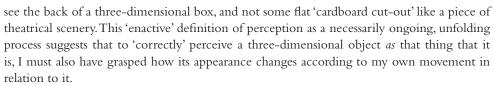
By enhancing the capacity of our biological bodies to engage with the environment around us, skilled tool use causes new features of the world to begin to 'show up' in perception – simply because they have now become available to us for use or occupation. One illustration would be the difference in outlook that results from the possession of different skill sets, for instance, compare the reaction of a geologist to that of a mountain climber when faced with a vertical cliff face. The former might see it as a potential source of fossils ready to yield to the gentle tap of a rock hammer, whereas the latter would take it as a challenge to her climbing ability and would begin by instinctively assessing the quickest – or perhaps the safest – route to the top.

This example of the climber's initial, intuitive, sense of the rock face as either 'climbable' or 'not climbable' also highlights a key component of what Merleau-Ponty referred to as 'motor cognition'. This is the idea that our primary grasp of the space around us comes from a bodily sense of how to 'cope' with it, which perhaps also helps explain what was described above as the functional or 'task-oriented' basis of perception (Dreyfus 2014: 8). Further evidence of the mechanisms by which this bodily response is orchestrated comes from recent research in neuroscience on the workings of the so-called mirror neuron system. Initial experiments carried out at the University of Parma in the late 1990s showed a significant overlap in the neural mechanisms active during both perception and action (Gallese *et al*. 1996). The neural circuits in operation during the performance of a particular action also become activated when observing someone else carrying out the same movements. While these initial findings involved the direct observation of an action happening 'live', later experiments showed similar results from observations of the physical traces left behind by previous actions. For example, in experiments carried out by Vittorio Gallese and the art historian David Freedberg, participants were shown paintings by Jackson Pollock and Lucio Fontana. In both cases mirror neurons were activated in response to the movements implied by the marks on the canvas, whether the paint dripping actions of Pollock or the canvas-cutting gestures of Fontana (Freedberg and Gallese 2007).

More recent research is beginning to explore the role of mirror neurons in the perception of spatial affordances, for example in the neural responses to objects and spaces that are specifically shaped for bodily actions (Jelic *et al*. 2016). All of these strands of research are now becoming incorporated within a new paradigm in the cognitive sciences known as the '4E' approach, which suggests that perception and cognition are, necessarily, 'Embodied, Extended, Embedded and Enactive' (Menary 2010). The examples referred to already above provide evidence for the first three of these four Es: the idea that experience begins with a biological body that is extendable by technical tools that are, in turn, 'geared into' a pre-structured environment – the continuum of all three equating to Merleau-Ponty's notion of the 'flesh of the world'. Perhaps most importantly, the enactive element relates to the essential role of our own bodily movement, which is also implied by the close connection between perception and action seen in the workings of the mirror neuron system. Historically, this idea is also prefigured in the findings of Gestalt psychology, from which Merleau-Ponty also took direct inspiration. This is the idea that our perception of a three-dimensional object must include an assumption about two things that cannot – at any one moment – actually be seen: the background which is currently obscured by the object, as well as its own hidden sides. When I 'read' the scene in front of me as, for example, a box on a table, I must have already made two unconscious assumptions: one is that the table must be continuous even though part of it is hidden by the box, and the second is that if I walked around behind the table I would

see the back of a three-dimensional box, and not some flat 'cardboard cut-out' like a piece of theatrical scenery. This 'enactive' definition of perception as a necessarily ongoing, unfolding process suggests that to 'correctly' perceive a three-dimensional object *as* that thing that it is, I must also have grasped how its appearance changes according to my own movement in relation to it.

Merleau-Ponty also highlighted a normative element in perception that appears to drive this ongoing unfolding of experience, the idea that we are somehow impelled to explore the world around us in order to achieve the best possible understanding of it. Interestingly, he also referred to a museum experience in order to illustrate this point:

> For each object, just as for each painting in an art gallery, there is an optimal distance from which it asks to be seen – an orientation through which it presents more of itself – beneath or beyond which we merely have a confused perception due to excess or lack. Hence, we tend toward the maximum of visibility and we seek, just as when using a microscope, a better focus point.
>
> *(Merleau-Ponty 2012: 315–6)*

Drawn in by the 'solicitations' of the world we are naturally curious to confirm or correct our expectations, and we should therefore think of all our experience as an ongoing process of 'learning' – especially in light of the fact that we will never again encounter exactly the same scene. According to a recent model of the brain as a constantly improving 'prediction machine' – as set out by the contemporary philosopher and cognitive scientist Andy Clark – we are constantly refining and retuning our expectations of what we are about to encounter in experience (Clark 2016). This principle also goes some way towards explaining why the context (both physical and social) of an educational experience is so central to its success, as the educational theorists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger have so powerfully pointed out (Lave and Wenger 1991; Lave 1988). In other words, it is perhaps more correct to say that when we have really learned something new – even some item of so-called propositional or factual knowledge – we have also learned in what context (i.e. how and when) it makes sense to 'use' it. This idea also echoes the famous attempt made by the philosopher Gilbert Ryle to dismantle the typical distinction between 'knowing that' and 'knowing how', that is between possessing a piece of information (or a belief) about something, and having a practical, bodily ability to perform a particular action (Ryle 1963: 28–32).

Learning from the body

By engaging museum visitors in a 'learning process' of bodily exploration and discovery, the genre of installation art could perhaps best be seen as an extension of our experience of everyday reality. By presenting the artistic space as a bodily 'task' or challenge to the visitor, this experience taps into a deep-seated force at the heart of what it is to be human. As each of us has grown up in a world pre-structured by others before us, we have had to learn how to come to grips with it on a more or less 'trial and error' basis. Out of this process of largely unconscious and mimetic, or imitative, learning, we have gradually acquired what Pierre Bourdieu famously called an appropriate *habitus* for each situation – sets of rules and habits of behavior deemed acceptable by the culture in which we find ourselves. One of the reasons why these patterns of behavior are so difficult to acquire – and, by the same token, so difficult

to change – is the length of time it takes to develop them, through repeated attempts to per-form them, followed by continued efforts to 'correct' them. Witness the commonly quoted factoid that it takes 10,000 hours of practice to become an 'expert' at any new skill. Even more significant for a social theorist like Bourdieu is that fact that everyday bodily behaviors are often unconsciously acquired and maintained, like those distinctive styles of speech or fashion that are characteristic of particular professions. By slipping in 'under the radar' of conscious intellectual awareness these habits are also notoriously difficult to resist, even after their insidi-ous workings have been unmasked by the sociologist in the medium of everyday language.

The relative ineffectiveness of the medium of language to 'control' or override this kind of intuitive bodily learning is one the key reasons why art itself is still such a powerful means of communication (Noe 2015). As Bourdieu has written:

> the work of art always contains something *ineffable*, not by excess, as hagiography would have it, but by default, something which communicates, so to speak, from body to body, i.e. on the hither side of words or concepts, and which pleases (or displeases) without concepts.
>
> *(Bourdieu 1977: 2)*

This might even be one of the underlying reasons for the continued popularity of the museum experience, being a fully immersive medium of spatial and bodily communication. While offering something unique that is missing from two-dimensional forms such as books and websites, it seems ironic that so many exhibitions still rely on textual methods of inter-pretation to reinforce their message. Thankfully, recent years have also seen a broader cultural interest in the significance of embodiment, evident for example in a proliferation of writings in cultural studies on bodies and 'body cultures' (Feher *et al.* 1989; Weiss 1999; Shilling 2003; Turner 2008). This shift is also reflected in the way that museums and galleries increasingly use more embodied forms of interpretation, such as interactive 'hands-on' exhibits, along with task-based – and in-gallery – educational activities.

Many recent exhibitions have also directly addressed the theme of embodiment through a focus on sensory experience, such as those surveyed by curator Madeline Schwartzman in the book *See Yourself Sensing* (2011). These examples draw attention to the unique opportu-nities offered by the museum as a bodily mode of communication, capable of drawing on all forms of cultural expression while exploiting the full potential of the human sensorium. Perhaps envious of the immersive multimedia work of artists such as Bill Viola and Olafur Eliasson, even veteran film makers like Peter Greenaway have been tempted to present their work in more interactive ways – suggesting that cinemas are no longer good enough for film, but perhaps museums are (Pascoe 1997). Likewise, contemporary dance practitioners are also increasingly attracted to work in museums and galleries, including choreographers like Rosemary Butcher whose work has always moved between visual arts and performance (Butcher and Melrose 2005). While some examples have simply replicated theatre viewing inside the walls of the gallery – and hence stayed within the limitations of the static-viewer/moving-image format – others have attempted to explore the combination of moving per-former and mobile audience, the Spanish artist La Ribot being just one intriguing example among many from the genre of performance art. Finally, there are also now many examples of visual and performance artists working as guest-curators within museums, including those where the artist's own live performance also becomes a medium of museum interpretation (Wookey 2015).

Conclusion

In conclusion, we would like to make brief reference to another recent exhibition, which also involved a more nuanced exploration of the possibilities of 'reactivated viewing'. This example also involved a gallery environment that offered what Merleau-Ponty called 'solicitations' to the spectator, whereby the space offered itself as a challenge to the visitors' active process of interpretation. In some ways, similar to the 'Yellow Box' exhibition described by Vivian Ting in the previous chapter of this book, this final example also attempted to engage visitors' bodies directly in the process of viewing. Staged at the Royal Danish Library in 2015 as part of the exhibition series described above, this show also dealt with the challenge of presenting written texts as a whole-body experience. Titled '101 Danish Poets', the show comprised written compositions from a range of living writers who were each asked to provide handwritten copies of the submitted work. Seeing the work written out by hand gave the viewer an immediate physical link to the individual writer, partly on the basis that the visible trace of a bodily gesture activates the mirror neuron circuits, as described above. As with the Yellow Box exhibition, the viewer was invited to make a certain physical 'investment' in the act of viewing, as each poem was mounted at a different height on the wall requiring an adjustment of bodily comportment. As with Merleau-Ponty's museum visitor searching for the optimum viewing position, either a seat or moveable steps were offered to facilitate this exploration (Figure 25.1).

One lesson from the success of the '101 Danish Poets' exhibition relates to the challenge of creating environments that balance novelty with familiarity. This is something that has often been referred to in relation to the design of learning spaces – a balance of stimulation and reassurance that is characteristic of 'moderately novel' environments (Falk and Dierking 2000: 116). A second, more specific, lesson concerns what we initially called 'spatial interpretation',

FIGURE 25.1   '101 Danish Poets'. Designed by Christina Back, 2014

Photo: Laura Stamer. Reproduced with kind permission of the Royal Danish Library.

relating to the message that is conveyed by this attempt to actively engage with the spectator. It serves to illustrate that even the process of reading is a necessarily embodied activity, and that to really 'understand' a text is, in a sense, to come to 'inhabit' it and find oneself in it, or – as Merleau-Ponty implied – to 'take it up' like a tool, or as a project of one's own:

> The word has never been inspected, analysed, known, and constituted, but rather caught and taken up by a speaking power, and, ultimately, by a motor power that is given to me along with the very first experience of my body and of its perceptual and practical fields. As for the sense of the word, I learn it just as I learn the use of a tool – by seeing it employed in the context of a certain situation.

(2012: 425)

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