

# **SHARPENING YOUR SENSES: Reflective Essay**

*By Isabel im Brahm*

## **Jumping Into Cold Water:**

This course, above all, has allowed me to discover the city and everyday places differently from what I had before. Even though I have stayed within this environment for more than two years, all the ways I have not been aware of my surroundings was especially surprising to me. Having no clear expectations before starting the course, or any similar experience, this was an interesting balance to other academic and theory- heavy courses.

Overall, the course gave the opportunity to become more aware of and attuned to one's own bodily sensations and how the sensory input in daily life deeply impacts our engagement with the world. Whether it was in re-directing the focus on one's own movement through space, on the sound landscape while moving through the city, or the immediate sensation of touch and different materials, it made that which is usually suppressed to some degree, come to the fore front, and made space to explore those sensations.

For the visual sense, the first experiment of walking around blindfolded immediately shifted one's engagement with the world. Even though temporarily, the suspension of the visual makes the other senses that more important. Hearing, and especially the sense of touch which is even less used in daily life, suddenly needs to be relied upon much more than usual. What was most memorable about such an experiment, was the discovery that, as these senses are mostly underused and undertrained, the perception of the world in regular terms becomes much harder. To shift one's perception in such a way also made it apparent how disconnected to some senses we can become if we do not attend to them. The pure focus on the auditory and haptic sense made the environment become much more immediate.

One's immediate surroundings always already display and enforce their own limitations on the self, and sometimes painfully so. Whether it is by bumping into a wall blindfolded, or crashing into a table because the distance was miscalculated, our sensory input provides crucial information in deciding how to move through the world.

## **Communicating the Senses:**

The sensory maps that were part of the course focused on illustrating our sensory input, then organizing, categorizing, and communicating what we found. A lot of the time, this involved the issue of being at a loss for words, for what it was that we really wanted to describe.

Whether it was the feeling of heat, sounds, smell, or taste, the tasks revealed a lack within common language that generally focuses on the visual or auditory senses and lacks more detailed descriptions for the other senses. However, with practice over the various sessions, to organize the input became easier, and even though the right expressions might not have been available, the communication within the group became more natural.

In exchanging these sensory maps and receiving feedback, it became helpful to see how others organized the specific input and created agendas.

It was always a joined effort of getting more in touch with our environment and trying to articulate our sensations more clearly.

## **Training the Senses:**

As we rely most heavily on our visual sense in everyday life, it is not an easy task to become more attuned to other senses such as smell and touch (Classen, C. 1999). However, when directing attention more consciously, the sensory field shifts and expands. The experiments were important in initiating such a shift, so that afterwards, the attention to a particular sense also shifted the perception of the environment. Through our in-class tasks one such example was the sense of touch in molding a piece of clay blindfolded. This shutting out of one sense to tune in to another was a method not usually used in everyday life and therefore even more significant.

For the visual sense, observational skills could be improved in paying close attention to the details and viewing something over and over again. Through such repetition, our senses also incrementally became more schooled. Within one such task, the use of one's own body to model another person's movements allowed for closer exploration into elements of a person that is very individual to them. Feeling of the body gains a different role, as understanding of others' bodies and one's own is deepened. Even though we move around in the world all the time, we might not actually notice how we do so, unless it fails in some way and we bump into a person or thing. This exercise also helped in gaining new insight into our constant coordination of movement, whether it is within enclosed spaces, or on a walk through the city. The mere fact that most of the time we do not bump into other people, even though it might be extremely crowded, takes for granted that we pay close attention to our own, as well as to the movements of others in an ongoing process, though it may be subconsciously.

## **Feedback Reflection:**

Especially in exchanging feedback, it was helpful to see how everyone was immersed in their sensory experience during the sessions.

The feedback sessions gave insight into how the sensory maps and participation during the sessions could be improved, which was always very reflective and gave opportunity to progress throughout the weeks.

Especially when comparing the sensory maps, it became more clear in which ways it could be communicated more accurately. One such thing was the use of colors, or more precise wording in trying to describe the senses or going from a sketch of the surroundings to a more conceptual description. On the other end, what I struggled with in the beginning was being rather abstract when sketching the environment, which therefore became too ambiguous in the final map. One's own level of skill also came heavily into play in trying to make the depictions accurate which posed another challenge. In describing the sensory experience, things such as the word collection helped a lot in getting more detailed beyond the very obvious "cold" "warm" and "loud" "quiet" distinctions. Considering the feedback after each session, it became helpful both to receive and to give feedback, as a form of reflection after each session.

For the fieldwork, it was always interesting to hear what everyone had done and what their experience was like. This also gave insight into how the same task could result in different sensory perceptions, depending on what environment was chosen. Especially the task of sitting with an artwork for a longer time than usual, left a lasting impression. Extended attention to the same thing provides a sense of immersion in the artwork, so that minor details can be noticed. As a practice in everyday life, this can be very helpful in becoming more mindful of one's immediate surroundings. In trying to link the course with the broader fields

of social sciences and the arts, this is especially relevant for the museum space. In taking a look at normal museum practices and engagement of visitors, this re-positions participation in one's own experience of the artist's work. Museums have broadly recognized the value of integrating more than just the visual sense (Levent, N, Pascual-Leone, A. 2014) and more and more multisensory exhibitions are being developed. What we have practiced in the course therefore also links to current museum practices and the directions museum design is taking into account. Furthermore, the role of creativity for the classroom and academic practices (Culhane, D. 2017) gave another perspective. This was illustrated well by combining different fields, the arts and the medical field, and comparing ways of attending to the body. Getting an insight into the various viewpoints from people of each profession especially gave valuable input when considering engagement with the senses and how this can differ tremendously. Even when looking at the same thing, the background one's eyes and senses are schooled in impacts what clues can be picked up. Considering one's own input and prior education in a field therefore heavily affects the engagement with the senses and categorization of sensory data.

The course provided material throughout the weeks to reflect on one's own engagement with the senses and presented interesting perspectives on practices in the arts, the medical field, and daily life. The learning process over the weeks gave rise to a new perspective on internal and external sensations which are usually taken for granted and a more attuned appreciation of our involvement with immediate surroundings and the world at large.