

# **Outside and beyond: the manuscript as object and the implications for interpretive settings**

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## Abstract

The success of recent exhibitions testifies to the enormous popularity of manuscripts, both medieval and beyond, and our enduring fascination with them. Yet our relationship with medieval manuscripts is fundamentally a deceit. They have been subject to the general compulsion of museums and other interpretive settings to distance the visitor from the objects on display. Preservation, conservation, security concerns and interpretive conventions coalesce to create a *modus operandi* that works to put distance, both temporal and spatial, between person and thing. Through their tendency to consider the medieval manuscript almost exclusively a ‘manuscript qua manuscript’, interpretive settings conceal its fundamental material and kinetic qualities. This research asks, what if the display space became a place of sensorial exploration in which people could have embodied encounters with a manuscript released from vitrine, and free from prescription?

How then, can we reconnect the *manus* with the *script*?

To try to answer this question, the focus of this thesis is the ‘manuscript qua material’. Using the ecological concept of ‘rewilding’ this study investigates if and how less mediated corporeal encounters and intra-actions with manuscript materials, including digital objects, can engender transformative experiences, rupture the conventional subject/object dichotomy and destabilize traditional notions of temporal synchrony. It asks if potent affective, emotional and imaginative visitor reactions are inspired when encounters with ‘medieval’ manuscripts using multiple senses are enabled, and what, if any, implications there may be for how museums and libraries exhibit manuscripts.

This research takes a qualitative approach using one manuscript as a case study and the creation of a ‘rewilded displayscape’ to locate the fieldwork.

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*'As I turned the bone over in my hands, feeling its weight, feeling the years fall away, feeling myself, in that cave of Bronze Age junk, fall with them, I experienced what seemed like an electric jolt. The great weight of the bone, the knowledge of what it was, the sense – so new and clean it seemed – that the beast whose head it bore might have been hunted and slaughtered not three thousand years ago, but so recently that I could almost reach out and place my palm on the sweat and hair of its cooling flank, ran through my hands and fulminated in my head, almost with a flash of light.'*

George Monbiot, 'Feral'

*I must confess that I know nothing whatever about true underlying reality, having never met any. For my own part I am pleased enough with surfaces – in fact they alone seem to me to be of much importance. Such things, for example, as the grasp of a child's hand in your own, the flavour of an apple, the embrace of a friend or lover..., the sunlight on rock and leaves, the bark of a tree, the abrasion of granite and sand, the plunge of clear water into a pool, the face of the wind – what else is there? What else do we need?*

Edward Abbey, 'Desert Solitaire'

*Our world, and the worlds around and within it, is aflame with shades of brilliance we cannot fathom.*

Sy Montgomery<sup>1</sup>

*I dutifully took the approved path to the tree with its tourist-trade messages carved into the flagstones. And felt my eager mood evaporate. The air barely stirred in the tree's compound, and sunlight was rationed there to a few bright scraps the size of fallen leaves that had squeezed through the bars to tease the ancient limbs. And*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.brainpickings.org/2019/02/13/henry-boston-outermost-house-animals/>

*science has done this. It has made a freak show out of perhaps of the oldest living thing...I want to liberate it...*

*A woman...skipped tourism's preamble and came over to where I was standing. She fretted by the railings. She had a camera in hand. I sympathised:*

*"Not easy to photograph, is it?"*

*"Oh, I don't care about that," she said, "I'd just like to touch it."*

Jim Crumley, 'The Great Wood'

*The suburbs dream of violence. Asleep in their drowsy villas, sheltered by benevolent shopping malls, they wait patiently for the nightmares that will wake them into a more passionate world.*

J.G. Ballard

*Now that is what I call workmanship. There is nothing on earth more exquisite than a bonny book, with well-placed columns of rich black writing in beautiful borders and illuminated pictures cunningly inserted. But nowadays, instead of looking at a book, people read them.*

George Bernard Shaw, 'St Joan'

*O world invisible, we view thee,  
O world intangible, we touch thee,  
O world unknowable, we know thee,  
Inapprehensible we clutch thee!*

Francis Thompson, 'The Kingdom of God'

*That very night in Max's room a forest grew...and grew and grew until his ceiling was hung with vines and the walls became the world all around and the ocean tumbled by*

*with a private boat for Max and he sailed off through night and day and in and out of weeks and almost over a year to where the wild things are.*

Maurice Sendak, 'Where the Wild Things Are'

*The materials he works in – wood, stone, clay, iron, living wools and natural hides – are still those divine materials of the earth for which there are many substitutes today, but no replacements. His products are the result not of the juddering steel press, die-stamp and reeking chemical synthesis of mass production, but of human skills and judgments which have filtered down into these pages, into this moment through unbroken generations of eyes and hands.*

Laurie Lee, 'On Craftsmen'

*Books are not absolutely dead things but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul was whose progeny they are; nay they do preserve as in a vial the purest efficacy and extraction of that living intellect that bred them.*

John Milton, 'Areopagitica'

*In hoc corpore continetur tractatus Augustini super quinquaginta psalm priores*

*(In this body is contained the tract of Augustine on the first 50 Psalms).*

Codex 63 Koln Dombibliothek, 8<sup>th</sup> century

*...Throughout its course one is never quite sure if one is listening to something very old or very new...*



J A Fuller Maitland reviewing Ralph Vaughan Williams's 'Variation on a Theme by Thomas Tallis'

*Books have the same enemies as people: fire, humidity, weather and their own content*

Paul Valery, 1914

## Preamble: Past present

'Touching the past' through lived experience. In a wooded hollow on the leeward side of a hill on the South Downs. No power. A sliver of moon and starlight through the clouds. Sitting on a log, cloaked by the darkness of the woodland at night, staring into the fire of both light and warmth; a diorama of imagination animated my emotions and made the hairs on my neck stand up. This was my experience but not mine alone. It was one I shared with countless people over countless centuries. The solace and comfort of the flame at night. With whom did I share this experience? How many people in how many places? With the dance and flicker of its deep warm colour, it shared the faces of past lives, characters inhabiting my imagination: Brother Caedfael's monks, Ragnar and Uhtred, Iseult and Alfred. Sandaled feet and mailed arms, cloaked shoulders and bearded, blackened faces. Ink-stained fingers rolled parchment. Horses snorted. Damp clods thrown up by hoofs, steel and iron sounding, rough cloth, rushes strewn. Voice. The bitter-sweet smell of charcoal, the crack and hiss of the fire, the smell of sweat. All there in the comfort of night and fire and the fear of darkness and restless wait for morning. The confluence of past and present; of the material and the emotional experience; of empathy and affinity with past lives. Textured imaginings. Simply *being* in silent stillness, watching the flames dance in infinite shades and shapes reaching, twisting orange and yellow. The twinkling iridescent Orpiment and saffron sparks ebb and flow across a burning log like two giant armies meeting on the field – Blenheim perhaps, or Waterloo? At once constant and ephemeral, the shifting flowing shapes of flame conjure spectres of past lives: the Celtic blacksmith, the Roman centurion, the Saxon thane, the Viking warrior, the wandering monk, and medieval shepherd... Listening to the wood crackle and hiss, it tells of countless others who have shared this lived experience down the years and across the centuries: Pedlar, traveller, Gypsy, king, queen, general, redcoat, bodger, milestone inspector, woodsman. I am sitting with the ghost of Tom Joad:

'I'm sittin' down here in the campfire light  
Waitin' on the ghost of Tom Joad...

I'm sittin' down here in the campfire light  
With the ghost of old Tom Joad'.

Bruce Springsteen, *The Ghost of Tom Joad*

## 1. Introduction

This is an exciting time to study manuscripts. The record-breaking popularity of recent exhibitions held by major institutions, as well as the burgeoning number of permanent, manuscript-centred exhibitions in cathedrals across the country, stand testament to the fascination that manuscripts exert on audiences.<sup>2</sup> In figure 1, for example, we see visitors drawn to the display cases of books and manuscripts in the galleries of Trinity College, Dublin, in numbers typical for any given day.



Figure 1: The allure of the manuscript. Visitors pack the Library, Trinity College Dublin, 2018

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<sup>2</sup> For instance, visitor numbers to the British Library's permanent 'Treasures' gallery and the sell-out, record breaking 'Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms: Art, Word, War' exhibition, Winchester Cathedral's, 'Kings and Scribes: Birth of a nation', Rochester's, 'Hidden Treasures', and Durham Cathedral's 'Open Treasure'.

At the same time, advancing digital technologies have made manuscripts available to much wider audiences and offered new opportunities for experiencing manuscripts. However, the potential presented by digital technologies has also been accompanied by concerns about what this might mean for how we engage with manuscripts and the future prospects for the 'real thing'. In turn, this has brought renewed attention to the physical and material properties of manuscripts, how they were used and their artisanal modes of production.<sup>3</sup> Thus, as medieval scholar, Jonathan Wilcox asserts, 'the time is ripe...for new understandings of manuscripts as objects of study and artefacts of desire'.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, while the recent 'material turn' in medieval studies has seen scholars begin to consider the worth of manuscripts, not simply as carriers of textual information, but also as physical artefacts that represent 'a powerful way of touching the past', few specialist scholars,<sup>5</sup> let alone the exhibition visiting public, find themselves with opportunities to touch medieval manuscripts.<sup>6</sup>

Our relationship with manuscripts is fundamentally a deceit. It has been subject to the 'almost universal rule that you cannot touch the exhibits.'<sup>7</sup> This is reinforced by putting manuscripts in glass cases, cordons and room attendants watching visitors. This produces an exclusive culture of looking but not touching. The manuscript thus reflects a truth centred on the institution's analyses, values and classification schema, rather than one based on personal, physical experiences. Through their tendency to consider the manuscript almost exclusively a '*manuscript qua manuscript*', interpretive settings

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<sup>3</sup> Exemplified by the collection of papers in Jonathan Wilcox, (ed.), *Scraped, Stroked and Bound: Materially Engaged Readings of Medieval Manuscripts*, (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2013)

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, (p.2).

<sup>5</sup> Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre-and Postmodern*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), referred to in Wilcox, Jonathan, 'Introduction: The Philology of Smell', in Wilcox, Jonathan ed., *Scraped, Stroked and Bound: Materially Engaged Readings of Medieval Manuscripts*, (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2013), 1-13, (p.1).

<sup>6</sup> Even for most specialists and academics, haptic experiences with medieval manuscripts are few and far between. As Christopher de Hamel notes in his *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts*, 'It is easier to get an audience with the President of the US or the Pope than with one of the world's famous manuscripts' (pp.1-2).

<sup>7</sup> Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*, (London: Sage Publications, 2016), (p.239).

conceal its fundamental material and kinetic qualities. How then, can we reconnect the *manus* with the script?

To try to answer this question, the focus of this thesis is the ‘manuscript qua material’. Taking, as a case study, an Ethiopic manuscript referred to as ‘*MS210*’ in the catalogue of the University of Leicester Library’s Special Collections department, this research is an intimate investigation into the meaning of a manuscript; not the meaning of its language and text, or the interpretation of miniatures, but if, and how, meaning can be created through sensory encounters with the matter supporting the literary and art object.<sup>8</sup>

This study explores ways to enable visitors to have opportunities to engage with the manuscript as a three-dimensional, dynamic, complex composite of matter. It asks if potent emotional and imaginative visitor reactions are inspired when encounters with medieval manuscripts using multiple senses are enabled, and what, if any, implications there may be for how museums and libraries exhibit manuscripts.

### **i. Professional Practice**

The research questions and the recognition of their attendant significance to museum and wider interpretive practice emerged directly out of my 25-years of professional practice across libraries, archives and museums, and my wide reading of scholarly theory. Rather than being approached as an abstract subject that has been looked upon and studied over, this research is something that I have been part of and am sited within. It has been experiential. Various professional posts that have involved engaging people with archival materials ignited my interest in shifting the conventional focus on the informational content of documentary material towards the physicality of the material itself, and, in turn, what this might mean for how we define objects. This area of interest was heightened when I managed a digital reprographics studio, established, in part at least, to draw physical attention away from the ‘real’ thing.

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<sup>8</sup> Bruce Holsinger points out the often ignored truism that a medieval manuscript is countless stains made on a stack of dead animal parts. Such are the material substances that have given much of medieval literature and art ‘the morbid life it continues to share with those of us who consume it’. See Holsinger, ‘Of Pigs and Parchment: Medieval Studies and the Coming of the Animal’, (p.619) [https://www.academia.edu/2568554/Of\\_Pigs\\_and\\_Parchment\\_Medieval\\_Studies\\_and\\_the\\_Coming\\_of\\_the\\_Animal](https://www.academia.edu/2568554/Of_Pigs_and_Parchment_Medieval_Studies_and_the_Coming_of_the_Animal) Viewed 14/08/18.

Indeed, at the time, conversations around the very necessity of keeping the physical object once a digital version had been created were taking place. Coinciding with this work, I had taken on a curatorial role and had been responsible for creating exhibitions. This provoked me to reflect on the interpretive interventions used, and the authority and sense of truth that accompanied every text label and panel that attended each item. At the same time, I became increasingly interested in the possibilities and implications of exhibiting and interpreting objects in ways that attended to their physical characteristics and aesthetic qualities as much as their historical or cultural significance. And yet, the orthodox approach to the work I was doing seemed to highlight the latter while overshadowing the validity of the former. Taking up a post as a cathedral librarian as part of a Heritage Fund project, I was responsible for engaging communities with manuscripts and incunabula written in languages that few, if any, members of the local communities were familiar with, which were printed using archaic typefaces and with content that many people considered no longer relevant or current. Indeed, prior to this I had had very little interest in the medieval world, or the manuscripts with which to me it was synonymous. This was a world so distant and alien that little about it appeared relevant to or resonated with me. However, this changed on a winter's day a few years ago when, alone in a cathedral library, I opened a cupboard door, pulled out a box and lifted its lid. There was a manuscript; not spot lit in a glass case or propped up on a book support like an ailing patient, but vibrant, provoking me to touch it, lift it out and *be* with it. I held it in my hands and could feel the texture of the binding, the smooth surface of the vellum. I was surprised by the density and weight of the manuscript, and the solidity and hardness of its boards. I could hear the leaves scrape over one another as I turned them, and I could smell its pungent aroma. I could intuit a sense of taste. These sensory stimuli triggered a powerful emotion: All of a sudden, I was transported back to the favourite shop of my childhood, which as a young boy I would visit most Saturday mornings with my parents. The shop stocked toys at the back, but to reach this you had to pass through the leather goods department at the front with its potent, almost acrid odours of hide and leather. This experience led to my recent research.

In addition, three other incidents occurred that ignited my desire for further reflexive research, leading firstly to undertaking an MA in Heritage Interpretation and Representation and then to this research thesis. The first event occurred when a young child and his mother inadvertently found their way into the cathedral library during a half-term holiday. Not wanting to turn them away, even though the library was closed to the public at that time, I struggled to think what I could find of interest among a collection of religious texts in Greek, Latin and Hebrew. I recalled a volume in which there was evidence of bookworm activity and so showed the child the holes that the bookworms had eaten through the folios; in one case the worms had meandered through, while in another they had rifled through directly from front cover to back. The child became hugely excited by this and told me how his mother called him a bookworm; he dived into her handbag to produce the book he was reading. The physicality of the book was what had affected such a reaction, and this inspired me to work with an artist to create interventions based on book materialities and the so-called pests in libraries, archives and museums, which we presented with a rich restaurant menu in the form of gathered collections.

The second episode involved a security sniffer dog that patrolled prior to a VIP visit. The dog became animated by the odour of a medieval manuscript and proceeded to sniff and lick it eagerly. I realized that non-human interest in this object was based on sensory stimuli and not on any of the constructed human values we had attached to it. The dog, just like me, had had an olfactory encounter that had enlivened his embodied reactions to the object. The third incident took place when, having commissioned a digital version of a medieval manuscript, I observed people gasping in awe at the physical details revealed by the digital object, which, even if security and conservation concerns had been suspended and access to it had been possible, were hidden from the human eye within the 'real' manuscript. These experiences provided examples of how meanings, values and understandings of manuscripts and books could be generated by sensory interactions alone. They also provided a powerful impetus to explore further how, within interpretive settings, we might enable more intimate embodied encounters with these objects. I was keen to find an avenue that would allow further exploration of this potential, not least because, within the framework of



professional practice, very often such an approach meets with opposition and is dismissed simply because it flies in the face of the accepted and deeply embedded practices. It seemed relatively radical and raised questions that implied uncommon practices and challenged orthodox institutional methods of curatorial interpretation and didactic learning.

## **ii. Research questions**

The questions that arose out of my professional practice probe concepts of object agency, notions of arousal and ‘touching the past’, and exploration and ‘foraging’ within the interpretive environment. They are:

What (if any) meanings can be made through sensory engagement with the material attributes of a historical manuscript?

To what extent do people engage with, and experience exhibited manuscripts themselves (rather than their textual content or contextual interpretations)?

Can physical and sensory encounters with a historical manuscript generate a sense of ‘touching the past’?

Can object-oriented digital theatre inspire imagining and enhance visitors’ capacities to engage with a manuscript?

Do physical encounters with manuscript materials prompt strong reactions? (arousal – surprise, shock, delight – emotions and memory)

Does a multi-dimensional display of a manuscript arouse a sense of curiosity?

To what extent (if any) do multi-sensory opportunities rupture conventional routines of engagement with manuscripts?

This thesis aims to develop work connected to the ‘material turn’ within the museological literature led by anthropology, but which has also been contributed to by the fields of archaeology and art history, for example.<sup>9</sup> An important purpose of this research is to contribute to the fledgling but growing multi-disciplinary materiality and object engaged literature (including medieval studies, history, environmental studies

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<sup>9</sup> For example, Dudley, Edwards and Hart, Ingold, Tilley *et al.*

and material culture).<sup>10</sup> What is unique to this research study, however, is that it recuperates the manuscript's physical materiality. Our connections to the materiality of manuscripts have been fractured, not least by the *modus operandi* of museums and elsewhere.<sup>11</sup> However, these connections with manuscripts, physical, emotional and imaginative, have, in the past, been key to human understanding and meaning making around these objects, particularly, but not exclusively, the broad temporal spread of the Middle Ages. While this thesis has theoretical implications, it has a significant practical component insofar as it explores ways to 'dissolve' the glass case and enable multi-sensational encounters between people and manuscripts. It may therefore signal potential changes in existing practices to better facilitate material engagement with manuscripts.

### iii. Methods

The research questions are explored using qualitative methods, which include a case study created to investigate multisensory interpretations of a manuscript in the display setting. A qualitative research approach was chosen because it is best suited to investigating the richness, depth, diversity and multi-dimensionality of experience that is pertinent to this research project. Within a discreet space the 'real' manuscript was displayed in a conventional display case, but multi-sensory encounters with 'deconstructed' manuscript materials, such as parchment, wood, 'blood', bone, stone, flax, reed, quill, roots and pigments, were also enabled. This approach involved establishing an interpretive displayscape in which *MS210* was exhibited with an array of manuscript materials, and sonic, visual, olfactory and gustative interventions. Participants were given the opportunity to freely access the manuscript materials using all of their sensory modalities, but without text or audio interpretation or wayfinding interventions. The project used a combination of first-person filming, interviews, questionnaires and observations of volunteer participants, to create a 'montage of triangulated data'.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For example, James Paz, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, Heidi Estes, Jonathan Wilcox, *et al.*

<sup>11</sup> Sandra Dudley *Museum Objects: Experiencing the Properties of Things*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), (pp. 1-16)

<sup>12</sup> Norman Denzin, Yvonna Lincoln, 'Introduction' in, Denzin, Norman and Lincoln, Yvonna, (eds.), *The landscape of Qualitative Research: Theories and Issues*, (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2003), (p.8).

#### iv. Research rationale and context

What is peculiar to an exhibition and what, for instance, distinguishes it from a visit to the cinema is that we move bodily through it, both temporally and spatially. It is in the multi-dimensionality of the exhibition experience that its most significant characteristic lies, and it is this that holds the potential to affect a number of outcomes. This thesis argues that it is important to enable embodied and multi-sensational encounters between people and manuscript objects because such confrontations hold the potential to give rise to physical, emotional and imaginative interpretations of manuscripts, materials, past lives and eras. Of course, on the face of it, such an approach clashes with conventional concerns within museums, archives and libraries around issues of preservation and security. These are valid and important concerns, yet, nourished by the new material focus across a broad range of scholarship, which challenges human primacy and, thus, the notion of object subject dichotomy,<sup>13</sup> and in light of the potential of advancing digital technologies, the time is ripe to re-assess the status quo rather than simply accepting it and persisting without question or review. New strategies for encounters between people and things could initiate new institutional thinking, which would lead to more meaningful engagement for visitors with manuscript exhibitions.

Common interpretive practice within museums and beyond sees objects understood from within a historical framework. This is, indeed, more often than not the case with manuscripts.<sup>14</sup> Simon Knell points out the importance of retaining this historical perspective and ‘not abandon[ing] object-oriented, reality centred practice in order to pursue dreams and myths’.<sup>15</sup> Although efforts to help visitors to identify the meaning and context are highly commendable and valuable, the prevalence of socio-cultural understandings and the predominance of context and story sometimes overshadow the material object and thus deny visitors access to what Dudley asserts is ‘a powerful

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<sup>13</sup> See Luci Attala, and Louise Steel, (eds.), ‘Introduction’, *Body Matters: Exploring the materiality of the human body*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2019), (p.1).

<sup>14</sup> For example, exhibitions featuring manuscripts at Durham, Winchester and Rochester cathedrals, the British Library, the V&A and the British Museum.

<sup>15</sup> Simon Knell, ‘Museums, reality and the material world’, in Simon Knell, (ed.), *Museums in the Material World*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), (p.xiii).

component of what a museum experience can offer...sensory and emotional engagement with the physicality of an object before necessarily knowing anything about it..'.<sup>16</sup> Knell also discerns a shift in museum studies from object to subject, which is commensurate with the shift in focus in recent years from collections to impact.<sup>17</sup> However, to talk in terms of a simple shift from one to the other, from object to human subject, can be misleading and underpin a sense of dualism between non-human object and human. The purpose of this research is to rupture this dichotomy that pervades much of museum studies and, instead, explore strategies to bring object and subject together. Within the broad disciplinary church of 'Posthumanism' it draws in non-human materials with human materialities to show that material things 'are able to engage, resist and enable outcomes'.<sup>18</sup> This study affords opportunities for intimate interactions, which build upon historical and contextual influences, but does not see these as precluding imaginary or aroused reactions. Indeed, these contexts, as this study shows, can fuel imaginations and creative understandings of manuscripts when allied to sensory interactions.

This research points to space (room to roam) and objects as being equally important because in the same way that human subjects do not exist 'over' and gaze 'down' upon the world, but rather, live *in* it, so too, objects inhabit the very same space together *with* human subjects and other non-human objects. This is the holistic context for our experiences and provides opportunities for our interactions with things in the world. This thesis then, has developed a notion of 'eco-materiality' to bring about a shift, both theoretical and practical, in the way museums and other interpretive settings enable visitors to perceive manuscripts. It reframes subjectivity 'beyond the unitary, self-interested, individualist, human subject',<sup>19</sup> and turns our attention to what Rosi Braidotti describes as the 'post-human', thus providing

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<sup>16</sup> Sandra Dudley, 'Experiencing a Chinese Horse: engaging with the thingness of things', in Dudley, Sandra, (ed.), *Museum Objects: Experiencing the Properties of Things*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012 (pp.2-3).

<sup>17</sup> A point, for example, made by M. Davies in 'What Next?' (2012), *Museums Association blog*, 15/01/2012. Viewed 12/10/2016.

<sup>18</sup> Luci Attala and Louise Steel, (eds.), 'Introduction', *Body Matters: Exploring the materiality of the human body*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2019) <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Body-Matters-Exploring-Materiality-Human/dp/1786834154> Viewed 07/11/2019.

<sup>19</sup> Norie Neumark, *Voicetracks* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), (p.3).

interpretive settings with an alternative paradigm within which to situate encounters with manuscripts (and indeed other objects).<sup>20</sup> Within this 'more than human' context it becomes possible to listen to voices, both literal and metaphorical, beyond the human. By employing the notion of rewilding, the concept of 'eco-materiality' better facilitates a practical emphasis on the experiential impact of subjects' multi-sensational confrontations with objects.

While this study did not set out to contribute to the literature around the social agency of museums, libraries and archives, in advocating for the fundamental experience of sensory engagement with the things around us and enabling greater access, it *de facto* encourages expository and reflexive personal interpretations of manuscripts. A growing body of literature has emerged over recent years concerning the health impact of sensory engagement with heritage objects,<sup>21</sup> but this study discovered first-hand the positive and telling effect that enabling encounters with manuscript materials, beyond the ocular-centric norm, can have. Prior to this field study, one participant, who was without sight had never before encountered a manuscript.

As some participants also noted, sensory engagement with objects, and often 'handling opportunities', are typically associated with the provision that interpretive settings offer to young people.<sup>22</sup> This notion is underpinned by the fact that museums and museum services of all shapes and sizes, do offer opportunities for sensory engagement, but primarily, if not solely, as part of their respective school learning programmes. This project aims to take at least a modest step towards rehabilitating multi-sensory practice and encouraging institutions to consider it as a mainstream provision, not simply an addendum to the main event in a glass case. It argues that if we think about subject and object equally, about space, impact and materiality together and not hierarchically, then embodied, sensory experiences can become an integral feature of an encounter with a manuscript.

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<sup>20</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *The Post-Human*, Cambridge: Polity, 2013), (pp.49-50).

<sup>21</sup> For example, Helen Chatterjee and G. Noble, *Museums, Health and Well-being* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013).

<sup>22</sup> For example, post-encounter interview OQ 25/04/18(a).

## v. Thesis structure

Starting in chapter two with an examination of the methodology employed in this research project, we move on to an object description in chapter three. In chapter four we look at how most of us encounter manuscripts through conventional modes of display, in which they are almost invariably exhibited behind glass, as a predominantly flat surface, motionless, propped up on a cushion like an ailing patient, untouched and untouchable.

This is followed, in chapter five, by an introduction to the concept of rewilding as it is employed in this research project; that is, as a strategy to return to museums a mission to inculcate wonder as well as to educate and, to borrow from James Clifford, 'to return' to [manuscripts] their lost status as fetishes' - their power 'to fixate, rather than simply edify or inform'.<sup>23</sup> Chapter six, 'Embodied encounters', probes participants' corporeal engagements with objects within this project's rewilded displayscape and the responses and affects these might have afforded. Chapter seven deals with the confusion and disorientation that less directed, less mediated wanderings can, and as this study shows, do engender.

Chapter eight delves into the potential potency of manuscript materiality as *agent provocateur*; that is, how the participants' interactions with the manuscript materials challenged the privileged agential status of people over things. The overarching theme of chapter nine, 'Thinking with things', is concerned with how corporeal intimacy and multi-sensational interactions can open up new routes to knowing the manuscript object and engender empathies and understandings of the craftsfolk who created *MS210* and the people who carried it with them, read it and used it. Following on from this, in chapter ten, 'Touching the past', we get a sense of how sonic, visual, haptic, olfactory and gustatory experiences have the potential to awaken our imaginations and arouse our creativity. This chapter also explores the potential of digital

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<sup>23</sup> James Clifford, 'Objects and selves-an afterword, in Dudley, Sandra, 'Experiencing a Chinese Horse: engaging with the thingness of things', in G.W. Stocking, (ed.), *Objects and Others: essays on museums and material culture*, (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, 1985), (p.244).

technologies to provide an alternative material reality, a 'liminal space between the tangible and imaginary' and a theatre for fantasy and imagination.<sup>24</sup>

#### **vi. Explaining the title: 'Outside and beyond: the manuscript as object and the implications for interpretive settings'**

The title of this thesis, 'outside and beyond' refers to the thrust of this research project, which is to move without the bounds of the conventional *modus operandi* of exhibiting manuscripts and thus the environment within which most of us are likely to encounter manuscripts. Outside of the parameters of normative display techniques; outside of narrative and contextual interpretation; outside of the vitrine; beyond the notion that manuscripts are simply carriers of text; beyond the notion that they are 'projectiles bearing [human] intentions'; beyond the focus on the aesthetic and symbolic meaning of manuscripts; and, beyond a focus on the material attributes of manuscripts, meaning lies in the 'embodied, felt' experience.<sup>25</sup> Using the terms 'outside and beyond' is not meant to suggest that this 'construction of reality' is distant or far away, but rather, that it is (or could be) right under our noses.

Once the books and documents of study for scholars and experts in libraries and archives, manuscripts have, without doubt, become the art objects in galleries and the artefacts for museum display. Manuscripts are at the nexus of shifting sectorial 'tectonic plates' within the 'GLAM' sector (Galleries, Libraries, Archives, Museums).<sup>26</sup> It seems that we do not necessarily want to read them but to see them, and to be in the same room as them. The 'interpretive settings' of this research project refer to museums, libraries, archives and the growing number of diverse spaces in which manuscripts are exhibited.

This thesis argues that while looking at a manuscript is an important way to engage with it, it is but one way to do so. The pervasive ocular-centric approach of many

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<sup>24</sup> See Ross Parry, *Recoding the museum: digital heritage and the technologies of change*, (London: Routledge, 2007), (p.72).

<sup>25</sup> David Morgan, 'The Materiality of Cultural Construction', in Dudley, Sandra, ed., *Museum Objects: Experiencing the Properties of Things*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), (pp. 101-102).

<sup>26</sup> Shannon Wellington, *Building GLAMour: Converging practice between Gallery, Library, Archive and Museum entities in New Zealand Memory Institutions* (Unpublished doctoral Thesis), (Victoria University of Wellington, 2013).

interpretive settings is regularly accompanied by the restrictive directive, 'do not touch'. This stifles our instinctive impulses to probe things further in order to understand the world around us. As humans, after we have seen something, if we are not repulsed, we are often drawn to touch it; this is the next step in our interrogation of objects of all kinds. In getting to know things further, we listen, sniff, and then, sometimes, we are compelled to taste too. To paraphrase Andre Malraux, rather than looking at a manuscript as belonging to knowledge, we might, instead, apprehend it as a thing belonging to *life*, and life is about experience. This thesis calls for the necessity of embodied, sensory encounters as ways of interpreting manuscripts.



*It ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble.*

*It's what you know for sure that just ain't so.*

Mark Twain

## **2. Research approach and design**

### **i. Overview**

This chapter sets out the methodological approach taken to explore physical and sensory engagements with manuscript materials in an interpretive setting. This research project is qualitative and interdisciplinary and used a variety of methods to explore its case study. The goal was to use 'methodological triangulation' to collect data with which to find answers to the research questions.

### **ii. What is qualitative research? Why does this study use it?**

#### **a. Fluid definition**

Qualitative research attracts various definitions and defies precise delimitation. Cary Nelson highlights the essentially 'multiparadigmatic' nature of qualitative research and Jennifer Mason points out that although numerous attempts have been made, no consensus has been reached to delineate the wide ranging set of 'techniques...philosophies...and traditions' from which qualitative research is comprised.<sup>27</sup> Despite its slippery nature, most commentators agree that, however it might be defined, qualitative research is an approach that is well suited to helping us understand 'intangibles' such as meanings and interpretations, and is an ideal tool with which to explore, describe and understand experiences, ideas, beliefs and values.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Cary Nelson, *et al.* cited in Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln, 'Introduction', Denzin, Norman and Lincoln, Yvonna (eds.), *The landscape of Qualitative Research: Theories and Issues*, (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2003), (p.12) and Jennifer Mason, *Qualitative Researching*, (London: Sage Publications, 2005), (p.2).

<sup>28</sup> Gina Wisker, *The Postgraduate Research Handbook*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), (p.75).

Robert Silverman and Kelly Patterson aver that the strength of qualitative research lies in its focus on the unique characteristics of a phenomenon that are not explained by a quantitative or positivist approach.<sup>29</sup> Qualitative methods tend not to result in ‘hard and fast’ findings but they do enable us to reveal the views and feelings of people from which patterns and trends can be extracted. Qualitative methods locate the researcher as an ‘observer in the world’ and equip him or her to develop a rounded and integrated rather than atomistic, understanding of the phenomenon in question.

## **b. Why a qualitative approach?**

‘Qualitative research is exciting and important. It engages us with things that matter and ways that matter.’<sup>30</sup> It enables us to investigate the rich variety and depth of the social world, the experiences of our participants and the relationships between things. Qualitative approaches equip us to acknowledge the significance and importance of nuances, textures, depth and contexts. However, qualitative research is not without its detractors and it has been criticised as a method that is used by ‘soft scientists’ or ‘journalists’ to gather ‘anecdotal’, or, at best, ‘illustrative’ evidence.<sup>31</sup> Its critics say that qualitative research is ‘only exploratory’ and is ‘unscientific’,<sup>32</sup> and claim that it is an ‘unsystematic’ method.<sup>33</sup> Yet, qualitative research ‘has an unrivalled capacity to constitute compelling arguments about *how things work in particular contexts*’ (author’s emphasis).<sup>34</sup> And, as this study looks specifically at individuals’ experiences in a specific setting and in relation to a particular set of objects and materials, a qualitative methodology was seen as the most germane strategy. It is also hoped that this research methodology and the findings may be applicable and translatable to other similar settings and interpretive situations to help produce a broader, general

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<sup>29</sup> Robert Mark Silverman and Kelly L. Patterson, *Qualitative Research Methods for Community Development*, (New York: Routledge, 2015), (p.9).

<sup>30</sup> Jennifer Mason [http://www.sxf.uevora.pt/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Mason\\_2002.pdf](http://www.sxf.uevora.pt/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Mason_2002.pdf) (p.1) Viewed 12/08/2019.

<sup>31</sup> See, Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln, ‘Introduction’ in, Denzin, Norman and Lincoln, Yvonna ‘Introduction’ in (eds.), *The landscape of Qualitative Research: Theories and Issues*, (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2003), (p.12).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* p.12.

<sup>33</sup> Jennifer Mason, [http://www.sxf.uevora.pt/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Mason\\_2002.pdf](http://www.sxf.uevora.pt/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Mason_2002.pdf) (p.1) Viewed on 09/12/2018.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* p.1. Viewed on 09/02/2018.

picture and ‘well-founded *cross-contextual generalities*’ (author’s emphasis).<sup>35</sup> A qualitative approach can help to accomplish this, insofar as it locates the researcher at the ‘intersections of disciplines’, thus enabling her, or him, to generate a holistic understanding which transcends disciplinary boundaries.<sup>36</sup>

The success of recent ‘blockbuster’ manuscript exhibitions can be and is, measured by their popularity – the numbers of visitors the exhibitions attract. However, while such statistics provide us with important information, this quantitative data does not illuminate individuals’ preconceptions, experiences, feelings, emotions and imaginative responses to the objects on display. This research project set out to interrogate if and how visitors make meaning from sensory and physical encounters with manuscript materials. It probes if and how these encounters prompt strong reactions (arousal), if they provoke a sense of curiosity and exploration, and, if digital theatre inspires imaginings and understandings. As Mason puts it, ‘through...qualitative research we can explore ‘the texture and weave of everyday life’ and ‘the understandings, experiences and imaginings of our research participants’<sup>37</sup> It is the capacity of qualitative research to investigate the richness, depth, granularity and multi-dimensionality of life and experience that makes it so pertinent to this research project.

### **c. Theoretical framework**

Qualitative research may be a slippery customer when it comes to a definition, but it nonetheless provides an ideal tool with which to delve into cultural phenomena. As this research study investigates both the realms of culture - the behaviours of people in a particular interpretive setting - and of phenomena - it involves a detailed exploration of participants’ experiences - a qualitative research approach was seen as the most appropriate.<sup>38</sup> At the heart of this research project lie certain ontological

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<sup>35</sup> Jennifer Mason, [http://www.sxf.uevora.pt/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Mason\\_2002.pdf](http://www.sxf.uevora.pt/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Mason_2002.pdf) (p.1) Viewed on 09/12/2018.

<sup>36</sup> Robert Patterson and Kelly Silverman, *Qualitative Research Methods for Community Development*, (New York: Routledge, 2015), (p.2).

<sup>37</sup> Jennifer Mason, [http://www.sxf.uevora.pt/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Mason\\_2002.pdf](http://www.sxf.uevora.pt/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Mason_2002.pdf) (p.1) Viewed on 09/12/2018.

<sup>38</sup> Carol Grbich [https://uk.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/50313\\_Grbich\\_Chapter\\_1.pdf](https://uk.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/50313_Grbich_Chapter_1.pdf) (p.5) Viewed 12/08/2019.

elements - people, objects, senses, feelings, emotions, memory, and, to some degree, organizations, structures, regularities, spontaneity and disorder.<sup>39</sup> It focuses on how aspects of our social world are experienced, interpreted and understood, and recognizes these subjective elements as important to making meaning in a multi-faceted, multi-layered and inter-connected social environment. The essence of this research is to explore in rich detail participants' experiences of a phenomenon and to attempt to describe and communicate these feelings and experiences. As Grbich points out, qualitative research lends itself to supporting research approaches that attend to subjectivity – with both the participants' and researcher's views acknowledged and valid in the interpretation of the data; recognize the importance and expertise of the participants in regard to the topic; get to the 'truth of the matter' – that is, a sound research design probing depth and detail rather than broad generalisations; and appreciate the uniqueness of the research context and bounds, which make 'replication and generalisation unlikely'.<sup>40</sup>

Among a number of reasons that influenced the selection of a qualitative approach to this study were that exploring why and how something was happening, enabling a detailed view in a particular setting, and being able to write in a literary style were all important.<sup>41</sup> It is also an approach that, as Lester notes, recognizes personal perspectives and interpretations.<sup>42</sup> Qualitative research also allows for the researcher to take a role as an active learner. Mason, for example, asserts that qualitative research is an invitation to researchers to, 'learn actively, to recognize, confront and make decisions about key research issues for themselves', rather than 'passive[ly] follow[ing]...methodological recipes'.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Derived from a list put forward by Jennifer Mason, *Qualitative Researching*, (London: Sage Publications, 2005), (pp.14-15).

<sup>40</sup> Carol Grbich [https://uk.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/50313\\_Grbich\\_Chapter\\_1.pdf](https://uk.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/50313_Grbich_Chapter_1.pdf) (pp.4-5) Viewed 12/08/2019.

<sup>41</sup> J. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Traditions*, (Thousand Oaks, CA, 1998), (pp.17-18).

<sup>42</sup> Stan Lester, 'An introduction to phenomenological research', 1999, cited in Woodall, Alexandra, *Sensory engagements with objects in art galleries: material interpretation and theological metaphor* (Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leicester, 2016), (p.39) <http://hdl.handle.net/2381/37942>.

<sup>43</sup> Jennifer Mason, [http://www.sxf.uevora.pt/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Mason\\_2002.pdf](http://www.sxf.uevora.pt/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Mason_2002.pdf) (p.1) Viewed on 09/12/2018, (p.4).

So, while this research project takes a methodological approach that is unswervingly qualitative, it does not adhere to a particular 'recipe'.<sup>44</sup> Its epistemological framework is post-modernist and post-structuralist. It set out regarding the world as a complex, chaotic network of entanglements, in which 'realities' are multiply constructed and shifting across time and location. 'Reality' is viewed as socially and societally embedded and existing within the mind'.<sup>45</sup> This 'reality' is mobile, shifting, and multiple, and people experience 'realities' differently. It considers the notion of 'truth' as elusive, fluid and heterogenous and holds that subjectivity is of the utmost importance. This project's approach is flexible and contextual and attends to the depth, textures and nuances of the research data rather than trying to pick out overarching trends and patterns.<sup>46</sup> It embarked from the assumption that there is no objective knowledge outside of, or independent of, individual thinking and interpretation. Relationships and contexts are paramount to understandings.

The genesis of this research project lies in the questions raised through observations within the context of professional practice and a subsequent wish to know more about audiences' perceptions, reactions and feelings on encountering the phenomenon of a manuscript, (whether 'physical' or digital'), in an interpretive setting. Grbich points out that 'when the microcosm of interaction in poorly researched areas is the focus of the research question', grounded theory 'can be a useful approach'.<sup>47</sup> This suggests that for a study such as this one, which proposes to interrogate interactions in a specific, delineated setting, employing aspects of grounded theory is valid and, if utilised along with phenomenological approaches to qualitative research, they provide a sharp analytical tool with which to probe notions of experiences, feelings, impacts, meanings and understandings.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> The use of a recipe as an analogy in discussions of qualitative research points to the multiple paradigms and variety of approaches to conducting qualitative research (*Ibid.* pp.1-2).

<sup>45</sup> Carol Grbich [https://uk.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/50313\\_Grbich\\_Chapter\\_1.pdf](https://uk.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/50313_Grbich_Chapter_1.pdf) (p.7) Viewed 12/08/2019.

<sup>46</sup> Jennifer Mason [http://www.sxf.uevora.pt/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Mason\\_2002.pdf](http://www.sxf.uevora.pt/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Mason_2002.pdf) (pp.3-4).

<sup>47</sup> Carol Grbich, *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Introduction*, (London: Sage Publications, 2013), (p.79).

<sup>48</sup> Z. Knight and K. Bradfield referred to by Carol Grbich in, Grbich, Carol, *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Introduction*, (London: Sage Publications, 2013), (pp.101-102).

In the context of this research project, certain aspects of Kathy Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory are of particular interest, namely the notion of a more subjective relationship between researchers and participants and recognising that the researcher-participant relationship might, in fact, be more productively described as a 'partnership in the data generation process'. This project also acknowledges Charmaz's emphasis on 'keeping close' to the data so as to maintain participants' voices.<sup>49</sup> This research study also takes an interest in the shift away from scientific writing styles, which is evident in the 'newer' approaches to qualitative research. These approaches favour a postmodern, creative, more literary approach, which forefronts the voices of the participants.<sup>50</sup>

Insofar as this project is interested in participants' encounters with manuscript objects, it is influenced by phenomenological approaches to experience. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's reflections on the connections between our consciousness of the world around us are relevant here. We do not peer into the world as a cat might look into a fish tank, but, rather, we can see things in the world but also be seen. When we touch something that thing touches us back because we and it are made of the world's materials. 'If this were not the case [we] could neither touch nor see anything at all.'<sup>51</sup> Objects are encounterable because we are also encounterable. The concept of 'chiasm' sums this up. Drawn from the Greek letter 'chi' it signifies an intertwining as indicated in the shape featured in Figure 2. It denotes an interweaving that summarizes the relationships between things in the world. As Merleau-Ponty puts it: 'the hold is held'.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Kathy Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory described in *Ibid.* p.88.

<sup>50</sup> See Carol Grbich's chapters on 'newer qualitative approaches' in *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Introduction*, (London: Sage Publications, 2013), (pp.105-155).

<sup>51</sup> Sarah Bakewell describing MMP's phenomenology (p.236).

<sup>52</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty in Bakewell (p.235).

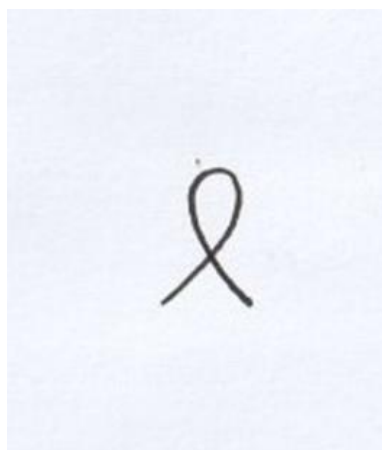


Figure 2: The 'chiasm': the thread loops back to grip itself, each clasps the other

Peter Willis has pointed to a tendency within the phenomenological tradition for orthodox descriptions of experiences to be dull and boring for the reader.<sup>53</sup> There is, within the context of this project, an attraction in his advocacy that 'living text' should relate to 'lived experiences', one that perhaps draws on literary styles and techniques, for instance, utilising metaphor and reflection. Meanwhile, social scientist and leading advocate of Subjective Evidence-Based Ethnography (SEBE), Saadi Lahlou, asserts that text does not do justice to the fine-grained detail captured within 'subcam' films and, therefore, 'video should be used not only for conducting the research but also for publishing the results'.<sup>54</sup> While recognizing that some disciplines and commentators may find adopting a more creative approach problematic, this study considered it a risk worth taking if a creative synthesis, using, for example, film, fiction and the graphic/visual arts, could invest the research data with more engaging, accessible content and intensify the reader's attention.<sup>55</sup>

However, it is important to be aware of what approaches are being adapted and how they are being used and to consider any potential limitations, as well as advantages, that may develop from mixing certain theoretical paradigms with analytic analyses.

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<sup>53</sup> Peter Willis referenced in Grbich, Carol, *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Introduction*, (London: Sage Publications, 2013), (p101).

<sup>54</sup> Saadi Lahlou, *How can we capture the subject's perspective? An evidence based approach for the social Scientist*, <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk> (p.44). Viewed 05/02/18.

<sup>55</sup> This same approach, that is, to exploit film, the theatrical, and sonic and visual imagery, was taken in the field research to create accessible content and. potentially, intensify participants' attention.

With this in mind, it is, nevertheless, a feature of qualitative research that the field evolves, and relevancy is maintained only through trialling new ways of proceeding.<sup>56</sup>

The key point, as far as this research study is concerned, is that the approach used facilitated 'exploratory, fluid, flexible, data-driven and context-sensitive' research.<sup>57</sup>

If, as Jennifer Mason asserts, a qualitative approach 'does not dovetail neatly into one uniform philosophy or set of methodological principles.... [and] cannot be neatly pigeon-holed and reduced to a simple and prescriptive set of principles',<sup>58</sup> it does make a perfect bedfellow for Museum Studies. This is because both fields attract researchers from many different traditions and disciplines, and across these 'disciplines' the nature of investigation is fluid and organic. As Mason points out, qualitative methods are particularly good for inter-disciplinary research and research that bridges the professions.<sup>59</sup> And Museum Studies is perhaps the quintessential interdisciplinary field, cross-cutting a wide range of traditions of study, research and professional practice from the arts, social sciences and humanities, to technology and the sciences. Both the fields of qualitative research and museum studies display an evolutionary nature, adapting to changing contexts and needs, and thus creating a highly congruous environment for this research project, which examines the notion of 'rewilding' within interpretive settings. Just as rewilding advocates more stimulating, adventurous interpretive experiences, so qualitative research supports less restrictive and less directive approaches to developing understandings. We might think of the structure of qualitative methodologies as analogous to a landscape, or a context for the research, but one without strictly defined pathways that must be followed. The qualitative researcher, like the visitor to a 'rewilded' display setting, has scope to manoeuvre and to explore. In both situations, the processes are not so prescribed and choreographed that they deny impromptu investigation and spontaneous exploration.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Carol Grbich *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Introduction*, (London: Sage Publications, 2013), (p.39).

<sup>57</sup> Jennifer Mason, *Qualitative Researching*, (London: Sage Publications, 2005), (p.24).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* p.3.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* p.2.

<sup>60</sup> Brady Wagoner commenting on the nature of aspects of qualitative research: 'There unfortunately are no fixed rules for this— you have to test it out in practice (Email to author 06/03/18).



### iii. Case Study

This qualitative investigation adopted a case study approach to examine perceptions and interpretations of manuscripts. Rooted in Merleau-Ponty's assertion that human perceptions of the world are grounded in a sensory communication between object and subject,<sup>61</sup> it foregrounds the material substance of the manuscript – an object that provides the possibility of a physical conduit between us and past epochs and lives.<sup>62</sup>

This case study was designed with an emphasis on interrogating the material attributes of the manuscript object, and observing, recording and analysing how visitors experienced a 'tangible' and a 'virtual' manuscript – physically, sensorially, imaginatively and emotionally. It centres on the unique characteristics of a phenomenon and exploits the ability of the case study to tease out granulated data.<sup>63</sup> It is this kind of singular, detailed focus on the unique characteristics of a phenomenon that qualitative studies embrace. Indeed, a case study approach is one of the best illustrations of how qualitative research 'ferret[s] out the nuances of a phenomenon observed in the real world and develop[s] textured narratives that make them accessible to a broad audience'.<sup>64</sup>

### iv. Setting up the case study

One of the most challenging aspects of this research project was selecting and establishing the fieldwork case study. From the outset a case study approach seemed the most appropriate and potentially rewarding in terms of data generation. Locating the research 'experiment' spatially and temporally offered a particular utility as it mirrored most audiences' encounters with manuscripts in the exhibition setting, which

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<sup>61</sup> Bakewell, Sarah, *At the Existentialist Café: Freedom, Being and Apricot Cocktails*. (London: Vintage, 2017), (p.40).

<sup>62</sup> Manuscripts survive in greater numbers than any other artefact from the medieval period. See de Hamel, Christopher, *The British Library Guide to Illuminated manuscripts: History and Techniques*. (London: British Library, 2001), (pp.9-10). Jonathan Wilcox suggests that manuscripts are a potentially potent means of 'touching the past', although his investigation limits the possibility of such an experience to scholars. See, Wilcox, Jonathan ed., *Scraped, Stroked and Bound: Materially Engaged Readings of Medieval Manuscripts*, (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2013), 1-13 (p.1).

<sup>63</sup> A point made, for instance, by R.K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. (London: Sage Publications, 1984) and Piet Verschuren and Hans Doorewaard, *Designing a Research Project*. (The Hague: Eleven International Publishing, 2010), (pp.178-184).

<sup>64</sup> Robert Mark Silverman and Kelly L Patterson, *Qualitative Research Methods for Community Development*, (Routledge, New York, 2015), (p.9).

typically take place in a single location and at a particular time. While this enabled certain case boundaries to be established, (where and when the 'experiment', or experience, began and ended), if the idea of a case study implies neatly defined and ring-fenced foci of study, then it is somewhat illusory. A number of complex and interwoven issues come into play as the boundaries of a case study are determined. For example, in this research project, objects, people and an event, occasion, or, activity were included and each, as Mason highlights, involved theoretical (ontological and epistemological) and practical considerations.<sup>65</sup>

A single site case study promised to be the most feasible and practical format given that this research project required significant 'front end' work in developing a space and devising and setting up a display in which sensory oriented, subject-object encounters could be performed.

With this in mind, two institutions that regularly exhibit manuscripts were initially identified as potential hosts for the case study. While both organisations gave serious consideration to the research proposal and each referred to the case study as 'interesting', 'exciting' and 'innovative', both organisations, nonetheless, declined to take part. One cited the methodology as 'too exploratory', running 'contrary to our existing policy of not allowing this type of independent research' and emphasising that, 'it could interfere with the visitor experience'. Concerns also centred around how the methodological approach of this project could 'potentially cut across pre-planned evaluation'.<sup>66</sup> The other organisation's declination to host this case study was due to the fact that it was 'not in a position to collaborate with external partners', and, at this time, it was not prepared to be involved with 'a project involving engaging our audiences digitally within the building'.<sup>67</sup>

Finally, Special Collections, part of the University Library at the University at Leicester, offered to host and make available an object from its manuscript collection for this case study. While the University Library, of course, has a long tradition of supporting and encouraging research and enquiry, its Special Collections department adheres to

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<sup>65</sup> Jennifer Mason, *Qualitative Researching*, (London: Sage Publications, 2005), (pp.166-167).

<sup>66</sup> British Library email correspondence with author 07/11/17.

<sup>67</sup> The John Rylands Library email correspondence with author 12/09/17.

conventional approaches to accessing and handling manuscripts, and, understandably, security and conservation issues remained priorities. Whether or not the Library's agreement to participate was underpinned by a conscious adherence to postpositivist, postmodern values, the Library was, nonetheless, prepared to facilitate a case study designed to explore not how people engage in the world by interpreting and exchanging socio-cultural meaning, but one that set out to privilege 'non-representational' and close, embodied engagement with the materiality of our world. Without the Library's support, and, in particular, that of the Special Collections department, it is doubtful that this research would have been possible.

It is important to note that, out of necessity, this research project had to establish, from scratch, a less prescribed and choreographed space of encounter precisely because orthodoxies regarding exhibiting medieval manuscripts appear to reinforce a dominant 'scopic regime', which excludes opportunities and the freedom for sensorial and physical intimacy and associated feelings, emotions and imaginings. It is also worth noting that attempts to introduce sensory experiences that are unusual within the traditional library environment met with reticence and uncertainty. For example, for this project I proposed dispensing scents associated with the manufacture of manuscripts, but this was met with concerns around health and safety issues regarding using room spray atomisers in the Library. While these concerns included valid health and safety issues, it is difficult to disentangle the uncertainty surrounding the use of a scent dispenser in a Library from apprehensions about the unconventional and concerns about novel, irregular and abnormal behaviour in such a setting.

#### **v. Sampling: the object**

Selecting the manuscript that was to be central to this case study and its digital simulacrum involved questions that are common to sample selection in all qualitative research: 'what it is seen to be?' And, what it is that makes it of interest and relevant to this study?<sup>68</sup> It is important here to note that it is the object itself that is pertinent to this study rather than the meanings associated with it, or the systems of classification that attribute value and quality. Similarly, while the process of the

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<sup>68</sup> Jennifer Mason, *Qualitative Researching*, (London: Sage Publications, 2005), (p.131).

object's creation is pertinent, as far as it is possible to disentangle the two, it is in the craft of making it rather than in the reasons for its making that the interest of this project lies.

Furthermore, it is essential to recognize that the selection of a manuscript as the focus for this case study cannot remain isolated from wider debates, for example, those which surround theories of visual methodologies. The historical manuscript is an object often featured in the widely accepted meta-narrative of the dominant growth of visual culture – a feature of our move from pre-modernity, through modernity to post-modernity and to a digital age in which Western culture is predominantly ocular-centric.<sup>69</sup> Some commentators have challenged this position, arguing that some pre-modern societies were also highly visually centred, citing manuscripts, with their plethora of images as the basis of this counter argument, along with medieval ideas intertwining spirituality and visual materiality.<sup>70</sup> Thus, any case study that centres on embodied, sensory engagement with a manuscript intersects with debates concerning the extent to which visually centred cultures were common to medieval societies and also, to societies today.

Moreover, in selecting a non-Western, Ethiopic manuscript, this study becomes implicated, not only in points of debate about the history of visual culture, but also in issues of the geography of visual culture. Insofar as this study used an Ethiopic manuscript as its object of attention, it finds itself, if not explicitly, then certainly

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<sup>69</sup>Although the manuscript selected for this research project is probably 18<sup>th</sup> century and not medieval it is highly characteristic of medieval manuscripts, both materially and visually. Professor Jo Story, for example, points to the Coptic sewing structure being almost identical to that used in the Anglo-Saxon, *St Cuthbert Gospel* held by the British Library. Comments made in conversation with the author, 09/10/17. The similarities of the structural and physical features of Western medieval manuscripts and later Ethiopian codices are also noted in, Nosnitsin, Denis, 'Ethiopian Manuscripts and Ethiopian Manuscript Studies: A Brief Overview and Evaluation', in *Gazette du livre medieval*, Number 58 (1), (2012).

<sup>70</sup> For example, Jeffrey Hamburger, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam referenced in Rose, Gillian, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*, (London: Sage Publications, 2016), (pp.9-11). See also, Jennifer Borland, 'Unruly Reading', in Wilcox, Jonathan ed., *Scraped, Stroked and Bound: Materially Engaged Readings of Medieval Manuscripts*, (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2013), 97-114, Matthew T Hussey, 'Anglo-Saxon Scribal *Habitus* and Frankish Aesthetics in an Early Uncial Manuscript', in Wilcox, Jonathan ed., *Scraped, Stroked and Bound: Materially Engaged Readings of Medieval Manuscripts*, (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2013), 16-37 and Karen Louise Jolly, 'Dismembering and Reconstructing: MS Durham, Cathedral Library, A.IV.19', in Wilcox, Jonathan ed., *Scraped, Stroked and Bound: Materially Engaged Readings of Medieval Manuscripts*, (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2013), 177-200.

implicitly, questioning the Eurocentrism that has been identified as pervading discussions of 'the visual'.<sup>71</sup> If museums and galleries have traditionally played a key role in establishing different and divided traditions of visual culture, then recent exhibitions such as *Beyond Compare* at the Bode Museum, Berlin, and *African Scribes: Manuscript culture of Ethiopia* at the British Library, for example, emphasise that this role is being rethought and that boundaries between distinct visual cultures are impossible to draw.<sup>72</sup>

So, while this case study was designed and developed to provide access to data that, it was hoped, would allow for empirically and theoretically developed answers to the research questions, inevitably, the methods also emerged from the theoretical framework surrounding the methodology. A further example of this lies in how the case study juxtaposed the 'real' manuscript with the digital version. This has formed the nexus of a debate over recent years in which the digital has, on the one hand, been identified as a threat to the 'original' and, on the other, been pivotal in heightening a sense of the materiality of the manuscript.<sup>73</sup> In recent years, the relationship between the 'actual' and the digital has been crucial in igniting this debate in which there has been a growing emphasis on the materiality of the object or medium. Thus, this case study sought to create an environment with palimpsestic potential; a space in which there would lie some capacity to echo the embodied relationships with manuscripts experienced by former readers and open up opportunities for participants' imaginings and for them to feel empathy with past lives.<sup>74</sup> The research methods of this project were designed to simply '...unfold, to increase the surface area of the experience'.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> See for examples, Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*, (London: Sage Publications, 2016), (p.11).

<sup>72</sup> *Beyond Compare*, Bode Museum exhibition, visited 26/12/17. Also, *African Scribes: Manuscript culture of Ethiopia*, British Library exhibition, visited 07/02/18.

<sup>73</sup> See, Jonathan Wilcox, Wilcox, Jonathan, 'Introduction' in Wilcox, Jonathan (ed.), *Scraped, Stroked and Bound: Materially Engaged Readings of Medieval Manuscripts*, (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2013), (pp.1-14).

<sup>74</sup> See, for example, Jennifer Borland, 'Unruly Reading', in Wilcox, Jonathan ed., *Scraped, Stroked and Bound: Materially Engaged Readings of Medieval Manuscripts*, (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2013), 97-114.

<sup>75</sup> Laura Marks quoted in Rose, Gillian, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*, (London: Sage Publications, 2016), (p.10).

In doing this, this study took a bold step, and addressed the widely accepted convention within museums of the need to foreground informational and contextual interpretation. Within a discreet space the 'real thing' was displayed to participants (in the conventional display case mode for security and conservation reasons), but multi-sensory encounters with the 'deconstructed manuscript', that is, the physical properties of a 'medieval' manuscript, were also enabled through the provision of a range of substances, such as parchment, wooden boards, flax, quills, ink making ingredients, and so on. This research investigated whether such an approach ruptured the conventional linear notion of time that often seems to render the past so distant, dense, unvarying and monolithic.<sup>76</sup> The case study method was employed here to position the participants 'in the middle' and, thus, by increasing their propinquity to the material substances of the manuscript (we might think of it as all around them), the participants did not have to reach *back* to 'touch the past', but might have experienced a sense of affinity in the present. This reveals a further theoretical position underpinning this project's research methodology, which considers that, contrary to the notion of the Cartesian dichotomy, the self and the world are not two separate, distinct realities, but rather a single, interdependent whole. Drawing on Laura Marks' assertion that *things* are as much bodies as we ourselves are, this case study was constructed to enable participants to physically connect with the bodies of the manuscript: its 'deconstructed self', and the digital simulacrum, film and audio.<sup>77</sup>

The link and images below (figure 3) show the display environment in which participants encountered the manuscript materials. The layout and features of the display space were designed with the aim - within the confines of what was available - of situating the participants 'in the middle' of the experiences.

<https://youtu.be/VqSlkjr7U3c>

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<sup>76</sup> See Robert Mills discussion of this in the context of Derek Jarman's work in *Derek Jarman's Medieval Modern*, (Cambridge: D S Brewer, 2018) and participants' responses to the pre-encounter questionnaires, revealing their preconceptions of manuscripts and the medieval past, in Appendix 6.

<sup>77</sup> Gillian Rose references Laura Marks referring to a video film as being 'as much a body as she is'. Rose, Gillian, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*, (London: Sage Publications, 2016), (p.10).



Figure 3: The display environment

#### vi. Subject/participant

In this research project the term ‘participant’ is primarily used to denote the people who took part, that is the subcamers, observees, or interviewees. They are the participants who actively engaged in meaning making. People were asked to *participate* because their descriptions of the experiences they had had and how they expressed the reasons for their responses and actions were key to this study. Simultaneously, while the term ‘subject’ distinguishes the human foci of this study from the non-person ‘objects’, such as the manuscript, it also works to denote that people are subject to wider socio-cultural discourses and influences that impact on their experiences, and affect how they feel about them and how they articulate them. This dual role played by the people that take part in qualitative research is neatly described by the term ‘authored authors’, coined by Svend Brinkmann and Steinar Kvale.<sup>78</sup>

#### vii. Sampling: the participants

The methodological approach applied to this project began from the premise that people are meaningful sources of data and therefore it treated them as essential to addressing the project’s research questions. While recognizing that one of the biggest

<sup>78</sup> Svend Brinkmann and Steinar Kvale, *Interviews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*, (Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications, 2015), (p.3).

challenges posed by qualitative research is the sheer volume of data than can be generated, it was important that this study provided both a quantity and quality of data sufficient to enable solutions to the research puzzle to be found. So, bearing in mind the propensity of the scope of qualitative research to spread, the participant sample size was limited to between 15 and 20 people. In the end 16 volunteer participants took part.

Initially it was thought that the audience sample would be drawn from the University of Leicester, reflecting the breadth of roles and occupations across the institution. However, several practical obstacles, including examination schedules and space availability, meant that the pragmatic approach was to release a general call for participants through the University's agencies.<sup>79</sup> The participant sample was subsequently drawn from within the University of Leicester community and beyond (See Appendix 1: Summary of fieldwork - participants). The sample featured in this project therefore comprised:

Professional Services Staff: 4

Undergraduates: 4

Taught postgraduates: 1

Research postgraduates: 6

Other: 1

The absence of a classified participant sample, (for example, based on gender, ethnicity, age, etc), is not problematic in the context of this research project. Categorisation, as Mason points out, might be appropriate to a qualitative research project, but 'equally, might well not'.<sup>80</sup> Because the ontological perspective of this research project considers people's experiences as meaningful, rather than people or their characteristics *per se*, its goal was to sample experiences, feelings and behaviours

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<sup>79</sup> The University's media and PR departments, together with the Library and History and Museum Studies Schools were instrumental in publicising the call for participants.

<sup>80</sup> Jennifer Mason makes this point. See, Mason, Jennifer, *Qualitative Researching*, (London: Sage Publications, 2005), (p.128).



and not the variables by which people are conventionally distinguished.<sup>81</sup> It is worth stressing that representativeness was not the driver in this case study as it is not key to the puzzle posed by the research questions. Social processes or gauging the representativeness of the sample against a wider population are also not the focus of this study. Instead, it was motivated by the desire to explore the rich and nuanced interactions between the participants and the object - people's perceptions are important to this research study.

Nonetheless, if this study's attempts to tease out the complex and interwoven threads of people's feelings and emotions (the raw data of this study) influenced the methods proposed to generate this data, they were also coloured by the notion that different people participating in the same event might have radically different experiences and thus attribute divergent meanings and significances. This approach, which Peter Willis has termed, 'empathetic phenomenology', recognizes the 'socially embedded nature of human consciousness'.<sup>82</sup> In other words, if it is the participants' experiences of 'the things themselves' that are the focus of this study, it must also acknowledge the influences of the subjects' life experiences on how they reacted and responded to, and interpreted their respective encounters with the displayed manuscript. This approach is reflected in the questions posed to the participants interviewed. On the one hand, answers to the question, 'what was it *like*?' may tell us something of what holding the parchment was like for a participant so that others can imagine it as their experience ('objectivised subjective feelings'), while answers to questions about how things *felt* would say more about how the participant responded to the experience ('subjectivised subjective feelings').

Of course, knowing what a participant makes of an experience is key to qualitative research, but it is also potentially of great importance within interpretive settings. The subjective interpretations of visitors, all of whom are likely to have shared a common experience, for instance, encountering a medieval manuscript on display, may well be overlooked by institutional initiatives wishing to project an 'official reading of

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<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.* p.128.

<sup>82</sup> Peter Willis, "'From the things Themselves" to a "Feeling of Understanding": Finding Different Voices in Phenomenological Research' in *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, Vol.4 (1), July 2004, (pp.1-13), (p.4).

particular activities'. For example, evaluations centring on learning outcomes or enjoyment might not consider the wider subjective experiences of visitors, which could include horror, amusement, surprise, upset, intrigue, or bemusement. What, if any, implications might this have for how manuscripts are displayed?

### **viii. Methods**

Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln have used the term 'inventor' to describe the qualitative researcher. Because of the evolving, constantly changing and adapting nature of qualitative research, practitioners, they point out, must often 'invent' appropriate methods with which to interrogate the puzzle in question.<sup>83</sup> This project, to use Carol Grbich's phrase, had to 'hunt through the tool box for the best tool for the job'.<sup>84</sup> In fact, in this case, it was decided that to seek the best answers to the research questions established by this project a number of 'tools', or analytical approaches, would prove helpful, each making its own contribution to the evolving research process. So, while this piece of qualitative research employed some tried and tested methods of data collection, it also used 'newer' methods of enquiry, such as first-person filming, and involved an experimental element in combining these methods to generate data.

### **ix. The crystal triangle**

In this research project, multiple methods were used to 'cobble' together or combine data.<sup>85</sup> The goal was 'methodological triangulation', that is, the 'use of different methods to collect information [to lessen] limitations [...] validity threats and distortions inhering in any single method'.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln, 'The Seventh Moment: Out of the Past' in, Denzin, Norman and Lincoln, Yvonna, (eds.), *The landscape of Qualitative Research: Theories and Issues*, (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2003), (p 635).

<sup>84</sup> A metaphor used by Carol Grbich, *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Introduction*, (London: Sage Publications, 2013), (p.9).

<sup>85</sup> Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln, 'The Seventh Moment: Out of the Past' in, Denzin, Norman and Lincoln, Yvonna, (eds.), *The landscape of Qualitative Research: Theories and Issues*, (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2003), (p.635).

<sup>86</sup> Tindall, 1994, (p. 147) quoted in Eric Jensen, 'Introduction', *Methods for Change* [file:///C:/Users/arm13/Downloads/Jensen%20presentations%20-%20Visual%20Methods%20Workshop%20-%2016%20Oct%202017%20pt1%20\(2\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/arm13/Downloads/Jensen%20presentations%20-%20Visual%20Methods%20Workshop%20-%2016%20Oct%202017%20pt1%20(2).pdf).

Laurel Richardson has questioned the widely used concept of triangulation within qualitative research, suggesting instead that the notion of a crystal rather than a triangle more accurately encapsulates the complex, shifting, reflexive process of qualitative enquiry.<sup>87</sup> Whichever metaphor we might choose, the significant point is that for this project multiple methods were used to allow us to arrive at some rich, holistic answers to questions around people's engagement with manuscripts in interpretive settings.

Each participant 'event' or interaction provided data to address the specific research questions of this study but should also provide results that are accessible to a broader audience. Silverman and Patterson highlight the approachability of qualitative research to wider and general audiences and it is intended that this study will both have implications across interpretive settings and reach further into issues of social inclusion and equality. For example, much research within museum and gallery studies has centred on the visual as the fundamental sense and on 'the gaze' and 'ways of seeing' as the primary mode of encounter. This is perhaps unsurprising when we consider that some commentators suggest that the primacy of sight is inherent in human development - as children we look and recognize before we speak.<sup>88</sup> Meanwhile, comparatively little attention has been paid to people with sight loss in interpretive settings. However, engaging audiences using a wide range of senses and privileging none above the other may have positive repercussions, not only allowing equitable access, but also enabling greater equality - making richer, deeper, more profound experiences available to hitherto excluded audiences.

#### **x. 'Damastism'**

Whatever metaphor we might like to apply, the key point is that various methods were used to generate and capture the data. As qualitative researchers it is also important that we allow ourselves to consider the possibility that the very methods we use to generate and capture data may also be tools we use to 'excavate' and 'construct' data.

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<sup>87</sup> Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln, 'Introduction' in Denzin, Norman and Lincoln, Yvonna, (eds.), *The landscape of Qualitative Research: Theories and Issues*, (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2003), (p.8).

<sup>88</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, (London: Penguin, 1972), (p.7).

The role of researcher bias and influence in qualitative research and the impact of the ontological and epistemological positions of those conducting the research has been well-documented.<sup>89</sup> 'As researchers we frame the issue; then we describe the techniques in enough pragmatic detail to make them transferable to the reader; finally, we give quick illustrations of their power.'<sup>90</sup> Saadi Lahlou uses the term 'Damastism' to refer to researcher bias, not only on influencing the data, but also on 'influencing their very construction'.<sup>91</sup> In the same way that the infamous Greek bandit, Damastes ensured that his victims would fit the size of an iron bed, so Lahlou contends that qualitative researchers, 'induc[e] (unconsciously) the phenomena themselves, not only the data, to conform to the expectations of the researcher'.<sup>92</sup>

From the outset of this research project I acknowledged my influence on the phenomena captured and analysed, and the inevitable impact that I would have on the construction of the results.<sup>93</sup> The research questions and objectives of this project arose from experience within professional practice, which suggested that an exploration into less restrictive, less directive practices of displaying manuscripts might point to ways of making encounters with manuscripts in interpretive settings more emotionally engaging and stimulating. In this sense, this research study is biased; it is located in personal experiences, theories, observations and views and it is no less subject to abductive processes than any other qualitative research project.

Kathy Charmaz and Frederick Steier both refer to an element of co-creation within the qualitative research process and, indeed, this project involved close collaboration between me, as the researcher/observer, and the participants/observees in a comparatively intimate space within the library building. But there is a thin line between co-creation and researcher bias within the data generation process and it is not always clear when that line has been crossed. The film review process afforded me

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<sup>89</sup> For example, Mercer Takacs, Saalzman, Deveraux, even as early as 1911 Oskar Pfungst noticed how researchers could influence not only human but animal subjects – 'Clever Hans' the horse. Cited by Saadi Lahlou, *How can we capture the subject's perspective? An evidence-based approach for the social scientist*, (2011), (p.3) <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/37759/> Viewed 22/02/18.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.* p.3.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.* p.3.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.* p.3.

<sup>93</sup> This is in essence the definition of Saadi Lahlou's term, 'Damastism'.

the opportunity to play the field research back and observe ‘after the fact’ both my own behaviour and that of the participant/observee. In this case it raised questions about how far I had played a facilitating role and how far my actions had directed, or at least, influenced, the participants’ behaviours and responses. For example, because participants were often unaware of, or unused to finding olfactory or gustative opportunities within display settings, on several occasions I had to point out that these opportunities were present. To what extent therefore, did this influence participants’ behaviour? One participant commented, ‘Like, without being prompted, I wouldn’t have put these things in my mouth’.<sup>94</sup> Similarly, when I pointed out that ‘wet-wipes’ were available, did this encourage participants to ‘get messy’ or simply reassure them that it was OK to touch? It must be acknowledged too that there is a risk here of ‘observer expectancy effect’. That is, I might have subtly conveyed my expectations and this, in turn, might have influenced the participants’ behaviours to conform to this expectation.

Although such subjective influences and effects are unavoidable in qualitative research, new technologies provide us with opportunities to record from the subject’s perspective and involve them in the analysis, thus changing the relationship between the researcher/observer and the participant/observee. As a method of subjective evidence-based ethnography, first person audio-visual recording is, as Lahlou contends, ‘a major step forward’ in recording actual activity in natural environments without the need, necessarily, for external observation.<sup>95</sup> However, this fieldwork revealed that subcamming too, raises its own issues.

## **xi. First person filming (subcamming)**

Though all photography and films are subjective, ‘video glasses’ are particularly subjective cameras. This makes them an especially useful tool for ‘entering the phenomenological tunnel’.<sup>96</sup> They represent, asserts Brady Wagoner, one of the ‘best option[s] for the researcher to get close to the visitor’s experience of moving through a

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<sup>94</sup> Film review interview with SM, 23/04/18.

<sup>95</sup> Saadi Lahlou, *How can we capture the subject’s perspective? An evidence-based approach for the social scientist*, (2011), (p.4) <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/37759/> Viewed 22/02/18.

<sup>96</sup> Brady Wagoner, ‘Introduction to Evaluation Using First Person Videos’, *Methods for Change* workshop. Attended 16/10/17  
<file:///C:/Users/arm13/Downloads/Subcam%20video%20presentation.pdf>.

site, providing rich and contextualized data'.<sup>97</sup> The aim of using first person video in this project was to discover if a displayed manuscript, in a less directed, choreographed environment, in which sensory and physical encounters are encouraged, really opens-up opportunities for different visitor experiences, interpretations and practices. Initially, a number of characteristics that a rewilded space might generate on the part of the participants were identified. For example, it needed to be a space that presented challenges to the participants, encouraged their curiosity, and ignited their imaginations. Then it was decided how these characteristics might be presented – opening and closing drawers, attentive listening, haptic engagement, tasting substances, and so on. How, then, would we test for these responses? Interviews and questionnaires are tried and tested methods, but first-person filming presented a relatively innovative approach, commensurate with the nature of the research project. Most importantly, however, first-person audio-video enables the researcher to enter the participant's (i.e. the data source's) 'stream of experience', in situ. This represented a valuable means of generating data with which to seek answers to the research questions (see Appendix 2: Excerpts from examples of subcam film footage).

## **xii. Limitations of subcaming**

All qualitative research methods have limitations. When it comes to 'subcam filming', not least among these is the amount of data generated and the concomitant time and effort required to collate and analyse that data. However, before any data can be generated and captured, first-person filming involves a significant preparation phase. Technical considerations, including operation, battery life, recharging timings and procedures are added to the raft of pragmatic, technical and creative issues that accompany establishing an innovative interpretive setting.<sup>98</sup> And, of course, with technical devices come technical burdens. Poor quality recordings can result from any

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<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.* <file:///C:/Users/arm13/Downloads/Subcam%20video%20presentation.pdf>.

<sup>98</sup> Setting up and replenishing the materials for the display – topping up the odours and ink pots and preparing batches of 'dry' and 'wet' ingredient mixes for tasting was required between the sessions. In addition, technical checks had to be carried out – setting up the audio-visual screens and linking to the online digital manuscript. This represented a labour intensive set of tasks and may raise questions of practicality in front-line practice.

of a plethora of reasons; inadequate camera adjustment, a full memory card, low battery, or forgetting to press the 'start' button are all very real hazards.

The relative novelty of this situation and my lack of familiarity with the equipment and procedures made 'scouting in the field an...inescapable requisite'.<sup>99</sup> Testing first-person recording in a range of situations and then conducting a pre-pilot to trial various technical protocols, followed by a pilot involving a participant to generate, capture and run some preliminary analysis of the data were all necessary prior to the commencement of the real fieldwork. Indeed, one of the key concerns that the pilot study addressed was whether the microphone in the camera-glasses was capable of capturing a specific conversation when located within the general auditory environment of a display incorporating sound interventions in the form of music and the spoken word. In fact, the microphone performed well. However, on reviewing the audio-visual data, it became immediately apparent that it was almost impossible to distinguish the voice of the participant during the film review interview from the voice of this same participant captured on film during the walkalong interview. The solution to this problem was to ensure that the walkalong interview was transcribed immediately prior to the film review interview. In this way, I could recognize the comments of the participant made during the walkalong interview and omit them from the transcription of the following film review interview.

Common to all observations where the observer is present in the situation is the issue of the subject being aware of being observed. This fieldwork was no exception. When asked if s/he felt free to explore, one participant, for example, revealed their awareness of being watched: 'I think, yeah, I was a bit. I mean, obviously I am aware that you're there and it is being recorded which, obviously, I was trying not to think about, but, you know, it, it is'.<sup>100</sup> These comments also pick up on some additional implications with subcam filming, that is, participants' potential awareness of the fact that their behaviour and the focus of their attention is being digitally recorded. For some participants a sense of self-awareness was emphasised by the fact that they

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<sup>99</sup> Saadi Lahlou, *How can we capture the subject's perspective? An evidence-based approach for the social scientist*, (2011), (p.47) <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/37759/> Viewed 22/02/18.

<sup>100</sup> Film review interview JH 17/04/18b.

could see themselves reflected in the glass case housing the manuscript.<sup>101</sup> Under these circumstances the participant may have been inclined to modify his or her behaviour. Another factor to be accounted for is 'attentional focus'. For instance, if the subject appears to be focussed on a particular aspect or feature, it does not necessarily mean that this is of significance or importance to him or her. Their attention may in fact be drawn to what they are hearing or smelling, and the focus of the gaze is only of secondary significance, or perhaps not even consciously perceived at all. The researcher therefore needs to maintain an awareness of the global context. One way in which we can seek to do this is through interviewing. The purpose is not to ask participants to produce theory but, based on the empirical evidence of the subcam film, simply to explain what they perceived and why they acted in the way they did. Indeed, Wagoner points out that first-person filming is eminently suitable to complement additional methods of data capture to provide a more holistic picture of visitor experiences.<sup>102</sup> In this research process, participants would often be observed looking at an object or at one of the digital screens; however, the interview would confirm that they were not visually interrogating, but attending aurally to stimuli present in the display space.

### **xiii. Overview of the experience/procedure**

Each participant was 'introduced' to the video eyewear (subcams) and then a brief trial and check took place. Once comfortable, the participant, accompanied by me, encountered the display. Participants visually encountered the 'real' manuscript in a glass case placed directly above a 3-drawer display cabinet. Text on the drawers invited participants to pull open and push closed the drawers. No other textual intervention or interpretation was featured in the case study 'experiment'.

Within the drawers, a range of materials - substances from which a medieval manuscript might typically have been made or imbued with, (parchment, inks, soot, odours, incense, feather quills, reeds, minerals, plants, oak galls and more) – were available. The participants were encouraged to engage physically and sensorially with

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<sup>101</sup> Film review interview GW 24/04/18.

<sup>102</sup> Brady Wagoner, 'Introduction to Evaluation Using First Person Videos', *Methods for Change* workshop. Attended 16/10/17  
<file:///C:/Users/arm13/Downloads/Subcam%20video%20presentation.pdf>.



these materials – to touch them, smell them, listen to them and even to taste them. Edible ingredients, suggestive of those used to make iron gall or carbon inks, were available for participants to taste.<sup>103</sup> The ‘walk along interview’ method was used. Put simply, this involved me accompanying the participant and observing while occasionally asking questions. The questions and timing were flexible and responded to the participants’ actions and behaviours.

#### **xiv. Audio-visual**

The audio-visual content of the display space was designed to create a sense of scale, but also to evoke memories, draw on cultural references and influences, provide creative inspiration and assist in establishing an ambience and probe boundaries between a sense of the past and present, with the intention, in turn, of igniting participants’ imaginations. The audio-visual content attempted to relax and raise notions of temporality and the idea that forms may endure beyond the immediate context of their creation, whether these forms are tangible (the manuscript), or intangible (moving digital images, musical and vocal sounds). Would this elicit questions, for example, about objects within interpretive settings as acts of performance or final contemplation?<sup>104</sup> This is the link to the audio-visual content used in the display setting, or ‘displayscape’: [link to video removed in eThesis due to copyright restrictions].

#### **xv. Post-filming**

The research protocol included a ‘regular interview’ with each participant about their experience of the visit as a whole. This was followed by a ‘confrontation interview’, that is, an interview using subcam playback to elicit the subject’s memory of what they were experiencing and feeling. The aim here was that as the participant and I watched the film together, access to the participant’s own interpretations could be gained.

A particular risk accompanying the use of technology is ‘to fetishize the method’. To avoid this, it is important to remain mindful not to over-focus on the device (the subcam) and to ensure flexibility and adaptability in the interview method. However,

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<sup>103</sup> The ingredients for this were charcoal, sea salt, cacao nibs and smoky Lapsang Souchong tea.

<sup>104</sup> This is a concept that is raised and discussed by Tim Ingold in, Ingold, Tim, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on livelihood, dwelling and skill*, (London: Routledge, 2011), (p.198).

this proved to be difficult for the participants who were wearing glasses. Subcaming does not work as well for people wearing glasses as the video frames are not designed to be worn with other glasses. This makes them relatively cumbersome and conspicuous for the wearer. The post-film interviews also exposed a degree of device awareness on the part of some participants. Where this was the case, it seemed to centre around participants' cognisance of the camera angle. This is important, not only because it demonstrates that camera glasses, like a human observer, have a potentially influential presence, but also because it highlights a significant flaw in the use of camera glasses for recording sensory and physical activities. The angle of the camera glasses worked very well to record what was happening ahead of a participant's facing direction, but it failed to detect everything the participant looked at simply because the camera could not follow their eye movements. So, when participants faced down into a drawer, while the camera recorded what was in the back half of the drawer, it did not film what the individual's eyes looked down at, or what the participant picked up and touched towards the front of the drawers. Only when prompted by me to accentuate their head movements did the participants' camera glasses record these details. Interestingly, during the confrontation interview some participants noticed that the camera had not recorded what was the focus of their attention and their actions in relation to this, and they went on to explain their movements in more detail, thus exemplifying the importance of deploying a range of complementary data gathering techniques in qualitative research.

Encountering the manuscript, the display space and its components was not intended to be a single linear or prescribed narrative experience. On the contrary, participants, it was hoped, would feel free to move, negotiate, explore, be impulsive and indulge their curiosities. Therefore, it was not expected that, in the interview, the subjects would relate a straightforward track of actions – 'First I did this, then I felt that, then I went there...' and so on.<sup>105</sup> The joint researcher-participant review of the film was intended to empower the latter to explain, to help them remember intentions and 'peel back' different layers of simultaneous feelings, memories, emotions and

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<sup>105</sup> Saadi Lahlou, *How can we capture the subject's perspective? An evidence-based approach for the social scientist*, (2011), (p.15) <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/37759/> Viewed 22/02/18.

imaginings, thus enabling me to better collect their respective subjective experiences.

#### **xvi. Observation**

The walk along interview method was not anticipated to involve a constant or continuous question and answer interaction between the participant and me. It was important that space and time were given to the participants to 'forage' and to allow the possibility of free exploration and surprising encounters. This aspect of the research study was developed throughout the pilot phases and during the fieldwork itself, as part of an inherently iterative process.

During the periods when the participant was not involved in a semi-structured interview, he or she was observed based on a loose but pre-categorised and pre-structured observation schedule devised to record events, actions and responses.<sup>106</sup> (See Appendix 3: 'Observation schedule'). An initial 'pilot' observation, an element of an iterative, reflective process, helped develop and refine the categories of the observations. The observation schedule was devised to record events, actions and responses and to assist in answering the research questions. Key characteristics were identified (for example, affinity with the past, imagining, arousal, curiosity, foraging and exploration), and through a mapping exercise actions and responses were selected to identify when these were displayed by participants. For instance, opening drawers might indicate curiosity and foraging (See Appendix 4: Mapping exercise). Additional notes were taken during and on reflection, following each fieldwork activity, to monitor responses, record thoughts about what had been observed and help manage the observation data during the analysis.

Integrating observations with first-person filming, qualitative interviewing and the survey questionnaires adds rigor and was aimed at gaining a still deeper knowledge of individuals' experiences in context. It added a further dimension to the triangulation process, or another facet to Richardson's crystal. The value of observations, as Eric Jensen found in his study of family outreach activities at the Fitzwilliam Museum in

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<sup>106</sup> Gina Wisker, *The Post-Graduate Research Handbook*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), (pp.203-209).

Cambridge, lies in their capacity to reveal evidence that tells a different, or richer story than that which can be conveyed by verbal or written signs alone.<sup>107</sup> An example of this lies in one participant's repeated verbal frustration about the lack of instruction and textual information. Yet, the observation showed that despite this participant's yearning for explanations and claims not to understand, s/he nonetheless, demonstrated a high level of sustained curiosity and inquisitiveness and a willingness to explore.<sup>108</sup> In a similar direction, but with a slightly different thrust, another participant watched themselves smelling Gum Arabic and commented: 'But in this room, I was still finding the smells really, I mean, I am still aware of them now'[Sic]. Yet, in the walkalong interview the same participant claimed not to have a good sense of smell.<sup>109</sup>

While the observation method may be defined as non-participatory, the boundaries were blurred because the observer interacted through intermittently interviewing the participant 'subcamer'. There are also implications for the social dynamic that result from just two people (participant and researcher) being in the room. While acknowledging that it is considered important that qualitative researchers 'need to maintain a sense of objectivity through distance' when engaged in this ethnographic practice, this study also recognizes that my physical proximity to the participant in a delineated space could have had an impact on the dynamics of influence; I could have influenced the participant and vice-versa.<sup>110</sup> Virginia Nightingale emphasises the dependence that observation as a method has on the relationship of cooperation and communication between the observer and observee.<sup>111</sup> In this study, perhaps because of the absence of textual interpretation combined with the novel and unconventional

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<sup>107</sup> Eric Jensen found that mothers typically framed engagement and enjoyment of the outreach activities at the Museum around their children and implied that the Museum was not a source of fun and engagement for them. However, observations evidenced positive interactions on the part of mothers attending the 'Introduction to Visual Evaluation', *Methods for Change* workshop. Attended 07/10/17 [file:///C:/Users/arm13/Downloads/Jensen%20presentations%20-%20Visual%20Methods%20Workshop%20-%2016%20Oct%202017%20pt1%20\(3\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/arm13/Downloads/Jensen%20presentations%20-%20Visual%20Methods%20Workshop%20-%2016%20Oct%202017%20pt1%20(3).pdf).

<sup>108</sup> Observation notes GP 16/04/18.

<sup>109</sup> Film review transcript 24/04/18(b) and walkalong interview 24/04/18.

<sup>110</sup> Bernard cited by Barbara Kawulich in, Kawulich, Barbara B. (2005). 'Participant Observation as a Data Collection Method'. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 6(2), Art. 43 <http://nbnresolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0502430>.

<sup>111</sup> Virginia Nightingale cited in Alexandra Woodall, *Sensory engagements with objects in art galleries: material interpretation and theological metaphor* (Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leicester, 2016), (p.51) <http://hdl.handle.net/2381/37942>.

freedom for tactile engagement, participants frequently asked questions and sought my confirmation. My reactions in such circumstances were crucial, insofar as they had significant potential to influence the direction of the activity and the participant's behaviour. If it is the case that 'participant observation requires a certain amount of deception and impression management', it is also true that once a question had been asked, whatever my response, no matter how seemingly non-comital, it was bound to have some degree of influence.<sup>112</sup> Carol Grbich sums up nicely the multiplicities involved with the subject within qualitative research. The postmodern subject is, she points out, 'decentred, layered, unstable, fragmented...made up of many selves. Fuzzy objects with dynamic and overlapping boundaries loosely interconnected and with emergent patterns exhibiting stability and instability, dominate.'<sup>113</sup> The researcher is no less human and so, one must assume, no less multifarious and 'fuzzy' even within the context of the research process.

While observer bias and influence is a constant presence and consideration, Nightingale reassures us that observation involves an exchange between researcher and participant, which acts as a 'corrective to the assumptions inherent in the researcher'.<sup>114</sup> However, it is perhaps grounded theorist Kathy Charmaz's take on the relationship between researcher and participant that is most helpful, because it brings the two together as partners in the data gathering process, while emphasising the importance of the critically reflective role of the researcher in acknowledging and managing their biases.<sup>115</sup> Indeed, we might consider the qualitative research process, as Frederick Steier suggests, (in an apt analogy for a project that draws on the concept of rewilding), as an 'ecology', that is, a structured development within a bounded environment *in* which researcher and participant, (as well as the literature and objects

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<sup>112</sup> Barnard cited by Barbara Kawulich in, Kawulich, Barbara B. (2005). 'Participant Observation as a Data Collection Method'. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 6(2), Art. 43  
<http://nbnresolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0502430>.

<sup>113</sup> Carol Grbich, *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Introduction*, (London: Sage Publications, 2013), (p.115).

<sup>114</sup> Virginia Nightingale quoted in Alexandra Woodall, *Sensory engagements with objects in art galleries: material interpretation and theological metaphor* (Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leicester, 2016), (p.51) <http://hdl.handle.net/2381/37942>.

<sup>115</sup> Kathy Charmaz's grounded theory approach discussed in Grbich, Carol, *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Introduction*, (London: Sage Publications, 2013), (p.88).

involved), enter into a dialogical relationship to uncover findings; or, as Steier, puts it, to 'co-construct a world'.<sup>116</sup>

Silverman and Patterson argue that '*active observ[ation]*' is essential for qualitative researchers'.<sup>117</sup> This they define as being in a research mode of heightened awareness, with a readiness to amplify all of one's senses. While this might conjure up an amusing image of a meerkat at dawn, keenly sniffing the air and scanning the horizon for predators, it is, in fact, a highly appropriate approach for a study that explores people's sensory engagement with objects. Indeed, it is particularly so if we consider that it is not only the participants' actions, but also the roles of the objects in this interaction that are pertinent; in other words, not only observing how the participants behaved towards the objects, but also how the objects engaged with the participants. In this case study it was imperative that I remained alert to the sights, smells, sounds, tastes and tactile information, and considered all of the surrounding factors and elements in the fieldwork environment.

This approach draws on actor network theory, which recognizes that 'non-humans (particular technologies and objects, for example,) may also be actors and exercise agency'.<sup>118</sup> Again, it is important to emphasise that in undertaking participant observation it was not social interaction that was the focus of this study, but how participants interacted with the *things* themselves, so that I could gain first-hand, contextual experience of participants' actions, how they engaged materially and imaginatively with the objects in the study and what, if any, emotional responses arose.

## **xvii. Qualitative research interviews**

Through qualitative research interviews the researcher attempts to understand participants' experiences, and their respective points of view. This research enquiry

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<sup>116</sup> Frederick Steier, 'Reflexivity and Methodology: An Ecological Constructionism' in, Steier, Frederick, (ed.), *Research and Reflexivity*, (London: Sage Publications, 1991) (p.180).

<sup>117</sup> Robert Silverman and Kelly Patterson, *Qualitative Research Methods for Community Development*, (New York: Routledge, 2015), (p.45).

<sup>118</sup> Sharon MacDonald quoted in Alexandra Woodall, *Sensory engagements with objects in art galleries: material interpretation and theological metaphor* (Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leicester, 2016), (p.51) <http://hdl.handle.net/2381/37942>.

embarked on a journey to uncover the lived worlds of its participants and unveil the meaning of their experiences using semi-structured interviews. The interviews were designed to garner descriptions of the participants' experiences and accumulate details of what they felt about the phenomena experienced.

Inspired to some extent by phenomenology, this type of semi-structured interview gets close to an everyday conversation, yet is neither open-ended nor closed like a questionnaire. Unlike an open conversation it retains the specific purpose of seeking out data specific to a participant's experiences of particular phenomena. While this research enquiry sought fine-grained descriptions of participants' direct experiences through the interviews, it also attempted to draw meaning from central themes emanating from what was said and how it was said. Respondents' physical gestures and expressions can help illuminate meanings that lie 'between the lines', and on reflection, despite deploying a range of methods to gather data, it would have been helpful to have film recorded the walkalong interview process in order to capture the facial expressions and mannerisms of the participants when they were engaging, for example, in tasting and smelling materials. While observation notes provide a valuable 'written photograph' of the situation under study, the explicit details that could have been captured by video observation would have proved a useful supplementary tool with which to cross-check participants' verbal data.<sup>119</sup> For example, it was the footage from video observations, which confounded participants' verbal explanations, that Eric Jensen found to be the most revealing data in his study of family outreach activities at the Fitzwilliam Museum.<sup>120</sup> Similarly, notwithstanding reservations about the mass of data that this would have generated, visual recordings of the subcam film review interviews in this study might also have been revealing because it became apparent during the transcription process that it was impossible to see the facial expressions

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<sup>119</sup> Erlandson, Harris, Skipper and Allen, (1993) cited in, Kawulich, Barbara B. (2005). 'Participant Observation as a Data Collection Method'. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 6(2), Art. 43 <http://nbnresolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0502430>.

<sup>120</sup> Eric Jensen found that mothers typically framed engagement and enjoyment of the outreach activities at the Museum around their children and implied that the Museum was not a source of fun and engagement for them. However, observations evidenced positive interactions on the part of mothers attending the 'Introduction to Visual Evaluation', *Methods for Change* workshop. Attended 07/10/17 [file:///C:/Users/arm13/Downloads/Jensen%20presentations%20-%20Visual%20Methods%20Workshop%20-%2016%20Oct%202017%20pt1%20\(3\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/arm13/Downloads/Jensen%20presentations%20-%20Visual%20Methods%20Workshop%20-%2016%20Oct%202017%20pt1%20(3).pdf).

and mannerisms of participants reacting to, and explaining their actions, while watching their own subcam footage.

It is important to be mindful that the qualitative research interview is just that; an 'inter-view', an exchange or interchange of views between the interviewer and the interviewee, around a common theme. This interaction between the 'knowers' constructs knowledge and, as Svend Brinkmann, notes, lends the interview a 'dual aspect' – 'the personal interrelation and the knowledge that it leads to'.<sup>121</sup> This 'dual-aspect' is exemplified by one instance during an interview in this study, when the conversation morphed into a discussion between a participant and me about the imagined (or intuited) comparative gustative qualities of a medieval manuscript and a modern paperback!<sup>122</sup> However, while an interview is a dialogue between two persons that gives voice to both, it is not necessarily an egalitarian relationship - the researcher usually asks the questions. Brinkmann suggests that the power tends to lie with the interviewer.<sup>123</sup> However, this power asymmetry is not necessarily weighted in 'favour' of the interviewer if, for instance, the interviewee is an elite or expert in his or her field, and one or two participants in the research study are experts in associated fields. In such circumstances the dialogue may be one way or instrumental but not necessarily controlled by the interviewer. If, as Brinkmann says, the interview agenda can be manipulated, then, in certain situations, there is potential for the manipulation to be conducted not exclusively by the interviewer.<sup>124</sup> However this 'balance of power' was weighted, the interview process and the film review interview afforded both parties the opportunity for reflection. Not only did it provide data for me to analyse, but it also enabled participants to consider how they engaged with objects and how they behaved in the display setting, as well as giving them a chance, as we shall later see, to reflect on concepts such as the past and temporality.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Svend Brinkmann, *Interviews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Interviewing*, (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2015), (pp.4-5).

<sup>122</sup> Walkalong interview, JH 17/04/18.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.* pp.37-38.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.* pp.37-38.

<sup>125</sup> Film review interview OQ 25/04/18b.



### **xviii. Questionnaires**

Qualitative questionnaires supplemented the audio-visual recording and the ethnographic data generated by the interviews and observations. Just prior to taking part participants were asked to complete a short questionnaire, which included a personal meaning map intended to elicit what the subject felt about medieval manuscripts, and an annotated drawing, which asked participants to draw or write what came to mind when thinking about manuscripts (See Appendix 5: Pre and Post-encounter questionnaires). Together, these aimed to explore participants' understandings and preconceptions of medieval manuscripts.

Immediately after experiencing the manuscript display, participants were asked to complete a post-encounter questionnaire that asked the same questions as the pre-encounter questionnaire, thereby enabling a comparative content analysis. However, the post-encounter questionnaire contained additional questions that asked about visual liking in relation to the manuscript and digital manuscript, multi-sensory liking in relation to the content of the drawers, and the sound and the digital content of the display, respectively. Three questions then asked about the intensity of arousal in relation to the same aspects of the display. Participants were then questioned about the importance of each specific sense. These questions were designed to quantify the added value of sensory augmentation to the manuscript. Participants answered using a 6-point Likert scale, where 6 was the highest rating. An even number was chosen to remove participants' option of 'sitting on the fence' by selecting a non-committal middle option. However, the question regarding the importance of the part played by particular senses in the experience used a 5-point scale because it was felt that experiences and responses might be less ambiguous.

As Jenson notes, questionnaires are a standard method of data collection and an effective way to gather information about recent actions and experiences and current thoughts and views.<sup>126</sup> Even so, in the spirit of a reflective approach, the questions were reviewed and, if necessary, revised during the pilot phase, and then again when

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<sup>126</sup> Eric Jenson, 'Introduction to Visual Evaluation', *Methods for Change* workshop. Attended 07/10/17 [file:///C:/Users/arm13/Downloads/Jensen%20presentations%20-%20Visual%20Methods%20Workshop%20-%202016%20Oct%202017%20pt1%20\(3\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/arm13/Downloads/Jensen%20presentations%20-%20Visual%20Methods%20Workshop%20-%202016%20Oct%202017%20pt1%20(3).pdf).

the initial data analysis took place as the case study began and throughout the fieldwork stage. In order to explore participants' experiences, the questions were adapted in response to the behaviours and expressions of participants. Although supplementary, it is important that the questionnaires effectively probed and generated data that would contribute to answering the research questions.

### **xix. Data analysis**

Regardless of which data collection methods, or combination of methods are used in a qualitative study, analysis too, is central to the process of enquiry. Indeed, Mason points out that even the most apparently practical aspects of data collation and organization - categorizing, indexing and filing - are, in fact, 'not analytically neutral.'<sup>127</sup> From the outset, she stresses that assumptions are made that will enable some analytical possibilities and exclude others. Silverman and Patterson echo Mason's point that analysis is inherent in every stage of qualitative enquiry: '...a truism about analysis and data collection in qualitative research is that it is a single, iterative process'.<sup>128</sup>

If there is potential for qualitative research to generate large amounts of data, then first-person filming, in particular, is apt to produce sizeable chunks of information. Gina Wisker likens the mass of material typically resulting from qualitative field research to a large cake. There may be plenty of cake there to sustain numerous studies, but it is important that the researcher cuts a neat slice that 'satisfies the need he or she set about satisfying in the first place'.<sup>129</sup> In order to marshal and manage the data effectively and efficiently this study used a form of coding. The process of organizing and indexing data can be described by a range of terms, but coding, in some form or other, is common to most qualitative studies.

Rather than adhering exclusively to a particular method of data organization and analysis, this research project selected from various methods. The two primary types of coding that feature in qualitative analysis - open coding and focused coding -

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<sup>127</sup> Jennifer Mason, *Qualitative Researching*, (London: Sage Publications, 2005), (p.148).

<sup>128</sup> Robert Silverman and Kelly Patterson, *Qualitative Research Methods for Community Development*, (New York: Routledge, 2015), (p.20).

<sup>129</sup> Gina Wisker, *The Postgraduate Research Handbook*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, (pp.313-314).

informed the fundamental approach to the data organisation. But, bearing in mind the goal of managing and analysing the data to uncover responses to the research questions of a study influenced by phenomenology, this project also drew on elements of the idiographic and nomothetic modes of analysis identified by Stuart Devenish. That is, it gathered closely related themes and concepts that emerged from the phenomenon being researched and extrapolated broader patterns, concepts, principles and contexts from the data.<sup>130</sup>

An exhaustive approach to coding was taken for this project. During the open coding phase codes were assigned to words or phrases that captured meaning and referenced the key elements set out in the research questions, for example, empathy, curiosity, surprise or shock, imagination, story or narrative, emotions or arousal, and memory. Focussed coding involved synthesising the initial codes and organizing them around the key themes that emerged out of the material.<sup>131</sup> Traditionally applied to written texts, field notes and transcripts, for example, its inherent flexibility means that coding of this sort can be applied to a broad range of newer data formats, including audio-visual data. It appeared to be an apt approach for a research project that is innovative, exploratory and experimental in nature, but which, nonetheless, required the rigor and robustness of tried and tested methods of data collation and analysis.

Acknowledging Strauss and Corbin's notion that data collection, analysis and theory stand in reciprocal relationships with each other, this study did not set out to prove a pre-existing theory, but, rather, 'what is relevant [to the area of study] was allowed to emerge'.<sup>132</sup> It is important here to stress again that the genesis of this research project was rooted in experiences within professional practice, which triggered curiosity and questions, rather than theories hatched from anecdotal evidence. Donald Schon's ideas about how professionals and practitioners learn from experience are both relevant and inspirational. He argues 'that professionals respond to and reflect on the varied experience that arises in their work. They then seek development and change.

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<sup>130</sup> Stuart Devenish referenced by Carol Grbich, *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Introduction*, (London: Sage Publications, 2013), (p.96).

<sup>131</sup> Robert Silverman and Kelly Patterson, *Qualitative Research Methods for Community Development*, (New York: Routledge, 2015), (p29), provide some pragmatic insight into focussed coding.

<sup>132</sup> Strauss and Corbin cited by Gina Wisker, *The Postgraduate Research Handbook*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), (p 214).

These reflective practitioners are more than merely technical solvers of problems. They use “artistry” creatively to draw from a set of past examples and precedents to transfer from one situation to the next continually, and create and learn anew in each situation, bringing their past learning to bear on the new situation.’<sup>133</sup>

## **xx. An iterative, self-reflexive process**

Applied to this research study’s approach to the data analysis, we might think of such ‘artistry’ in culinary terms and consider the similarities between analysing qualitative data and the craft of making a curry.<sup>134</sup> As one of the nation’s favourite dishes, curry is familiar to most. A simple comfort food for some, it can also be a subtle and complex combination of ingredients that create a dish fit for the gourmet. Cooks may debate ingredients and the merits and demerits of the traditional dish versus the ‘new wave’, but once the recipe is decided on the process is much the same - the ingredients are stirred and simmered. However, each cook’s interpretation produces a uniquely complex and original dish, reflecting both the personal and cultural perspective of the cook.

Similarly, we might think of qualitative analysis as at once a simple and complex process, involving the interrogation of a discreet set of data, which, once gathered, are coded and analysed. While this process is generally common across qualitative studies, the results are influenced by the epistemological and paradigmatic stance of the individual researcher. However, like any good curry cook, a qualitative researcher takes a reflexive position. This study acknowledges that as a researcher, ‘I am in my enquiry’. In adopting a self-reflexive, iterative approach an acknowledgement of researcher bias is enabled, but, importantly, it also allows for the contextualisation of the data and analysis from which alternative dimensions or perspectives may be provided. In the same way that the curry cook will continually taste and season to adjust the flavour profile during the cooking process, the qualitative researcher will

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<sup>133</sup> Gina Wisker, *The Postgraduate Research Handbook*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), (p.149) referring to Donald Schon’s, ‘Reflective Practitioner’.

<sup>134</sup> This analogy owes much to the detailed analogy that Robert Silverman and Kelly Patterson use, which likens qualitative data analysis to making a chilli. While chilli is a dish familiar to most Americans, curry seems to be more appropriate in a British context. See Robert Silverman and Kelly Patterson, *Qualitative Research Methods for Community Development*, (New York: Routledge, 2015), (pp.23-24).

constantly compare, code and recode to identify themes and relationships emerging from the data analysis process.

Cooking a curry and the qualitative research approach taken by this study are also analogous insofar as they both seek to produce a final product that is accessible and appealing to a broad audience. Curry dishes attract the culinary connoisseur and a wider public equally. Likewise, as Silverman and Patterson assert, 'the litmus test of good qualitative analysis is its accessibility'.<sup>135</sup> This is apposite because as libraries and archives (the traditional repositories for manuscripts) adopt increasingly 'interpretive' approaches and disciplinary boundaries blur within a merging 'GLAM' sector,<sup>136</sup> and as institutions strive to attract new and wider audiences, remain relevant, expand their outreach and become more inclusive, there appears to be a growing need to address wider concerns and broader audiences. This research project aims to respond to the growing demand within Museum Studies and beyond for inter-disciplinary research and research that acknowledges the inter-connectedness of professional practices. Attending too, to wider social and cultural challenges (shifting demographics, community engagement and citizen empowerment, for example), it aims to be both theoretically engaging and professionally pragmatic.

## **xxi. Conveying findings**

From early on it was clear that during a project that is so deeply interdisciplinary - mixing museum studies with manuscripts, codicology with craft, things with theory, and methods with materiality – I would face an abundance of challenges in deciding how to represent what had been uncovered. The methods and means through which the data generated by this research project are conveyed respond to conventional requirements but attempt to include more creative methods. So, along with text and still images, links to closed 'YouTube' film and audio clips are also included. Willis notes that there is a certain irony attached to conveying the findings of phenomenologically

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<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.* p.24.

<sup>136</sup> See for example, Shannon Wellington's doctoral research which addresses this very current issue in New Zealand. <http://researcharchive.vuw.ac.nz/xmlui/handle/10063/2835>.

grounded qualitative research. 'The very text that sets out to uncover the livedness of lived experience can become deadening... because of the scientific/propositional genre of the writing'.<sup>137</sup> The approach taken by this project acknowledges that the methods of sharing and representing the findings are not detached final elements of the research process but rather integral components. Thus, this study considered the design and structure of the field research, the data sources, and the means of data generation and collection as intrinsic to the data display. I strove to develop an approach that would reveal the nature and significance of participants' experiences 'in a fuller or deeper manner'<sup>138</sup> and express 'the liveliness, the involvement and the passion' of the experiences being researched.<sup>139</sup>

## **xxii. Ethics**

This research project adheres to the four main guidelines 'for directing an inductive science of means toward majoritarian ends':<sup>140</sup> In other words, it is based on the principles of 'informed consent' – participants were informed about the nature and consequences of the research in which they were taking part; 'opposition to deception' – the nature and purpose of the research were unambiguous; 'privacy and confidentiality' – safeguards were put in place to protect participants' identities and personal data; and, 'accuracy' - ensuring that the data are accurate and valid.

Although this project did not involve working with children or vulnerable adults, it was heavily dependent on human participants. It was therefore necessary to seek ethics approval in accordance with the University of Leicester's ethics regulations. This was subsequently granted through the University's Ethics Approval System.<sup>141</sup>

Prior to participating in the research all of the participants were given an information sheet. They all had opportunities to ask questions and were required to sign a consent

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<sup>137</sup> Peter Willis, "'From the things Themselves" to a "Feeling of Understanding": Finding Different Voices in Phenomenological Research' in *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, Vol.4 (1), July 2004, (pp.1-13), (p.5).

<sup>138</sup> M. van Manen quoted *Ibid.* p.6.

<sup>139</sup> Peter Reason quoted *Ibid.* p.6.

<sup>140</sup> Noted by Clifford Christians, 'Ethics and Politics in Qualitative Research', in, Denzin, Norman and Lincoln, Yvonna (eds.), *The landscape of Qualitative Research: Theories and Issues*, (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2003), (p.217).

<sup>141</sup> University of Leicester Ethics Code of Practice: <https://www2.le.ac.uk/institution/ethics/code>.

form before taking part in the study. All of the documentation was approved by the University of Leicester ethics committee.

The ethical issues around informed consent, transparency, confidentiality and validity pertain to all aspects of the qualitative research process and have been discussed at length in the literature in connection with the major ethnographical methods of data generation such as observation and qualitative interviewing.<sup>142</sup> However, this study also recognizes that first-person filming may throw up certain additional ethical issues.

### **xxiii. First-person filming**

Of course, in all situations where the subject is aware of being observed, their behaviour may be modified. In general, filming can make people feel self-conscious, nervous or intimidated, feelings which may be exacerbated through the involvement of technology. Equally, it may heighten self-awareness, which, in turn, might be expressed through relatively abnormal, overt behaviour.

In using 'wearables' (camera glasses), a further dimension may be added, insofar as the subject knows that his or her behaviour will be recorded automatically. However, at the same time, this issue may also be solved by the technology. This is because wearing the camera glasses puts the participant in the position of being the observer, as well as in the role of the observed.

It is important to note that the subcaming in this research study did not involve interpersonal or social interactions (other than my involvement during the walkalong interview). This largely mitigated the potential problems that lie around eye contact, facial expressions and direction or focus of gaze – whom or what part of the body a participant may appear to be looking at – and the potentially embarrassing and difficult situations, particularly within group situations, that might result. In these instances, informed consent is not sufficient and, as Lahlou points out, it can lead to 'risky' raw data that must be discarded.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> See Jennifer Mason, *Qualitative Researching*, (London: Sage Publications, 2005), chapters 2, 4 and 5, for example.

<sup>143</sup> Saadi Lahlou, *How can we capture the subject's perspective? An evidence-based approach for the social Scientist*, (p.46) <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk> Viewed 05/02/18.

In some research projects that use first-person filming, the researcher will only have access to the film after review and censorship by the participant or 'subcamer'.<sup>144</sup> However, this is not always considered practical or necessary. For example, in cultural psychologist Brady Wagoner's research project, which involved 'subcamers' encountering modern war memorials, he did not use the method of showing the film to participants afterwards because it was 'felt this would have been redundant since they had already been commenting on it with us'.<sup>145</sup> This research project used a similar 'walk along method' so comments could be made as we proceeded. There were practical issues too, around the amount of time that showing the film to the participants first would have involved. Sending each participant away to watch the film and then arranging to meet again and watch it together would have demanded a great deal of additional time commitment on their part, as well as on mine, which would have placed it beyond what could reasonably be expected of a research project of this scope.

Nonetheless, this project adopted an ongoing process of ethical review, ensuring that it was applied to the analysis and writing up stages, as well as the data gathering stages. This involved reflection on the extent to which the commitment to confidentiality and informed consent had been adhered to as the project progressed, with simultaneous consideration being given to if and how the research had been used effectively and appropriately.<sup>146</sup> This project regards ethics as a valuable research tool with which to build trust.<sup>147</sup>

#### **xxiv. A substrate subtext?**

The nature of the object that forms the central focus of this research project prompted self-reflection at an early stage. From the outset, it was recognized that within the project there was an implicit subtext around speciesism and the treatment of animals. If the 'wonder' of a manuscript, medieval or later, lies on its pages, in the form of text and images, then the horror of a manuscript lies in the substrate and materiality of the

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<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.* p.46.

<sup>145</sup> Brady Wagoner Brady Wagoner in email to author 06/03/18.

<sup>146</sup> See Jennifer Mason, *Qualitative Researching*, (London: Sage Publications, 2005), (p.201).

<sup>147</sup> Saadi Lahlou, *How can we capture the subject's perspective? An evidence-based approach for the social Scientist* (p.45) <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk> Viewed 05/02/18.



pages. In the same way that glass is sand, a manuscript is an animal. The researcher in this field is, it seems, in one way or another, implicated in the mass deaths of countless sheep, lambs, goats and calves.<sup>148</sup> This notion inevitably led to ethical issues surrounding my acquisition of parchment for the purposes of this study. In purchasing parchment, I was surely supporting what is considered by some a cruel and exploitative industry, in which sentient animals are regarded simply as commodities and routinely slaughtered. Yet, the research aim of the project necessitated the creation of a particular kind of multisensory and physically interactive experience for the visitors, key to which were materials of which parchment was the prime substance. Indeed, a key premise behind this research project was that in being displayed the parchment manuscript was beyond our reach and made intangible. If parchment were not available for tactile engagement, how else could we establish and test an innovative, rewilded space in which visitors could encounter a manuscript, or know what parchment is? In response to this ethical dilemma, in my mind a compromise had to be reached, one in which the purchase of parchment was justified (albeit reluctantly) because in sensorially encountering the material substance itself, the parchment had the potential to reveal to the participant its gruesome, visceral truth: 'The dead animal is the "con-text" of medieval and later literary production in the most immediate way: that with which writing is joined or woven inseparably together in and as text... Medieval literature is, in the most rigorously literal sense, nothing but millions of stains on animal parts.'<sup>149</sup> Many scholars, it seems, are reluctant to interrogate parchment as animal, perhaps because, as Bruce Holsinger suggests, we conceive of the origins of the manuscript as an ethically dispensable component of our investigations. In some small way then, (and risking antipathy for the newcomer from seasoned medievalists), this project focussed attention on the parchment as animal as ethically, as well as philosophically, important.

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<sup>148</sup> See Bruce Holsinger, 'Of Pigs and Parchment: Medieval Studies and the Coming of the Animal', [https://www.academia.edu/2568554/Of\\_Pigs\\_and\\_Parchment\\_Medieval\\_Studies\\_and\\_the\\_Coming\\_of\\_the\\_Animal](https://www.academia.edu/2568554/Of_Pigs_and_Parchment_Medieval_Studies_and_the_Coming_of_the_Animal) (p.619).

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.* p.619. These are just two of several truisms listed by Holsinger.

## xxv. Conclusion

Approached as a craft, an art form, or a making process, a qualitative research project is far more likely to generate insightful answers to the questions posed at the outset of the study.<sup>150</sup> This is because, like learning an art form or honing a craft, it must be done through practice, an iterative, self-reflexive journey. Signposts of experience and rules of thumb may be there to guide the researcher, but, ultimately, each qualitative research project is unique, set within its own contextual frame, with its own sets of goals, challenges and materials.

A craft analogy seems especially appropriate for this research project, which centres on how its participants experienced the materiality of a manuscript. Made by hand from a varied palette of living, organic and inorganic materials, a manuscript, like a qualitative research project, represents a fluid and adaptive process of trial and test. In the same way that a good qualitative research study uses multiple methods to create a montage of data, or methodological triangulation, in order to arrive at rich and textured conclusions to research questions, a variety of methods and materials were brought together in a reflexive, iterative process of what we might term, ‘materialological triangulation’ to create a medieval manuscript. In both instances, the outcomes and effects can be seen to share certain characteristics - knowledge construction, challenging views, inviting new interpretations and illuminating new understandings – all of which, while they may be accessible to a wide audience, will always speak more profoundly and deeply to some.

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<sup>150</sup> See for instance, Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln, ‘Introduction’, in, Denzin, Norman and Lincoln, Yvonna (eds.), *The landscape of Qualitative Research: Theories and Issues*, (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2003), (p.9); Carol Grbich, *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Introduction*, (London: Sage Publications, 2013) (p.23); Svend Brinkmann and Steiner Kvale, *Interviews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Interviewing*, (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2015), (pp.20-21, pp.339-340).

### 3. Object Description: The thing itself

#### i. The Object

There are many different levels on which we can analyse an object: functional, historical or structural, for example. However, in considering the object itself the fundamental starting point is an object description. The description process is an important basis for the analyses of all sorts of objects, including manuscripts - indeed, it is a central tenant of most institutions' cataloguing process, but it is also a crucial element in the interrogation of an object's form, materials and techniques. It is through close-grained, object-centred analysis that we can arrive at questions that probe our experiences of the manuscript's materiality. Do we respond to it? How do we respond to it and why?

Resting on the book cradle is a small codex volume (see figure 4). It measures approximately 173mm high x 138mm wide x 48mm deep.



Figure 4: The manuscript resting on a cradle in vitrine

## ii. Binding

The binding is partial (quarter covered) in red-brown leather, possibly tanned sheepskin or goatskin, with some simple, 'blind tooled' triple fillet decoration. Five columns of vertical lines in groups of three have been impressed on the leather covering. This was probably done with a metal hand tool while the leather was damp. Typically for an Ethiopian manuscript the binding is modest and unpretentious. The front board is split in two and has been crudely stitched back together in four places.<sup>151</sup> *Cordia africana* (wanza), *Olea africana* (wäyra), or cedar were the common choice for front and back boards. Cut and shaped roughly with an adze they are rarely perfectly square and the grooves and ridges running across the surface of the wood are clearly visible in figures 5 and 6.



Figure 5: The front cover of *MS210* showing its 'blind tooled' partial leather cover and split wooden board that has been roughly repaired<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> This repair is perhaps reminiscent of 'Frankenstein-style' stitch work, reassembling parts to create a new lease of life.

<sup>152</sup> The cover boards of Ethiopian manuscripts often appear to have split, possibly because they were not 'quarter sawn' as was the practice in the medieval West, but also, perhaps, because the boards were not entirely supported by a leather covering

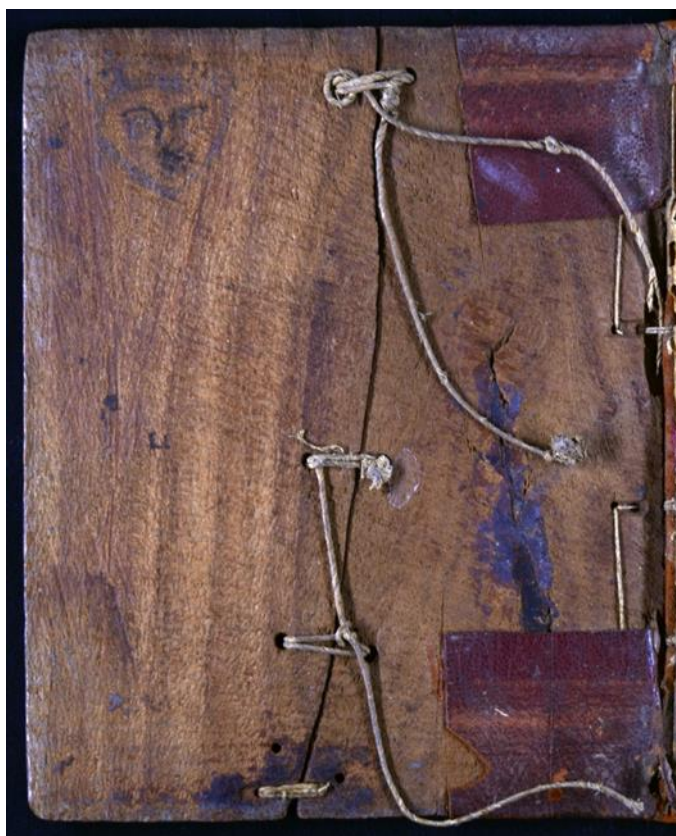


Figure 6: Inside cover revealing the channels cut to conceal the original sewing mechanism<sup>153</sup>

The Coptic method has been used to sew the manuscript during binding.<sup>154</sup> The quires are sewn together by thread carried by two needles working in a figure-of-eight movement from quire to quire. The wooden boards are then laced onto the loose ends of these threads. Grooves are cut into the binding boards to carry the thread and ensure they do not stand out on the inside of the boards. Splits have formed in the parchment along the gutter folds a short way away from the sewing stations, which gives the illusion of extra holes, but there appear to be a total of six sewing stations, two of which look like ‘kettle’ stitches at the top and bottom.<sup>155</sup>

<sup>153</sup> Later repairs to the split boards have been more crudely executed. The ‘turn-ins’ of the partial leather bindings can also be seen.

<sup>154</sup> Coptic stitching is named after the Egyptian Copts who pioneered this method between the second and fourth centuries. It is thought that the Coptic Church may have had an influence on Western book making especially between the sixth and eighth centuries. See, Houston, Keith, *The Book*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2016), (p.294) and <http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/GlossC.asp>.

<sup>155</sup> A tentative view given in an email to the author by conservator, Macaulay Bristow, following an examination of JPEG images (9/10/18). A more certain assessment would require a physical encounter



If we look closely at the gutter between some of the gatherings we can see ‘stubs’ or ‘loose guards’ (see figures 7). These may be the loose ends of earlier folios, particularly as they are located towards the back of the text block, or possibly part of the construction of the endleaves.



Figure 7: The stubs of single folios evident towards the gutter of the pages<sup>156</sup>

Without the advantage of advanced digital software,<sup>157</sup> or dismantling the manuscript, it is impossible to be certain of the precise nature of the binding, but it is most likely that the technique used is similar to that described below:

‘Imagine for a moment, the stack of folded parchment gatherings, sandwiched between wooden boards, that would have lain before the maker of [MS210]. Each of the boards and gatherings has four holes, or notches, that we will label from top to bottom as A, B, C and D. With a needle in hand, the [craftsperson] began by sewing the front boards onto the first gathering, passing the needle into the gathering to run along its centre fold from A to B and out again. Next, the needle passed into the

with the manuscript, if not some exploratory invasive work. ‘Kettle’ stitch is a sewing technique in which a knot is formed in the sewing thread at the ends of the sections to hold them together.

<sup>156</sup> That is, half a single sheet of parchment that produced only two pages, or, half of a bifolium (a single sheet of parchment folded in half to produce two leaves i.e. four pages).

<sup>157</sup> For example, the [Schoenberg Institute for Manuscript Studies](https://github.com/leoba/VisColl) Collation Modeller, [Schoenberg Institute for Manuscript Studies](https://github.com/leoba/VisColl), University of Pennsylvania. <https://github.com/leoba/VisColl>.

second gathering, running this time, from B to A, where it passed out of the gathering to be knotted to the first by means of a “kettle” stitch. This continued all the way to the back of the manuscript book, the thread diving into the interior of each folded parchment gathering and then out again to be consolidated in twin rows of chain stitches.

All this was repeated until all the gatherings had been sewn together at A and B, and the back board had been sewn into the final gathering. Having done this, the bookbinder took up the second needle and thread and repeated the entire process at C and D so that the whole book was fastened together by four lines of chain stitches running across the exposed spines of the gatherings.’<sup>158</sup>

This technique, a ‘crucial’ innovation in the history of the book, produced a lively and constructionally imaginative book that was very flexible and almost entirely flat.<sup>159</sup> We might think of it as the ‘Yoga laptop’ of its time. As Gary Frost asserts, whatever the ‘variation of sewing supports, stitch patterns, lacing paths...and other structural features... the motion derived from leverage of the board transmitted to the text produces a gymnastic action’.<sup>160</sup> A physical dynamism inheres in the materiality and the combination of materials and is expressed in the object’s interaction and relationship with human users; in the ‘manipulation and mystery’ of movement when the finished binding is handled and used’.<sup>161</sup> Frost’s statement also stands testament to the technological precision and refinement of the manuscript as ‘a conceptual and material witness’ of past times. And, while we may, with some validation, consider the manuscript as the medieval equivalent of 21<sup>st</sup> century digital communication technology, it remains to be seen whether our digital technology is capable of ‘transmitting knowledge’ across time and cultures as effectively and efficiently as the medieval manuscript.<sup>162</sup> The transmission of knowledge of which Frost speaks

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<sup>158</sup> Keith Houston, *The Book* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 2016), (p.292).

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.* p.294.

<sup>160</sup> Gary Frost, ‘Material Quality of Medieval Bookbindings’, in Wilcox, Jonathan (ed.), *Scraped, Stroked and Bound: Materially Engaged readings of Medieval Manuscripts*, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 129-134, (p131).

<sup>161</sup> Unpublished draft of a talk given by Chris Clarkson in Erice, Italy, September 1992.

<sup>162</sup> Gary Frost, ‘Material Quality of Medieval Bookbindings’, in Wilcox, Jonathan (ed.), *Scraped, Stroked and Bound: Materially Engaged readings of Medieval Manuscripts*, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 129-134, (p129).

requires some physicality. Manuscripts are a paradox of ‘timeless composites of biodegradable materials’.<sup>163</sup>

It was this sense of timelessness and materiality and how this was crafted and formed that determined the selection of *MS210* as the focus for this case study. We remain uncertain of the exact date of the creation of *MS210*, but it is thought to be early 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>164</sup> However, so effective and efficient was the early medieval assemblage of materials and mode of making described above, that more than a thousand years after the ‘St Cuthbert Gospel’ was created in Wearmouth and Jarrow, Ethiopian craftspeople used similar materials, skills and techniques to create *MS210* – a manuscript with almost exactly the same structure as the ‘St Cuthbert Gospel’.<sup>165</sup> The materiality of a manuscript, be it ‘St Cuthbert’s Gospel’ or *MS210*, renders it persistent and overt. They passively persist, simultaneously storing and displaying, while their overt physicality constantly confirms their material existence.

A leather slip-case (mahdär) accompanies the codex (Approximately, 178mm high x 146mm wide x 56mm deep). It is difficult to be certain whether the case is contemporary and was made especially for this manuscript. However, the slipcase, shown in figure 8, is typical of those made for use with this style and form of manuscript and the manuscript fits into the case remarkably well. The straps of the case have been lost but the loops are still in place. Most Western medieval manuscripts have lost their original protective coverings or chemises.<sup>166</sup> However, the slip-case accompanying *MS210* is an important part of the manuscript assemblage because it speaks of the personal and intimate relationship between the object and the subject. The slipcase ensured that the manuscript object could be kept close and

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<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, p.132

<sup>164</sup> According to Edward Ullendorff, Department of Oriental Languages, St Andrews University, in notes accompanying *MS210*, 29 November 1953, (p.1) The date of the manuscript’s creation is unclear. A label adhered to the slipcase says that the manuscript is 14<sup>th</sup> century, but the same note also claims it is an Armenian manuscript (See fig.6). Or does this reference pertain to a former occupier of the slipcase? Notes accompanying the manuscript, which were written in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, claim the paleogeographic style of the manuscript and its general appearance make it likely to be of 18<sup>th</sup> century manufacture.

<sup>165</sup> <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/st-cuthbert-gospel> Professor Jo Story, University of Leicester, uses *MS210* as an exemplar of early medieval manuscript making with her undergraduate students.

<sup>166</sup> Chris Clarkson says it is probable that all 12<sup>th</sup> century monastic ‘working’ library books in England were protected by a chemise – a heavy tawed jacket, in which the book was held by two envelope pockets enclosing the fore-edge half of the boards. Unpublished draft of a talk given by Chris Clarkson in Erice, Italy, September 1992.



accompany its user wherever he or she travelled.<sup>167</sup> Echoing, up to a point, assertions made by Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart that the presentational forms of photographs are integral to their meaning, the slipcase is ‘invigorated’ when it is in conjunction with the manuscript, but, so too, is the manuscript when it is *with* the slipcase. If there is a ‘symbiotic relationship’ between these two objects, then such a relationship extended too, to the connection, physical, spiritual, emotional and imaginative, that these objects had with their human owner and user.<sup>168</sup> All of these objects, human and non-human exist/ed in a dialogue with one another – a dialogue that itself creates associated values and meanings. The materiality of the slipcase serves to highlight the texture of the socio-cultural relations in which it (and the manuscript) have performed and continues to influence those relationships, even in a collection environment.

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<sup>167</sup> In conversation with the author, an Ethiopian curator explained that while growing up around the borders of war- torn Ethiopia and Somalia in the 1970s and early 1980s, certain objects, including cooking pots and manuscripts, were considered as prized possessions and were kept close and had to be ever ready for transportation (British Library, November 2017).

<sup>168</sup> Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart, ‘Introduction: photographs as object’ in Edwards, Elizabeth and Hart, Janice, (eds.), *Photographs, Objects, Histories: On the materiality of images*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 1-15, (p.11).



Figure 8: The leather slipcase accompanying *MS210*<sup>169</sup>

The largest of several bookmarks, which appear to be structural features of the codex, lies in the gutter between folios 76v and 77r. The individual threads are clearly visible in figure 9.

<sup>169</sup> Although the manuscript fits this case very well, we cannot be certain this case was made for *MS210*, or whether it has been reused. The loops for the straps can be seen on the side view. There may have been an additional piece of the slipcase - a cover, or outer case that fitted over the existing case to form a lid which the straps threaded through. The strapped slipcase meant that the manuscript could be carried over the shoulders and by these straps the books were hung on wooden pegs on the walls of the library. Three or four per pegs would have been typical. The portability of the manuscript speaks of its personal value and the close relationship between subject and object.



Figure 9: The threads of one of the book or page markers still contained within the manuscript

### iii. Text-block

High quality calfskin, or possibly goat or sheepskin parchment was used to provide the manuscript's folios. In general, both surfaces of the leaves in the manuscript appear to have been finished to a fine 'velvet'. However, on the 'hair-side' of the parchment on some of the leaves, much of the hair follicle pattern is still intact. An example of this can be seen in figure 10.

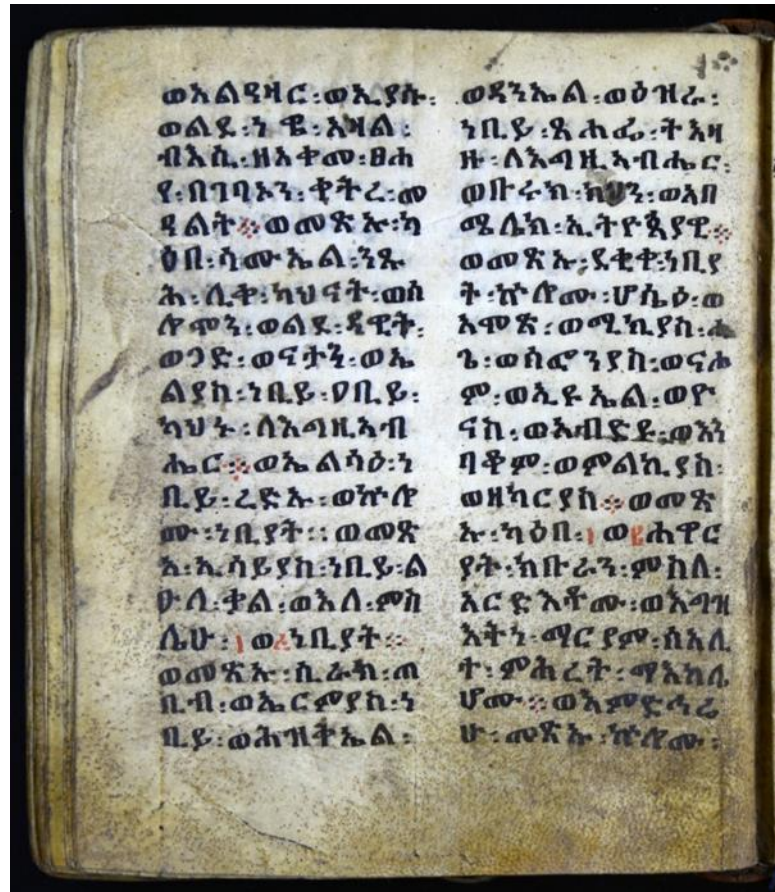


Figure 10: Folio 39v on which the pattern of hair follicles can be seen on the animal's skin<sup>170</sup>

The manuscript contains ninety parchment leaves. The leaves remain supple and strong. The text-block measures 140mm high x 170mm wide x 30mm deep.

Usually soaked in lime to remove the hairs and de-flesh the skin, it was then stretched on a frame and scraped with a long-bladed knife while damp. The skin could then be treated with a pounce made of pumice and chalk to smoothen and whiten its surface ready to accept ink. As we can see on folio 89v (shown in figure 11), no matter how well stretched and prepared, or how well preserved, with fluctuations in humidity, parchment tends to 'cockle', the form of the animal reasserts itself and shadows of the ribs of a creature long since dead run across the page in front of you.

<sup>170</sup>The bottom of folio 39v reveals not only the scoring of vertical and horizontal incisions on the page's parchment surface, but also the pattern of the hair follicles on the skin of the animal from which the parchment came.





Figure 11: Folio 89v displays signs of insect activity but also reveals the ghost of the animal in the humidity affected parchment<sup>171</sup>

The leaves measure approximately 169mm x 140 mm and all appear to have been ruled in hard point. The incised horizontal page rulings are shown clearly in figure 12.

<sup>171</sup> Is that the shape of a rib picked out by the light and shade of the cockled parchment?

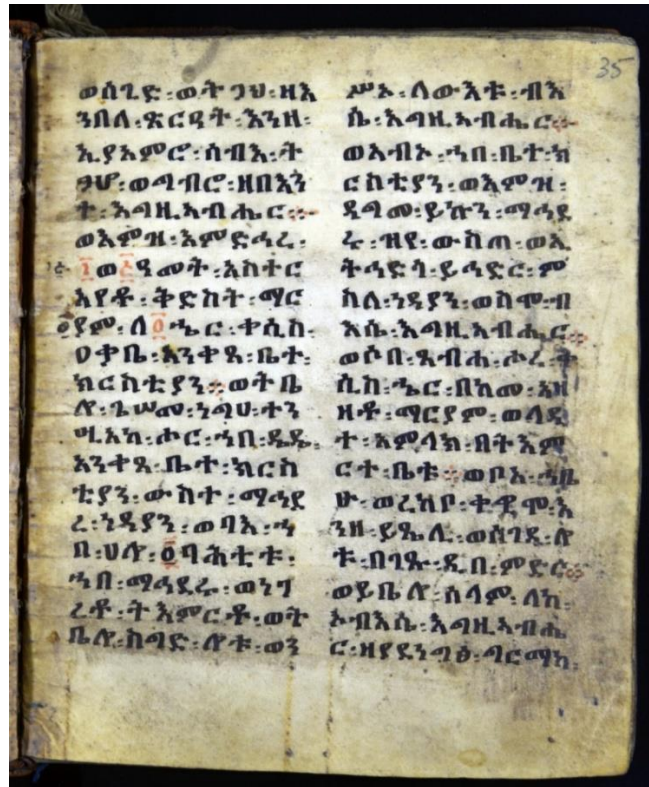


Figure 12: Clearly visible incised page rulings marking out the horizontal lines for the scribe to follow and the two columns

The 'prickings' that guided the rulings are visible on folio 90, shown in figure 13. It is one of only a very few of the leaves on which these puncture holes are still visible. This is probably the result of the leaves having been trimmed through along the head, tail and fore-edge at some time. As a result, most signs of the 'prickings' made down either side of the folios to guide the page rulings have been lost. It also suggests that the leaves were originally larger, and, perhaps, that evidence of quire signatures and marginalia has been removed.

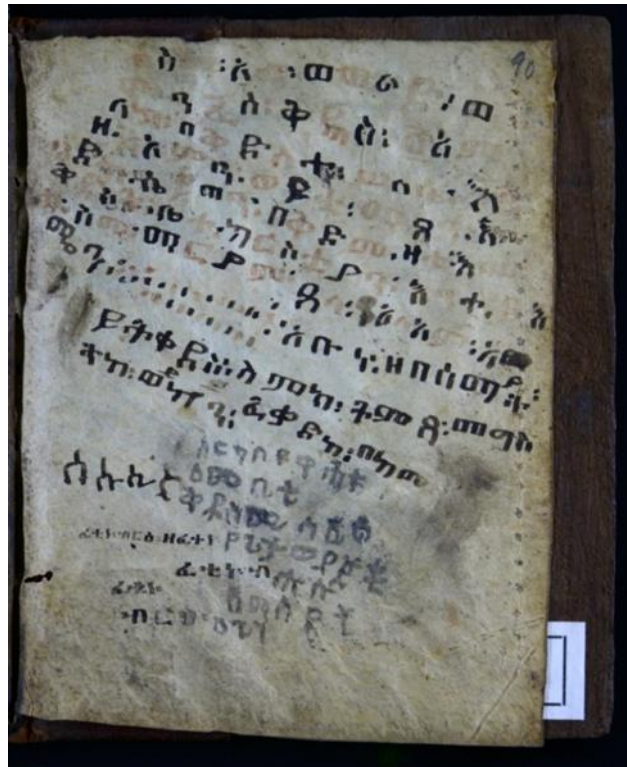


Figure 13: The hard point prickings that provided guidance for ruling the pages are visible on the outer edge of the leaf<sup>172</sup>

Making parchment is a gruesome process. The skins of animals that have been stunned and bled are normally used because the blood vessels drain and leave them colourless and difficult to detect in the flayed skin. However, if the animal dies of natural causes or is run to death, blood remains in the vascular system and iron compounds present in the blood react with the lime liquors to form dark colored pigments. This leaves a coloured pattern of arteries, veins and capillaries in the final parchment.<sup>173</sup> Some leaves of *MS210* show clear signs of ‘veining’, indicating that the blood of the slaughtered animal was not completely drained prior to the beginning of the parchment making process. The pattern on the animal’s veins can be clearly seen toward the bottom of folio 42r, shown in figure 14.

<sup>172</sup> Batches of stacked parchment gatherings were often pierced simultaneously with a thin, hard, sharp point, attesting to the ‘vigorous, if not violent’ physical effort needed to mark the animal’s skin.

<sup>173</sup> For a more detailed explanation of the parchment making process see Clarkson, Chris, ‘Rediscovering Parchment: The Nature of the Beast’ in, *The Paper Conservator*, Vol. 16, 1992, 5-25.



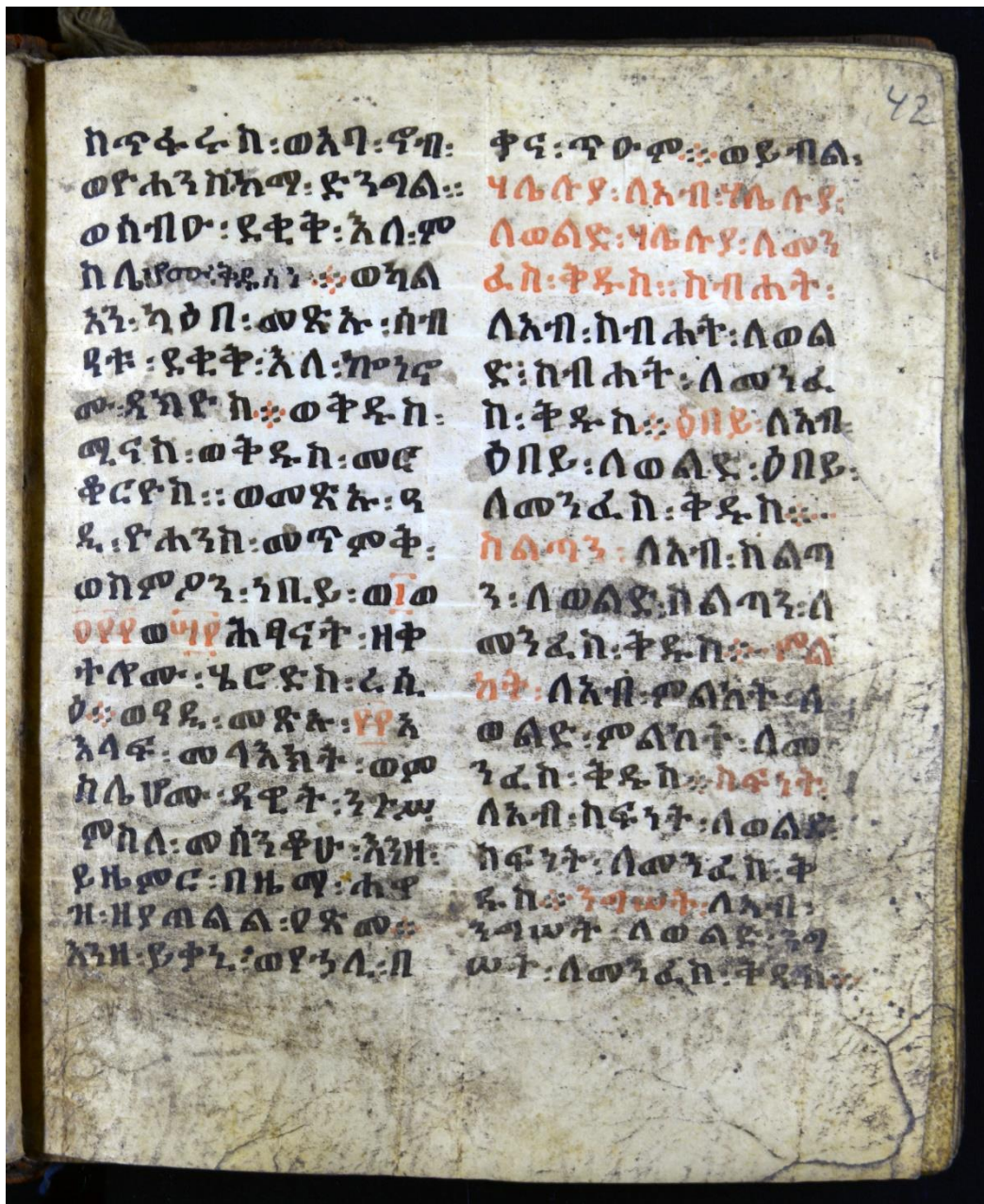


Figure 14. Folio 42r. At the foot of this page the pattern of the animal's veins is still visible in its skin – the material which was used to make the substrate for the text

At least one of the parchment leaves has holes that the scribe appears to have allowed for. In figure 15, we can see that the parchment and text have been configured to ensure that the hole in the parchment appears in the margin rather than the centre of the page. Figure 16 shows how the scribe has written around the hole in the parchment. A fragment of text from a previous page, however, appears through the hole.





Figure 15: The lesions in the animal skin appear on two pages (folios 81r and 81v)<sup>174</sup>

<sup>174</sup> However the break in the animal's skin or parchment came about, it stands testament to the vigour and violence that attend the manuscript, which are belied by the placid nature if its display in the vitrine.



Figure 16: Imperfections in the parchment. A hole through which text from the previous page can be seen. The scribe has written around the hole

These ‘imperfections’ in the animal skin might have been created during the parchment making process or may have been caused by insect bites on the living animal’s hide. There is also evidence of insect activity on the parchment after it was incorporated into the codex. The ‘grazing shape’ that appears on folio 88r (see figure 17) looks to have been formed by beetle larvae (or maybe silverfish), who were attracted to the protein in the parchment.<sup>175</sup> It appears that this manuscript escaped lightly as sometimes parchment and paper can be turned to lace from the damage caused by pests. Though it is difficult to say for certain, the area of loss in the bottom right corner of folio 87, shown in figure 18, looks less like pest damage, which raises the question of why the hole is there and what caused it. Was it a slip of the scribe’s knife? Was the parchment punctured by the manuscript’s owner or is it simply the patina of age and use? What both areas of parchment loss indicate is that the

<sup>175</sup> This is the opinion of conservator, Macaulay Bristow, (Kent Archives and Churchill Archives), after having examined the image presented to her by the author. In an email sent to the author, 22/10/18.

manuscript has always, and continues to, interact with non-human as well as human actants – insects, animals, temperature, humidity and more.



Figure 17: The grazing pattern of ‘bookworm’ or silverfish evident in the bottom left of the page<sup>176</sup>

<sup>176</sup> At least four folios (this one and the following three) appear to have succumbed to the insect’s appetite.



Figure 18: This hole, to the bottom right of folio 87, is less likely to have been caused by an insect, so what did cause it?

#### iv. Text

The book is not richly illuminated or decorated. The most decorative feature in the manuscript marks the beginning of the main body of text in the codex, which tells the story of the life and martyrdom of St. Cyriacus and his mother, St. Julitta. This decoration, which echoes the Celtic style, consists of interlaced ribbons and interwoven straps of yellow, black and red with some green detailing. Similar styles of decoration are used to indicate the beginning of separate bodies of text within the manuscript, for example, marking the beginning of a Discourse of John, Bishop of Aksum on folio 53r, as shown in figure 19. Red rubrics, operating as navigational tools for the reader, highlight the beginning of texts throughout the manuscript. In general, there are two columns to a page with 20 lines to a column.<sup>177</sup> The main body of the text appears a darkish black brown, probably carbon ink, which was commonly used in Ethiopian manuscript production. The basic ingredient for this ink tended to be soot, usually scraped from the bottom of a cooking pot, which was then mixed with a

<sup>177</sup> According to the notes accompanying MS210 written by Edward Ullendorff, Department of Oriental Languages, St Andrews University, 29 November 1953, (p.1).



binding agent made from grains, such as barley and maize, and extracts from the fruits of insect repellent plants.<sup>178</sup>



Figure 19: Interlaced decoration at the head of the column marking start of Discourse of John, Bishop of Aksum. Folio 53r<sup>179</sup>

The text is written in Ge'ez and is penned in what has been described as a 'mediocre hand'.<sup>180</sup> The scribe's identity is revealed on folios 86v and 52v, as 'Newaya Maryam'. The manuscript's owner and the person who commissioned its making is given as 'Bakwara S'eyon'.<sup>181</sup> Following the story of St Cyriacus, folio 27r begins a history of 'Cabra Krestos, son of Theodosius, Emperor of Constantinople'. Hymns and a calendar

<sup>178</sup> D. Nosnitsin, *Ethiopian Manuscripts and Ethiopian Manuscript Studies* <https://www.aai.uni-hamburg.de/en/ethiostudies/research/ethiospare/results/publications/pdf/nosnitsin-2012--in-glm-.pdf> Viewed 11/10/18.

<sup>179</sup> Note the red coloured tab on the left-hand side of the page. This appears to me the remains of an integral page marker made of thread.

<sup>180</sup> Edward Ullendorff, Department of Oriental Languages, St Andrews University, notes accompanying MS210, 29 November 1953, (p.1).

<sup>181</sup> According to Ullendorff. *Ibid.* p.1.

of reading follow, after which comes the ‘Discourse of John, Bishop of Askum, on Isaac (Abba Garima)’.

Traces of human activity over time are suggested by later annotations. Folio 1r, for example, contains a partial description of the manuscript’s contents in Amharic, while sketchy but intriguing drawings in black ink occupy most of folio 1v. These are shown in figure 20 where we can also see some additional words penned in red. Below this, also shown in figure 20, is a ‘fragment of magical prayer’, apparently written upside down, and ‘asking for deliverance from “homama dam”’.<sup>182</sup> Indeed, there are numerous annotations and amendments scattered throughout the manuscript.

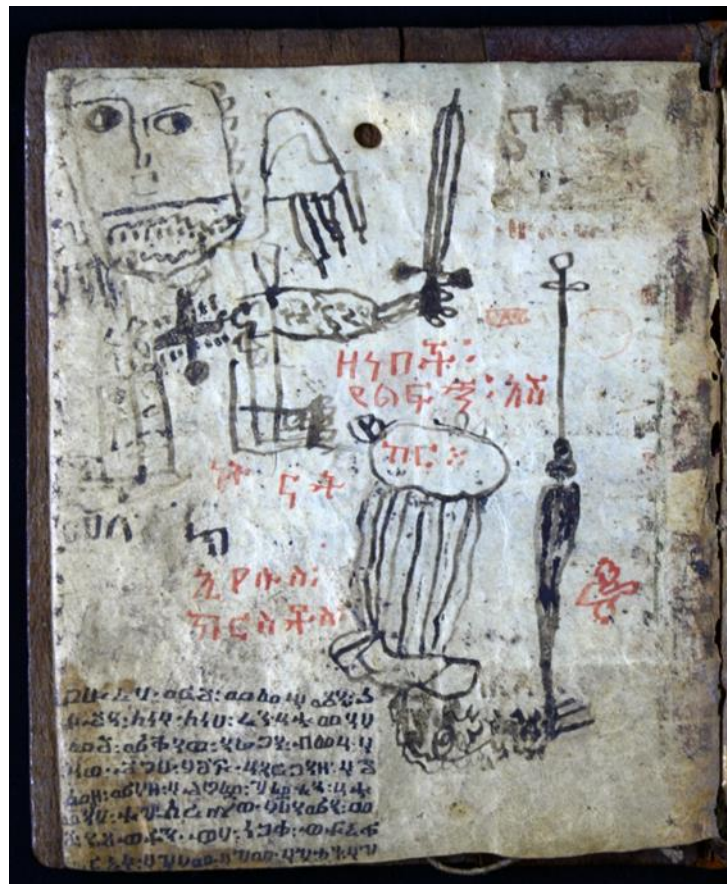


Figure 20: Very personal, characterful drawings, perhaps made by a one-time owner of the manuscript. He or she has also added an inscription to ward off evil

<sup>182</sup> Edward Ullendorff, Department of Oriental Languages, St Andrews University, notes accompanying MS210, 29 November 1953, (p.1).

In figure 21, ‘Tuesday’ has been inserted at the very top of the page by the manuscript’s user, probably to indicate a portion of text to be read on that particular day of the week. This addition appears in a much freer style than the more precise hand of the manuscript’s scribe. all of which reside within the context of the wear and tear commensurate with centuries of handling and use. This patina of use and wear stands testament to the manuscript’s ‘life history’, intersecting with the trajectories of other objects, ‘hyperobjects’ and human and animal lives.



Figure 21: A later hand has added the days of the week to the section of the manuscript containing the above page. At the top of the page we can see that someone has added ‘Tuesday’ in Ge’ez. The wobbly hand contrasts sharply with the sure strokes of the scribe

Folio 26v, shown in figure 22, nestled between the folio carrying the end of the story of St Cyriacus and the one beginning the history of Cabra Krestos, might originally have been left blank, but has been written on sometime later by, what Edward Ullendorff



describes as, a 'slovenly hand'.<sup>183</sup> The ink on the lower portion of the page has faded, rendering it partly illegible.

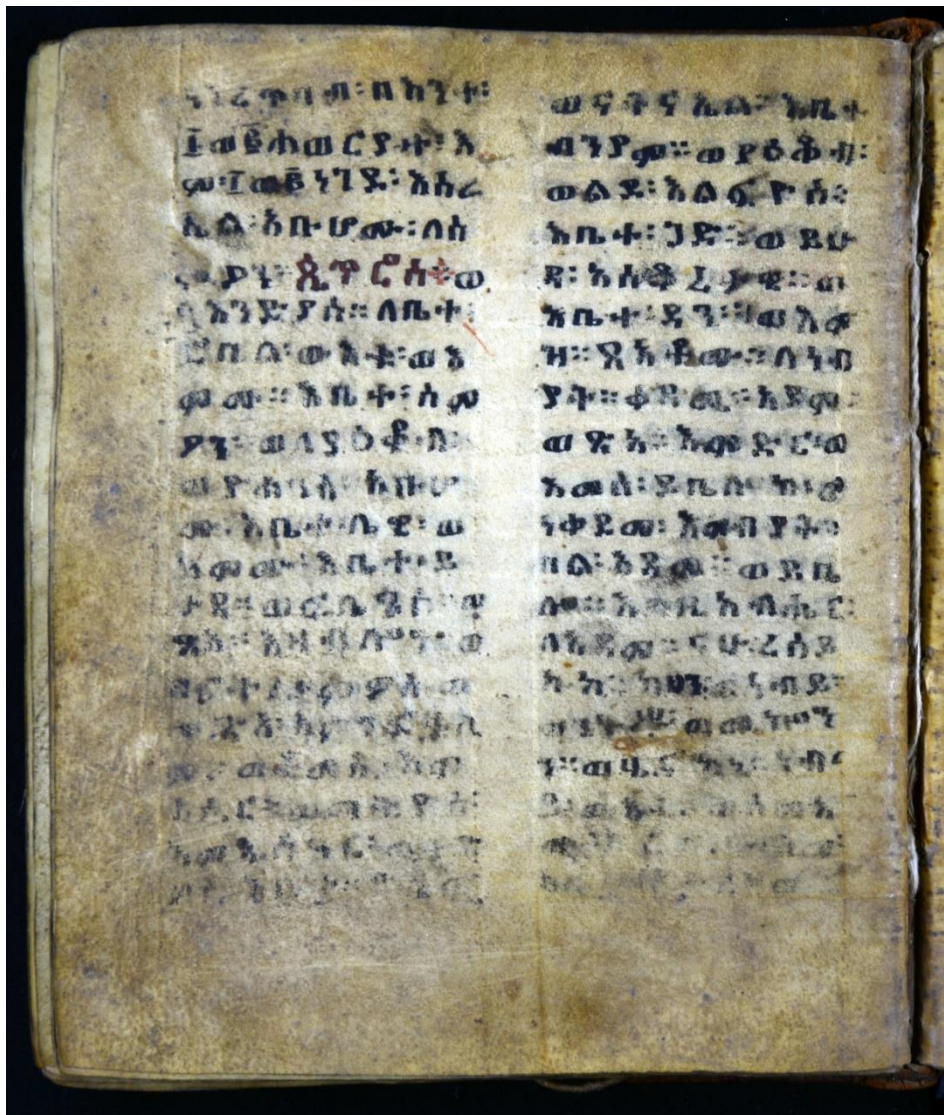


Figure 22: Folio 26v. The faded, so called 'slovenly' hand that has filled in the folio that was probably left blank by the original scribe. The fading ink helps to reveal the hard-point column and line rulings incised into the parchment

On folio 87r prayers and psalms have been added in what appears to be a later hand, while a still later hand added a now partially illegible colophon on folio 89v. Pen trials, shown in figure 23, follow the Lord's Prayer written on a slant on folio 90r, while the

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.* p.1.



following folio displays some rustic but striking ‘magical drawings’.<sup>184</sup> These can be seen in figure 24.

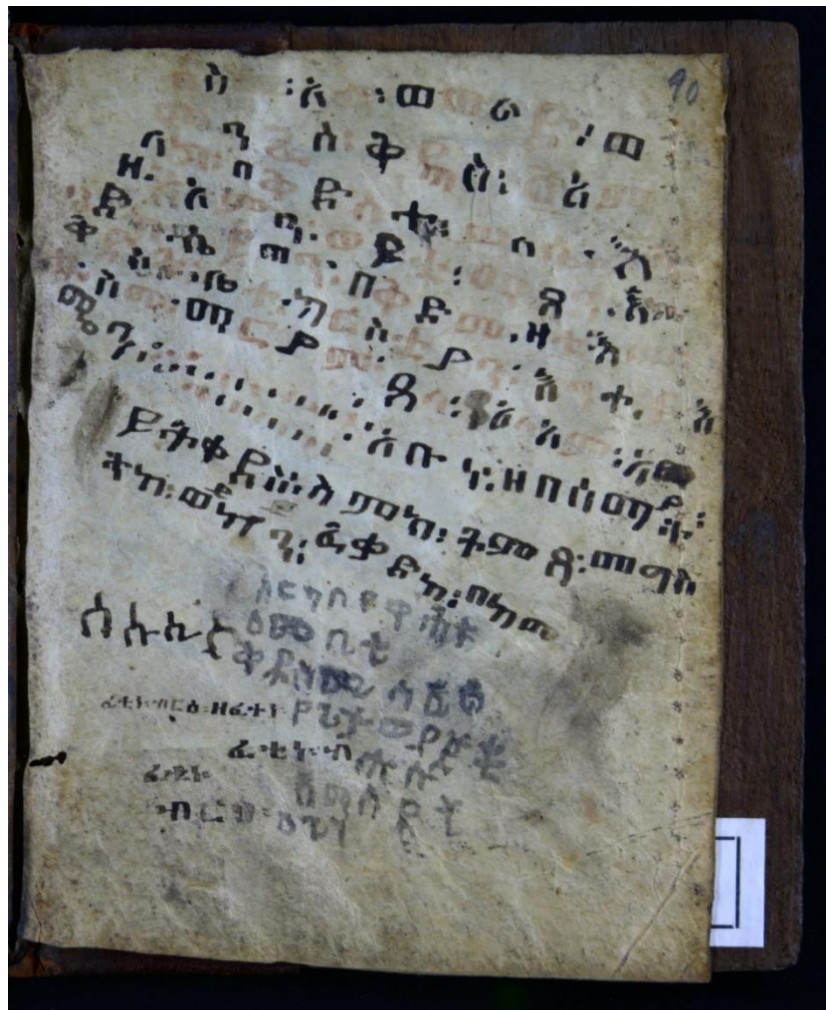


Figure 23: Pen trials carried out on a section of page below a rustic rendering of the ‘Lord’s Prayer’

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.* p.2.

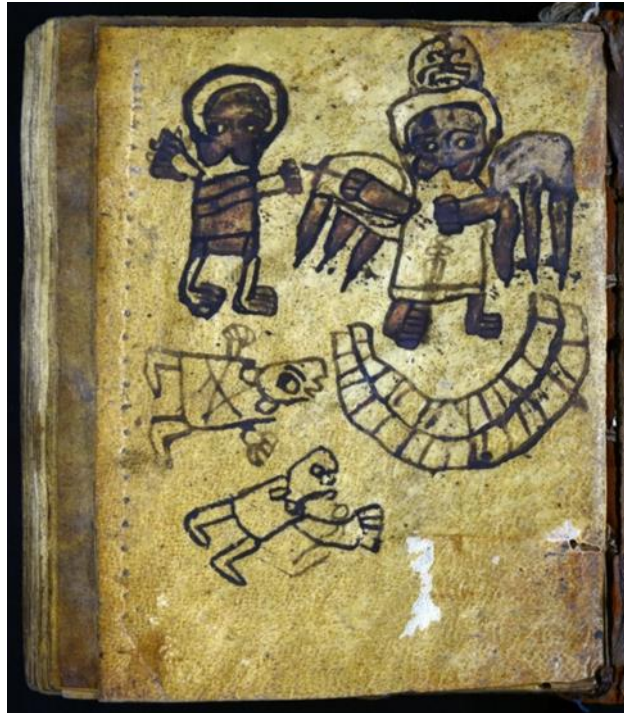


Figure 24: Simple sketches of what might be SS Cyriacus and Julitta depicted with people supplicant before them. Somehow these rudimentary drawings exude a certain intimacy and vitality

While the text contained in *MS210* conveys information and ideas, establishes context and has been a main source of the historical and cultural value ascribed to the manuscript, it is also one of its material characteristics. While the parchment and wood that provide the substrates for the text form one manifestation of the manuscript's materiality, the inks and pigments represent another. If choices of substrate materials and inks and colours are the result of practical considerations and human desires to make meaning and imbue values, whatever shape, form or language the letters make, they remain organic and inorganic chemical residues that have been carefully and skillfully applied to another physical properties of the book, its vellum, goatskin or sheepskin pages. The text etched into the parchment testifies to an embodied presence. As Bruce Holsinger points out, 'the dead animal is the "con-text" of [medieval] literary production in the most immediate way: that with which writing is joined or woven inseparably together in and as text'.<sup>185</sup> Both of these material forms

<sup>185</sup> Bruce Holsinger, 'Of Pigs and Parchment: Medieval Studies and the Coming of the Animal', [https://www.academia.edu/2568554/Of\\_Pigs\\_and\\_Parchment\\_Medieval\\_Studies\\_and\\_the\\_Coming\\_of\\_the\\_Animal](https://www.academia.edu/2568554/Of_Pigs_and_Parchment_Medieval_Studies_and_the_Coming_of_the_Animal) (p.619).

have been subject to further key elements – usage, entropy and the passage of time.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> See, Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart, 'Introduction: photographs as object' in Edwards, Elizabeth and Hart, Janice, (eds.), *Photographs, Objects, Histories: On the materiality of images*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 1-15, (p.3).

*Beware, Guidebook*

*Once one has fallen victim to the red book, all attempts to escape it are in vain...so it deprives us of yet another bit of freedom.*

Criticism, C.A. 1870. Displayed at 'Touriseum' (South Tyrol Museum of Tourism)

*As a matter of fact, all our senses have been somewhat blunted, because they immediately look for the sense; that is, they ask what "it means" and not what "it is" ... The more capable of thought that the eye and ear become, the more they approach the limit where they become senseless... the organs of the senses themselves become dulled and weak, the symbolical takes more and more the place of the actual...*

Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Human, All Too Human'

*Noli me tangere*

The Bible, John. 20:17

## **4. Conventional modes of display**

### **i. Introduction**

This chapter looks at how manuscripts typically feature in exhibitions and how normative methods of display and interpretation prescribe and limit our experiences of and with manuscripts. Exhibitions and displays take place within a context, or a space, which, almost invariably, is carefully designed to reinforce meaning and authority, frequently around received wisdom or singular ideas, while choreographing our movements through the space and around the objects displayed and the interpretive interventions featured. This often creates a tamed, benign environment in which we generally know what to expect and surprises are few.

Our highly mediated encounters with manuscripts are hugely different from the embodied, intimate and emotional engagements that often occurred in the past between manuscripts and their original users.<sup>187</sup> Manuscripts, therefore, stand as powerful examples of Susan Vogel's contention that 'museums provide an experience of most of the world's art and artefacts that does not bear even the remotest resemblance to what the makers intended'.<sup>188</sup> Conventional modes of display tend to dislocate and re-contextualise the manuscript and cultivate a way of looking that encourages us to see a manuscript as a 'treasure', a remote object of reverence. This 'museum effect' has distanced us from the sensuous qualities of the object and excluded us from opportunities to encounter the haptic and olfactory potential of the object – in other words the 'manuscript *affect*'.

However, empirical research indicates what some Museum Studies theory and anecdotal evidence implies, that is, that the interaction of multiple senses influences how we experience and understand things.<sup>189</sup> This suggests that, as visitors, we are therefore denied potential avenues of exploration and new possibilities for making meaning. This is the interpretive background, or status quo, against which this research asks, what if we were to create less predictable, savourless display spaces and make them wilder places? If we were enabled to encounter a manuscript using a range of our sensory modalities, would we find that boundaries blur and the porous nature of influence and response permeates the object-subject discourse? Would exposure to manuscript textures, odours, sounds and tastes elicit arousal – imaginative, emotional reactions? By approaching the context of manuscript displays as dynamic spatial media, rather than static and passive spaces, can an environment that better facilitates mediation, negotiation and investigation be developed?

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<sup>187</sup> The intimate physical, sensuous, emotional interactions between manuscripts and their readers have been highlighted, for example, by Jennifer Borland, 'Unruly Reading', (2013), Kathryn Rudy, 'Piety in Pieces', (2016), Kellie Robertson, 'Medieval Materialism: A Manifesto', (2010), Karen Louise Jolly, 'Dismembering and Reconstructing', (2013), Mary Carruthers, 'Reading with Attitude, Remembering the Book', (1997), Michael, 'The Book as Flesh and Fetish in Richard de Bury's "Philobiblon"', (1997).

<sup>188</sup> Susan Vogel, 'Always true to the object, in our fashion', in Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago, (eds.), *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 653-664, (p.653).

<sup>189</sup> Helen Saunderson, '"Do not touch": a discussion on the problems of a limited sensory experience with objects in a gallery or museum context' in Sandra H. Dudley, and Pearce, Susan M., et al (eds.), *The thing about museums : objects and experience, representation and contestation : essays in honour of professor Susan M. Pearce*, (London: Routledge, 2012). 159-181 (p.163).

## ii. The conventional display model

When we encounter a manuscript on display, for example, at the British Library or the V&A, not only is it already temporally distanced from us, but the conventional *modus operandi* of museums works to distance us spatially from the object. Understandable, yet often overwhelming conservation and security concerns, coupled with interpretive imperatives generate cordons, text panels, lighting, plinths and glass enclosures, can conspire to create an exhibition environment that sets the subject (visitor) and the object (artefact) apart. Tim Edensor's observation of our modern urban environment describes 'seamless walkways, linear sight-lines, de-odourized environments, regulated soundscapes and smooth tactilities', which direct visitors to 'perform in appropriate and rational ways'.<sup>190</sup> This description could apply equally to many contemporary exhibition spaces in which manuscripts are displayed. Gillian Rose posits that 'docile bodies are produced' through designs that regulate visitors' behaviour.<sup>191</sup> And, as Hans Obrist points out, so much discourse has been produced and so many structures have been built to guide the visitor that it has become difficult for he/she to 'be' with an object.<sup>192</sup> This approach which restricts access beyond the visual is exemplified in figure 25. Vertical and horizontal planes dominate display spaces, which promote visual and textual stimuli at the expense of other sensory spurs and, as Ane Pilegaard argues, create 'stage sets for the eye' at the expense of 'supporting the visitor's perception of material object qualities'.<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Tim Edensor's argument about how the body is expected to behave in modern urban environments translates very well to an analysis of the exhibition space. When these norms are ruptured, the results can be disorientating but also pleasurable (pp.324-5).

<sup>191</sup> Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*, (London: Sage Publications, 2016), (p.232).

<sup>192</sup> Christophe Cerix 'Preface' in Obrist, Hans Ulrich, *A Brief History of Curating*. (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2008), 4-9 (p.4).

<sup>193</sup> Ane Pilegaard, 'Material Proximity; Experimenting with Material Strategies in Spatial Exhibition Design' in *Museum Worlds: Advances in Research* 3 2015: 69-85 (p.76).



Figure 25: Restricted access. No trespassing: The vitrine may have been removed by the message is clear; we can look, but we cannot touch. Sculptures in bronze at the Hepworth Wakefield

In figure 26, we can see manuscripts displayed conventionally; here closed and closed off, distanced by glass barriers. If, as Rose suggests, this style of display produces visitors as 'docile bodies', then it also projects manuscripts as equally docile and dormant objects.



Figure 26: A display of manuscripts at The Chester Beatty, Dublin, Ireland, 2018

Note: The images included were taken where permission was granted. No photography was permitted either at the British Library or any of the cathedral exhibitions cited.

The dominant modes of display today work not to *connect* the viewer with the manuscript, but, on the contrary, and as exemplified by figure 27, to physically distance visitors from an object intended to provide a tactile experience. Brian Farrimond cites the British Library's recent block-buster exhibition, 'Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms: Art Word War' as an 'outstanding example' of the normative practice of 'static displays of manuscripts in glass cases opened at particularly significant pages'.<sup>194</sup> Each manuscript and artefact in 'Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms' was cast under a reverential spotlight, while all of the space in between was rendered as a gloomily insignificant, desensualized 'no-man's land'. Discrete, single purpose realms were carved out between the carefully distributed objects with the effect of 'purifying the space'.<sup>195</sup> Svetlana Alpers terms this as the creation of 'a trap for looking'. Andre Malraux refers to this phenomenon of the museum stripping the object of its original significance, and isolating and framing it, as a 'metamorphosis' - a 'quasi-magical transformation of

<sup>194</sup> Brian Farrimond, 'Bringing medieval manuscripts to the public: and alternative approach', *AMARC Newsletter* no. 72, April 2019, (pp.12-13). Farrimond's alternative approach however, while acknowledging the haptic 'robustness' of parchment leaves, seemed to consist of placing them in polypockets; thus, glass is swapped for a transparent barrier made of another material.

<sup>195</sup> See, Tim Edensor 'Waste Matter – The Debris of Industrial Ruins and the Disordering of the Material World', in *Journal of Material Culture*, 10, (2005), (p.312).



objects into art'.<sup>196</sup> This phenomenon is repeated across a number of manuscript focussed exhibitions that have been installed in cathedrals across Britain.<sup>197</sup>



Figure 27: An example of how the substantial heft and material qualities of a manuscript can be reduced to a single flat surface and rendered inapprehensible with any sensory modality other than sight

In these instances, the 'sheer smoothness of [the] space[s] and constant maintenance of space and objects' works to conceal patinas of age and uses of ancient stones, tiles and timbers, while reflecting conventional ideas about how the body should comport itself in an exhibition space – looking, not touching, and moving on in an ordered predictable manner from entrance to exit.<sup>198</sup> Meanwhile, in exhibitions of manuscripts in libraries and museums (see figures 28 and 29) manuscripts are 'protected by Plexiglass and haloed in sanctifying spotlights'. This approach projects the exhibition

<sup>196</sup> Emma Barker 'Introduction' in Barker Emma (ed.), *Contemporary Cultures of Display*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1999), 8-20, (p.12).

<sup>197</sup> For example, Durham Cathedral's 'Open Treasure', Winchester's 'Birth of a Nation, Rochester's 'Hidden Treasures'.

<sup>198</sup> See Tim Edensor, 'Waste Matter', (p.312).

space as one of 'purity', isolation and 'cleanliness like sterility' – notions that may also infuse the objects on display.<sup>199</sup>

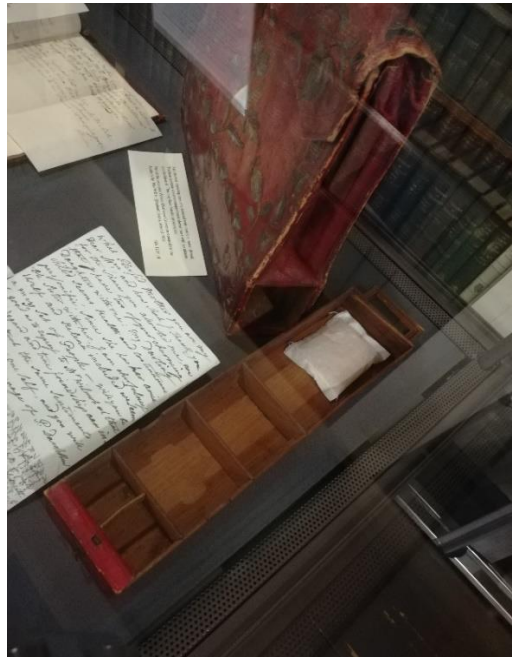


Figure 28: Royal Irish Academy, Dublin, 2018



Figure 29: The Chester Beatty, 2018<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Johan Idema, 'Introduction' in *How to Visit an Art Museum*, (Amsterdam: BIS Publishers, 2017), (unpaginated).

<sup>200</sup> The multi-dimensionality of objects 'flattened' under glass, where even the reflections of light hinder our appreciation of the material qualities of these things once created for haptic encounters.

In the absence of images of manuscripts because of restrictions on photography in many manuscript exhibitions, an image from the Hepworth Gallery, Wakefield, serves equally well to demonstrate the transformation of a workaday, hands-on, messy object into a sanitised revered artefact (see figures 30 and 31). In the case of manuscripts, this process frequently reduces them to flat, veneered surfaces; vehicles simply for carrying text, their materialities superficialized rather than deepened and enhanced. Much like a frame around a picture in an art gallery, the display cabinet, lighting and authoritative text isolate the manuscript from the rest of the world, defining where it begins and ends.<sup>201</sup>

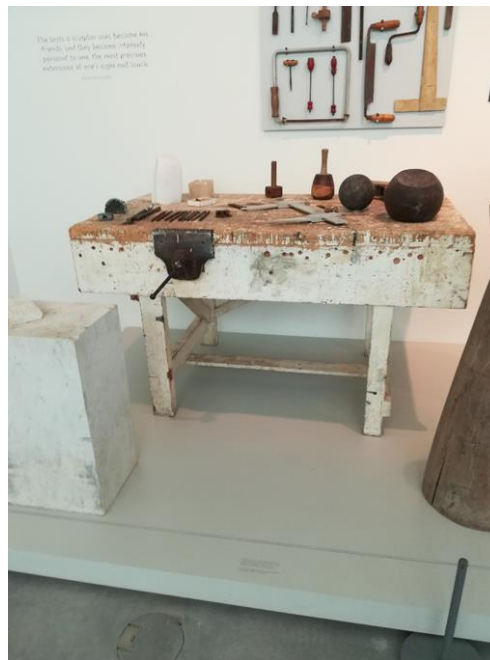


Figure 30: Barbara Hepworth's workbench. Note the cordon and plinth emphasising the museum effect. It is literally and metaphorically elevated from quotidian to revered object

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<sup>201</sup> The notion of a trap for looking is coined by B. Fer in Saunderson, Helen "'Do not touch': a discussion on the problems of a limited sensory experience with objects in a gallery or museum context' in, Dudley, Sandra H., and Pearce, Susan M., *The thing about museums: objects and experience, representation and contestation : essays in honour of professor Susan M. Pearce*, (London: Routledge, 2012) 59-181 159-181 (p.162).



Figure 31: Barbara Hepworth's workbench removed from the context of activity – one of 'craft and graft' - and sanitised in a 'white cube'<sup>202</sup>

This act of concealment and isolation is taken to the extreme in some cases, as for example, in a display of manuscripts at the Royal Irish Academy, shown in figure 32, where the manuscripts are sealed off in glass and hidden by cloths. If museums cultivate a way of looking that transforms artefacts into art objects,<sup>203</sup> they tend to do so, argues Emma Barker, by adopting an aesthetic approach that 'neutralizes' or seeks to put in parentheses the wider world beyond their walls.<sup>204</sup> Only certain selected surfaces are visible to us, those aspects of the manuscript that someone else, curator or scholar, has decided are the most valuable, important or significant. All other folios and facets of the manuscript are backgrounded, rendered invisible, unapprehendable

<sup>202</sup> All sensory connections, the smell, sounds and tactilities of being with material objects are removed. Rather than creating an aura that speaks of the craftsperson having just left the room, the feeling is of the workbench having been torn away from its original context and placed in a blanched illuminated limbo. Recontextualized out of all potency? On the one hand, the craftsperson, Barbara Hepworth, champions intimacy with and the value of knowing materials: '...a complete sensitivity to material - an understanding of its inherent quality and character is required'), while on the other, the curatorial authorities do not afford visitors any opportunity to get to 'know' these materials beyond gazing at them from a distance.

<sup>203</sup> As argued for instance by Alpers and Fer. Cited in Emma Barker, 'Introduction' in, *Contemporary Cultures of Display*.

<sup>204</sup> Emma Barker 'Introduction' in Barker Emma (ed.), *Contemporary Cultures of Display*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1999), 8-20 (p.14).

and virtually non-existent. While this implies that the museum is a site and source of disinterested, objective knowledge and even reminds us of the Husserlian phenomenological approach of 'bracketing off' extraneous elements in order to experience, unhindered, the things themselves, it is also a reminder, as Ivan Karp points out, that 'the alleged innate neutrality of museums and exhibitions is the very quality that enables them to become instruments of power as well as instruments of education and experience'.<sup>205</sup> In other words, as Susan Vogel argues, the material the public encounters on display is 'not material that "speaks for itself" but material filtered through the tastes, interests, politics, and state of knowledge of particular presenters at a particular moment in time'.<sup>206</sup> A manuscript's static open page becomes 'a surface onto which we project significance',<sup>207</sup> rather than a portal of opportunity through which we can explore complex human relationships with things in the world.<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> Ivan Karp in *Ibid.* p.14.

<sup>206</sup> Susan Vogel, 'Always true to the object, in our fashion', in Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago, (eds.), *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 653-664, (p. 661).

<sup>207</sup> Paul Graves-Brown quoted in Dudley, Sandra, (ed.), *Museum Objects: Experiencing the Properties of Things*. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012) 103-108 (p.4).

<sup>208</sup> For example, in the V&A's Medieval and Renaissance Galleries and the British Library's 'Treasures' gallery, and 'Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms exhibition, where medieval manuscripts are/were 'displayed as valuable treasures protected by Plexiglas and haloed in sanctifying spotlights'. Suspended 'for purposes of aesthetic contemplation', an illuminated manuscript might seem to glow in an otherwise dimly lit space. Already 'alien' to modern viewers, this approach risks, Emma Barker argues, 'inhibit[ing] any engagement with the meanings and values [manuscripts] would have had in their original context' Emma Barker 'Introduction' in Barker, Emma, (ed.), *Contemporary Cultures of Display*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1999), 8-20, (p.15).



Figure 32: Hidden from view. There may be an element of discovery and surprise in lifting back the cloth to find out what is underneath, but frankly, how many of us would dare to walk in and 'forage' in the Royal Irish Academy?

Conventional display methods imply that a manuscript is limited to communicating with audiences only through its textual content, miniatures or illuminations and we often overlook the three-dimensional material qualities of manuscripts and how far their form and materials influenced how their makers and readers engaged with, and attributed meanings and values to them. This approach to display and interpretation denies us, as visitors, opportunities for close and intimate encounters with the manuscript object, which, as Jennifer Borland and Karen Louise Jolly have shown, was intended to be a site of embodied encounters.<sup>209</sup> Kinaesthetic design, organic materials, and content and display (pages, text, images and bindings) facilitated

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<sup>209</sup> Jennifer Borland, 'Unruly Reading' and Karen Louise Jolly, 'Dismembering and Reconstructing' in Wilcox, Jonathan (ed.), *Scraped, stroked, and bound: materially engaged readings of medieval manuscripts* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 97-114 and 177-200.

embodied, sensory engagement for past readers to elicit meanings and understanding. We could open up potential for experiential learning and meaning making once more if we made the manuscript and its contextual displayscape a site of embodied encounters too. However, this implies introducing processes, dynamism and interconnections that can run counter to the message of the museum, which encases, isolates and stills the manuscript as though an insect in amber. Display techniques are underpinned by conservation and preservation initiatives that seek to remove the manuscript from networks of association, entanglements that may affect its condition. So authoritative has become the informational context carried via words and illustrations and so apparently irrefutable the knowledge conveyed through displaying these elements of the manuscript, that it has all but eliminated our sense of the interpretive worth of a manuscript as object – an object that can also affect and tell stories and affect meaning, through its material properties.

While efforts to make objects and interpretation more accessible and to provide space for visitors to understand contexts and develop meanings are commendable, decades of concern for future preservation, allied to a preoccupation with providing contextual narratives and information dissemination, have suppressed the object, and its ‘material actualities’ and material engagement beneath dominant cultural and historical significances. This enthrallment has backgrounded an element central to the nature of human experience – our sensory experience with the things around us.<sup>210</sup> We might consider this situation as generating the museological equivalent of ‘Shifting Baseline Syndrome’;<sup>211</sup> that is, an unquestioned point of authority and authenticity that engenders a widely accepted practice applied to almost all designs for displaying manuscripts. It is an approach, however, that has blinkered us to alternative processes of encounter and risks both stifling a fundamental strength of the exhibition medium – the object- and its potential to *affect* visitors.

To call for the museum to return to the ‘material reality of the material’ and allow a more candid encounter between visitor and object is not as radical a departure as it

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<sup>210</sup> Suzanne MacLeod, ‘Introduction’ in, MacLeod, Suzanne, (ed.), *Re-Shaping Museum Space: architecture, design, exhibitions*. (London: Routledge, 2005), 1-8, (p.3).

<sup>211</sup> George Monbiot, *Feral* (London: Penguin, 2014), (p.242).

might seem at first. Interestingly, one participant, prompted by his/her embodied encounters with manuscript materials in this study, speculated about whether conventional modes of encounter were ever thus: 'But I wonder if, we are so immersed in watching tv and to have a third person narrative, is that the right word? Yeah. I wonder if you thought about museums a hundred, hundred and fifty years ago, and prior to – I mean, I know they had novels and theatres in Victorian times - but I wonder if the museum experience for visitors was different then?'<sup>212</sup> They were. If we had come across, for example, the Lewis chess pieces in the British Museum in the nineteenth century, our encounter would not have been restricted to looking at them. We would also have been able to pick them up and handle them. As figure 33 illustrates, today we may frequently be confined to visual only encounters but, as Sandra Dudley and Helen Saunderson point out, in the past visitors often had the possibility of physically and emotionally engaging with objects – testing through touch, smell and hearing what they could visually apprehend.<sup>213</sup> Museums displayed objects, not just to educate but to affect visitors, inspire awe and 'inculcate a sense of wonder'.<sup>214</sup> The museum, or other interpretive setting, however tamed and highly pedigreed its exhibitions, still carries the potential for embodied engagements with manuscript materials, and wild, magical, and emotional connections with past lives and eras. Usually we can only grope at these through glass cases, overlaid with text, but that is not quite the same as interacting with the physical artefact and sensing the material object. The interpretive space, then, has acquired a 'shell' of habit and familiarity; it has too often been stripped of diversity and texture, 'creat[ing] a dull, flat world devoid of colour and variety'; in other words, a 'monocultural' space that risks narrowing the scope of our responses and understandings.<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> Post-encounter interview OQ 25/04/18(a).

<sup>213</sup> Helen Saunderson, ' "Do not touch": a discussion on the problems of a limited sensory experience with objects in a gallery or museum context' in *The thing about museums: objects and experience, representation and contestation : essays in honour of professor* (p.162) and Sandra Dudley 'Experiencing a Chinese Horse: engaging with the thingness of things', in Dudley, Sandra, (ed.), *Museum Objects: Experiencing the Properties of Things*. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 1-16 (p.6).

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

<sup>215</sup> George Monbiot, *Feral* (London: Penguin, 2014), (p.154).



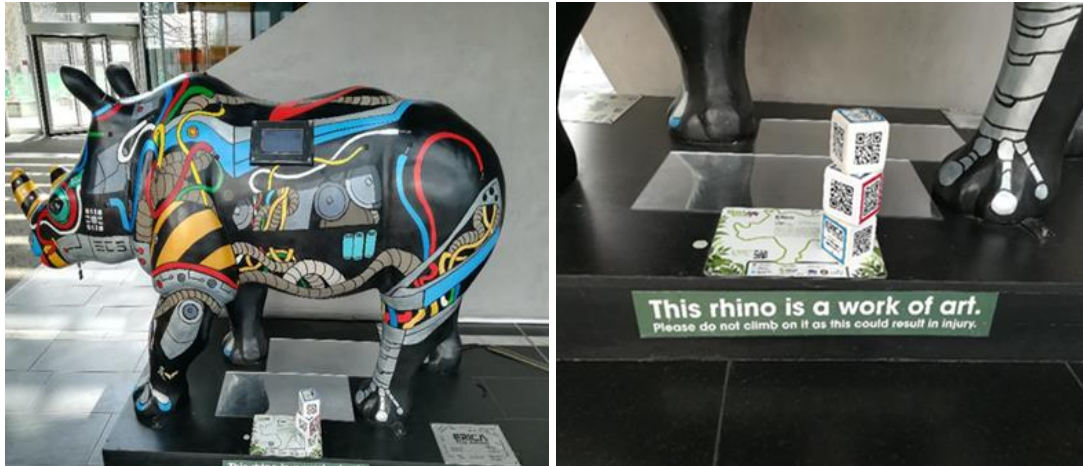


Figure 33: Notwithstanding health and safety concerns implicit here, there is another clear message: This is art. Art is only to be seen. On display at the University of Southampton

Figure 34 demonstrates how manuscripts typically presented appear frozen behind glass, and how the spaces inhabited by manuscripts are circumscribed, distinct and distanced from the space inhabited by the visitor. Thus, within many interpretive settings, our relationship with manuscripts is fundamentally a deceit because, paradoxically, *manuscripts* – the scripts crafted by hands – are absolutely, out of hands' reach.



Figure 34: Manuscripts, spot lit, 'frozen' and 'ossified' in vitrine. Chester Beatty, Dublin

*Let the wild rumpus start*

Maurice Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are*, 1963

## 5. Rewilding the ‘displayscape’

How then can we reconnect the hand with the script? The field of ecology provides a useful concept with which to explore this – *Rewilding*. In ecological terms one understanding of this idea suggests that well-meaning but over-zealous concerns around care for the natural world have morphed into a sense of custodianship, and that this has slipped into one of possessiveness and exclusion. This has led to the misguided notion that the natural world cannot thrive without human help. Rewilding proposes stepping back and desisting with restrictive, directive practices and enabling ‘natural’ processes to resume. This approach, some ecologists argue, will create environments promising experiences for people that are richer in adventure and surprise.<sup>216</sup> Sandra Dudley has identified what might be considered a parallel situation in the display of objects in museums and elsewhere.<sup>217</sup> While efforts to help visitors to locate meaning and contextualise are both welcome and important, the predominance of context, narrative and socio-cultural meanings and story tends to overshadow the material object. This is compounded by the ‘Catch 22’ experienced by most museums, archives and special collections libraries, in which conservation is pitched against access. More often than not, of course, conservation concerns drive approaches to access. Together, these factors typically operate to deny visitors access to a compelling element of what an interpretive experience can offer – fundamental sensory and emotional engagement with the physicality of an object, prior to, or without the need to know, anything about it.<sup>218</sup> Here, Roger Deakin describes an experience of an

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<sup>216</sup> Among others, for instance, George Monbiot, *Feral* (London: Penguin, 2014), Richard Mabey, *The Ash and the Beech: The Drama of Woodland Change*, (London: Vintage, 2013) Roger Deakin, *Notes from Walnut Tree Farm*, (London: Penguin, 2009).

<sup>217</sup> See, for instance, Sandra Dudley ‘Experiencing a Chinese Horse: engaging with the thingness of things’, in Dudley, Sandra, (ed.), *Museum Objects: Experiencing the Properties of Things*. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 1-16.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.2-3.

interpreted, waymarked 'nature reserve', yet he might as easily be referring to an encounter with a manuscript displayed, for example, at the Fitzwilliam Museum, British Museum or British Library: 'The whole experience is hugely diminished by the feeling that one has been robbed of any sense of adventure or discovery. You already know what you're going to find. Indeed, they tell you on your way in.'<sup>219</sup> As in an ecological context, the concept of rewilding within interpretive settings advocates embracing unpredictability and surprise. In the same way that, for instance, Deakin, George Mabey, Robert McFarland and George Monbiot assert that encountering an untamed natural environment can have a powerful experiential affect, this research project suggests that less proscribed encounters with manuscript materialities have potent and transformative potential.<sup>220</sup>

The concept of rewilding is as hotly contested in ecological circles as the notion of increasing the proximity of visitors to manuscripts is likely to be in museums, archives and libraries. In both cases this is, in part at least, because it implies wresting control from curatorial and exhibition authorities and permitting *processes* to resume – less controlled processes in which there is the implication that the 'realms of object and subject [are] not really separate at all' and that, as people, we 'experience the world through a physical body and interpret it through a material mind'.<sup>221</sup> As in an ecological context, this project's concept of rewilding advocates a return to the unpredictable nature of growth, experience and development. This has profound implications, as it calls for a greater emphasis on the sensory and emotional ways in which a manuscript object is experienced; the interwoven connections between its (as an object) material qualities and the participants' (subjects') sensory modalities as a material being. Theoretically rooted in an embodied approach to cognition, rewilding is influenced by the notion that *being* and *acting in* the world are inextricably interwoven, and that values and meanings derive from people's continuous embodied and situated activity

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<sup>219</sup> Roger Deakin, *Notes from Walnut Tree Farm*, (London: Penguin, 2009), (p.247).

<sup>220</sup> In the way that, for example, Sandra Dudley testifies to in, 'Experiencing a Chinese Horse: engaging with the thingness of things', (pp.2-3), Roger Deakin, (2009), Richard Mabey, 2013) and George Monbiot, (2014) convey the excitement of less proscribed encounters in the wild.

<sup>221</sup> Sandra Dudley 'Experiencing a Chinese Horse: engaging with the thingness of things', in Dudley, Sandra, (ed.), *Museum Objects: Experiencing the Properties of Things*. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 1-16 (p.8).

within their material environment.<sup>222</sup> This study's concept of rewilding therefore challenges museums and other interpretive settings to reconsider their disposition to distance people from things and, instead, advocates rewilding display spaces to create 'displayscapes'. As this study indicates, a rewilded displayscape better enables fundamental sensory encounters, once vital to the creation of meaning and understanding of the manuscripts of our medieval and later past, to resume.

Rewilding presses museums and other interpretive settings to return three dimensions to the manuscript and resume broad ranging sensory interactions – adding to visual apprehensions with sonic, tactile, olfactory, and even gustatory experiences. Roger Deakin's reflections on the decline of common land over recent centuries, and the attendant dearth of sensory stimuli in the landscape and consequent loss of our sensory engagement with the things around us, is echoed in the absence of sensory incitements in most display spaces: 'I walk about the common with my imaginary medieval friend. "The ponds are so shallow. Why are they nearly dried out?" he says, amazed at the state of the grass. "What happened to all the cowslips and buttercups – and the hay rattle flowers? Where are the clouds of butterflies that used to rise up before the scythe? It's so quiet. Where are the voices of the children stone-picking in the fields, where is the birdsong, where are the grasshoppers?"'<sup>223</sup> For 'common' we could easily read 'display space': 'I walked up to the display case with my imaginary medieval friend, the scribe..."What happened to all of the other folios? Reduced and stilled to a single open page, where has the depth and heft of the manuscript gone? And its flex and movement? I cannot feel the tension and spring of the binding, nor the warm rub of parchment. Why can I not hear the sounds of the words spoken? No longer can I breathe in the sweet smell of the incense.'" Deakin's words are not only an insightful comment on the demise of natural diversity, but a telling comment on the *modus operandi* of many interpretive settings displaying manuscripts.

George Monbiot argues that conventional approaches to environmental conservation attempt to 'freeze living systems in time'; neither animal nor plants are permitted to

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<sup>222</sup> This idea is influenced by Mariza Dima's PhD thesis, *A design led approach for transferring the embodied skills of puppet stop-motion animators into haptic workspaces* <http://hdl.handle.net/1842/7866>.

<sup>223</sup> Roger Deakin, *Notes from Walnut Tree Farm*, (London: Penguin, 2009), (p.241).

enter or leave, and human engagement is strictly mediated.<sup>224</sup> This bears a striking resemblance to how we manage manuscripts (and other heritage and art objects), which, Kathryn Rudy contends, are frozen the moment they enter a collection.<sup>225</sup> This point was noted by one participant who reflected: ‘archives are quite quiet, they’re a bit tomb-like’. Nor does exhibiting necessarily thaw them, as figure 35 graphically shows; orthodox display techniques share many of these characteristics. This participant continued, ‘books and manuscripts that are in use are more, uh, living [sic]’.<sup>226</sup> Of course, there are exceptions, but many of the environments of display in which we encounter manuscripts are intensively managed and, if not quite ‘white cubes’, are, nonetheless, sanitised, sterile contexts, in which sensory and physical engagements are strictly controlled, and opportunities for serendipitous, unexpected and surprising encounters highly restricted.<sup>227</sup> Text, cordons, lighting, plinths, frames and so on control visitors, as well as managing manuscripts, steering visitors on paths in, through and out of exhibitions in which the nature and extent of experiences and interactions have been devised and assessed and are monitored. Despite moves in recent years to put the visitor at the centre, exhibitions often set out manuscripts and other objects to tell a particular story, or way of knowing, or use the medium of exhibition to convey ‘facts’ and information. Such an approach can sometimes, even unwittingly, suggest a ‘natural order’ of things. Our being in the presence of ‘real’ objects, tangible traces of the past, can reinforce this, underpinning the authority of the institution and the ‘truth’ of the message being conveyed. Rewilding is an adjuration to interpretive settings to upset the ‘natural order’ and to provide opportunities for more affective experiences with the potential to challenge preconceptions, values and beliefs and generate new perspectives and interests.

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<sup>224</sup> George Monbiot, *Feral* (London: Penguin, 2014), (p.8).

<sup>225</sup> Kathryn Rudy ‘Introduction: A new approach to codicology’ in *Piety in Pieces*, (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2016), (p. 2).

<sup>226</sup> Film review interview DdC 24/04/18(b).

<sup>227</sup> A visit to any interpretive setting will exemplify this. For example, *Juden, Christen und Muslime: Im dialog der Wissenschaften 500-1500*. Visited February 2018.



Figure 35: 'Systematically frozen'. 'Illuminated' manuscripts accompanied by a huge amount of textual interpretation. National Library of Latvia, Riga, 2018<sup>228</sup>

K. L. Nyberg uses the Yiddish term 'chutzpah' to describe the 'unmitigated gall' of interpretive authorities to position those who come to encounter manuscripts pejoratively as 'visitors'.<sup>229</sup> The term 'visitor', of course, implies a fleeting, passing presence, but , more significantly, Nyberg also points to the authority of interpretive institutions employed in controlling and governing what visitors see and what they hear, smell, touch and taste – or, indeed, what they are denied sensing at all. If, as visitors we see something other than what the curatorial powers identify, then, Nyberg suggests, we are typically led to believe that we have '*mis*-seen', mis-interpreted and mis-understood. In the case of *MS210*, displayed conventionally then, we would probably encounter it presented as an unremarkable exemplar of an Ethiopic, Coptic hagiography, simply decorated and penned in a largely obsolete language with a few

<sup>228</sup> There is an enormous amount of interpretation here telling us about these manuscripts, contextualizing and interpreting them. How much could we discover if we were enabled to get close to them? And would it confirm or refute what the curators say?

<sup>229</sup> Kenneth Nyberg, 'Some Radical Comments on Interpretation: A Little Heresy is Good for the Soul', in Machlis, Gary E. and Field, Donal R., *On Interpretation*, (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1984) (pp.151-156).

‘crude’ annotations and doodles.<sup>230</sup> And, given what little we know of its provenance, it is likely that it might also be described as a ‘contested’ object.<sup>231</sup> The manuscript thus presented would be done so as a *fait accompli*, accompanied by a curator’s final word. The material object would be obscured by taxonomies, categories and context, its physicality reduced to the functional designation, ‘MS210’. The manuscript’s age inevitably renders it fragile in experts’ opinions and its patina of use and the evidence of bodily presences define it as worn and damaged. Unfit for use beyond resting on a cushion under glass or resting in a box in a darkened room, it is removed from its centuries long network of encounters and consigned to a state of isolation – a delicate remnant or, a rare ‘treasure’.

This is the kind of ‘reality’ typically conveyed to visitors through conventional displays of manuscripts.<sup>232</sup> Yet, manuscripts are tough. They endure. Manuscripts, for example, survive in greater numbers than any other object from our medieval past. Next to stone, parchment is the hardest wearing substrate for text. But beyond some misconceptions of material frailty, conventional methods of manuscript display create a sense of finality, not just in the sense that this is the culmination of the manuscript’s biographical journey – its final rearing place, a glass displaycase, but also in terms of its interpretation. When we encounter a manuscript in an exhibition it is easy to consider this as the end point of learning rather than just another step in the process of enquiry and understanding. We are given all there is to know from the experts and scholars. However, this approach precludes an enormous degree of potential for individual and personal exploration and discovery. This study’s rewilded displayscape afforded participants what Heidegger notes as human fundamentals, ‘Grunden’ (founding a world), ‘Shiften’ (discovering the things that are), and ‘ontologische, Begründet des Seienden’ (giving them a sense of meaning).<sup>233</sup> Rewilding proposes enabling other trails of exploration, outside and beyond textual, historical and contextual interpretations. As this study demonstrates, when allowed to forage and

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<sup>230</sup> See typed note accompanying *MS210*, undated, signed, ‘T.M.B.’ Special Collections, David Wilson Library, University of Leicester.

<sup>231</sup> See Appendix 7.

<sup>232</sup> Such as *Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms*, *African Scribes: Manuscript Culture of Ethiopia* at the British Library, the *Open Treasures* exhibition at Durham Cathedral and *Hidden Treasures* at Rochester Cathedral.

<sup>233</sup> Martin Heidegger cited in K L Nyberg (p.153).

interrogate manuscript materials via their sensory modalities, visitors dwell, return, probe. The exhibition is not an end point, or final destination and definitive word. Rather, it is a starting point, a point from which to begin an enquiry. The displayscape is a piece of a puzzle of learning and understanding that will not necessarily be concluded at the exit. Rewilding does not detract from what interpretive settings have learned about interpretation and storytelling but, rather, adds to this by charging the display space with a frisson of challenge, provocation, apprehension and temptation, so that at the moment of encounter, we can reach out to 'touch the past', not knowing quite what it will feel like.

In the same way that rewilding the landscape involves pulling down restrictive fences, neglecting drainage ditches, and resisting the urge to prune and trim, so rewilding the display space proposes removing some of the barriers and practices that prevent more direct, essential physical and sensory encounters with the material properties of manuscripts. This may sound fanciful but some interpretive settings, perhaps most notably modern art museums (see figure 36), have shown it is possible to provide opportunities for visitors to get up close and 'be' with objects. Rewilding enables opportunities for surprising, unexpected experiences, wider ranging sensory and potentially emotional engagements with the physical properties of manuscripts. Rewilding is an invocation to relax rigid, reductive 'rules of encounter' within the medium of the display space and to reinvigorate it to enable fundamental processes of sensory and emotional engagement and interaction between visitors and the material properties of medieval manuscripts to flourish.





Figure 36: An example of how it can be possible for visitors to be with the objects on display. Here visitors are immersed in the display space, or at least encompassed by the multi-dimensionality and dynamism of the displayed object, which swirls and swoops over and around

The public exhibition gallery is not a place that traditionally affords us the time or haptic opportunities to *be* with materials. Rewilding suggests a way to reverse this trend and create a site where material things are released from their place in the momentum of human narrative; a site that percolates with a ‘kind of threshold tension’ and resonate[s] with potential energy’,<sup>234</sup> in which spontaneity and unpredictability are allowed to play out and open up new and creative approaches to experiences with manuscripts. These may not always be pleasing and pleasant

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<sup>234</sup> Sharon Blakey and Liz Mitchell, ‘Unfolding: A multisensorial dialogue in “material time”’ in, *Material Thinking* Volume 17, (p.7)  
[https://www.materialthinking.org/sites/default/files/papers/SMT\\_Volume17\\_Paper%2001\\_FA2.pdf](https://www.materialthinking.org/sites/default/files/papers/SMT_Volume17_Paper%2001_FA2.pdf)  
 Viewed June 2019.

experiences. Indeed, as some of the participants' responses demonstrate, they may be challenging, demanding, confusing and disturbing. Equally, in the same way that we cannot predict how rewilded eco-systems might emerge, as Dudley points out, museums cannot predict how, or even if, visitors will experience powerful responses to objects.<sup>235</sup> However, museums and other interpretive settings too, can work to ensure that they do not inhibit emotional and sensory interactions or preclude enthralling, surprising experiences.

This project's approach enabled the participants and manuscript objects to meet 'on the brink of happening', and spark 'ideas on their way to becoming'.<sup>236</sup> There is no end point marked by a certain level of cognitive learning and the concept of rewilding does not strive to create a particular understanding or to project a specific meaning. This is the interpretive equivalent of ecological rewilding rejecting the preservation of a fixed state of heathland or meadow and standing back to let nature decide. In the rewilded interpretive environment of this study, participants were provided with equality of access but a variety of experiences. The purpose was to enable diverse opportunities and experiences beyond prescribed narratives and learning outcomes. By enabling physical and emotional contact between object and subject, the latter was presented with a chance to step outside of social and disciplinary constructs, and experience 'raw', unexpected encounters with the potential to generate a rich variety of experiences, excite senses and emotions, and ignite imaginations.

If we consider the traditional display environment to be the equivalent of a preserved, intensively managed eco-system, then rewilding is an adjuration to remove the barriers excluding the flora and fauna of the subject-object relationship, and allow its interconnectivity and porosity to thrive. In the same way that ecological rewilding does not exclude and restrict growth, rewilding the display space recognizes that digital objects, performance events and virtual media are not 'other' and can also have

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<sup>235</sup> Sandra Dudley, 'Experiencing a Chinese Horse: engaging with the thingness of things', in Dudley, Sandra, (ed.), *Museum Objects: Experiencing the Properties of Things*. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 1-16 (p.11).

<sup>236</sup> Sharon Blakey and Liz Mitchell, 'Unfolding: A multisensorial dialogue in "material time"' in, *Material Thinking* Volume 17, (pp.6-7).  
[https://www.materialthinking.org/sites/default/files/papers/SMT\\_Volume17\\_Paper%2001\\_FA2.pdf](https://www.materialthinking.org/sites/default/files/papers/SMT_Volume17_Paper%2001_FA2.pdf)  
Viewed June 2019.

‘physical expressions and material affects’.<sup>237</sup> If, through conventional display methods, manuscripts have largely been subjugated out of all potency, this study demonstrates that even modest innovative adjustments in how museum technologies and modes of display are employed can present alternative paths to realize the promise of encounters with a manuscript and enable people, not only to experience potentially rich emotional and imaginative connections with past lives and epochs, but also to understand more about their own relationship with the object world around them. This is the core concept of rewilding – enabling immersive processes of interaction in interpretive settings in which people and objects can *be* together. If interpretive settings are bold enough to increase our propinquity to the manuscript and provide opportunities for visitors to go beyond the text, then encounters might become full of promise and unpredictability: the pages themselves, as we reach out to touch them, might touch us back and conjure up forgotten ghosts of things, animals and humans, and challenge the idea of the ‘muteness of matter’.

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<sup>237</sup> See Andrea Witcomb, ‘The Materiality of Virtual Technologies: A New Approach to Thinking about the Impact of Multi-Media in Museums’, in Kenderine, Sarah, (ed.), *Theorizing Digital Cultural Heritage: A Critical Discourse* (Boston: MIT Press, 2007) 35-48 (p.47).

## 6. Embodied encounters

### i. Introduction

This chapter explores participants' embodied presence in the displayscape (shown in figure 37), that is, how they experienced themselves, their environment, and the objects in it with them, through their bodies. It shows that even looking, when we cannot follow-up with additional sensory interactions, is never objective. Our gaze is materiality situated (in our bodies) and materially oriented (it is focussed on *something*). How and what we see can therefore be affected by how we feel physically, emotionally and so on. It is necessarily contextualised. Our social, cultural and personal backgrounds similarly, form part of this context of bodily experience.

Participants' reactions indicated that while looking, for most of them, was important, and a primary tool for exploring things in the world, just looking and not being permitted to probe further using other instruments in our sensory tool bag can be frustrating. Touch, sound, smell and taste are intimate and penetrative actions that can reveal much more about the objects that confront us and allow us to know them more closely. Freedom to roam off the beaten track and corporeally explore the displayscape brought apprehension and proprioceptive pleasures, while the act of opening and closing drawers evoked the thrill of the illicit, and a sense of uncertainty around using physical exertion in a 'museum' setting.



Figure 37: The displayscape and its material details

## ii. Embodied looking: *MS210* in vitrine

*MS210*, the manuscript itself, was presented conventionally, centrally positioned on a plinth, set apart under glass and spot-lit. This display technique is enough, as Svetlana

Alpers points out, to lend objects an aura, a sense of presence and authenticity.<sup>238</sup> Indeed, so displayed, the manuscript's capacity to transfix was demonstrated by one participant, who, gazing upon it in the glass case, expressed: 'I could stand there looking at that all day, so...'. In this situation, the roles of the beholder and the beheld become blurred; how far is the participant beholding the manuscript object, or the manuscript directing the gaze (and bodily actions) of the participant? This situation again evokes Merleau-Ponty's notion of 'chiasmic' experience.<sup>239</sup> The participants, to paraphrase Olga Belova, open themselves up to the object and sensitise themselves 'to what the object has to express'.<sup>240</sup> We might ourselves have had a similar experience on encountering a picture in a gallery; are we looking at the image or is it looking back at us? Or, deep within a forest, we may sense the trees beholding us as we look upon them. But what next? What could the participants do next? Step closer to the glass, press their noses to it? Touch the glass? In traditional exhibitions, opportunities even to get this close to the display cabinet would be unusual.<sup>241</sup> This study, however, permitted participants to get closer to the manuscript, even though it was behind glass. Such physical proximity encouraged participants to look hard, gesture with hands and fingers - point, trace and turn. Touching the glass barrier itself was possible too, and so the glass itself became a conspirator in these tactile performances. Almost as a surrogate for the surface of a folio, the glass became increasingly misted with the breath of the observers and smeared with the oily residue of their fingerprints. The surface of the vitrine even took on a palimpsestuous appearance - both in the sense that it was designed for one purpose but took on another (from transparent lens to haptic focal point), and also because it became a veneer that acquired faint, barely perceptible, ethereal images, patterns, patinas of participants' actions. The implication that the looked at manuscript greeted participants on a kinaesthetic level, almost

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<sup>238</sup> Svetlana Alpers 'A Way of Seeing', in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (eds.), (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991) (pp.25-32).

<sup>239</sup> Olga Belova, 'The event of seeing: A phenomenological perspective on visual sense-making', in Dudley, Sandra, (ed.), *Museum Objects: Experiencing the Properties of Things*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 116-133, (p.123).

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, p.123.

<sup>241</sup> The author knows from personal experience at the Rijksmuseum (June 2018) and Gropius Bau (Feb 2017) how unconventional ways of moving through an exhibition and attentive, embodied looking can cause consternation on the part of museum authorities.

compelling them to take action, evokes medieval theories about how sight worked. Suzannah Bierhoff's examination of sight and embodiment in the Middle Ages shows how 'sight could be what we tend to think touch is today – immediate, proximate, bodily and intimate, rather than a controlling and objectifying distance gaze'.<sup>242</sup> And Adrian Johns points out that 'seeing' could be much more than an ocular-centric activity.<sup>243</sup> Later, in Early Modern England, for instance, to 'see' was to engage the 'passions' and experience emotional and physiological responses to one's physical surroundings. Thus, reading involved reasoned *and* corporeal responses. People perceived books, like all objects in the world, Johns notes, through the mediation of their bodies.

Rewilding does not advocate a return to medieval beliefs, but it does espouse creating space to explore the potentially dynamic nature of the inter-relationship between human and non-human objects, which, as this study shows, can elicit engaging embodied dialogues between the beholder of the manuscript and the manuscript itself. As Susan Stewart points out, 'the things we handle will always reciprocate the treatment we administer to them' and we 'receive back a deeper disclosure of ontological truth'.<sup>244</sup> By providing a less strictly curated and manicured environment, a rewilded interpretive space becomes a zone of contact, allowing for the potential of manuscript materials to 'act back'.

### **iii. Embodied looking: film and the digital manuscript**

As another participant noted, this extended to the visual encounters, which were enhanced by the digitally screened images: '...with the TV, it's got, you can see all the colours that are in the draw as well, so you can kind of connect the two together'.<sup>245</sup> This notion of connection was not solely visual, but engaged other senses too. The digital images on the screen and iPad reinforced the 'coupling' of the manuscript and its accompanying slipcase by featuring the two objects together – always side by side,

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<sup>242</sup> Suzannah Bierhoff referred to in [www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2008/08/opening-up.html](http://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2008/08/opening-up.html) (Viewed 26/08/17).

<sup>243</sup> Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the book: Print and Knowledge in the Making*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 386-7.

<sup>244</sup> Susan Stewart quoted in Blakey, Sharon and Mitchell, Liz, 'Unfolding: A multisensorial dialogue in "material time"' in, *Material Thinking* Volume 17, (p.11).

<sup>245</sup> Walkalong interview AR 17/04/18.

but never physically interconnected. In one instance, a participant enacted her/his frustration, or appetite to physically connect the slipcase and the manuscript. S/he sighed, gasped, pointed, then walked over and ran his/her fingers over the glass case and tapped them on it.<sup>246</sup> The subcam film footage revealed how participants looked – at *MS210* in the vitrine, and the images displayed on the TV screens and iPad – and then proceeded to follow up the visual encounter with embodied re-examinations of what they had discovered earlier in the drawers. The observation notes revealed, for example, how one participant:

‘Enters and looks briefly at screen on right, then repeatedly looks back at researcher, as if for some guidance. Then settles on screen.

Gazes at one screen, then the other; then looks at the parchment on frame. Settles again on tv screen for two to three mins.

Picks up an oak gall and rolls it between fingers and handles vellum fragments.

Looks then at manuscript in case, briefly, then gaze diverts to other tv screen (for confirmation?) then to parchment on frame again.’

This incident shows how bodily movement and haptic interactions were interwoven with, if not instigated by, this participant’s attentive looking. Aside from corporeal interactions with the material objects in the displayscape, imagery, woven with sound and tactile and other sensory opportunities, appeared to stimulate some bodies to act, posturing and motioning in relation to the sounds and images, suggesting the ‘kinaesthetic impact of imagery’ identified by Tilley.<sup>247</sup>

Catherine Moore’s observation that materiality can inhere in watching film and that the physicality of film may be manifested in gestural and mimetic responses was not explicitly borne out by this study. However, it is important to note that this project’s film was not an anthropological documentary, like the one that featured in Moore’s study, and, importantly, only one sequence featured human movement. Nonetheless, in her study, Moore makes a point that may be very pertinent to this research project;

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<sup>246</sup> Walkalong interview DdC 24/04/18(a).

<sup>247</sup> Revealed by subcam film triangulated by observation and interview.



that is, that physical gesture is ‘an intermittent marker of a process’ and that its absence does not point to ‘an absence of physical or material response to the images being watched’.<sup>248</sup> Enactive bodily responses may have been present even if the participants did not feel the need to corporeally perform. This raises the important proposition that embodied responses are not always bold and easily observable. They may be present but expressed subtly, in small ways that are almost imperceptible to the observer: a movement of the lips, a little nod or turn of the head, delicate eye movements, a shift in body weight, or a turning of the stomach or shiver down the spine. The subcam film, while not picking up facial gestures, did show what the participants were watching, looking at, or, at least, the direction in which they were facing. Some participants book-ended their experience by watching the film on entering and then again on leaving. Others interwove shorter spells watching the film and engaging with the materials in the drawers, or dispersed in the space, or using the film to reveal more of the manuscript in the vitrine. Adapting Bill Endres’ observation about how 3-D technology applied to manuscript folios can provide ‘the start for a series of rotations and turns which lead to knowing’, in this study, any feature that caught the eye, or the ear, of the participants, or sparked curiosity, or ignited a reaction, became a point from which to begin an enquiry.<sup>249</sup> ‘The aesthetic experience of the [manuscript] is made and remade and paths of enquiry were available for thought, reflection and knowing.’<sup>250</sup>

#### **iv. Beyond sight**

In explaining his/her experience of encountering the manuscript materials and being in the rewilded displayscape, one participant commented: ‘Like you can always try to guess and be led by your feelings, but also, in a way, I want to know as well, what, uh, information about the object I am experiencing’. This comment suggests that while

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<sup>248</sup> Catherine, Moore, ‘The Material in the Immaterial – The Powell-Cotton Oukwanyama Film Archive and some Contemporary Material Responses among the Community it Depicts’ in *Museological Review*, Issue 15, University of Leicester, 2011, (p.80).

<sup>249</sup> Bill Endres ‘More than Meets the Eye: Going 3D with an Early Medieval Manuscript’, in, Mills, Clare, Pidd, Michael and Ward, Esther, *Proceedings of the Digital Humanities Congress 2012*, Studies in the Digital Humanities, (Sheffield: HRI Online Publications, 2014), <https://www.hrionline.ac.uk/openbook/chapter/dhc2012-endres> Viewed November 2014 and 14 March 2017 (p.10).

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*, p.13

this participant valued sensory engagement, s/he did not feel entirely comfortable without some authoritative interpretive information to direct, or at least supplement, the information s/he received via his/her own sensory modalities. However, in further comments from this participant we get some equally significant insight into how s/he perceives the world: 'Seeing is very important and is the one I use the most, in general. Like, also, if we have to talk about intelligence, I don't know, but I am always very interested about this topic and it's the way I learn ...so visuality is very important for me'.<sup>251</sup> It is possible that this suggests a notion of sight from the Cartesian perspective; that is, of sight as a unidirectional activity in terms of power and action.<sup>252</sup> The participant seemed to be trying to intellectually appropriate the object by seeking to assign it meaning via gazing from a distance. Yet, this process of cognitive learning did not occur in the abstract. Rather, it was corporeally constituted. Visual engagement, as we have seen from the above episodes, was contextualised in a physical environment *with* things. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's concept of 'flesh' as a bond interconnecting body and thing in the event of the living world, Belova points out that 'visual engagement with the world occurs on the border between body and its surroundings'.<sup>253</sup> Participants' positions were not fixed. They were not corralled to look at something in front of them. Within this process of seeing I could discern participants moving bodily and changing their perceptions as part of their visual encounters. The material and digital objects were not passive things in the displayscape, but were engaged in a dialogic, discursive and dynamic relationship with the participant subjects.

This is important because even a sense of such physical nearness, as Dudley has suggested, 'stimulates the visitor's haptic fancy, [that if] actual touch may not be possible... imaginings of the object's tactility may nonetheless be at work'.<sup>254</sup> One participant noted, 'when I looked at that (*MS210* in the vitrine), I could almost sense how it would feel'.<sup>255</sup> Participants' responses also indicate how this concept of 'fancy'

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<sup>251</sup> Post encounter interview CM 24/04/18(a).

<sup>252</sup> Olga Belova discusses this in detail in, *The Event of Seeing* in Dudley, Sandra, *Museum Objects: Experiencing the Properties of Things*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), (pp.121-122).

<sup>253</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty referred to by Olga Belova, 'The event of seeing', (p121).

<sup>254</sup> Sandra Dudley, 'What's in the Drawer?' in *The Senses and Society*, (2014), 9:3, 296-309, (p.305)

<sup>255</sup> Film review transcript SW 23/04/18(b).

might extend to the olfactory, as they imagined how the manuscript might smell. One participant looking at *MS210* behind the glass also showed how intuition can blur the boundaries between sensory perceptions. S/he commented that s/he thought it might smell 'musty' because, 'it's definitely got a musty look to it, so...'.<sup>256</sup> However, despite their powers of intuition, not being able to touch the object left some participants bemused and puzzled about its actuality. One participant, for instance, noted in regard to her own experience that seeing something could present an illusion. 'It looks waxy', said this participant, examining the parchment folios of *MS210*, yet s/he imagined it sounding 'rustley'. S/he went on, 'which is in contradiction a bit to what I said about it looks a little bit waxy'.<sup>257</sup> This instance suggests that visual apprehension of material objects can confuse and elude our understanding and that, in some cases, only through the use of our other sensory modalities can we make sense of them.

After a long pause watching the subcam film playback, one participant expressed his/her exasperation about not being able to close in and touch the manuscript: 'See?! I really, really want to touch it there... but I can't because there is the box around it (the vitrine)'.<sup>258</sup> Indeed, another participant's comments support this idea that a deeper understanding, or knowing of an object, can be gained through more extensive sensory investigations. S/he noted how, for example, being able to smell the odours of manuscript materials 'definitely' enhanced his/her experience of the manuscript 'because smell, you can't do that through glass'.<sup>259</sup> The following conversation between two participants (one of whom was without sight) expresses just how profoundly limiting visual perception alone can be, and exemplifies the fundamental experiential variances between multi-sensory and visual only opportunities:

AS: 'So, this is interesting because we obviously have a totally different experience here. And you're looking behind glass...'

AD: 'You're relying on my...'

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<sup>256</sup> Walkalong interview AR 17/04/18.

<sup>257</sup> Walk along interview GP 19/04/18.

<sup>258</sup> Film review transcript DdC 24/04/18(b).

<sup>259</sup> Post encounter interview EG 16/04/18(a).

AS: 'Yeah, so, whereas you would probably stand here and look at the drawings and stuff, I'm done, do you know what I mean?'

AS: 'Yes.'

For some people, using senses other than sight is the only option. However, because of normative display techniques manuscripts cannot generally be apprehended by any other of our sensory modalities. So, how can people without sight apprehend a manuscript's material presence? As the above comments demonstrate, they cannot. Interestingly, this was an issue that was raised for one participant through his/her experience of the fieldwork's displayscape: 'One thing I thought of, wearing glasses, is how those sorts of physical differences might impact on people's experiences of this. So, I thought that for myself, some things maybe felt less evident because I couldn't see them in detail.' The potential broader limitations of non-sensory engagement was also brought to the fore by this same participant: 'I know I was thinking, watching the video, for instance, if someone wasn't able to hear, like, would they get the same multi-sensory experience of that sort?'<sup>260</sup> For the participant in this project who was without sight, this was the very first time they had encountered and engaged with a manuscript.

#### **v. The pivotal moment of perception**

Johan Idema has posited the idea that paintings only come to life through illusion. That is, only through the act of being looked at does art occur. In other words, *MS210* is not 'out there' to be known in the abstract but is apprehendable precisely because it is in the world with us and can be perceived via our senses. But if it cannot be apprehended by the sensory modalities we possess, it cannot be realized. 'Simply being in a museum, in the presence of great art and merely contemplating it, 'does not mean your experience will be meaningful by definition'.<sup>261</sup> Yet, Idema continues, 'the way the establishment presents art to us does not invite us to bring ourselves into contact with it'.<sup>262</sup> The same is true where manuscripts are concerned. The interpretive

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<sup>260</sup> Walk along interview SM 23/04/18(a).

<sup>261</sup> Johan Idema, in 'Introduction', *How to Visit an Art Museum*, (Amsterdam: BIS Publishers, 2017), (no pagination).

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.*, (no pagination).

establishment rarely encourages or allows us to apprehend manuscripts other than visually. Neither *MS210*'s physical substances, nor the perceiving participants' materialities existed in isolation but, rather, the manuscript object existed as the sum of the relationship between the object's qualities and the embodied way in which the participants experienced it. More than the quantitative and qualitative characteristics of the manuscript, its materiality manifested in these characteristics combined in the moment or act of perception. If we think of the manuscript objects in this study as fascicles of sensory properties, and its participants as bundles of sensory perceivers, then it is in the moment of confrontation between the manuscript and its beholders that both object and subject are realized. And it is at this juncture that understandings and meanings are ignited. This is a pivotal idea with profound implications for interpretive settings because it suggests that there are significant limitations to our understanding of the actual material object when we are restricted to visual encounters, or, if we are without sight, denied these altogether by ocular-centric modes of interpretation. So, we return to the question, what next? The manuscript entreated and provoked participants to do more but how could the rewilded displayscape enable them to get close to its material substances?

Following Merleau-Ponty's assertion that reaching and grasping gives form to objects that are within our reach,<sup>263</sup> this research project, in contrast to the conventional modes of displaying, enabled its participants both to reach out and to grasp. Not all interpretive environments are sensorially proscriptive, at least when it comes to being outside – in the 'wild', as figure 38 encouragingly demonstrates. However, as one participant noted, most 'multi-sensory' opportunities in museums are little more than tokenistic and limited to simple handling: 'Sometimes with multi-sensories it is this thing that you tack on at the end...When I see, 'multi-sensory', I think, "Oh, well, I'll pick something up". It [this experience] was more than that'.<sup>264</sup> This study's rewilded displayscape promoted opportunities for participants' creative, close, embodied experiences of manuscript materials. With an innovative use of materials and subtle design techniques, Ane Pilegaard demonstrates ways to 'destabilize' the enclosing,

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<sup>263</sup> Stephan Kaufer and Anthony Chemero, *Phenomenology: An Introduction*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), (p.105).

<sup>264</sup> Post-encounter interview OQ 25/04/18(a).

distancing function of the traditional glass display case.<sup>265</sup> Pilegaard's modifications to display furniture work to draw the viewer 'off the beaten track' and towards a physically closer encounter with the displayed object.<sup>266</sup> Drawing on Pilegaard's ideas, in this study multi-sensory encounters with the physical properties of a manuscript were facilitated through the introduction of 'deconstructed manuscript' materials into the space between the visitor and the 'original' manuscript encased on a plinth. By enabling physical contact between object and subject, the latter was presented with a chance to step outside of social and disciplinary constructs and have 'raw', surprising encounters with the potential to excite the senses and emotions and ignite imaginations through a rich variety of experiences - new, unexpected or just plain strange.



Figure 38: Not every interpretive environment is sensorially proscriptive. At least when it comes to being outside – in the 'wild'. The gardens of Trautsmansdorf Castle, Merano, Italy<sup>267</sup>

<sup>265</sup> See, Ane Pilegaard, 'Material Proximity; Experimenting with Material Strategies in Spatial Exhibition Design' in *Museum Worlds: Advances in Research* 3 2015: 69-85.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, p.73.

<sup>267</sup> The garden to a historic castle provides access to a range of sensory stimuli and encourages visitors to indulge in sensory experiences, or, perhaps, prepares them for this assault on the senses.

At liberty to explore beyond the interpretative confines of curatorial authorities and interrogate the cracked, the worn, the gritty, the smooth, the cold and warm, the bright, the hard and soft, the pungent and aqueous materials they were *present with*, some participants did so hesitantly, others more eagerly but, all, nonetheless, reached for, picked up, handled, rubbed, stroked, sniffed, sucked, licked, chewed and swallowed liquids, powders, pebbles, parchment, pigments and so on. If, behind glass *MS210* remained out of participants' reach and beyond their grasp, 'exploded', its materials became available to every sensory mode of engagement. 'It was interesting' said one participant, 'because you don't really consider things like the sound that the parchment makes, or what it feels like or anything, because you know it's behind glass and you're not meant to touch it. [It] was interesting remembering that there is all this kind of stuff that isn't just visual, which is also really interesting [but different] from what I am also personally interested in, which is disability and stuff and obviously, if you have got an exhibit on medieval manuscripts it's very easy to assume that if you have someone who is blind or partially sighted, there's nothing you can offer them. Or, possibly, you might be able to make a tactile version of one of the pages or something. I really think that [this] showed there are a lot more options and [there is] a lot more available than just the visual'.<sup>268</sup> In a gesture typical of many participants, one picked up a pot containing 'blood' and rotated it, pivoted it from side to side so that the deep red viscose liquid clung to the inside of the pot as it was swirled around.<sup>269</sup> As the participant brought the pot closer to his/her nose s/he dipped her/his nose towards its contents and inhaled what s/he described tentatively and curiously as the metallic odour of blood.<sup>270</sup> This process of interrogation continued as the blood was swapped for a container of fine, pale grey pumice powder into which the participant dipped his/her fingers and then rubbed them together, further pulverizing the mineral and smoothing it over skin between forefinger, middle finger and thumb.

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<sup>268</sup> Film review Interview JH 17/04/18(a).

<sup>269</sup> Walkalong interview/subcam film ZA 19/04/18.

<sup>270</sup> Walkalong interview/subcam film ZA 19/04/18.

The rewilded approach of this project did not strive to create a particular understanding, or to project a specific meaning. Rather, it foregrounded opportunities for experiences beyond any prescribed narratives and learning outcomes and facilitated the potential for experiential learning, and imaginative and aroused responses. This is the interpretive equivalent of ecological rewilding rejecting the preservation of a fixed state of heathland or meadow and standing back to let nature decide.

#### **vi. Bodily aware**

The 'space plan' of the room, the environment of encounter, was largely predetermined. Certain items of furniture were immovable in the oblong room, which had no windows. There were limited lighting options, but the overhead lights could be turned on and off, and lamps added mood and ambience. There were no way-markings, but routes all around the drawered cabinet were accessible. Despite the modest size of the room and the limitations on traversing the room presented by its permanent fixtures and fittings, it, nonetheless, opened up opportunities for connections, which Merleau-Ponty identifies as being between affect and movement; that is, that which is felt and that which is acquired. In practice, the methodology employed did not enable the intense focus on movement and mobility necessary to unpick the extent to which performances were kinetically geared to the environment, and on whether gestures were universal and innate, or whether they were accultured, conventional and acquired. On reflection, third person filming might have provided this additional dimension. In the event, however, some participants were clearly aware that they were research subjects being observed. The likelihood is that broader bodily actions and more detailed, subtle facial gestures, for example, were a combination of biological autonomy, training and personal experiences.<sup>271</sup> One participant described how my presence validated his/her actions: 'I didn't even know I was curious about some of the aspects. But it was great that you (referring to me, as the researcher) were there... I wonder though, if there was no-one there, and I was in a museum; I don't know if I would engage as much as I did. Because it was almost like I had a guide to,

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<sup>271</sup> See Carrie Noland's discussion of this in relation to artist, Bill Viola's filmic gesturing in Nolan, *Embodied Agency* (pp.85-90).



you know, work through all the different elements and, erm, it, yeah, it was almost like having, not a babysitter, but yeah...What's another word for a guide? A guardian. Yeah, you (me, as the researcher) were like the guardian of the experience'.<sup>272</sup> Is this sense of being 'guided' an accurate reflection of what happened? Upon watching the walkalong interview it was apparent that very few questions were actually answered. So perhaps it was simply the impression of being accompanied by a validating source, who was 'in the know', that generated this notion of being guided, permitted and cared for through the experience of the encounter. Most participants looked back frequently to me for confirmation that what they were doing was okay or that what they were about to do was acceptable.<sup>273</sup>

### **vii. Wayfaring and navigation**

In the same way that, as George Monbiot points out, our traversals of conserved landscapes are highly modulated, display spaces typically feature pathways along which visitors are directed and that they are expected to follow.<sup>274</sup> Interpretive spaces rarely 'stress the role of the carnal human body', or encourage us to express and process our emotions. An important purpose of design and display features within display spaces, as Johan Idema notes, is to direct human bodies through exhibitions in a certain, culturally pre-determined fashion, to control the relationship between people and objects, and to facilitate prescribed smooth, uncomplicated transit through and around the space.<sup>275</sup>

Perhaps in an expression of the cultural determinism that Idema implies is at work in gallery spaces, on entering the displayscape, participants typically stood and dwelled at the threshold and looked at and listened to the audio-visual screens. The pervasive presence of the visual and auditory features of the displayscape, coupled with its ubiquitous and familiar appearance, which was similar to interpretive spaces of all kinds, acted to orient participants within the interpretive environment. Some participants were confused and frustrated on entering the displayscape and being told

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<sup>272</sup> Film review interview OQ 25/04/18(a).

<sup>273</sup> For example, Walkalong interview EG 16/04/18(a) and Walkalong interview GC 24/04/18(a).

<sup>274</sup> See, George Monbiot, *Feral*, (London: Penguin, 2014).

<sup>275</sup> Johan Idema 'Introduction', *How to Visit an Art Museum*, (Amsterdam: BIS Publishers, 2017), (Unpaginated).

that there was no linear path to follow. One, for instance, replied: 'No? OK! I don't know!'

With no wayfinding or conceptual guidance, the two large screens and their audio provided a beacon, a safe haven of familiarity: 'At first, it's a familiar concept so I went straight to it...' said one respondent, reflecting on their apprehension on entering the room. Another noted, 'I think I started watching the video waiting for explanations; 'So what am I doing here?' 'What is this?'<sup>276</sup> On the one hand, participants may have been expressing a sense of complacency about the passive object in vitrine - ubiquitous in interpretive displays of all kinds - but, on the other, displaying a sense of hesitancy and uncertainty, borne of the strange and unfamiliar, full-size calf vellum suspended nearby. These contradictory feelings may both have been factors that, encouraged participants to eschew both the manuscript in vitrine and the vellum and, instead, focus on the sounds and images carried by the digital audio-visual.<sup>277</sup> The digital combined conversancy – all participants were familiar with this technology and with it as a mode of interpretation - with action, moving images and sonic interest. 'At first, I didn't know what it, that, was', explained one participant, looking back at his/her initial actions, 'and then, "oh, OK", I think this is where I start because the voice from the audio was speaking in, whatever the language was. I think that was when it started speaking in English and my ears picked it up'.<sup>278</sup> However, the audio-visual also emerged as go to features within the realm of the displayscape because of expectations about information emanating from the audio and imagery: 'I think if I hadn't necessarily started with the digital tv screen, for instance, I wouldn't have felt the same. Like, if I'd started looking at scans of the images, for instance, or maybe with the drawers, I might not have felt that same sense of engagement, so it was kind of getting into the environment first and then exploring within that'.<sup>279</sup> The visual digital features of the rewilded displayscape, probably because of their close proximity to the

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<sup>276</sup> Film review interview SM23/04/18(a).

<sup>277</sup> Walk along and film review interviews, GC 24/04/18, 14/04/18(a) referred to the familiar format of audio visual content.

<sup>278</sup> Film review interview SW 23/04/18(b).

<sup>279</sup> Film review interview SM 23/04/18(a).

‘material objects’ within the space, served as a ‘triangulation point’ for most participants as their encounter progressed.

If the traditional museum environment provides a structure through which movement can be controlled and contained, the slightly ‘bewildering woodland’ of this project’s display space provoked participants to decide their own actions and movements. In the absence of textual or verbal instructions and information, participants were compelled to seek out, or forage, for sources of information. Jay Rounds’ ‘Optimal Foraging Theory’ posits that the ‘curiosity driven museum visitor is analogous to that of an animal foraging in the wild’.<sup>280</sup> However, if Rounds’ likening of the museum visitor to an animal of the wild implies something carnal, his theory in fact centres on foraging within the museum setting as a cognitive, non-tactile information gathering process. But it is important to remember that in ecological terms foraging is a fundamentally embodied activity – it is about bodily movement, grasping and ingesting. And, in an environment without instructive text panels and directive headphones, embodied curiosity, the urge to physically ‘rootle around’, flourished: ‘What would it feel like? Feel like to touch it?’<sup>281</sup> Moving amongst the multiplicity of the disseminated objects and materials was to move fleshly within a material environment that continually engaged bodies, distracting and repulsing the participants – smells attracted them to unfamiliar textures, peculiar shapes prevailing on them to make a path, around, through and between stuff.

Museums and other interpretive settings, as Idema points out, typically foster mono-directional and slow, single-paced embodied behaviours in which subject and object are clearly defined and distinct.<sup>282</sup> While minor digressions and detours are acceptable, the general flow of progression from entry point to exit is the norm. This study’s displayscape became more like a vortex of motility, in which participants walked back and forth, stepping to the side, forward, back, bending, kneeling, twisting, turning, ducking behind and returning to whence they came, combined with reaching, touching

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<sup>280</sup> Jay Rounds, ‘Strategies for the Curiosity Driven Museum Visitor’ in *Curator* 47/4, October 2004, 389-412 (p.394).

<sup>281</sup> Wal along interview UA 19/04/18(a).

<sup>282</sup> Johan Idema, ‘introduction’, *How to Visit an Art Museum*, (Amsterdam: BIS Publishers, 2017) (unpaginated).

and sniffing, and tasting. Manoeuvrings, repositioning, relocations, passages and actions were defining elements of the experience for some participants. As one pointed out, 'It really...works to *move* through all those things...'.<sup>283</sup> The experiential mode of knowing took precedence over any overlaid interpretive meanings.<sup>284</sup> This embodied activity reminds us of artist Anthony Gormley's observation, and a guiding principal of his work, that the human body too, is an object among other objects.<sup>285</sup> Neither within interpretive settings, nor the wider environment, do human bodies exist in the abstract, looking on from outside. We actually inhabit the space with other things.

The implication here is that the notion of *wayfaring* is as desirable and productive within the interpretive setting as conventional ideas around *wayfinding*. If the conventional experience of the exhibition space is of a signed trail from A to B, then this rewilded display was an open-ended landscape without finger posts, animated not by curatorial interpretation, but by the combination of participants' curiosity and the sensory properties of the manuscript materials. 'It was interesting to move, but not necessarily through different stages. I thought the nature of the video and the way the exhibition was constructed - it was non-linear. So, I got a sense of different components and then I actually moved through and found different ways to put those together and just generally, kind of broaden the experience besides, "OK, I'm looking at a book, or pieces of paper or drawings". It was building on that to "what, who made this book?" to, "what were they thinking about?" And, "what's in the book itself?" And putting yourself in that greater experience'.<sup>286</sup> Most obviously this was expressed through bodily movement. Not simply stepping from A to B, participants frequently backtracked and detoured to explore the space and its contents more effectively for them and more intimately. One courageous participant even detoured to follow the lure of the conventionally forbidden ground, the back of the case – the 'dark-side' of the display cabinet: 'This (referring to the display cabinet) was placed centrally, so I could walk all the way around it but, I think sometimes, in displays they are against a

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<sup>283</sup> Film review interview SM 23/04/18(a).

<sup>284</sup> See Robert Mills' discussion of this notion in Derek Jarman's film, 'The Garden' in Mills, Robert, *Derek Jarman's Medieval Modern* (p.132).

<sup>285</sup> Anthony Gormley, in *Imagine: Being Human*, BBC One, 03/11/2015.

<sup>286</sup> Film review interview SM 23/04/18(a).

wall, so you just look at [the manuscript] from the one angle that they've stood it up for. I suppose going around the other side (of the display case) was when I noticed [that] there was an opening (in the slipcase) it (the manuscript) could go inside and that was quite interesting'.<sup>287</sup> More free-style than choreographed, this performance indicates that, if permitted to do so, visitors to interpretive settings will step off the waymarked trail and carve out their own individual routes of discovery. This evokes Carrie Noland's assertion that we should not forget that the human *body* is capable of wielding its own embodied agency: 'subjects make conscious decisions...but [they] also make *motor* decisions...' <sup>288</sup> (author's emphasis). Agency here is being dispersed within the cognitive mind, but also the physical body, or, as Christopher Tilley's puts it, 'perceptual consciousness arises from a body-subject, a knowing body'.<sup>289</sup>

#### **viii. Getting to grips with the drawers**

Foraging and discovery is an embodied act. More than any other element of the display, the four drawers that sat beneath the glass case housing *MS210* exhorted participants to engage in active performance. But first, the drawers had to be discovered and approached. In some cases, despite two labels, one reading, 'Open me!' and the other imploring, 'Touch me!', the drawers eluded participants. This, it seems, was primarily because they were unexpected features in an interpretive setting for adults and because, while pulling open drawers and handling objects may be familiar to younger audiences, it is not normal etiquette for adults to pull and push stuff in displays of manuscripts. Moreover, drawers are typically used to store and conceal objects out of sight and out of reach. Within interpretive settings, contends Dudley, this lends them an 'aura of ambiguity'.<sup>290</sup> In this study, the design and colour of the drawer unit probably reinforced such a sense of ambiguity. The back, sides and drawer fronts were all the same colour and the grips were subtly lipped and not distinct, exposed handles. Consequently, they did not present a clear invitation to transgress the divides between 'curator and visitor', 'museum and outside'. 'I didn't

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<sup>287</sup> Post encounter interview SW 23/04/18(b).

<sup>288</sup> Carrie Noland, *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2010), (p.2).

<sup>289</sup> Christopher Tilley, 'From Body to Place to Landscape', in *The Materiality of Stone: Explorations in Landscape Phenomenology*, (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 1-12.

<sup>290</sup> Sandra Dudley 'What's in the Drawer?' in *The Senses and Society*, (2014), 9:3, 296-309, (p.299).

quite know what to do with myself', said one participant on reflection. 'So, I know that drawers had things like, "touch me" and "open me", but the things on the table were still quite...I'm kinda [sic] used to stately homes where there's the "do not touch" signs. So, things are made to look really pretty and, even if it's a demonstration of things, they don't really want them messing about with'.<sup>291</sup> In ecological terms this correlates with the categorization of certain landscapes for public use and those ringfenced for experts and rare species to inhabit. When the signs denoting the boundaries weather and disappear, and the fence falls into disrepair it is not always clear where one area ends and the other begins. In the former space we tend to know what to expect, but in the latter habitat what will we find? Should we be there? Will we damage the carefully balanced eco-system that, we are given to believe, depends on boundaries of human making?

In addition, opening and exploring the drawers necessitated a conscious re-orientation of the whole body: a bending of the spine, a flexing of the knees, and squatting or sitting on the floor. Exhibiting essentially surface qualities, the screens, vitrine and vellum all inhabited a similar level of elevation and orientation and could be engaged with visually and haptically while standing upright. The drawers added new dynamic potential to the displayscape and an extra dimension to the proprioceptive possibilities for the participants. Participants had to consider shifting from a standing position, which is conventional in galleries, to at the very least a bending position, and, to open the bottom most drawer, they had to squat down or sit, positions probably not often encountered in the galleries displaying 'remarkable manuscripts'. As Idema points out, the code of behaviour in most museums and galleries eschews encouraging whole body gestures.<sup>292</sup> If bodily movement is personally expressive, it is also culturally shaped. Participants were pulled between the 'flesh of performance' and the 'carapace of routine'.<sup>293</sup> Some drawers opened more easily and smoothly than others, and where at first the drawer resisted being pulled open, some participants readily abandoned their efforts and moved on to the next one, hoping it might be more compliant and

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<sup>291</sup> Film review transcript DdC 24/04/18(b).

<sup>292</sup> Johan Idema, *How to Visit an Art Museum*, (Amsterdam: BIS Publishers, 2017) and also author's experience at the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam and Gropius Bau, Berlin.

<sup>293</sup> Carrie Nolan, *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2010), (p.7).

submit to a light, polite, pull. One participant, for example, said that she/he gave up trying to open one drawer after one attempt because he/she found it 'was quite hard to open'.<sup>294</sup>

If exerting real physical effort in the context of an interpretive space seemed incongruous to some participants, as Dudley points out, it is likely that another factor was also at play in this scenario. The muscular heaving open of resistant drawers in a museum may, she suggests, be perceived by some visitors as tantamount to an act of trespass.<sup>295</sup> A sense of the illicit can adhere to such levels of kinaesthetic accessibility. Some participants were clearly uncertain, perhaps even anxious about physically breaching the boundaries of convention. In traditional ocular centric static regimes of display, we are not used to things moving, flexing and detaching.<sup>296</sup> Only on being encouraged by me did those participants who were initially reluctant to express muscular force, return and try again, and pull harder. Thereafter, in an expression of proprioceptive awareness and kinaesthetic confidence in foraging, participants' arms reached out, their torsos tilted, and their hands laced on the lips of the steel drawers, touching, tugging and pulling. When the drawer did yield and thrust open towards the participant it was a moment of excitement and anticipation, mixed with anxiety, because something had come loose and moved! With their ambiguity, drawers also harboured intrigue: 'Do these open?' enquired one participant hesitantly yet curiously approaching the drawers. 'Ah, yes!' s/he exclaimed with what appeared to be a mix of relief, surprise and expectation. Then, slowly, seemingly with eager anticipation, s/he pulled open the drawer.<sup>297</sup>

Rather aptly, Dudley uses the term '*terra incognita*' to describe drawers in galleries at the Pitt Rivers Museum. We might say that the drawers themselves are 'islands' of 'unpredictability'.<sup>298</sup> Once it is realized that the drawers are there, accessible and openable, they become loaded with possibilities and filled with anticipation. The

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<sup>294</sup> Film review transcript CM 24/04/18(b).

<sup>295</sup> Sandra Dudley, 'What's in the Drawer?' in *The Senses and Society*, (2014), 9:3, 296-309, (p.299).

<sup>296</sup> This is demonstrated in the subcam footage taken by participants and through observations of participants' who expressed hesitant, uncertain behaviour and actions, seemingly lacking in confidence, about engaging in embodied activities and using physical effort within the displayscape.

<sup>297</sup> Walkalong interview JH 17/04/18.

<sup>298</sup> Sandra Dudley, 'What's in the Drawer?' in *The Senses and Society*, (2014), 9:3, 296-309, (p.299).

opening of the drawers also evokes a notion of ‘threshold tension’; a sense that one is on the verge, on the threshold of knowing/unknowing. What comes next? What is in here? One participant, for instance, said that this was an important element of their experience ‘because you know that there is something inside, but you don’t know what it is about’.<sup>299</sup> In such an instance the drawers themselves become active collaborators in the process of exploration and interaction. They ‘held’, as one participant put it, ‘the keys to discovery’.<sup>300</sup> Dudley suggests that ‘one’s first opening of a drawer is likely to be a more surprising, *qua* opening, than any subsequent openings’.<sup>301</sup> Not only is this due to the novelty of the activity but, also because there is an ‘explosive’ aspect to opening the first drawer, a ‘gasp’ moment. While the novelty of opening the first drawer might have been diminished subsequently, this was sometimes countered by a heightened sense of anticipation, built upon what had been found in the previous drawers: ‘I think on opening each drawer initially [there] was a sense of, “OK, what is this drawer about?” And sometimes it was a sense of surprise and it was very clearly like different themes. Some of it was about materials, some of it was about the process of actually making the manuscript, and just kind of, moving through those aspects of it’.<sup>302</sup> Indeed, often it was the bottom drawer, frequently the last to be opened, which elicited the most audible gasps and pronounced gestures. ‘And this drawer was quite interesting!’ exclaimed one participant, watching himself on playback opening the bottom and final drawer. ‘I was smelling them (jars of pigment) for some reason as well’, commented the participant laughing at his/her own actions, ‘but I was looking, and I was tapping to see how fine the grains were and things. And the ink, I think, when I picked it up and was looking at how well it runs. I was not sure what these were (referring to the oak galls). I would assume it was something where the pigments or, whatever, came from. Crushed them up or something? But I was not sure what they were. Seeds of some kind? And I was surprised by some of those colours!’<sup>303</sup>

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<sup>299</sup> Film review transcript CM 24/04/8(b).

<sup>300</sup> Comment made in post-encounter questionnaire re. intensity of digital content. OQ 25/04/18.

<sup>301</sup> Sandra Dudley, ‘What’s in the Drawer?’ in *The Senses and Society*, (2014), 9:3, 296-309, (p.300).

<sup>302</sup> Film review interview SM 23/04/18(a).

<sup>303</sup> Film review interview SW 23/04/18(b).



Once opened, the drawers seemed to recede from the participants' awareness, in the same way that within a book the substrate of a page tends to disappear below the text. Instead, their attention was directed to the objects contained within the drawers (see figures 39 and 40). The confined interior of the drawers created an intimate environment that encouraged participants to reach across and touch, to follow-up their close looking with touching, sniffing and even stooping to taste the material substances. To some degree, the physical relationship between drawer and participants was akin to that between the participants and the digital object on the iPad. In the same way that the digital object liberated participants to shrug off the convention of reading text left to right and instead follow any point of interest, so whatever material detail or sensory stimuli provoked participants' interest could be attended to, and participants' sensory fancies could be indulged.



Figure 39: Manuscript materials: contents of the drawers



Figure 40: Animal, mineral and vegetable: manuscript materials

For one or two participants getting down on the floor and squatting low to get at the drawers was embraced,<sup>304</sup> either as a comfortable or pragmatic act, or, perhaps, because, like heaving open and pushing closed unmarked drawers, it was a welcome opportunity to express mild resistance to behavioural and gestural norms. In most cases, the top drawer was the first one to be opened and participants worked down in order. However, one participant explained why she/he had subverted the norm and opened the bottom drawer first: 'Because my experience of museums is that you always do the first and the last and you miss out the middle and, or, you get fatigued by the time you get to the end, and I wanted to know what the end was – like cheating on a book (chuckles). Because I was by myself, I didn't feel like I needed to... When you look at pull-out drawers elsewhere, you only look at the top one and I felt like I had a bit more time to spend, but I didn't necessarily want to do it linearly'.<sup>305</sup> But, then came the whip in the tail, revealing perhaps the extent to which our cultural conditioning influences our actions in interpretive settings. The participant expressed some misgivings about eschewing the conventional choreography and order because s/he thought that s/he might have missed the meaning traditionally supplied by an authoritative narrative: 'But now I kind of regret doing it that way round because I wonder if there was a better logic, or a story to it had I done it the other way round.

<sup>304</sup> Subcam footage taken during encounter DdC 24/04/18.

<sup>305</sup> Film review interview DdC 24/04/18(a).

But because I was going in a bit blind, I didn't know where I was going to end up,  
so...'.<sup>306</sup>

Coupled with the promise of discovering what was within the drawers was the kinaesthetic satisfaction that the act of pulling them open and pushing them closed seemed to hold in itself. Even for those participants who were slow to engage with the drawers, it soon became apparent that some enjoyment inhered in the flow of movement that was bending, squatting, kneeling and standing up, coupled with the exertion of pulling and pushing the drawers. Dudley has identified this as 'a proprioceived pleasure in the bodily performance of the physical opening process *itself*'. The quotidian familiarity of opening and closing drawers made this an activity that participants were proficient in and comfortable with, but the context presented a sense of novelty. The flow and slide of the drawers, their heft, resistance and compliance, the sonic rhythm of click, slide and clunk, engendered a cadence in participants' proprioception and an emerging self-awareness of being in, and journeying through, a landscape of anticipation. In one instance, once a participant had realised the drawers were legitimate places of exploration and had overcome her/his hesitancy about interrogating them, s/he began an almost rhythmic corporeal to and fro, up and down, in and out, between the drawers. This is not too far removed from the sense we might get from walking through an unfamiliar woodland: apprehension and physical awkwardness slowing giving way to a growing bodily self-awareness and flow as we move through and between trees, over the ground as it rises and dips, through puddles and streams, climbing over and ducking under fallen branches. Moving from the top drawer to the second in a vertical sequence, s/he declared: 'Yeah, that one's strong!' On encountering the urine scent taper. 'Not the most pleasant, but I have smelt worse' (Chuckles). Then the participant pulled open drawers, closed drawers, moved between them, paused to gaze upon the contents, and assessed them visually and olfactorily, one at a time, finally ending this foraging phase to dwell on the pigments in the bottom drawer. Then, suddenly s/he flexed her/his knees and stood, returned to the top drawer and opened it, exclaiming: 'Right, I'm going to be brave and try this! (The 'liquid ink' mix). Shall I just drink from it, or

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<sup>306</sup> Film review interview DdC 24/04/18(a).

spoon? She/he ingests while looking away towards the hung vellum.<sup>307</sup> This is interesting, not only insofar as it shows how the participant's physical reluctance and then willingness progressed in tandem with the sonorous and kinaesthetic motion of the drawers, but also because it exposes the process in which, it appears, s/he acquired the courage and confidence to drink and taste a liquid which s/he had previously declined.

The subcam filming was crucial in highlighting the objects and material details within the drawers that became the focus of the participants' attention, and which things were disregarded. It would seem that the foraging process through the other drawers; assessing smells, sounds and sights, informed his/her decision and changed his/her mind, provoking what this participant perceived as an unconventional act within an interpretive setting and thus enabling a new experience to be had.

In an evocation of Robert McFarlane's description of revisiting a once familiar landscape, the motion of using the drawers triggered the 'autonoetic consciousness' of participants, whose muscles and memories were steeped in the activity of pulling and pushing drawers - actions that formed part of their learnt gestural vocabulary. Compare this to McFarlane's recollection: 'My legs preserved a ghost sense of stride, a muscle memory of repeated action...as if the terrain over which I had passed had imprinted its profile into my foot, like a mark knuckled into soft clay'.<sup>308</sup> In both cases there is an appreciation of the reassurance of, and comfort in the familiar (familiar objects and embodied actions), yet this seems to be shadowed by a spectre of excited apprehension cast by a sense of the anomalous and aberrant. Walking the line between the familiar and the unfamiliar infused the opening and closing of the drawers with an emerging aesthetic in which participants displayed 'effort qualities' in their respective attempts to find their way through the somehow familiar, yet bewildering landscape. Each gesture simultaneously exposed the uniqueness and repeatability of gestures. Movements were 'tentative or firm', rigid or flowing, 'lethargic or rushed'.<sup>309</sup> In observing participants' actions and bodily movements, it

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<sup>307</sup> Walkalong interview AR 17/04/18.

<sup>308</sup> Robert McFarlane, *The Old Ways: A journey on foot*, (London: Penguin, 2013), p.53.

<sup>309</sup> A number of subcam films taken by participants revealed this. For example, AR, SW, GP, EG.

became apparent that kinaesthetic sensation is immersed in a flux of cultural, biological and personal exigencies. Gesture, Carrie Nolan asserts, is a 'nodal point' where culture (the imposition of bodily techniques), neurobiology (the mechanics of the human sensorimotor apparatus) and embodied experience (kinaesthetic experience specific to an individual body) overlap and inform one another. This is a fluid informative process. In the context of an interpretive setting, the gestural meaning differs from the meaning that can be ascribed to opening a drawer at home, for instance. However, the rewilded displayscape presented opportunities for a wider range of individual proprioceptive responses and gestural freedom. The gestural performance of opening drawers in this context not only foregrounded the interdependence of the subject and object (the participants and drawers) in the process of discovery, but also signified a dissonance compared to normative physical behaviour and rhythm in museal environments.<sup>310</sup> Participants overcame the sense of incongruity and, enticed by the illicit and the curious, succumbed to the call to pull and to push.<sup>311</sup> This is the nucleus of what Dudley describes as the 'corporeal dynamic element to the museum visit that for many people is new and enlivening'.<sup>312</sup>

## ix Conclusion

This chapter has explored participants' corporeal presence both within the displayscape and in relation to the other material objects with which they inhabited the space. It shows us that while visual engagement was an important aspect of formulating understandings of manuscript materials, and itself an embodied activity, given the opportunity, participants not only employed their other sensory modalities to interrogate manuscript materialities, but found also that the stimuli ignited by intimate multi-sensorial interactions with manuscript materials could be potent tools in creating deeper understandings. Most participants were unaccustomed to engaging in physical activities within an interpretive setting, which brought apprehensions, often compounded by the lack of directions and instructions within the displayscape.

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<sup>310</sup> Rees Leahy (2012), (p.85), quoted in Dudley, Sandra, 'What's in the Drawer?' in *The Senses and Society*, (2014), 9:3, 296-309, (p.303).

<sup>311</sup> See Sharon Blakey and Liz Mitchell, 'Unfolding: A multisensorial dialogue in "material time"' in, *Material Thinking* Volume 17, (p.6), for their discussion of this idea around the unfolding of a piece of cloth.

<sup>312</sup> 'What's in the Drawer?' in *The Senses and Society*, (2014), 9:3, 296-309, (p.303).

However, this uncertainty was accompanied by feelings of excitement and anticipation at the prospect of new adventures and surprise discoveries.

## **7. Confusing encounters**

### **i. Introduction**

However, if this element of the experience was new and enlivening for some participants, for many, it was also confusing and frustrating. As might happen if we step away from a waymarked trail and into a forest, we can soon become lost in the unknown, having to find our own way via our own sensory modalities. Such an experience can be packed with opportunities for discovery but, it can also prove overwhelming and disconcerting. In this chapter, we investigate how some participants looked for the familiar and sought expert reassurance and guidance in an unorthodox context. Some participants' reactions suggested that this uncertainty was underpinned by concerns around doing things wrongly, indicating that there is a perception of a right and wrong way to behave within a museum, gallery or library. In addition, objects dislocated and re-contextualised beyond the confines of the manuscript's binding instilled a sense of unease for some participants. Surprising discoveries, if sometimes pleasing and revealing, could also be repelling and concealing. The unanticipated potential wealth of sensory stimuli was another factor in destabilizing the experience for some participants, who indicated a feeling of being overwhelmed. This was not an orthodox staged, layered and stepped encounter with manuscripts, which involves us seeing, reading and then moving on to the next featured object. Finding one's own way in a rewilded displayscape, as this chapter shows, can be difficult, challenging and frustrating.

### **ii. Wayfinding disorientation**

The reactions of most of the participants in this research study suggest that in the absence of text panels or audio guides to provide historical, contextual information or wayfinding, as visitors to interpretive settings, we can struggle to 'understand' and find our bearings.<sup>313</sup> Indeed, on entering the space, the majority of the participants paused and expressed some sense of uncertainty about how to navigate and behave 'because

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<sup>313</sup> This has long been a criticism levelled at museums of modern art, which often eschew labels and leave visitors to create their own meanings.

there was little text to go with it'.<sup>314</sup> Despite most of the participants affirming that they knew they had a 'green light' to move around freely, most expressed a physical reluctance to move *into* and *in* the displayscape. 'But is there a path that I have to follow? No?' exclaimed one participant on entering the displayscape. All of the participants paused, perhaps, among other things, reflecting on past experiences of conventional patterns of behaviour experienced in interpretive spaces. One participant offered an explanation as to why s/he had hesitated after entering the room: 'It's just, er, I dunno, you might have wanted me to look at it in, like, a particular way'.<sup>315</sup> Their initial embodied actions revealed socialized behaviour, adherence to customary ways and conventional etiquette in interpretive environments and an uncertain, hesitant approach to haptic engagement: 'No, I dunno', replied a participant when asked if s/he felt free to explore. 'It doesn't specifically say, so...Something saying, "you can touch this", otherwise you don't want to touch it and mess something up'.<sup>316</sup> 'I suppose when I came in it was the initial kind of, you know, like in a museum, you look. At first, I was quite hesitant to touch things because I suppose that is just your usual way you act in that sort of setting'.<sup>317</sup> Deep-seated cultural conventions about the right and wrong ways to behave physically in interpretive spaces were revealed by another participant's worry: 'I don't know, I'm just worried I am going to do it wrong'.<sup>318</sup> In the absence of other visitors to follow and without any chronological narratives, standard museum etiquette was obsolete, and with no directed pathway to tread, it was common for participants to remain for a few moments on the margins before moving bodily into the centre of the display environment.

Typical of most participants' behaviour, after a few seconds dwelling in the centre weighing up options, one walked across to the vellum on the frame and then to look at the table-top contents and then moved on again to the other screen.<sup>319</sup> All but one of the participants remained in the front of the objects in the room and appeared reluctant to venture around the sides and the back of things. This action we could

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<sup>314</sup> Film review interview EJ 18/04/18(b).

<sup>315</sup> Film review interview EJ 18/04/18(b).

<sup>316</sup> Walkalong interview EG 16/04/18(a).

<sup>317</sup> Film review interview SW 23/04/18(b).

<sup>318</sup> Film review interview EJ 18/04/18(b).

<sup>319</sup> Walkalong interview transcript EJ 18/04/18.



interpret as an example of information ‘triage’ in action - spending a few moments with each object, pondering which is most likely to yield most reward. However, it may also be a good example of how Gertrude Stein’s advice on how to behave in a museum still pervades in interpretive settings; that is, simply to remain quietly composed and ‘walk slowly but keep walking’.<sup>320</sup> Clearly, participants were hesitant and reluctant to take unconventional physical action within the interpretive setting, not unlike a rambler contemplating walking off the beaten track but stopping short, apprehensive about walking into the wild wood – the unknown.

Akin to being *within* an uncertain, unfamiliar, ‘wild’ environment, some participants found the intensity and holistic nature of the multisensory experience overwhelming and disorienting. Describing his/her experience, one participant said: ‘Erm, intense. Sometimes confusing. I think there are a lot of things here happening at the same time. Yes, I think it was kind of confusing because I was trying to think and since you see, of course, like the - I don’t know how to call it - the installation, and then you open the drawers and you try to, you know, make some considerations, but there was always a voice, so you can’t because it was always there. So, sometimes I wanted to listen and then not, because I was thinking. But then, I didn’t know what the small balls (oak galls) were (and) then I saw them on the screen, so it was kind of helpful. But sometimes it made me confused at the same time’.<sup>321</sup> Here, multiple sensory stimuli pulled and competed for the participant’s attention and made it difficult for him/her to draw conclusions and to know more about what it was s/he was encountering.

Participants were ostensibly in control of what they engaged with within the display space, except for the sonic content in the room. One participant implied that the auditory content worked to prevent her/him from getting a sense of being in a past time and place: ‘It’s always nice to see, like, what they used, but at the same time I was still very much here and like, I dunno, ‘coz [sic] I never like it when there’s a video in the background because, like, I find that, like, annoying and distracting. Maybe that’s just me not liking noise? (Laughs). ‘No, I’d say it was nice but if I had it, I would like it

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<sup>320</sup> Gertrude Stein cited in Idema, Johan, *How to Visit an Art Museum*, (Amsterdam: BIS Publishers, 2017), (unpaginated).

<sup>321</sup> Post-encounter interview CM 24/04/18(a).

with like a button or something'.<sup>322</sup> Participants had no means of turning the sound down or off. This might be an aspect of the rewilded displayscape to consider further in the future to enable participants to control the audio. On the other hand, however, in a rewilded environment, we have little control ourselves over the 'hum of the world'.

This sense of being immersed, slipping into one of being overwhelmed, was alluded to by another participant: 'I'm getting distracted a lot by – I am liking the video and I am getting bits about being (gazes at film) – I am finding it quite overwhelming, despite the fact that there's not actually much in this room at the moment'.<sup>323</sup> Within interpretive settings, while pressing a button or putting on headphones to listen for selected information or narratives is relatively commonplace, surround sound is not.<sup>324</sup> The sonic content in the rewilded displayscape was not instructive, or informative in the sense that it conveyed facts or contextual details. Rather, it was non-linear, ethereal, anachronistic at times and ambient at others, mysterious, and even eerie, like the sound of the wind in the trees. The vocal presence in the rewilded displayscape brought ancient, unfamiliar languages that contributed to this sense of uncertainty, dissonance and disorientation: 'I think that there are a lot of stimuli, as I said, so, but possibly the most confusing one for me was the voice.'<sup>325</sup> Something was being said, and it was heard by this participant but not understood. This is an unfamiliar scenario in most interpretive settings.

### **iii. Dependency on external authorities**

What we are more familiar with, it seems, is being guided, directed, and having things clarified and elucidated. The majority of the participants in this research study, therefore, expressed some degree of apprehension, uncertainty and/ or frustration when exploring the displayscape and its components in the absence of a curatorial authority to 'speak' for the manuscript.<sup>326</sup> One participant, for example, lamented: 'I

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<sup>322</sup> Film review interview EJ 18/04/18(a).

<sup>323</sup> Walkalong interview DdC 24/04/18(a).

<sup>324</sup> IWM North employs sonic immersion but at designated, spaced intervals.

<sup>325</sup> Post-encounter interview CM 24/04/18 (a).

<sup>326</sup> Simon Knell makes the point that objects are 'mute' unless humans make them 'speak'. See, Knell, Simon 'Museums, reality and the material world', in Simon Knell, (ed.), *Museums in the Material World*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 1-28, (p.7).

didn't necessarily know what I could touch and play with...For me, personally, I like to know the history of something, I like to know what it is actually about.'<sup>327</sup> 'I don't know what the story is. I don't know where it [the manuscript] is from. I don't know why it was written!'<sup>328</sup> This response is indicative of our tendency within interpretive settings to rely on other people's views, typically through text panels, labels or catalogues or audio guides, to explain the whats, whys and meanings of the objects we encounter in exhibitions. Indeed, some participants clearly laboured with frustration at the lack of informative panels and craved the kind of guidance museums typically provide.<sup>329</sup> 'I kinda wish I could know what it (the manuscript) meant', said one participant reflecting on her actions on entering the displayscape. 'It is the words and the meaning. There's a bit fighting in me between what it (the manuscript) is as an object and what that means and the touch and its history as part of what it is'.<sup>330</sup> The subcam film revealed that while the participant said this, s/he was using hand gestures, mimicking the form of a codex and its movements in opening, corporeally trying to understand the object.

The displayscape did not contain any translation of the text contained within *MS210*, a fact that caused obvious perplexity for some. One participant considered the unfamiliar text: 'When I was looking at, erm, the iPad thing, (digital object) I don't know what it was, but the writing, it was just weird. Obviously, that's not how we write. And when I was looking at that, it's made me feel like – I didn't understand it but it's just – I don't know how to describe it. It was weird. I was reading it, but I just didn't know what was there'.<sup>331</sup> While, for this participant the textual language in *MS210* was incomprehensible, what is interesting and significant is that this seems to have obscured his/her perception of the physical object carrying that text. S/he could not, it seems, see beyond the puzzling text to the materiality beneath and around. The recedence of the material substance of the manuscript may have been exacerbated by

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<sup>327</sup> Post encounter interview GP 16/04/18(a).

<sup>328</sup> Post encounter interview GP 16/04/18(a).

<sup>329</sup> Scott Thorp argues that museums normalize experiences by providing information in which many visitors become more engrossed than they do in the objects and artwork themselves. 'How Curious People Visit Museums' <http://scottthorp.wordpress.com/2015/12/01/how-curious-people-visit-museums/> Viewed 17/05/18.

<sup>330</sup> Walkalong interview DdC 24/04/18(a).

<sup>331</sup> Post-encounter interview ZA 19/04/18a.

the digital form of the *MS210* with which s/he was engaging; however, this sat right next to the 'real' manuscript in the display case. Similarly, another participant lamented the dearth of contextual information, despite the material presence of objects: 'I think it's interesting because even touching and holding things, there's still a disassociation between that and the manuscript itself because I'd just like to know more about it in general. I'd say, more about the history of it. Where's it from? Why is it here? Erm, what meaning did it have...If I knew what meaning it had for the people who wrote it and used it, that would help me find meaning from it.'<sup>332</sup> These participants' preoccupation with the text points to our wider dependence and reliance on textual information within interpretive settings, which can obscure the material form outside and beyond and thereby diminish our chances of meaningful engagement with this physical materiality.

The subcam film also showed other participants searching for information in traditional formats, formats they were familiar with and used to consuming. Being unable to find any wayfinding instructions, or a text-based story, or a linear audio or filmic narrative was, for some, notably disorienting: 'Do I just look around?'<sup>333</sup> 'Am I OK to touch?'<sup>334</sup> One participant turned a full 360 degrees multiple times having entered the room; 'What do I have to do?'<sup>335</sup> The responses indicated that a number of the participants were uncomfortable with trusting their corporeal, sensory experiences of their immediate environment. For instance, one participant stated: 'I think it was very helpful to have drawers but without the explanation maybe it's difficult to get an idea of the object? I don't know if you know what I mean. Like, you can always try to guess and be led by your feelings, but also, in a way, I want to know as well, what, information about the object I am experiencing... Maybe in this case your senses aren't enough to give you an idea about a manuscript'.<sup>336</sup> Such a position, argued the French philosopher, Michel de Montaigne, is symptomatic of 'a deleterious impulse to think that the truth always has to lie far from us, in another climate, in an ancient library, in

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<sup>332</sup> Film and post encounter interviews GP 16/04/18(a).

<sup>333</sup> Walkalong interview AR 17/04/18.

<sup>334</sup> Walkalong interview DdC 24/04/18(a).

<sup>335</sup> Walkalong interview CM 24/04/18(a).

<sup>336</sup> Post-encounter interview CM 24/04/18(a).

the books of people who lived long ago’;<sup>337</sup> or, in the interpretation of experts in the museum or library, for instance. The implication of what Montaigne says is that ‘knowing’ is within much closer reach and open to us all if we attend more to our experiences. But this is not an easy idea, as these further comments from the participants indicate: On having a gustatory opportunity one participant, for example, pondered, ‘Erm, tasting, yes, but I don’t understand why, so, in a way, I cannot really tell if it’s working because I would like to know why I was drinking that drink, [I] never thought about how it would taste, so I thought it was an interesting question’.<sup>338</sup> This participant expressed uncertainty about whether being able to taste helped or enhanced his/her/understanding of the manuscript. It seems likely that this was, in part, because such intimate sensory engagements are rare in interpretive settings generally, let alone in the context of manuscript displays.

A similar reaction came from a participant in response to an olfactory encounter. Considering how a manuscript might smell was certainly a rarity: ‘I can’t say it ever occurred to me’ (how a manuscript might smell). ‘Probably I just had a vague idea of what it might feel like. But I had never thought about what it might smell like.’<sup>339</sup> In this participant’s sensory hierarchy, smell, understandably, given that manuscripts are almost always under glass, was not the go to sense with which to interrogate or interpret them. Another participant said that being able to smell simply puzzled her/him. ‘I had to ask because, like, touching and smelling - if I just don’t know what it is, it doesn’t really help me.’<sup>340</sup> Being free to touch and smell, as well as to look at the assembled materials did not help her/him conclude what it might be or represent:

Researcher: ‘What’s your interpretation of the red liquid?’

Participant: ‘Umm, ink? Dunno.’

Lifts to face. Smells: ‘I dunno, smells bad.’ And puts down the pot.<sup>341</sup>

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<sup>337</sup> Michel de Montaigne cited in Botton de, Alain, *The Consolations of Philosophy*, (London: Penguin, 2014), (p.164).

<sup>338</sup> Post-encounter interview CM 24/04/18(a).

<sup>339</sup> Film review interview EJ 18/04/18(a).

<sup>340</sup> Post-encounter interview EJ 18/04/18(a).

<sup>341</sup> Walkalong interview EJ 18/04/18(a).

The above examples seem to testify that ‘we are’, as Alain de Botton asserts, ‘educated to associate virtue with submission to textual authorities rather than with an exploration of the volumes daily transcribed within ourselves by our perceptual mechanisms’.<sup>342</sup> Yet, academic interpretations, Tilley contends, have no more legitimacy than any other and, ultimately, represent elitist attempts to control the past.<sup>343</sup> In other words, Tilley implies that knowing and understanding are in our own hands – quite literally. To further and deepen our understanding of objects, we have to move beyond semiotics and social values and explore our fundamental, but ever shifting, sensory and bodily experiences in the world of things.<sup>344</sup> He reminds us that we can only experience the world in an embodied fashion, through all of our senses, not solely through sight. Our proprioceptive capacities enable us to encounter and interpret the world around us.

#### **iv. Puzzling deregulated materials**

So, why were participants uncertain, both about finding their way and about creating their own understandings? Along with the unease that accompanied the unfamiliarity of being presented with the liberty to wander and touch within an interpretive environment, another factor seemed to be at play. If ‘exploding’ or ‘deconstructing’ the manuscript materials afforded participants closer physical proximity and sensory access to them, it also created puzzlement and confusion. Some participants’ reactions demonstrated that in ‘dis-assembling’ the object, its material elements became problematized by their isolation and relocation in a way similar to that posited by ‘Thing Theory’.<sup>345</sup> Simply put, once broken away from familiar contexts, associations and uses, things can baffle and frustrate us. Lorraine Daston speaks of the obviousness of objects as they ‘throw themselves in front of us’, ‘sharply-outlined’ and ‘self-evident’.<sup>346</sup> However, this study indicates that while objects that were previously

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<sup>342</sup> Alain de Botton, *The Consolations of Philosophy*, (London: Penguin, 2014), (p.165).

<sup>343</sup> Christopher Tilley and Michael Shanks, *Social Theory and Archaeology*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), (p. 195).

<sup>344</sup> Christopher Tilley, ‘From Body to Place to Landscape’, in *The Materiality of Stone: Explorations in Landscape Phenomenology*, (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 1-127.

<sup>345</sup> Heidi Estes, *Anglo-Saxon Literary Landscapes*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), (pp.150-151).

<sup>346</sup> Lorraine Daston in cited in Paz, James, *Nonhuman Voices in Anglo-Saxon literature and material culture*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), (p.9).

familiar may be physically apprehendable in, say, the form of the hard metal edge of a blade, or the heft and density of a stone, or the shape profile of a cut quill, disassociated and recontextualised these same objects become unfamiliar.

All of the objects featured in this project's displayscape are usually encountered as a physically complete, finished manuscript object. This is the normative mode of encounter when we gaze upon manuscripts, for instance, at the British Library, Bodleian, or British Museum. However, the unrefined disorder manifested in the seemingly random dispersal of objects was the antithesis of the polished surfaces, uniformed signage and hushed, regimented ranks of objects we find in most museum galleries. Released from this ordered, complete state, each object had the potential to be mysterious. Even everyday things could remain stubbornly silent. All of the participants had, for example, encountered stones, plant roots, fragments of wood and bone and grain, but few had ever encountered them individually revealed within the context of a manuscript display. 'What are the stones for?' 'What are these?' said participants picking up wood shavings. And, 'Ugh, what's...?!' 'Are these bones?' were frequent refrains.<sup>347</sup> These questions were commonplace: 'Erm, I dunno what you're looking for...Uh, I had to ask, 'coz like, touching and smelling, if I just don't know what it is, it doesn't really help me!' <sup>348</sup> Evidently perplexed, this participant, like most others, seemed uncomfortable in trusting his/her own non-visual sensory perceptions. Referring to the metal blade scraper in drawer number one, one participant commented: 'In the first drawer...there was this kind of tool ...I have no clue about.'<sup>349</sup>

In releasing manuscripts from the scholarly and curatorial narratives in which they are often manifested as art objects, or religious or historical texts, the rewilded displayscape allowed the manuscript to 'unbecome' - to deregulate and disperse its material substances and reorient and re-permutate with new potentials. The formerly hidden emerged – the 'guts' of the manuscript spilt out: parchment, blood, wooden boards, flax, quills and ink making ingredients, reeking, colourful, audible and haphazard, they emerged in the present, surpassing human classification schemes and

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<sup>347</sup> Walk along interviews EG 16/04/18(a) and GW 24/04/18(b), for example.

<sup>348</sup> See, Sandra Dudley, 'What's in the Drawer?' in *The Senses and Society*, (2014), 9:3, 296-309, (p.301).

<sup>349</sup> Post-encounter interview CM 24/04/18(a).

confounding preconceptions. With no attendant labels, the manuscript's deconstructed materials that confronted the participants formed an unfamiliar assemblage.

Participant: 'So, can I ask you? In this first drawer, what were you aiming for?'

Researcher: *In terms of the materials there?*

Participant: 'In that first drawer, in that top one?'

Researcher: *There's no strict order to the drawers. There is definitely an overlap (of materials) and not necessarily a logical sequence. So, there are...*

Participant: 'See, I was assuming that there was a logical sequence. I was confused why some of the things were in there.'<sup>350</sup>

Looking in drawer three, one participant lamented; 'the corn kernels – I didn't understand why they were there'.<sup>351</sup> Jane Guyer terms these as the 'what and how?' moments that follow the 'moment after surprise'.<sup>352</sup> These moments represent a vacuum, which, for some participants, certainly filled with doubt and uncertainty. The spaces or gaps between objects resisted reading and made it difficult for participants to 'place' the objects. However, as the following participant's comments attest, that vacuum and those spaces also evoked the artists' concept of 'negative space' - those spaces between depicted images, which are often overlooked but which, nonetheless, can create positive shapes and forms that may ignite our curiosity and enhance our understandings: 'Once I started touching the things themselves, I was probably even more curious, I think. I had a more desperate need to know what it was. One thing I was quite curious about; I am still curious about the rocks. Next to the big canvas, the pile of rocks next to it and I'm wondering, what's that for? Is it like a weight? I don't know!'<sup>353</sup> 'So, the roots, were they some kind of turmeric, or?' On picking up and touching, sniffing the Lubanja, s/he said: 'So, there was this one, but I couldn't work out what the white, crystalline stuff was'. Again, the metal blade, wooden handled

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<sup>350</sup> Walkalong interview DdC 24/04/18(a).

<sup>351</sup> Film review transcript SW 23/04/18(b).

<sup>352</sup> Jane Guyer, quoted in Dudley, Sandra 'What's in the Drawer?' in *The Senses and Society*, (2014), 9:3, 296-309, (p.300).

<sup>353</sup> Post-encounter interview UA 19/04/18(a).



tool, proved curious and evasive. Watching him/herself on the subcam film playback, s/he commented: 'So, I recognise it as something for either digging or, oh, no, it's the scraper isn't it, for the...?'<sup>354</sup> In these final words, the participant's visual apprehension triggered his/her kinaesthetic memory, which in turn ignited cognitive understandings, as s/her weaved connections between the materials - metal, parchment - and objects, blades and animals and humans to explain processes.

This approach to the puzzles presented by the 'exploded' manuscript materials and the rewilded displayscape once again evokes the Anglo-Saxon riddles contained in the *Exeter Book*. This prosopopoeic riddle, 'Riddle 26', or, the 'manuscript riddle', challenges its readers or listeners to answer, 'what am I?'<sup>355</sup> The material objects in the riddle change, mutate and morph, attaching and detaching to the finished form of the manuscript in active refusal to 'dissolve easily into human knowledge'.<sup>356</sup>

'...Scraped – fingers folded, shaped, me.

Now the bird's once wind-stiff joy

Darts often to the horn's dark rim,

Sucks wood stain steps back again-

With a quick scratch of power, tracks

Black on my body, points trails.

Shield-boards clothe me and stretched hide,

A skin laced with gold...' <sup>357</sup>

This riddle seems to resonate with the same sense of conundrum and quandary experienced by the participants in this study on encountering the manuscript objects scattered, independent from, yet implicated in the whole manuscript object. Fingering some modern sewn gatherings, one participant commented, 'that's really interesting'.

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<sup>354</sup> Film review interview DdC 24/04/18(b).

<sup>355</sup> 'Old English Riddle 26', *Exeter Book, MS Exeter*, Cathedral Library, 3501, f.107 r-v.

<sup>356</sup> Jane Bennet cited in Paz, James, *Nonhuman Voices in Anglo-Saxon literature and material culture*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), (p.4).

<sup>357</sup> An extract from the 'Old English Riddle 26', *Exeter Book, MS Exeter* translation from William, C., *A Feast of Creatures: Anglo-Saxon Riddle Songs*, (Philadelphia 1982), (p.84) wherein numbered riddle 24.

Her/his friend replied: 'Inside there, you can feel how the string...' His/her sentence was finished for her/him: 'How it's all stitched together'.

And then, 'It's almost like multiple books stitched together, so, like there, when you're not in a centre page, it's different to...'

'I'd never thought about that'.<sup>358</sup>

This participant's puzzled fascination attests to momentary glimpses of revelation followed by feelings of curiosity as the 'unfolding' simultaneously concealed as it revealed. In this tactile interrogation of the folios gathered, folded and sewn, these two participants discovered how the manuscript could be both a single manuscript object and multiple 'mini-manuscripts' at the same time; a notion mirrored in the physical act of turning the pages of a manuscript – the rhythm of folding and unfolding directed by the manuscript's material form. In turning over a page we simultaneously expose and conceal.

Taking this notion into account and considering the vast array of plants, animals and things -incorporated into an assembled manuscript - brings to mind Timothy Morton's concept of the 'hyperobject'. Hyperobjects, in Morton's conceptualisation, are difficult to understand because of their scale and complexity. 'The octopus of the hyperobject emits a cloud of ink as it withdraws from access.' (This is not unlike the ink of a manuscript's text as the substrate recedes from view). 'Hyperobjects are contradictory beasts' and can only be understood, he suggests, through their traces and relationships with other objects.<sup>359</sup> 'Deconstructed', 'deregulated' and exposed, the manuscript, in both its physical and digital manifestations, the ostensibly familiar object of the book, becomes at once revealing and mysterious, known yet defying our knowing. If the manuscript form suggests a ubiquitous and familiar object, its physical materiality, as this study shows, can throw up the unexpected and the mysterious, challenging and thwarting our attempts to know.

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<sup>358</sup> Walkalong interview AT/AB 25/04/18(a).

<sup>359</sup> Timothy Morton cited Estes, Heidi *Anglo-Saxon Literary Landscapes*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), (p.160).

If the manuscript itself is reminiscent of a hyperobject, the notion of a rewilded displayscape with its array of dis-assembled manuscript materials conjures up the 'dada' assemblages of Kurt Schwitters, or the unlikely combinations of found objects assembled by surrealist artists to create surprising or unsettling encounters. 'It's not like paper', one participant ruminated, rubbing the edges of the parchment between his/her fingers; 'feels more like skin, but kind of like dry skin'. Sniffing a scent paper laden with the odour of hide and holding bones, s/he said: 'Uh, what's...?!' and with a snort of disgust s/he put both down. As in a rewilded landscape, the rewilded interpretive setting could supply unexpected, even unpleasant encounters. 'What smell is this?' asked one participant holding the urine scent taper.

Researcher: 'Is it pleasant?'

Participant: 'No! Oh, it smells like really flowery urine. It smells like old lady perfume...I know they used to dye things with urine.'<sup>360</sup>

## **v. Disgust and repel**

These last comments highlight another feature of the rewilded interpretive space, which is as potentially controversial as its ecological counterpart. The 'trophic cascades' proposed in rewilding the landscape present dangers, which were, of course, absent from the rewilded interpretive setting of this research, but the risks of encountering the unpleasant and repellent – physically and emotionally - did pervade the rewilded displayscape of this study. For example, one participant, on being confronted by the calf-sized vellum suspended on a rustic frame, exclaimed: 'Oh! Erm...? May I ask, what is this?' queried one participant waving a hand across in front of the parchment. 'I'm looking at it and...You know when you look at something and you don't know what to do with it?'

Researcher: 'What do you think it is?'

'It looks like when they stretch out the skin, yep. It's gross'.<sup>361</sup>

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<sup>360</sup> Walkalong interview EJ 18/04/18.

<sup>361</sup> Walkalong interview EJ 18/04/18.

Moving and stooping to carefully lift a pot of viscose red liquid, this participant sniffed, pulled back and then bent forward to sniff again: 'It looks like ink but in light of lots of this stuff', s/he said, waving her arm in an arc at the surrounding contents of the room, 'it looks like it's come from animals. Is it meant to represent blood?' With some hesitancy or trepidation, s/he said, 'Gross'.<sup>362</sup> Foregrounding 'multi-sensational engagements with physical objects', while backgrounding textual information, as Dudley argues, 'can enable visitors to respond to objects in their own way'.<sup>363</sup> Overt responses, and expressions of disgust and revulsion, are as valid as a cognitive understandings or polite nods.

'Ooh?!' exclaimed one participant, catching the malodorous whiff of hide and shrinking back, wrinkling up his/her nose. Again, this participant, encountering the 'dry ink' mix,<sup>364</sup> bent forward to smell the substances with a surprising result: 'If I am honest, it makes me think of bodies. It makes me think of archaeology and bones...'.<sup>365</sup> If some participants expressed confusion and uncertainty based on their physical encounters with things in the displayscape, here we have a participant who drew on their sensory information, noting the 'negative space' and sewing together some threads of understanding. This participant then interrogated the scent tapers in the second drawer: 'Neither of these smells, in the first drawer or second drawer are what I would have expected from a manuscript, for sure. Those are challenging my preconceptions'.<sup>366</sup> The 'remarkable' 'treasures' that manuscripts are often represented as in many exhibitions belies an alternative reality, which the rewilded experience afforded the participants in this study. The opportunity to interrogate, intimately, the material qualities of the manuscript enabled this participant to probe beneath and beyond the text and illumination to expose the material reality of the manuscript: it 'requires flesh and feather, including the (living) flesh of humans that provides sustained and attentive labour of various kinds'.<sup>367</sup> 'I had a sort of

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<sup>362</sup> Walkalong interview EJ 18/04/18.

<sup>363</sup> Sandra Dudley, 'Materiality Matters: Experiencing the Displayed Object' in *Working papers in Museum Studies*, Number 8 (University of Michigan, 2012), (pp.3-4).

<sup>364</sup> This consisted of cocoa nibs, charcoal, sea salt and dried leaves of Lapsang Souchong tea.

<sup>365</sup> Walkalong interview GW 24/04/18.

<sup>366</sup> Walkalong interview GW 24/04/18.

<sup>367</sup> Heidi Estes *Anglo-Saxon Literary Landscapes*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), (p.128).

presupposition of what the things might be in the drawers,’ noted one participant reflecting on his/her experience of manuscripts, ‘but, as you get more and more involved in it and they (materials) become more visceral, and stronger smelling or have more yuk factor to them’.<sup>368</sup> Despite the fact that manuscripts are typically presented to us in interpretive settings as great art, and invaluable cultural and historical artefacts, they also have the potential to disgust and repel us. As some participants began to discover, the art and decoration, and human skill and creativity that manuscripts convey depends on an ‘entire village of dead animals’.<sup>369</sup> ‘It was very bitter, and it tasted horrible, but at the same time I could kind of see how, maybe, that would [have been] how it tasted’, noted one participant, whose comments imply that tasting challenged his/her visual perceptions of a pleasant, benign looking object and raised the spectre of a phenomenon that was unadorned, grittier and more repulsive even.<sup>370</sup> Exploration may be full of promise and reward, but it is also fraught with the risk of finding something unpleasant, or offensive.

Contrary to Tristram Hunt’s implication that museums ought to be ‘shared spaces for unsafe ideas’, display spaces might invite greater reward if they recognized real world uncertainties. David Fleming advocates that museums embrace the provocative and challenges them not to step back from controversial or upsetting issues. For him, the approach that Hunt suggests is a cop-out, providing an environment that can be ‘edgy but unthreatening’.<sup>371</sup> Being in the world can reassure us, but it can also challenge us. Not all interpretive settings shy away from this issue. For example, the exhibition ‘Music for the Eyes’ at Santa Maria della Scala, Siena, recently posed potential emotional as well as physical risks (see figure 41).<sup>372</sup> If this implies that we should leave the ‘beaten track’, it means that we must have an environment that is not comprised solely of the ‘beaten track’. Stepping off the path and finding our own way, taking

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<sup>368</sup> Post-encounter interview GC 24/04/18(a).

<sup>369</sup> Bruce Holsinger “Of Pigs and Parchment: Medieval Studies and the Coming of the Animal.” *PMLA* 124, no. 2 (2009): 616–23, (p.619).  
[https://www.academia.edu/2568554/Of\\_Pigs\\_and\\_Parchment\\_Medieval\\_Studies\\_and\\_the\\_Coming\\_of\\_the\\_Animal](https://www.academia.edu/2568554/Of_Pigs_and_Parchment_Medieval_Studies_and_the_Coming_of_the_Animal) Viewed 14/08/18.

<sup>370</sup> Film review interview SW 23/04/18(b).

<sup>371</sup> David Fleming, ‘Stop trying to avoid the realities of life’, *Museums Journal*, July/August 2018 (p.15)

<sup>372</sup> ‘Musica per gli occhi’. (‘Music for the Eyes – Crossovers Between Video Art, Pop Music, Music Videos), Siena, October, 2018

things into our own hands, quite literally in some instances, requires curiosity and courage too. Incidents involving visitors and artworks at the Tate Modern and the Serralves museums in recent years demonstrate the inherent risks in embodied existence, but they also show that, as humans, we seek ‘rewards’ through lived experiences with material things. The artist, Tacita Dean notes that emotions such as ‘fear can sharpen our ability to engage with things’.<sup>373</sup> Uncomfortable though our encounters with the object world may sometimes be, they can also challenge complacencies, heighten our attention to sensory and neuro information and engender more somatically enlivened experiences.<sup>374</sup>



Figure 41: Risk, shock and challenge have a place in interpretive settings too. ‘Musica per gli occhi’. (‘Music for the Eyes – Crossovers Between Video Art, Pop Music, Music Videos), Siena, October, 2018<sup>375</sup>

<sup>373</sup> Tacita Dean interviewed on ‘Into the Eerie’, Sunday Feature, BBC Radio 3, 3/03/19

<sup>374</sup> Incidents at Tate Modern 2007 and Serralves Museum 2018.

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/aug/21/holed-up-man-falls-into-art-installation-of-8ft-hole-painted-black> Viewed September 2018.

<sup>375</sup> Not all settings shy away from this. Being in the world can be reassuring, but it can also be challenging. Rewilded interpretive settings have the potential to remind us of our materiality as humans within a material world.

## **vi. Conclusion**

This chapter reveals that participants were in the main uncertain about how to behave, how to move and negotiate the displayscape in the absence of wayfinding and contextual information. For many this brought a sense of discomfort, and for some even a sense of being overwhelmed both by open-ended options and the array of sensory stimuli. Participants' behaviours and responses indicated a dependency on external authorities for guidance, reassurance and to underpin understandings.

In addition, freed from the 'expert' narratives in which, within interpretive settings, manuscripts are frequently cloaked, the manuscript's materialities confronted participants as an unfamiliar 'disassemblage'. Echoing early medieval riddle culture, this proved both puzzling but, equally, for many participants, was an enticement to know and to embark on their own journey of discoveries. This frequently put participants on paths to uncovering messy, bloody material realities behind the conventional notion of the manuscript as an art object or revered tome. If these revelations invited disgust for some participants, it also challenged acceptances and sharpened attentions.

The king: *What is your reason for living?*

L'Angely: *Curiosity*

'Marian Delorme', Victor Hugo

## 8. Provocative objects

### i. Introduction

The research showed that objects in these contexts may challenge us, but they can also provoke our curiosity and stimulate us. The material attributes of manuscript objects can prompt us to act, touch, sniff and taste, for example. Participants were drawn into curious encounters by textures, colours and odours, wondering what it would be like to touch or to smell. The implication is that objects may not always be passive recipients of human attention but, rather, their physical materiality can be a catalyst for sensory stimulation and embodied human responses. This chapter explores how agency pivots between human subject and non-human object when opportunities for reciprocal corporeal contact are provided.

### ii. Catalysts for curiosity

'The more I saw, the more I wanted to know. I wanted to know more about everything! Just seeing one thing after the other. But once I started touching the things themselves, I was probably even more curious, I think. I had a more desperate need to know what it was'.<sup>376</sup> This participant's statement highlights how visual stimuli ignited his/her interest and curiosity, but also how tactile engagement fanned the flames of her/his curiosity. Some scholars of interpretation have dismissed the importance of 'mere' curiosity, emphasising the importance of intellectual understandings.<sup>377</sup> However, this study demonstrates that curiosity underpins cognitive knowing and is an

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<sup>376</sup> Post-encounter interview UA 19/04/18(a).

<sup>377</sup> Michael Gross and Ron Zimmerman quote Tilden Freeman in stating that the modern park service is again 'capitaliz[ing] on *mere* curiosity for the enrichment of the human mind and spirit'. (Researcher's emphasis), 'Park and Museum Interpretation: Helping Visitors Find Meaning' in *Curator* 45/4 October 2002, (p.266).



important aspect of learning and the development of creative imaginations. 'Being able to smell whilst also touching and feeling different things, did really put me into that mode of curiosity and facilitated it a bit...Having that smell and putting me back in that context sort of gave me that sense of wondering and that made me want to explore more and feel and think about things in a different way. I was more curious, but I was able to satisfy that curiosity.'<sup>378</sup> These comments from another participant again stress the importance of a range of sensory stimuli in provoking curiosity, but also in equipping the participant to think about things in different ways than s/he might have otherwise - if s/he had only been able to look at an object and read some text, for example. For one participant, simply being able to handle some grain seeds within the context of a radically different context shifted her/his preconceptions of manuscript culture. On seeing, touching and smelling the roots, rocks, and relatively unsophisticated tools, crafted from metal and wood, s/he determined that *MS210* might have been the product of a 'strata of society', which s/he had not previously considered within the context of manuscripts: it 'involv[ed] people who are farming!' Curiosity about the objects s/he did not recognise led this participant to examine the materials, the images and the text of *MS210*, in more detail, which elicited a surprising conclusion: 'it's from Africa'.<sup>379</sup> 'Erm, well, I suppose I had quite a rarefied idea of manuscripts existing only in libraries and only being a northern European type thing,' said this participant. 'This isn't from where I think it comes from, this is from a different part of the world. So that's a whole cultural richness that [I] hadn't perceived before. [One's] own conception of the thing was much narrower than what it really was'.<sup>380</sup> Interestingly, despite discovering that *MS210* has distant geographical origins, its rustic roots made it more 'reachable' and less 'rarefied', in this participant's perceptions.<sup>381</sup> Prior to this encounter, s/he had only ever known manuscripts from Western Europe. This research project shows that not only do the material attributes of the object *act* in defining our experience of the object, but also that learning and meaning can be achieved in embodied experience *with* materials. Chantal Conneller

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<sup>378</sup> Post-encounter interview SW 23/04/18(a).

<sup>379</sup> Post-encounter interview GC 24/04/18(a).

<sup>380</sup> Post-encounter interview GC 24/04/18(a).

<sup>381</sup> Post-encounter interview GC 24/04/18(a).

describes this as understandings arising, not simply as ““concepts” set apart from “real” properties’, but through ‘different practices that themselves have material effects’.<sup>382</sup> The data from this study lend weight to Sennett’s assertion that curiosity and attentiveness to the material qualities of objects are a prerequisite for learning and understanding about materiality. But, if this is the case, then, within the context of heritage interpretation, if objects such as manuscripts are kept at a distance, shielded from our tactile attentions in a vitrine, are museums and other interpretive settings doing all they can to encourage and enable such curiosity about, and attentiveness to, material things?

Curiosity, ignited by sensory triggers invigorated participants to embrace their circumstances. Curiosity is an important element of Rounds’ ‘foraging theory’, which entreats us to reconsider prevalent opinions about the most effective strategies for learning in museum environments.<sup>383</sup> Within a defined territory the foraging animal must find food sources – some of which will be more rewarding and nutritious than others - and overcome various obstacles in the process. Similarly, visitors to an exhibition setting seek out objects of interest by employing a three-pronged strategy to ‘achieve a net gain in “interest”’. First, they employ the ‘initial scanning mechanism, which is intended to improve the likelihood that they will locate exhibit elements that have a high personal interest potential, while avoiding elements that ‘are likely to prove boring’. Second, they employ the ‘attention rule’, whereby they momentarily pause to attend to an object, and third, they employ the ‘quitting rule’, whereby they know when to stop attending to a specific artefact and return to the search.<sup>384</sup> Rounds argues that few museum visitors actually follow the waymarked trail of informative interpretation in its entirety or in an orderly manner.<sup>385</sup> Shrugging off the interventions intended to normalize behaviour, ‘a great number of museum visitors are “drifters”

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<sup>382</sup> Chantel Conneller in Ingold, Tim, *Making Making: Anthropology, Archeology, Art and Architecture*, (London: Routledge, 2013), (p.290).

<sup>383</sup> Jay Rounds, ‘Strategies for the Curiosity Driven Museum Visitor’ in *Curator* 47/4, October 2004, 389-412 (p.394).

<sup>384</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.394-395.

<sup>385</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.394-395.

who...meander through exhibits. They fail to use the wayfinding aides or other instructional materials for that effective museum experience'.<sup>386</sup>

'I think spatially', said one participant, 'it felt less like you were enclosed in something, or that your experience was less limited, because you were able to move more freely and pick things up with fewer limitations and, yeah, just hearing things as you saw them. All of it generally contributed to a deeper sense of connection I wouldn't otherwise get, especially, with this period'.<sup>387</sup> Together, the subcam film footage and observation revealed that, in broad terms, participants conformed to Rounds' theory. However, it also exposed a much greater degree of embodied curiosity than Rounds' theory suggests. Curiosity provoked and enlivened by multiple sensory triggers emboldened the participants to act and 'wrap themselves around the situation at hand'; not just metaphorically, this extended to 'curiosity as corporeal'. Moreover, participants' foraging activities did not necessarily conform to the staged sequence suggested by Rounds' three strategies of 'searching', 'attending' and 'quitting'. As the above comments suggest, participants exploited the liberty to roam and wander in whatever direction they fancied. While Rounds' strategy implies a linear activity, the observation in this study revealed participants' foraging to be more cyclically heuristic, probably promoted by the more heterogenous nature of the rewilded displayscape. 'Erm, I would say it was not what I expected. Erm, I was expecting, although it is about deconstruction, I think I was expecting something a bit more linear, a bit more regimented, in a way. So, the fact that it was more about exploration and I was, actually, really pleasantly surprised.'<sup>388</sup> The stages of searching, attending and quitting were not well defined and blurred into a flux of embodied, sensorial probing, which was often piqued by the objects in the displayscape. 'This, I can't resist this. I have to touch that again', said a participant, who was rubbing the liquid substance onto the back of his/her hand. 'That is just gorgeous!' s/he exclaimed, rubbing the substance on his/her hand again. 'Whatever it is, I could use that as a cosmetic, it's beautiful. Oh, I hope it's nothing noxious because that is absolutely gorgeous', s/he exclaimed,

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<sup>386</sup> Scott Thorpe, 'How curious people visit museums'

<http://scottthorp.wordpress.com/2015/12/01/how-curious-people-visit-museums/> Viewed 17/05/18.

<sup>387</sup> Post-encounter interview SM 23/04/18(a).

<sup>388</sup> Post-encounter interview AB 25/04/18(a).

smearing it on her fingers.<sup>389</sup> This is a tiny instance, but it, nonetheless, throws a stone at that edifice of Enlightenment inspired ontologies that attribute agency only to thinking humans. It reminds us of Alfred Gell's theory that art objects can motivate responses and interpretations from human subjects.<sup>390</sup> Gell's assertion has brought its fair share of detractors, who argue, as Howard Morphy does, that Gell's theory 'obscures the role of human agency' and throws up problems as to what kind of things objects are. 'On the whole, objects do not change themselves', Morphy points out.<sup>391</sup> Morphy goes on to argue that while 'people may ascribe agency to inanimate objects' it is not enough simply to accept this; we need to know why people have come to believe in the effect of a particular object.<sup>392</sup> While Morphy makes a valid point, it is important to note, however, that both Gell and the participant who could not resist the manuscript material in this study challenge the idea that agency equals intentionality alone. Rather, this instance points to the notion that because of their very *being* things impact on other things.

Contrary to Rounds' observations, in this study participants' 'quitting' and moving on often involved retracing their steps and returning to dwell on objects they had passed over earlier, but which, in light of information gained or stimuli experienced, they subsequently considered were worth revisiting, in some cases, numerous times.<sup>393</sup> Through their respective characteristics and qualities - colours, smells, textures and so on - materials acted to capture the attention of the participants and provoked responses. In some instances, the sensory stimuli elicited by the materials (both tangible and intangible) acted like a piece of elastic – stretching away as the participant wandered off to the next element, but eventually pulling him/her back bodily for another look or another sniff, touch, taste or listen. Inhaling deeply, one participant exclaimed, 'Ooh, it's beautiful!'. If not decisive in uncovering the identity of the plant root that was the object of this participant's attention, nonetheless, it proved

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<sup>389</sup> Walkalong interview GW 24/04/18.

<sup>390</sup> Alfred Gell, 'Art and Agency' in van Eck, Caroline, *Art Agency and Living Presence in Early Modern Italy* [www.hum.leiden.edu/research/artandagency/subprojects/deel-proj-eck.html](http://www.hum.leiden.edu/research/artandagency/subprojects/deel-proj-eck.html) Viewed 25/11/16.

<sup>391</sup> Howard Morphy <http://mcu.sagepub.com/content/14/1/5.full.pdf> (p.3) Viewed 25/11/16.

<sup>392</sup> *Ibid.*, (p.6).

<sup>393</sup> Subcam footage shows most participants' movements as cyclical, and their attention being directed and redirected toward objects, gaining familiarity with them. For example, see walkalong subcam footage for GC, EG, SW.

a stimulating experience. And it could be quite addictive. Returning to the source, this participant added, 'I didn't smell this one, did I? That was from the first drawer. Gosh, that's gorgeous too!'<sup>394</sup>

Encounters with materials within the drawers triggered revisits and physical interrogations of objects earlier encountered outside in the wider displayscape and *vice versa*. In a kind of contrapuntal performance human bodies and object bodies engaged. Participants moved back and forth, repositioning themselves within the displayscape to touch again, smell again and attend again, to the vellum, stone and wood, as well as the digital and sonic objects. This process was often repeated by individual participants who moved off in one direction, attended to first one material and then another, returned to the *agent provocateur*, for example, in the drawer, and then, roused, wandered away again; stood, watched, craned and listened, bent over and touched, stooped and smelled, picked up and tasted. This foraging activity was considered to have some value and reward: 'It's a nice way of kind of organising and moving through those elements' said one participant, adding, 'I feel like if I'd spent more time I might have gone back and reopened drawers and things of that sort.'<sup>395</sup>

Moreover, the participants in this research demonstrated that they were not simply 'drifters', but 'strategic agents' who were 'up to something'. '[I] wanted to smell them and touch them and things. And, also, I'm probably going to go home and find out a bit more about medieval manuscripts and stuff, because, like I said, I'd never really looked into them because, well, they [seemed] boring really...and because I haven't felt they are very relevant to me. But it was interesting, so I am going to look into it more.'<sup>396</sup> If the concept of foraging implies a degree of speculation, equally it implies a desire to find something specific out: what does it smell like? How does it feel?

### **iii. Sensory provocateurs**

One participant exclaimed, 'Ooh, the smells! Ooh, the smells!',<sup>397</sup> and then, 'Phaor!' inhaling the scent of smoky, sooty, carbon ink and dipping his/her fingertips into the

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<sup>394</sup> Walkalong interview GW 24/04/18.

<sup>395</sup> Post encounter interview SM 23/04/18(a).

<sup>396</sup> Film review interview JH 17/04/18(a).

<sup>397</sup> Walkalong interview GW 24/04/18.

dark liquid.<sup>398</sup> This participant's reactions attest to the potent affect that sensory stimuli can have and how they can immerse us without us even knowing what the smells, textures or tastes, for example, are. For these next two participants too, not knowing or understanding was not so much frustrating as intriguing:

AD: '...But the language, I have no idea what it is.

AS: 'So, you don't understand it?'

AD: 'It's almost like runic. No, I have no idea what it is.'<sup>399</sup>

This exchange hints at the engagement felt by these two participants, but it was the subcam film, coupled with the observation, that provided the means to see ears cocked and brows furrowed – facial expressions that told of intrigue and curious grins.<sup>400</sup> It was also the tone of their voices in conversation that exposed how the sonic mystery – the unfamiliar and curious pitch, timbre and accent, the 'uncanny' - 'resonated with both presence and absence', yet was enticing rather than confusing.<sup>401</sup>

If the sonic could assume a role as *agent provocateur*, so too could the tactile: 'These bother me', said one participant, who rubbed some slivers of parchment between her thumb and forefinger, 'because they are obviously animal. Or, so I think. All the veins, the patterns'. S/he brought it towards her/his nose, smelt it and replaced it. S/he then looked around, and then, as if physically drawn towards it, s/he reached back and lifted it up once more. Apparently unsettled, yet seemingly enticed by the material's tactility, this participant picked up another piece of parchment: 'This feels like a more papery [sic] one, but, again, it's got the organic traces in it. It feels beautiful'. The parchment made a noise as the participant handled it. 'Waxy', s/he said and bent the parchment fragment in her hand. Then, shaking it vigorously, s/he said, 'Ooh, and it's dusty when I do that.'<sup>402</sup> Human objects and non-human materialities 'labour together

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<sup>398</sup> Walkalong interview / subcam footage GW 24/04/18.

<sup>399</sup> Walkalong interview AT/AB 25/04/18(a).

<sup>400</sup> Walkalong subcam footage taken by AB 25/04/18(a).

<sup>401</sup> Norie Neumark, *Voicetracks* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), (p.9).

<sup>402</sup> Walkalong interview GW 24/04/18.

in relationship'. This is the essence of what a rewilded displayscape provides – an environment in which people and objects can 'co-productively collide'.<sup>403</sup>

Another participant, gazing upon the manuscript through the glass, pondered; 'What would it feel like to touch it?' This instance is indicative of the temptation attached to the possibility of sensory engagement, and how this can also stimulate and prompt us into taking further actions: 'The next thing is ink. Pretty dry I am guessing. It could be a bit rougher than I imagine. And to be fairly smooth. You know, when you are around paper you run your hand over paper and pen you don't feel anything.'<sup>404</sup> Further testament to the potential capacity of manuscript materials to act and affect change in participants was provided in the encounter between the barley corns and one participant in this study. Visually stimulated initially, s/he declared, 'Oh, wow!' and was moved to pick up some barley corns; 'Now these I want to eat'. 'Can I eat these?' Chuckling, s/he then put the grains into his/her mouth and chewed on them.<sup>405</sup>

In another instance of an object provoking curiosity, a participant lifted up a pot of 'dry mix ink' and inhaled its odour; s/he reached for the gum Arabic, brought it to his/her nose and sniffed attentively, and then repeated the action after stooping towards the scent taper soaked in the essence of Frankincense. Intrigued by the earlier sensory encounter with the 'dry mix ink', s/he returned to it, perhaps with both curiosity and taste buds piqued: 'so what is it from?... First time I smelt...', and then, unable to resist being drawn in by the sensory bait, s/he declared, 'I think I'll try this!', and opened his/her mouth to take the substance onto his/her tongue. As this participant then paused to assess the taste, his/her olfactory senses were tickled and his/her attention was drawn to the drawers, from which odours emanated, which, s/he said, made her/him 'think of some sort of perfume – mixing ingredients to make some sort of perfume.'<sup>406</sup> There is a notion of sensory penetration here that evokes Michael Camille's description of a 'libidinous' relationship between the medieval reader and a

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<sup>403</sup> Luci Attala and Steel, Louise, (eds.), 'Introduction', *Body Matters: Exploring the materiality of the human body*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2019) <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Body-Matters-Exploring-Materiality-Human/dp/1786834154> Viewed 07/11/19 (Preface, unpaginated).

<sup>404</sup> Walk along interview UA 19/04/18(a).

<sup>405</sup> Walkalong interview / subcam footage GW 24/04/18.

<sup>406</sup> Walkalong interview/subcam footage UA 19/04/18(a).

manuscript, in which he describes the manuscript as an influential *partner*.<sup>407</sup> Evoking strong erotic overtones by referring to how a manuscript, once opened, is ‘penetrated’, he goes on to detail the relationship as very intimate and one of ‘promiscuous *interpenetration*’ (author’s emphasis), implying that agency resides both with the subject and the object. Camille’s reflections centre on the material residues of the manuscript-person relationship and how these evidence both an emotional and physical intensity: ‘It [the manuscript] has acquired grease-stains, thumb-marks, erasures, drops of sweat...’.<sup>408</sup> Indeed, parchment, glass screens, quills, inks and pigments all displayed similar patinas of use and intimacy. Camille may take the involvement of manuscripts in human lives to the extreme, but he makes a significant point. Neither entirely dormant nor static, manuscripts were lively actants, deeply involved in complex, nuanced and reciprocal relationships with human subjects. And, if we are afforded the opportunity, they can be today. Participants’ faces screwed up in disgust at unpleasant tastes. Their noses creased up and they recoiled from repellent odours, and looks of surprise and pleasure were prompted by intimate bodily, sensory encounters between them and the materials in a collective expression of the object’s materialities, directing the physical actions, and re-actions, of their beholders. Participants were stimulated by material objects and *moved* to touch, smell and even taste the manuscript materials.

#### **iv. Conclusion**

This chapter demonstrates the importance of curiosity in the learning process and the development of meanings and understandings. Significantly, it also highlights the key role that sensory encounters with things played in sparking the curiosity of participants, which, in turn, engendered deeper more probing enquiries. The rewilded displayscape was crucial to enabling participants to follow, quite literally, at times, their noses and explore their own avenues of interest rather than the prescribed routes of exhibition designers and curators. Manuscript materials physically attracted participants and enticed them to engage intimately with elements of the manuscript in

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<sup>407</sup> Michael Camille, ‘The Book as Flesh and Fetish’ in, Richard de Bury’s “Philobiblion” in, Warwick Frese, Dolores and O’Brien O’Keeffe, Katherine, (eds.), *The Book and the Body*, (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), (pp.41-42).

<sup>408</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.41-42.



a fashion sometimes reminiscent of medieval users interactions with manuscripts. Yet, these materials also repulsed other participants, forcing them to move bodily. Scents, textures and sounds could provoke emotional and imaginative responses and reactions in participants too. This chapter reveals the rewilded displayscape to offer a place for materials, together with humans, in the production of agency.

*To touch a leaf of Borage, to attend to that touch, is to be taken by the mystery of what  
is close at hand.'*

Oliver Southall, 'Borage Blue', Xylem Press, 2019

## **9. Thinking with things**

### **i. Introduction**

This chapter investigates the relationship between corporeal encounters with material objects and cognitive understandings of *MS210*, as an object in itself and in regard to its connections with other objects and people across time and geographical space. Without the intervention of other people's interpretations, participants were able to follow their own journeys of discovery and carry out their own interrogations of *MS210* using all of their sensory modalities. Rather than reading or hearing someone else's conclusions on the meanings and values of the manuscript, which often mark the end of an interpretive journey, participants were at liberty to wayfare and free to come to their own conclusions. The notion of thinking with things contends that the co-mingling of the flesh of the human body and the flesh of the manuscript body becomes the point from which all conclusions emerge.

### **ii. Thinking through objects and materials**

This project's rewilded approach to encountering manuscripts provided opportunities for embodied thinking, which, as these comments from participants show, is an experience that is rarely offered in conventional modes of manuscript display. Referring to the manuscript object, one participant said, '...it's all broken up and you could touch it... I never usually get to touch them, just look at them on a screen or, behind the glass case, I guess. Smell was good too, because you can't do that through glass.'<sup>409</sup> 'I'd never actually felt a feather quill...', admitted another participant, 'so it put me to thinking about things in a different way that I might not have done if I had just looked at the document (manuscript)'. And unexpected, additional sensory

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<sup>409</sup> Walkalong interview JH 17/04/18(a).

stimulation can shift our ways of thinking about things: ‘There was something about that smell, I don’t know, can’t place it [but it] just invokes for me, that sense of real...It gets me a really excited about *being* and *thinking* in a different frame of mind’ (Researcher’s emphasis). On being asked to describe her/his experience this participant replied: ‘It was definitely a way of looking at this kind of thing that I’ve never done before and wouldn’t expect to do. I think it was interesting... Especially the wasp gall things, where, at first, when I saw them, I thought, “I have absolutely no idea what that is”, but then, just kind of continuing to look through it, it kind of clicked’.<sup>410</sup> What begins to emerge from these participants’ comments is the potential of physical and sensory interactions with manuscript materials to both enhance and deepen our thinking about them, but also, and allied to this, to afford us a different perspective. Instead of standing back and considering from a distance, these participants were thinking *with* things. Referring to the opportunities to engage with manuscript materials using all of their sensory modalities, one participant exclaimed; ‘Yeah, it definitely helped. As opposed to just seeing them, because seeing them you can’t imagine using it [sic]. Once you start using it other senses help put other connections together.’<sup>411</sup>

Instead of passing by and looking in, participants were enabled to ‘dwell in the process of collecting sensory data’.<sup>412</sup> ‘If only people were exposed to this [embodied engagement] and were aware of how much you could open up one object!’<sup>413</sup> This comment from one participant’s attests to the potential potency of opportunities for close carnal intimacy with material objects; or, what Edward Hall terms ‘unmistakable involvement...physical touch and sensory awareness - detailed, fragmented, precluding rationality’.<sup>414</sup> Crucially, as this participant observed, this is an affordance that visitors

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<sup>410</sup> Walkalong interview JH 17/04/18(a).

<sup>411</sup> Post-encounter interview UA 19/04/18(a).

<sup>412</sup> Kirsten Wehner and Martha Sear, ‘Australian Journeys’ quoted by Sandra Dudley in ‘Experiencing a Chinese Horse: engaging with the thingness of things’, in Dudley, Sandra, (ed.), *Museum Objects: Experiencing the Properties of Things*. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 1-16 (p.9).

<sup>413</sup> Film review interview OQ 25/04/18(b).

<sup>414</sup> ‘Proxemic zones’ identified by anthropologist Edward Hall as less than eighteen inches from the body. Cited in Sharon Blakey and Liz Mitchell, ‘Unfolding: A multisensorial dialogue in “material time”’ in, *Material Thinking* Volume 17 [https://www.materialthinking.org/sites/default/files/papers/SMT\\_Volume17\\_Paper%2001\\_FA2.pdf](https://www.materialthinking.org/sites/default/files/papers/SMT_Volume17_Paper%2001_FA2.pdf) Viewed June 2019, (p.11).

are denied in conventional manuscript exhibitions. Responding to a question about whether s/he was enabled to satisfy her/his curiosity, the participant exclaimed, 'yes, yes exactly! I think when you look at something in a museum and it is just behind glass you can look at it and you can imagine; you can think about but then that is the end of the experience and you move on. Whereas here, I could look at it and go back and say, "Ok, I'm going to touch this string" and I can feel how the paper [parchment] felt. There was [sic] the two bits of wood with the paper between, showing how it would be put together. So, to be able to hold that, look at the actual object [manuscript in vitrine] while holding that in my hands. That gave me a much better visualisation of how that object might actually feel. And so that was really interesting for me.'<sup>415</sup> This is the ecological equivalent of being able to walk into the woodland and touch, smell, and listen to the flora and fauna close up, rather than looking across at the landscape from behind a fence and reading the interpretation board telling us what is that we cannot actually touch or hear, or smell.

When I was watching the subcam film with one participant, s/he commented: 'And this is me looking behind (the rear of the glass display case) at the bindings. Because when I felt what was in my hand (holding the sewn gatherings) I wanted to see what it actually looked like – the bindings on that (*MS210* under glass). I think the picture here (the digital image of the book board) had it, but I wanted to see it on the actual thing. Because I'd seen the sewn one, I'd wanted to see what it actually looked like on that. And this is me (referring to him/herself on the playback film) – I just actually wanted to *dive* into the document and see a page I couldn't see on there. (Then, moving to the digital object to interrogate more the pages more deeply): I was looking at the symbols and the way in which it's written. And this is the same page as the one that is open (folio with images and with decorative borders) So, (referring once more to his/her bodily moving between the digital and material objects – back and forth, to and fro), then I wanted to see again, it in person.'<sup>416</sup> This participant's embodied placement with the manuscript materials initiated new feelings, thoughts and imaginings, which, in turn, provoked kinaesthetic actions and also engendered an absorbing mindfulness.

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<sup>415</sup> Post-encounter interview SW 23/04/18(a).

<sup>416</sup> Film review interview SW 23/04/18(b).

Simon Knell asserts that objects are essentially mute and that, within museums, ‘if ...objects are “made to speak”, they do so through a human act of authorship with all its editing, contextual manipulation, and censorship’.<sup>417</sup> Yet, in participants’ experiences such as this one, we are reminded of the agential potential of objects, and their capacity to provoke thought and challenge views. The places in which manuscripts are held, museums, libraries, galleries and archives, are filled with things; they are society’s great repositories of objects and *de facto* afford material things a place in the agential hierarchy of the world. Taking a rewilded approach within these settings allows human/non-human agency to entwine and foment actions, reactions and new appreciations, and reaffirm understandings or new meanings.

The subcam film proved to be an important tool to capture and share this experiential thinking process. One participant’s recording, for instance, revealed a flow of embodied movement followed by sensory interaction, which involved picking up the smooth, knotted wooden handle of the scraping tool, bending to lift up and smell the tapers imbued with the scents of leather and hide, and then picking up a pot of ‘blood’ and swirling its thick liquid content slowly around the sides of the pot: ‘It’s like a dye. Very thick’. Lifting up a parchment fragment s/he held it up to the light, rotated it and slightly squeezed it over in two, observing its curvature and ductility before lifting out some pieces of bone and pressing his/her fingers on to their roughly textured, splintered broken ends. Then s/he immediately moved to attend to the oak galls, rolling them between his/her fingers and then lifting them to his/her face, in what was becoming a flow of easy interactions. ‘Peculiar shapes. Hard stones’, s/he commented, and then s/he dipped his/her fingers into the ebony black pigment and lifted his/her fingertips, heavy with the substance, to his/her nose.<sup>418</sup>

The following exchange between a sighted participant and non-sighted participant is worth quoting at length because it affords us a valuable insight into the process of thinking *with* things – exploring and interrogating using a raft of sensory modalities together:

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<sup>417</sup> See, Simon Knell’s, ‘Museums, reality and the material world’, in Simon Knell, (ed.), *Museums in the Material World*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 1-28, (p.7).

<sup>418</sup> Walkalong interview/subcam footage UA 19/04/18(a).

One participant passed the liquid 'ink' mix to the other:

A: I didn't know I'd be doing shots on a Weds afternoon! (S/he said, sipping, tasting).

B: Well? Good?

A: That's easier to deal with.

Participant B tastes too.

A: I don't mind that, at all.

B: I think I've still got the taste of the other stuff in my mouth, so I can't tell what it tastes like.

A: It's like...I don't know. I mean, it works with the other form, but it's not as intense, (i.e., the liquid) I don't think. Erm, I think it's interesting. It (the liquid) doesn't spark as strong a reaction as the solid form, I would say.

B: Yeah.

They then responded to being informed about the 'ink's ingredients:

A: Really? That's really interesting.

B: That is interesting.

A: The charcoal came through really strong.

B: So, yes, I'm not sure what all of these are. There's the Frankincense, but there's something else in this tub (Lubanja).

A: What's that tub?

B: You'll have to feel into it and...

A: Give it a prod?

B: It's quite chalky.

A: Maybe that's charcoal?

B: Yeah, but it's light. It looks more like salt.

A: Ok. Like sea salt, you mean.

B: It's "crystally". It's quite "crystally". It's got like, a reflective, a shininess on it.

Participant A then turned over pieces of the Lubanja between his/her fingers.

B: I'm trying to smell everything because I know it's something I have smelled.

A: (Chuckles)

A: There is a smell in this room though, when you walk in.

B: So, these, to me, almost look like resin (Gum Arabic).

A: Right.

B: Used to, erm, to, oh, you know, when you use resin on violin strings?

A: Yes, when you use resin on bows and stuff?

B: Yes, it's like that on the horses' hair. Yeas, it looks like that but I'm not sure about this bit.

A: Did you have any idea it (making a manuscript) was so involved?

B: I didn't, no. So, that liquid there, is that the same as the one we just drank?

B: Erm, there's this one here (Madder root). This looks like a mixture of... are they little twigs?

A: (Touches the objects). Feels like wood to me.

B: It's an orangey colour, more like a coppery colour.

A: See, it's funny, because I know it's not related, but that, the wood stuff (madder root), because of the context of what we are talking about, makes me think of the sorts of places this was done in.

These two participants used their sensory range, interacting, or, as feminist theorist, Karen Barad proposes, 'intra-acting'. For Barad, the term 'interaction' assumes 'that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction'. Her neologism, 'intra-action', on the other hand, 'signifies the mutual constitution of entangled

agencies.<sup>419</sup> Thus, what we see happening above is not simply the two participants speaking to one another, but, rather, both of them in an embodied dialogue *with* the manuscript materials. Human agency and object agencies do not pre-exist, asserts Barad, but, rather, arise out of their ‘intra-action’. Barad’s proposition is useful in exploring how people and objects ‘inter’ or ‘intra’ act within rewilded interpretive settings because it suggests that ‘distinct’ agencies (subject and object) do not exist in an absolute state; only relationally are distinct agencies manifested - that is, in moments of mutual perception.

This study’s rewilded displayscape aimed to foster, to use Rosi Braidotti’s phrase, a ‘more than human’ context, within which it became possible to listen to voices, literal and metaphorical, beyond the human.<sup>420</sup> Through their ‘intra actions’ with object materialities, the participants were enabled to ‘excavate’ meanings and understandings for themselves, gathering and assessing ‘visceral information’ to create a sensational kind of knowing. This influence, on what D. McMillin terms the ‘gut brain’ or the cerebral brain, may be greater than we have hitherto considered.<sup>421</sup> This is a complex area into which this research is but a very tentative foray. However, the idea that embodied, visceral data can have an influence on how we feel, understand and assign meanings has potentially profound implications for interpretive settings.<sup>422</sup>

What we see unfolding in the participant exchanges above is a process of ‘thinking through the body’, or what John Shotter terms ‘witness thinking’. The rewilded displayscape afforded participants time to settle with the objects in the space, which can be a rarity in conventional exhibitions with timed entries, entrances, exits and designated routes in between. Social and educational emphases on systematic, accelerated learning and factual, contextual interpretation can sometimes squeeze out opportunities for us to dwell and reflect; to take time to hold, listen, smell and *be* ‘in

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<sup>419</sup> Karen Barad, see <https://egs.edu/faculty/karen-barad> Viewed 27/06/19.

<sup>420</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *The Post-Human*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), (pp.49-50).

<sup>421</sup> D.L. McMillin, *et al*, cited in Blakey, Sharon and Mitchell, Liz, ‘Unfolding: A multisensorial dialogue in “material time”’ in, *Material Thinking* Volume 17, [https://www.materialthinking.org/sites/default/files/papers/SMT\\_Volume17\\_Paper%2001\\_FA2.pdf](https://www.materialthinking.org/sites/default/files/papers/SMT_Volume17_Paper%2001_FA2.pdf) Viewed June 2019, (pp.8-9).

<sup>422</sup> Research into neural conditions, autism, migraines and epilepsy suggests that the influence of the ‘abdominal brain on the cerebral brain may have been underestimated. See McMillin *et al*. (1999). *Ibid.*, pp.8-9.



the moment'. However, time and opportunity for subject-object intimacy and contemplation enables 'the body to become a workshop, forming and shaping', as 'a fast-slow dialogue between intellectual reasoning and visceral sensation, between cerebral and abdominal brain' takes place.<sup>423</sup> Participants in this study engaged repeatedly in this kind of dialogue. Fingers twiddled waxed hemp thread; parchment rubbed against palms, first flesh side, then hair, it was flexed, folded, sprung back; tongues tasted 'inks' and faces were contorted in revulsion; ears were cocked as spoken words connected with material objects; noses wrinkled, repulsed by the smell of urine and delighted by the scent of Myrrh.<sup>424</sup> While this was a process of exploration, discovery was not necessarily the end in mind. Some participants demonstrated that it was the physical and sensory experiences themselves rather than any final result that mattered – the manuscript had collapsed into an array of sensory stimuli. One participant, enamoured with a viscous deep red liquid, sniffed it, rubbed it rhythmically into his/her flesh and returned repeatedly to it during his/her participation, to smell, caress, massage and even taste this emulsion in an expression of what Stephen Greenblatt has referred to as 'exalted attention'.<sup>425</sup> This marks a different kind of knowing – kinaesthetic knowing.

Meanwhile, another participant reflected on how enthralling *being* amongst things and acting with them can be: 'As soon as you start to get into the drawers, the contents of the drawers, then it became much more absorbing. And you could start to make these, erm, I won't say intuitive leaps, because they are utterly conditioned about my sort of knowledge of the world and the bits of my experience of the world, that I am, sort of, pulling in from my education and background and things like that. And I suppose that it presupposes a level of intellectual engagement, so I think that I am curious about those things. Other people might be less so, or they might be put off by the smells.'<sup>426</sup> These comments also remind us of the wider contextual framework in which we encounter and interpret the world around us. This participant, for example, seemed to feel compelled to 'pin down' the materials experienced with a cultural tack. While

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<sup>423</sup> John Shotter cited *Ibid.*, pp.12-13.

<sup>424</sup> Multiple examples are provided in subcam film footage 'taken' by the participants.

<sup>425</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, 'Resonance and wonder', *Bulletin of the American Academy of the Arts and Sciences*, 43, (4), (1990), 11-34, (p.20).

<sup>426</sup> Post-encounter interview GC 240418(a).

his/her imagination was tempted to run, s/he, nonetheless, pulled on his/her pre-existing knowledge and personal, cultural and historical understandings to make sense of his/her physical experiences with the manuscript.

D. Jeans' diagram (figure 42) was originally intended to show attitudes to the environment – both the 'actual environment' and perceptions of it conditioned by cultural filters.

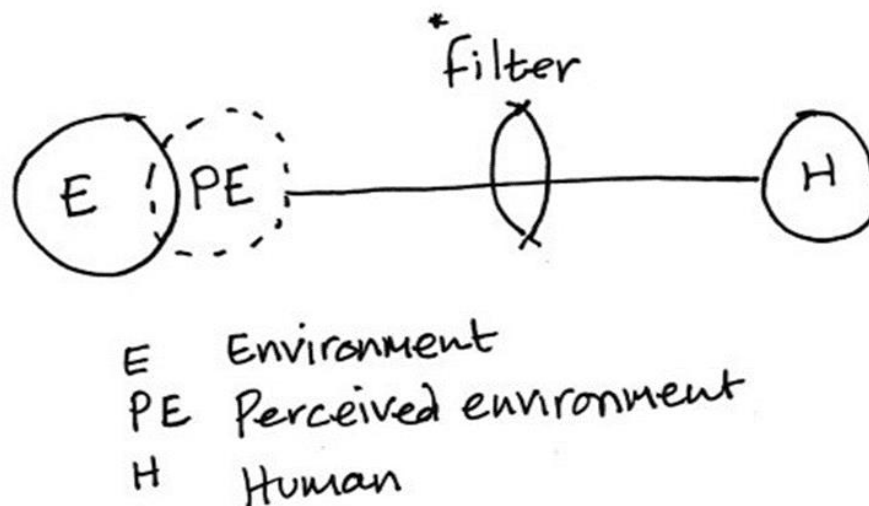


Figure 42: 'The cultural filter', (D. Jeans 1974). An adaptation of Jeans' cultural filter

If for 'environment' we read 'manuscript', we can discern that the 'real thing' is entangled with participants' culturally filtered perceptions of it. This is what we are seeing in the participants' comments above. Sensory and embodied experiences are themselves layered – touch reinforcing or refuting visual perceptions, for example - but these physical experiences too, are interleaved like *mille-feuille*, one upon another with prior knowledge and experiences to create complex experiential encounters. This

notion evokes the Old English concept of 'Ping'. The Old English word 'ping', (an etymological root of the modern, 'thing'), as James Paz points out, has temporal and geographical connotations, but also implies an assembly of various wide ranging phenomena: material objects, bodies, human and non-human, words, emotions, places, events, actions and ideas, all entangled in 'moulding meaning and matter together'. An object such as a manuscript might therefore be considered not simply a material artefact, but as a 'ping' that consists of a whole series of meanings, values and significances, as well as an object in which past lives - human and non-human - and happenings inhere.

### **iii. Thinking out of things - beyond the text**

The following comments provide an example of how contact with the manuscript materials facilitated an understanding of things beyond the text and the 'final' form manuscript. One participant described his/her actions while watching the subcam film s/he had recorded: 'I was looking at what I thought were the... they almost look like the veins in the paper, leather, whatever it is. So, I was tracing with my finger to see...I think, yeah, you could see them there (referring to a parchment sample in a drawer) much more pronounced than the others'.<sup>427</sup> This participant was using touch to try and discover the reality of the manuscript material. Is it paper? Skin? This embodied process of engagement with parchment was repeated by most of the participants who took part in this study. When asked about how s/he and it felt when s/he compared touching the parchment on the frame and the fragments in the drawers, another participant replied: 'Yeah, I didn't come back to that idea until now... I suppose that that informed the feeling I got in the drawer, that you have got something that's very smooth feeling and something that's not so smooth.'<sup>428</sup> In a further session another participant said: 'It's really weird because it's very shiny almost on that side and then a bit softer on that side. I'm not sure if that's the inside when it was, erm...?'

Researcher: 'An animal?'

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<sup>427</sup> Film review transcript SW 23/04/18(b).

<sup>428</sup> Film review interview GC 24/04/18(a).

‘Yes... I wasn’t expecting it to be that smooth’, s/he commented, tracing his/her fingers over lines *in* the vellum, ‘I’m just noticing all the lines on it, as well. I guess it makes sense.’<sup>429</sup>

Another reflected, ‘One side of the skin is going to be the side that’s in contact with the flesh. Yeah, that’s probably going to be the smoother side. And the side that’s got the hair of the animal on it is going to be the rougher side, so it depends if it’s come from the inside or the outside of the skin, which is a more visceral thing. It depends on your level of squeamishness with that as an idea and I’m not particularly squeamish about that as an idea. But then again... I’ve spent a lot of time looking at anatomical, actual dissections, post-mortem dissections of horses’ feet, so I’m like, “Oh, that’s what it (parchment) feels like!”’.<sup>430</sup>

These vignettes demonstrate the notion of ‘fathoming through fondling’ - drawing understandings from corporeal engagements with material things. Liz Mitchell and Sarah Blakey refer to this as ‘skin knowledge’ - thinking and embodied learning are born of gesture and intimate interaction with material and the environment.<sup>431</sup> Within the context of interpreting a manuscript, however, this term takes on a dual and more macabre meaning. All of the above participants were interacting with the skin of a calf, noting the differences in texture between the hair and flesh sides – the lining of the insides and the outside of the body of a calf. These carnal encounters point to the skin of the perceiver, not solely as a membrane through which feeling is gained but, Mitchell and Blakey suggest, as a membrane for thinking through. However, in this case, it is not only the subject’s skin that is a membrane for thinking through; the skin of the calf also provides a membrane for thinking with. Afferent messages were perceived by participants about the parchment’s paradoxical delicate fragility and tough resilience, its fine textures – smooth one side, and downy, velvety on the other - and its weight thickness and tensility. These messages, as we can see from the above comments, not only pointed to the material reality of *MS210*, but also obscured its

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<sup>429</sup> Walkalong interview JH 17/04/18.

<sup>430</sup> Film review interview GC 24/04/18(a).

<sup>431</sup> Sharon Blakey, Liz Mitchell, ‘Unfolding: A multisensorial dialogue in “material time”’ in, *Material Thinking* Volume 17, [https://www.materialthinking.org/sites/default/files/papers/SMT\\_Volume17\\_Paper%2001\\_FA2.pdf](https://www.materialthinking.org/sites/default/files/papers/SMT_Volume17_Paper%2001_FA2.pdf) (p.8) Viewed June 2019.

origins and thwarted efforts to know it. Nonetheless, haptic engagement enabled participants, literally, to feel their way to knowing about the manuscript. Touch is an important conduit for information, imparting it through muscles, tendons and joints to the interior spaces of the participant's body – across the threshold from outside to inside<sup>432</sup> in an iterative process of seeking and collecting sensory and physical knowledge: 'I was relying on touch. I think I put it down as quite leathery (referring to vellum parchment). It was quite firm and solid, so that I assume it's skin. And skin to me was, back in the day, was used as paper. So, like, OK, I am assuming there was some sort of painting or some marking on it or something. And I thought the markings had faded and you just see engraved lines. Then I saw the manuscript and I said to myself, " 'OK, that must be the spine of something; nothing on it yet. So, is that meant to be used for paintings? Or is it just to show you the quality of the skin? OK. So, even though it's massive, they would cut it into sized bits?'<sup>433</sup>

Somatic contact between subject and object played an important role in how participants absorbed and filtered information from their environment – from the things around them. The above episodes are telling because they point to the idea of alternative perspectives; perspectives gained through fingers tracing and rubbing, noses smelling, and ears hearing. Knowledge and understanding come via all of our available sensory modalities. Thinking is no longer demonstrative, but conversational and interpretive and it can be edifying. This may not be an easy concept for interpretive environments where the *modus operandi* positively identifies visual and intellectual knowing, while discouraging us from actually touching anything from the past.<sup>434</sup> As Michael Marder points out, conventional approaches view this kind of thinking as 'weak thought'.<sup>435</sup> Haptic knowing, therefore, might appear maverick and challenging. Yet, the implications may be profound for interpretive settings in general

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<sup>432</sup> See, Sharon Blakey, Liz Mitchell, 'Unfolding: A multisensorial dialogue in "material time"' in, *Material Thinking* Volume 17, [https://www.materialthinking.org/sites/default/files/papers/SMT\\_Volume17\\_Paper%2001\\_FA2.pdf](https://www.materialthinking.org/sites/default/files/papers/SMT_Volume17_Paper%2001_FA2.pdf) (p.8) Viewed June 2019.

<sup>433</sup> Film review interview UA 19/04/18(a).

<sup>434</sup> Sandra Dudley, 'Materiality Matters: Experiencing the Displayed Object' in *Working papers in Museum Studies*, Number 8 (University of Michigan, 2012), (p.2).

<sup>435</sup> Michael Marder, Gianni Vattimo, *et al*, *Plant-Thinking: a philosophy of vegetal life*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), (p.xiii).

and, in particular, for how we encounter manuscripts, because it connotes that embodied experiences are a provocation to thought, as well as emotional and imaginary reactions. For example, picking up the wooden handled steel blade, a participant hefted it and then asked him/herself, 'How does it work? How do they use it?' and then made scraping, hoeing gestures.<sup>436</sup> This physical, embodied analysis, continued. The participant moved through a range of motions to work out possible uses of the object. 'Bit awkward to use it as a spade like this' (moved tool forward and back, once or twice). 'Could be more like a lever', s/he said, as s/he posited and moved her/his top arm forward, holding the spade end still in one hand to create a levering gesture.<sup>437</sup> If we consider how conventional displays rely almost entirely on visual and conceptual apprehension to facilitate knowing about manuscripts, it is clear that both experiences and routes of understanding are being restricted. In contrast, the notion of rewilding the interpretive space broadens opportunities for more physical connections and sensory absorptions. These have the potential to open up an appreciation of manuscripts as more than simply vehicles for carrying old texts, or decorative artefacts.

'Withness thinking' certainly provoked new understandings for one participant: 'OK, this is dried skin, so you think of a book as once complete object but then you suddenly go, "OK, there are hundreds of pages in this book and all of these hundreds of pages have been cut from one thing that was another thing before that", so you start to see a sudden expansion of the continuity of the book, rather than it being an item in time now as a complete object, you suddenly see all the lives that have intersected to produce this item. So, I think that, that was the most mind-boggling thing.'<sup>438</sup> If the popular image of the manuscript craftsman is of an individual, skilled and dedicated monk, then being able to think tactility afforded participants a greater understanding of the complex network of contributors to this object. In some instances, it also provided an unanticipated and 'massive' realization: 'Suddenly think, 'OK, it's all a lot messier, than you, than I, presupposed it to be. I always think of books as quite clean things, but then you suddenly realise how, the amount of processing

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<sup>436</sup> Walkalong interview UA 19/04/18(a).

<sup>437</sup> Walkalong interview UA 19/04/18(a).

<sup>438</sup> Post-encounter interview GC 24/04/18(a).

that goes into producing ink, that goes into producing the item, so it's almost that there's a greater violence behind the book that you think of as very contained ideas in the pages, and that...But, actually, there's been a, you know, blood and death in order to get to this thing.'<sup>439</sup> However, the appearance of the passive, beautiful artwork in the vitrine, which we are so often presented with, belies this messier reality of the manuscript, Uncoupled from the *objet d'art*, cultural icon, or historical exemplar, the materials of the manuscript are given voice. They 'spoke' to the participants of the more complex, controversial 'truths' of the object. Beyond and beneath the art and calligraphy, a medieval manuscript is a stack of slowly decaying, dead animal skins once soaked in bodily fluids and painted with crushed insects and dried soot and covered in parasite-infected wood!

#### **iv. Crafting and grafting**

'That wood-stuff [madder root]...makes me think of the sort of places it was done in ...I kept thinking of woods and being out there in the middle of nature doing this and it being a lot more physical than I had actually thought about, and a lot more involved, as well.'<sup>440</sup> For this participant, who was without sight, simply being able to feel Madder-root was revelatory. Scents too, triggered vivid imaginative responses and provided a potent empathetic valence. 'I definitely think the smelling helped a lot more (than exclusively seeing)' noted one participant. 'It gives you an idea what it was like working with them (inks, pigments, tools).' These instances demonstrate the potent affect and cognitive insight that corporeal contact can yield and, further, stand as a powerful indictment of the prevalent interpretive practice, which, as Ernst van de Wetering points out, holds that 'museum objects are, unfortunately, only there to be seen'.<sup>441</sup>

'It was just kind of amazing to see the amount of stuff involved. Because you are aware that it's kind of a complicated process, but you don't really think about it when you see a manuscript. And then if you think about how many manuscripts there are in, say, the British Library, and obviously all of them have had kind of a lot of work put into them.

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<sup>439</sup> Post-encounter interview GC 24/04/18(a).

<sup>440</sup> Walkalong interview AT 25/04/18(a).

<sup>441</sup> Ernst van de Wetering, 'The surface of objects and museum style', in, Dudley, Sandra, (ed.), *Museum Objects: Experiencing the Properties of Things*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 103-108, (p.103).

And whoever was doing them was going through and doing it all so carefully. Because obviously you think about the monks who were creating it, but you miss out thinking about the people who make the initial things for it, like the people who do the pigments and stuff, as well, which I think that (referring to the research displayscape in general) showed quite well. And obviously, the people who were preparing the parchment, which was probably not a very pleasant task.<sup>442</sup> In contrast to how manuscripts are conventionally exhibited - like artworks in general, they are usually presented as complete in themselves - the dispersed materials arrayed in this deregulated research displayscape exposed the 'graft' involved in manuscript making.<sup>443</sup>

The capacity of this study's rewilded displayscape to engender encounters with manuscript materials to engender alternative and deeper understandings of things we can usually only gaze at is illustrated by some participants' responses in post-encounter questionnaires, reproduced in figures 43 and 44.

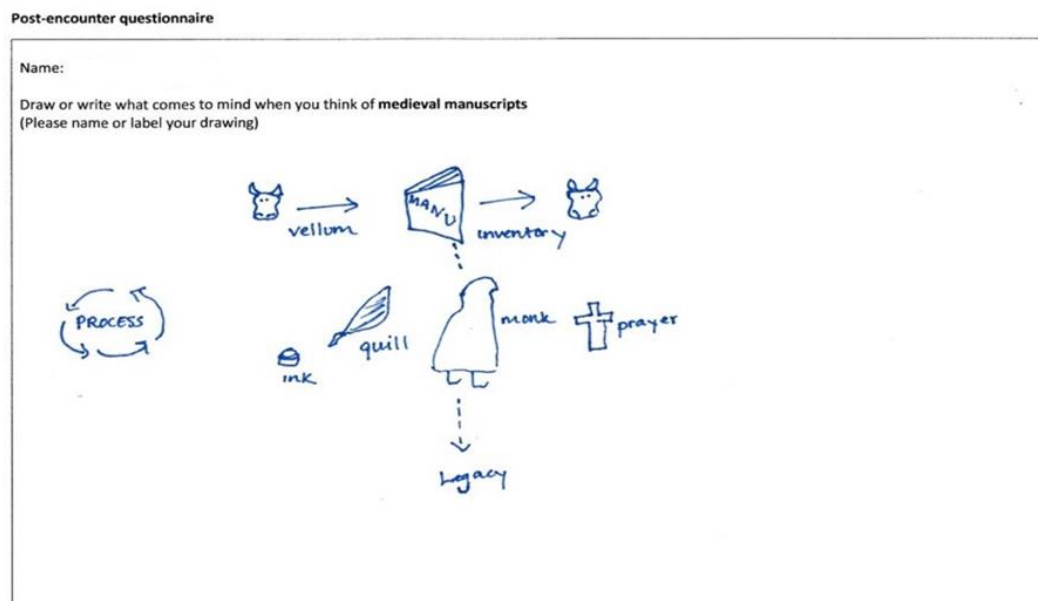


Figure 43: This post-encounter questionnaire shows an understanding of the collaborative nature of the 'crafting and grafting' of a manuscript – the human objects and non-human objects interacting

<sup>442</sup> Walkalong interview JH 17/04/18.

<sup>443</sup> 'Craft and Graft' is a notion that Seamus Heaney explored in the context of creativity in his poem 'Digging'. *Seamus Heaney: Listen Now Again*, 'A National Library of Ireland Exhibition'. Visited by author, August 2018.



Here, the notion of human and non-human objects involved in the co-creation of the manuscript is depicted. The comments of another participant also attest to an unexpected discernment of what manuscripts mean: ‘I just wanted to say that it’s really interesting actually and *it’s got me into the manuscript at a different level* than I’d anticipated exploring it at. I thought we were going to be *looking at a textual item*, whereas actually we are looking at a *crafted item*. Which, that was my preconception that I had, because I was thinking, “Oh manuscript text, textual analysis and language and discourse”. But, actually, no, it was much more hands-on than that.’<sup>444</sup> For this participant the opportunity to engage with the deregulated manuscript materials revealed the physical material behind the text, but also exposed the dead flesh of animals and the living flesh of humans, which were needed in collaboration to craft this object. This participant developed an understanding of manuscripts, not only being written, but also being made. In the above instance, the participant’s sensory encounters reversed her/his preconceptions of the manuscript and emphatically placed *manu* before *script*. This participant’s experience is evocative of Jacques Bonnet’s recollection of when, for him, a book’s text takes on flesh: ‘To pick up a book in your hands and discover what it really contains is like conferring flesh and blood, in other words a density and thickness, that it will never lose again, to what was previously just a word’.<sup>445</sup> This same participant later reiterated this dramatic shift in how s/he had perceived the manuscript when the subcam film was played back: ‘I think the cultural shift for me was, you know, book as complete item, with the emphasis on the ideas that it contained, moving to the manuscript or book as a physical entity with the input of so many other people who were not necessarily concerned with the ideas inside it’.<sup>446</sup> Pivotal in this re-conception of the manuscript from text vehicle to physical object was his/her embodied experiences with the manuscript materials – being able to practise thinking *with*, as well as *about* the manuscript.

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<sup>444</sup> Film review interview GC 24/04/18(b).

<sup>445</sup> Jacques Bonnet, *Phantoms on the Bookshelves*, (London: MacLehose Press, 2008), (p.52).

<sup>446</sup> Post-encounter interview GC 24/04/18(a).

Post-encounter questionnaire

Name:

Draw or write what comes to mind when you think of **medieval manuscripts**  
(Please name or label your drawing)

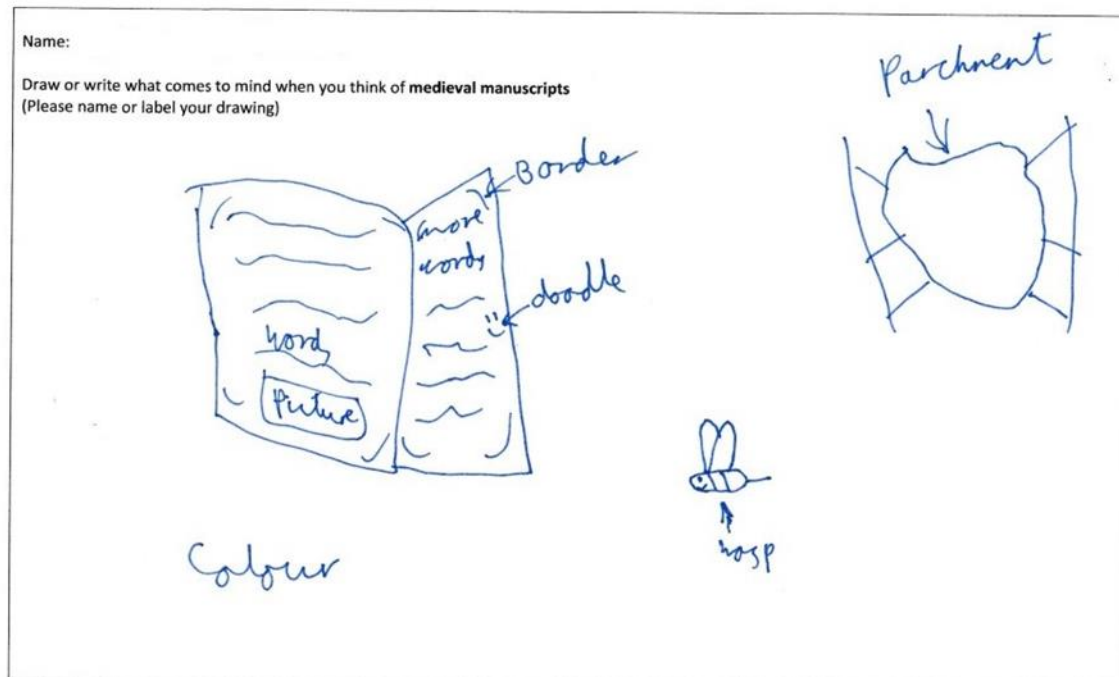


Figure 44: An illustration of the conspiracy from one participant's post-encounter data:  
parchment, wasps, words and images

Thinking through hapticity helped another participant to learn about his/her own work today from the materiality and craft of *MS210*: 'This fascinates me because one of the jobs I do is repairing books in a library and we still use string and needles, even now. And I am assuming this is genuinely how it was put together. I could learn from this, actually.'<sup>447</sup> The contemporary resonance of manuscript materials exemplified by this participant's comments not only suggests a sense of empathy centred on the shared experiences of past and present craftspeople with the manuscript's materiality, but also points to the porosity of the erstwhile temporal categories of history. The following clip from the BBC television series, 'Detectorists', is an excellent example of both this notion of shared experience and of temporal porosity.

[www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b09f2ndg](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b09f2ndg)

<sup>447</sup> Walkalong interview GW 24/04/18.

Pinching out some dry mix ‘ink’ between his/her fingertips and putting it in his/her mouth, one participant, after chewing and swallowing, commented: ‘Like raw, erm? Like cocoa powder, but a proper one. It tasted very natural.’ S/he then moved to try the liquid version, sipped it, swallowed and sipped again: ‘I’m like, thinking about how they would have had it back in the day, and the fact that they are very natural and... Obviously, we have more, we put more chemicals and stuff in our food, but the way that they just gather all of this stuff and mix it up.’<sup>448</sup> Attesting to Tilley’s assertion that ‘consciousness is corporeal’,<sup>449</sup> here, through an intimate, multi-sensational interaction with material substances, we see an emerging awareness of *things* beyond the script and outside of the codex form. Through the opportunity to taste and even ingest, this participant started to form wider understandings of the manuscript and its relationship with the world around it – then and now. S/he even implicated his/herself in the world around her/him today. This points further, to processes and collaborations way beyond the manuscript object; conspiracies in which it, other objects and people were and remain deeply involved.

Another participant was more explicit about how, through embodied engagement, she had sutured herself into the manuscript’s past: ‘I picked up and put down quite quickly the stylus... I mean, I don’t know how to do that sort of writing... I didn’t even pick up the feather... But I actually felt more comfortable, even though I wasn’t familiar with that tool, [the scraping tool] in grabbing it. I think it’s lends itself more, to hands. I thought it was used for harvesting tubers from the ground. I’m more familiar with tools. I went straight to that kind... It spoke more to me. I feel like if I was back in those times, I’d be the one in the fields, I wouldn’t be in the, you know, making the – I wouldn’t be in the main office, I’d be the supporting act. So, I guess I feel more comfortable with that. Is that my working class coming through?’<sup>450</sup> ‘Do you know’, continued this contributor, ‘... you could interchange that manuscript for another manuscript, for me. For me, what came alive was the concept of making and how a manuscript object is created, but it could have been any manuscript.’<sup>451</sup> For this

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<sup>448</sup> Walkalong interview ZA 19/04/18.

<sup>449</sup> Christopher Tilley, ‘From Body to Place to Landscape’, in *The Materiality of Stone: Explorations in Landscape Phenomenology*, (Oxford: Berg, 2004), (pp.1-12).

<sup>450</sup> Post encounter interview OQ 25/04/18(a).

<sup>451</sup> Post-encounter interview OQ 25/04/18(a).

participant, a new understanding emerged through touching and handling – through ‘skin knowledge’.<sup>452</sup> ‘The tangible - that was for me, embodied thinking. That revealed a lot more to me about the medieval manuscript and the object.’<sup>453</sup> If I’d have seen that object, normally, (that is, displayed conventionally) I’d have thought, “Oh, that’s interesting”, and walked on, but the fact that I really felt connected to the, I guess the hardship of making an object, especially, like, lifting up that tool, (a scraping tool of metal and wood) and, erm, thinking that, “oh, wow, you’ve really got to out in some heft and scrape off all the material from vellum to create it”. And that’s just even...I mean, you’ve grown the cow, you’ve slaughtered the cow, and you’ve taken the hide off the cow, then you have to clean the hide. It’s not even a quarter way through the process!’<sup>454</sup> This participant’s corporeal closeness afforded her an insight and understanding of the physical materiality of the manuscript and the time, ‘craft and graft’ that inheres in the object. For him/her, this lent it a vitality that was affective. S/he touched the object and the object touched him/her back. This concept and connection and understanding generated by the ‘sensory brain’ influencing the ‘cerebral brain’ is suggested too, in the remarks of another participant: ‘Because the fact of seeing and being able to touch all the objects, you were presenting in the drawers, I think it’s very important and it’s a way to connect. You can see the process. Maybe you cannot understand it but, it’s all there, so, of course it’s a way to connect...These very different objects and some of which you may be familiar with and some no. *But they are there to explain to you how* (researcher’s emphasis). So, I think that was very important.’<sup>455</sup> This participant refers to the potency of the dispersed materials of the ‘opened up’ manuscript object in illuminating the processual nature of manuscript creation. ‘There are so many processes required for a final product, it really reminded me of the intricacies of how things are made and how labour-intensive things were in the past and maybe we’re very lucky.’<sup>456</sup> The completed art object was

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<sup>452</sup> A concept of knowledge expounded by the Cashinahua tribe of Eastern Peru, for example. Blakey, Sharon and Mitchell, Liz, ‘Unfolding: A multisensorial dialogue in “material time”’ in, *Material Thinking* Volume 17, (p.8) [https://www.materialthinking.org/sites/default/files/papers/SMT\\_Volume17\\_Paper%2001\\_FA2.pdf](https://www.materialthinking.org/sites/default/files/papers/SMT_Volume17_Paper%2001_FA2.pdf) Viewed June 2019.

<sup>453</sup> Film review interview OQ 25/04/18(b).

<sup>454</sup> Post-encounter interview OQ 25/04/18(a).

<sup>455</sup> Post-encounter interview CM 24/04/18(a).

<sup>456</sup> Post-encounter interview OQ 25/04/18(a).

no longer the sole focus of this participant's contemplation and the act of crafting emerged from the shadows of the complete object. Instead, the manuscript was rendered as a 'taskscape' – a series of actions and interactions between non-human objects and people - at once in the past but thrust into the present through this lasting conspiracy. 'I think once I ... touched the vellum, I think that gave me a much better idea of the complexity of the construction of the thing',<sup>457</sup> said one participant, evoking Diane Ackerman's disconcerting, yet very expressive phrase, 'the skin has eyes'.<sup>458</sup> These participants' words also make another point that has implications for how we engage with manuscripts in interpretive settings; that is, that thinking and feeling are contained within the process of doing and that there is a rhythm between problem finding and problem solving that inheres in physical and sensory interactions with the things around us.<sup>459</sup>

This sense of rhythm was conveyed in the words of another participant: 'I'd never actually felt a feather quill that had been properly tapered and things, so when I was holding that in my hand, I was imagining how that must be and feel to write like that. And obviously, that's a totally different experience to what we do now, so I definitely felt – and as I was looking to the reed I was thinking – the first thing that came into my head was, 'how do they fill this with ink?' And then I remembered it was obviously just an ink well or and ink pot and thought, 'that must be really exhausting to write that so painstakingly, so it put me thinking about things in a different way, that I might not have done if I had just looked at the document.' This participant described how s/he was thinking through things, a process which brings to mind Gaston Bachelard's meditations on the allure of, and 'tactile transcendence of menial work'.<sup>460</sup> For Bachelard, attention to repetitive, or even simple tasks, bestows upon them creative, imaginative qualities. By consciously tending and attending to objects in this way,

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<sup>457</sup> Post-encounter questionnaire GC 24/04/18(a).

<sup>458</sup> Diane Ackerman quoted in Blakey, Sharon and Mitchell, Liz, 'Unfolding: A multisensorial dialogue in "material time"' in, *Material Thinking* Volume 17, (p.8) [https://www.materialthinking.org/sites/default/files/papers/SMT\\_Volume17\\_Paper%2001\\_FA2.pdf](https://www.materialthinking.org/sites/default/files/papers/SMT_Volume17_Paper%2001_FA2.pdf) Viewed June 2019.

<sup>459</sup> Idea posited by Sennett in the context of crafting and making. Sennett, Richard, *The Craftsman*, (London: Penguin, 2009), (p.7).

<sup>460</sup> Maria Popova, *Gaston Bachelard on the Meditative Magic of Housework and How It Increases the Human Dignity of Everyday Object*, <https://www.brainpickings.org/2015/06/01/gaston-bachelard-the-poetics-of-space-housework/> Viewed June 2019.

Bachelard argues that we reawaken them, reimagine them and create them anew. He goes on to suggest that imagination, accompanying even the most repetitive, or seemingly mundane labour, forges temporal links between the past, present and future of objects: 'The daydreams that accompany household activities ... keep vigilant watch over the house, they link its immediate past to its immediate future'. This notion was captured in an exchange between two participants regarding a feather quill:

A: 'Can you feel the quill running all down there? And then the ink would run there, see?'

B: Wow! What type of feather is that? I keep having, like, a physical sort of feeling of what it would be like'.

A: 'I am tracing potential stories and things that might have happened, processes...'<sup>461</sup>

Significantly for interpretive settings in which the security and value of artefacts prevent us from touching them, Bachelard also contends that even surrogate tactile, physical contact can have a potent empathetic effect: 'And so, when [one] rubs a piece of furniture — even vicariously - when he puts a little fragrant wax on his table with the woollen cloth that lends warmth to everything it touches, he creates a new object'.<sup>462</sup> Once again, the conversation that continued between these two participants is insightful:

B: 'It really breaks down just how much work...and time'.

A: 'And time...'<sup>463</sup>

The feather quill here is no longer simply a feather, inanimate and empty, but an empathetic conduit, or catalyst for imaginings. The feather contains 'a present of past things, a present of present things and a present of future things'.<sup>464</sup>

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<sup>461</sup> Walk along interview AT/AB 25/04/18(a).

<sup>462</sup> Gaston Bachelard quoted in Popova, Maria, <https://www.brainpickings.org/2015/06/01/gaston-bachelard-the-poetics-of-space-housework/> Viewed June 2018.

<sup>463</sup> Walk along interview AT/AB.

<sup>464</sup> St Augustine quoted in Mills, Robert, *Derek Jarman's Medieval Modern*, (Cambridge: D S Brewer, 2018), (p.50).

For interpretive environments, where the prevalent approach holds that the ‘brain is king’, this may not be an easy concept to deal with because it implies that consciousness is embodied and requires valorising the physical, experiential and imaginative alongside intellectual forms of knowing and understanding.<sup>465</sup> This project’s rewilded displayscape afforded the chance for time indulgent, material-oriented engagement with the things themselves; to pay quiet attention to tangible objects and intangible ideas and emotions that might ordinarily have been missed. As the following participant’s words attest, even this modest rewilded displayscape allowed ‘a listening... to one’s own minute and multisensory responses, through which the most powerful realisations may, occasionally, occur’.<sup>466</sup> ‘I think I was imagining the material being created by, or for, a monk. I felt never for me to be that monk. Maybe, I mentioned it. It was very male, and I don’t know if I can imagine, as a sole female. I don’t know if I can imagine being a male in that world, so, I did actually feel – you know, when I was holding that... I don’t know if I could imagine me being physically in that past. I think I could only think of myself as being an observer. Because the whole time I was imaging that it was like a storyboard; something there that wasn’t like me out there, you know, collecting...Even when you talk about the bees, I was seeing someone pottering around, going to the hives and getting that wax stuff... Yeah, that’s interesting.’<sup>467</sup> If the domestic environment of ‘housewifely care’ evoked by Bachelard was predominantly a female environment, then, for this participant, the realm of manuscripts too, was dominated by an elite patriarchal system from which she, as a female from a ‘working class’ background, had always felt othered. ‘I think a lot of the Catholic was coming off and being a woman, not thinking of how it would be like to be a man... you can fully divorce yourself from all your cultural baggage, but you can recognize it and use it as a springboard for knowing what you are not familiar with... [And] I think I have biases – I feel I worked through that a little today.’<sup>468</sup> ‘Material thinking’ elicited an empathy and shared identity that did not exist prior to this

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<sup>465</sup> Michael Gershon quoted in Blakey, Sharon and Mitchell, Liz, ‘Unfolding: A multisensorial dialogue in “material time” ’ in, *Material Thinking* Volume 17, (p.9)

[https://www.materialthinking.org/sites/default/files/papers/SMT\\_Volume17\\_Paper%2001\\_FA2.pdf](https://www.materialthinking.org/sites/default/files/papers/SMT_Volume17_Paper%2001_FA2.pdf)  
Viewed June 2019.

<sup>466</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

<sup>467</sup> Film review interview OQ 25/04/18(b).

<sup>468</sup> Film review interview OQ 25/04/18(b).

participant's encounter with the manuscript materials: 'Yeah, yeah. I mean I could fully imagine myself sitting in a room with all these inks or inks [one] had to make. Mixing and mashing it with mortar and using the mortar to grind it into fine powder and mixing it. And then painting. Painting the different parts of it, as well.'<sup>469</sup> Shared experiences and empathy elicited by physical and sensory interactions dissolved the perceived gender boundaries that had previously been a barrier to any potential affinity that this participant could feel for the manuscript or our medieval past. In this way Bachelard's 'housewifely care' becomes a gender-neutral attentiveness to material objects that 'weaves the ties that unite a very ancient past to the new epoch'. This participant entered the rewilded displayscape detached from the manuscript and the medieval past because she identified as a working-class female with preconceptions of manuscripts as high status, male associated artefacts. Yet, she left having placed herself in a manuscript workshop as a skilled craftsperson as a direct result of new sensorial understandings generated by her somatic experiences with the manuscript objects. This episode of attentive engagement, embodied cognition and imagination seemed to sew together object and subject biographies, evoking Elizabeth Grosz's notion of history, not as the 'recovery of lives or bodies of the past', but as 'the engendering of new kinds of lives and bodies'. 'History is an index of our present occupations', Grosz contends, but 'the past is [also] as rich as our futures allow'.<sup>470</sup>

'No, it wasn't the variety of things', said the same participant, explaining how the experience was meaningful for him/her, 'it was the fact that the variety of things was a cross-section with the different stages of process of manufacture, and I think it was very elegant because it was multi-sensory throughout the different stages of creation of the object. And I think that's what made it quite powerful in a multi-sensory way.'<sup>471</sup> Here the participant suggests that it was the sensory affordances that revealed to him/her the practices and procedure of crafting a manuscript – almost like a sense-powered x-ray, or digital spectral image. But, if sensorial engagement could help

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<sup>469</sup> Walkalong interview OQ 25/04/18(a).

<sup>470</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *The Nick of Time* (Durham NC, USA: Duke University Press, 2004), (p.255) quoted in Eileen Joy, 'Time is the Question of the Subject Seized by His or Her Other' in, *In the Middle* (p.2). <http://inthemedieavlmiddle.com/2008/08/time-is-question-of-subject-seized-by.html> Viewed 26/08/17

<sup>471</sup> Walkalong interview OQ 25/04/18(a).



participants 'deconstruct' the making process, they could also reassemble it and engender a more holistic meaning.

Olfactory opportunities within the displayscape seemed to be a particularly potent means of igniting thought and imagination: 'I think it's different to be like, "Oh, here's a scent of Frankincense on a little piece of paper" versus, "here is a taste of what all of these things together mean"'. This participant's choice of words is also interesting, mixing taste and smell, and demonstrates the overlapping, entangled nature of sensory perceptions. The wider 'smell-scape' of this study's rewilded displayscape appeared to play a part in affecting participants. 'What is it?' asked one participant, looking at the 'dry ink mix', and then, as if to answer the question s/he had posed, she lifted the pot to smell it closely.<sup>472</sup> The smell upon opening the drawers, 'was very engaging', said one contributor, adding, 'I think that smell was working very well for this'. When asked if smelling prompted a sense of curiosity or surprise, this same participant replied, 'Yes, both of them but in a way, I was also able, I could recognize some traits. I don't know, maybe not in the first drawer but in the first that I opened, so I think it was the second one, I could recognize what I was smelling but I cannot tell now. So, it was like a familiar smell in a way. Umm, yes.'<sup>473</sup> Like trying to capture an intangible, wafting odour on the air, smell proved both a tool with which to identify and probe more deeply but also eluded knowing. In this study scents were not confined, and odours were not decontextualized. Even where olfactory opportunities do present themselves in museums (and this is rarely the case in exhibitions of manuscripts) they tend to be isolated and contained. Consequently, interpretive settings miss the opportunity that the entangled, swirling complexity of scents and sounds presents to provide transformative experiences.

## **v. Rethinking preconceptions**

Describing how s/he had moved through the displayscape with the objects therein, one participant revealed; 'It made me think about things, [and] I especially liked the colours, like in the last drawer because it made me think about how were these colours made and because it's interesting how they were natural colours and the

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<sup>472</sup> Walkalong interview EJ 18/04/18.

<sup>473</sup> Post-encounter interview CM 24.04/18(a).

contrast between natural and artificial colours like nowadays, that was quite interesting'.<sup>474</sup> The subcam film showed how s/he had negotiated the material things, sampling and interrogating them using all of his/her sensory modalities - beeswax, hemp, wood, stone, blood, inks, powders and roots - 'holding, as it were [her] brain in her hands', assembling a network of materials, sensory stimulations and ideas. Another participant was also impressed by the 'organicity' of the manuscript. Engaging *with* the manuscripts' material substances could be a revelatory route to understanding: 'They were, like, natural things and the tools that they used as well, were very natural'.<sup>475</sup>

Material engagements could also disrupt preconceptions about the past as a receding and faded concept: 'I was assuming that those colours were either colours that were found in that document or were generally used, but I was quite surprised by the very, very bright colour and then the very, very deep colours, because, in my head, they are always very - they're quite deep colours, so I was surprised by the light, light colour. Apart from, obviously, the yellowy gold. But I couldn't think that I'd ever seen any that light blue before.'<sup>476</sup> This sense of surprise at the vibrancy of the past, which can be conveyed through material experiences, was echoed by another participant: 'I feel like you got the chance to see the materials and textures and stuff. And, obviously, again, when you see it in a cabinet it's (the participant sighs) very old, many centuries old. Old and faded. So, it's great to see all the bright colours and get a bit of a hint of what it would look like at the time it was created, as well. So, I think that was brought out by the multi-sensory experience.'<sup>477</sup> It is also important to note that for the participants involved in the project, it did not seem to matter whether the material objects involved were contemporaneous. The pigments, stones, minerals and so on were not replicas; they were authentic objects, but they were also anachronisms, insofar as they were modern versions of these objects. The authenticity of the objects seemed to lie in their materiality and the timelessness of the material substances brought about powerful sensations of historic authenticity on the part of the participants. Parchment

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<sup>474</sup> Post-encounter interview EG 16/04/18(a).

<sup>475</sup> Post-encounter interview ZA 19/04/19(a). The naturalness, organicalness of the manuscript materials was a theme throughout this participant's responses.

<sup>476</sup> Film review transcript SW 23/04/18(b).

<sup>477</sup> Post-encounter interview JH 17/04/18(a).

was parchment then and it is parchment now. Touching it now is the same as touching it was then. The notion of authenticity resided with the perceiver.

The pre-encounter questionnaires revealed ideas of manuscripts and notions of 'medieval', not only as largely synonymous, but also as 'old', 'musty', 'dusty' and 'yellowed' and as a 'dark', 'violent' and grim past, which was technologically primitive and creatively limited, respectively. These descriptions evoke the notion of medieval summed up in Quentin Tarantino's film, *Pulp Fiction*, where the threat of 'getting medieval' implies dark brutality. As one participant stated, 'the first major thought that comes to mind is the plague, but I don't really think about their religion, or, like, how they made things, and how, we have stuff like technology, and they didn't and how they went about their life without what we have now'.<sup>478</sup> Modernity, as this participant went on to suggest, did not exist in the past: 'There wasn't anything modern'.<sup>479</sup> 'Modern', as this participant's comments exemplify, is commonly thought to relate to the now, or nearly now, yet *modernus* was how the Middle Ages saw themselves, while the term 'medieval', on the other hand, did not enter the English language until the nineteenth century.<sup>480</sup> If this participant's remarks hint at disturbing comfortable ideas of distinct historical epochs, embodied encounters enjoined participants to rethink these preconceptions and think about categories together.

One participant's response to taking a sip or two of the 'edible ink' attests to a reframing of the past as more vibrant and creative: 'I'm thinking about how they would have had it back in the day and the fact that they (material substances) are very natural and...Obviously, we have more, we put more chemicals and stuff in our food, but the way that they just gather all of this stuff and mix it up and *create*.'<sup>481</sup> Feeling, hearing and smelling the vibrancy of the materials disrupted notions of the past as dull, silent and musty: 'You just think, it's all old fashioned and dark but, actually, the sort of muddiness and dirtiness and bloodiness of those kind of lives, the lives that people had in those times were, nonetheless, focussed on producing things'.<sup>482</sup>

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<sup>478</sup> Post-encounter interview ZA 19/04/19(a).

<sup>479</sup> Post-encounter interview ZA 19/04/19(a).

<sup>480</sup> See Robert Mills *Derek Jarman's Medieval Modern*, (Cambridge: D S Brewer, 2018), (pp.1-2).

<sup>481</sup> Walkalong interview ZA 19/04/18(a).

<sup>482</sup> Post-encounter interview CM 24/04/18(a).

Although it is important to acknowledge that things are socially, culturally, personally and historically situated and contingent, we should not exclude the potentialities for a deeper understanding that ‘looking’ *at* and *into*, rather than through objects to see contextual meaning, might offer. If we are to take ‘things’ seriously, we must begin to *see* them, *listen* to them, *touch* them, *smell* them, *taste* them, and recognize them for what are, what they once were, and what they could be.<sup>483</sup> Another participant commented, ‘I guess going back to the objects and stuff and looking at the detail that went into making a manuscript, I think I was comparing it to, as we’ve seen, to the progression about how easy it’s been made throughout time and so that, it’s like we’re creating the same things but it’s in different processes and I think that we’re still creating and making things and it’s that continuity that gives that connection’.<sup>484</sup> This participant’s experience suggests that s/he grasped some idea of ‘a plurality of times existing together’. Encounters with the past, as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen contends, ‘must not stress difference (the past as past) or sameness (the past as present) but temporal interlacement, the impossibility of choosing alterity or continuity (the past that opens up the present to possible futures)’<sup>485</sup>

## vi. Thinking into things

If corporeal encounters helped the participants think through the wider processes and object contributors involved in the making of *MS210*, they also emphasised its materiality in a microcosm. Amazed at the tactile opportunities the rewilded displayscape afforded, one participant began, ‘I could touch the powders and everything.’ This participant went on to describe getting to know the surface of a folio: ‘Pretty dry I am guessing (referring now to the folios of *MS210*). It could be a bit rougher than I imagine. And to be fairly smooth. You know, when you run your hand over paper and pen you don’t feel anything. Touching and feeling actually made me realise that it’s being mixed into powder and then it’s being, like, dabbed onto the paper which gives it a thickness on top of the paper. And the fact that this thickness

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<sup>483</sup> A point made by James Paz in his exploration of Anglo-Saxon objects in, *Nonhuman Voices in Anglo-Saxon literature and material culture*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), (p.2).

<sup>484</sup> Post-encounter interview EG 16/04/18(a).

<sup>485</sup> Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, (ed.), ‘Introduction’ in *The Post-Colonial Middle Ages*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2000), (p.5).

isn't just made up of the ink we have today, it's more all these different minerals crushed to different levels. So, I am imaging it to be fairly bumpy as you run your fingers across it to read the...rather than just flat out smooth.'<sup>486</sup> These participant's comments are significant because they reveal the often-unwitting deceit perpetuated by the conventional mode of manuscript display. We are used to seeing manuscripts, as shown in figure 45, propped up on conservation pillows, like ailing patients, opened to reveal two pages. Thus, the surface of a page is rendered in 2-D, a flat surface carrying text and images. However, this participant attests to the potential of tactile intimacy to change understandings. Through his/her embodied experience of the materials, the notion of the page as a flat surface was ruptured and it was reconstituted as a 3-dimensional, textured 'landscape' of material substances. This participant was not alone in making this discovery. 'It's not fragile! At the beginning I thought it was skin and very fragile with it, but it's very hard and plasticky, to my surprise. What's it like behind?'<sup>487</sup> These final words are telling, insofar as they reveal this participant's realization, through tactile thinking, that the parchment was not simply a surface for writing on, but that there was something behind it, a substance that was substantial. Contrary to the notions that conventional modes of displaying manuscripts promulgate, *MS210*, is not a flat surface, but a multifaceted object.

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<sup>486</sup> Post-encounter interview UA 19/04/18(a).

<sup>487</sup> Walkalong interview/subcam footage UA 19/04/18(a).



Figure 45: Manuscripts propped up, dormant, lifeless, with layers of interpretive text as well as glass to filter our experience of the thing itself

In a further example of how being with materials can challenge how things look on the surface, another participant revealed; ‘And then, when I touched the, erm, the thing – that (pointing towards the vellum on a frame) that’s when I realised it’s completely different to paper like we have now! And then it just made me think; how they could write before, compared to how we write now’.<sup>488</sup> In these few lines the potency of sensory engagement as a tool for learning and knowing is revealed, and we can also begin to see how embodied actions trigger imaginations and ignite a sense of empathy with past times and past lives. Knowing too, can be brought to consciousness through tactile gesturing: ‘I was putting the nib of the reed and then the quill against my fingers to feel how sharp and, because in my head the quills are quite scratchy and [when] you see [images] of people doing that it [seems] quite scratchy, but it was actually not as much as I thought it would be... And that’s me looking for where does the ink go [sic] (Inspecting the end of the reed pen on the subcam), “Oh, it doesn’t go in there!?”

<sup>488</sup> Film review interview ZA 19/04/18(a).

That's what I was doing again (running quill over palm of hand).'<sup>489</sup> Stretching the notion of 'skin knowledge', this is an almost 'epidermal explanation' of a feather quill. Certainly, the displayscape of this study invited participants to explore 'the myriad ways in which form and material alone can invite thoughtful encounters'.<sup>490</sup> The potential potency of touch in fostering an understanding of materials and processes was alluded to by the following participant's words: 'Touching it added to it... I really wish I'd just taken more, just touched it more, know it and understand it and get a proper feel of it, as opposed to just seeing them. Because seeing them you're not using it. [Sic] Once you start using it other senses help, like, put other connections together I suppose.'<sup>491</sup> This comment elicits the notion of 'slippage from the outside in' - afferent messages conducted through kinaesthetic sensors. These remarks, like those which precede it, point to learning as a physical *and* mental activity and to the idea that any resultant knowledge resides across both the cognitive and corporeal. This has profound implications for enabling sensory and physical engagement with materials because it connotes that embodied experiences provoke thought, as well as emotional and imaginary reactions. It implies that these elements are not distinct but, indeed, fundamentally inter-related; knowledge can be gained through bodily practices and developed via powers of imagination. What is thought without feeling, without imagination and *vice versa*?

Viv Golding, G. Were, Helen Chatterjee, Fiona Candlin and others have provided convincing evidence of the positive impact of handling and multi-sensory opportunities in developing learning and understanding in young people, and the contribution that affordances for sensory engagement can have for people's health and well-being.<sup>492</sup> Yet, often in museums, handling opportunities are separated from the gallery spaces in which the art objects and 'real' 'treasures' are distanced and revered in silence.

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<sup>489</sup> Film review interview SW 23/04/18(b).

<sup>490</sup> Megan Benton, 'Books as Art', in Eliot, Simon and Rose, Jonathan, (eds.), *A Companion to the History of the Book*, (Maldon, M.A., USA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 495-507, (p. 507).

<sup>491</sup> Post-encounter interview UA 190418(a).

<sup>492</sup> Viv Golding, 'Dreams and Wishes: the Multi-Sensory Museum Space' in Dudley, Sandra, *Museum Objects: Experiencing the Properties of Things*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012) *et al*, cited in Woodall, Alexandra, *Sensory engagements with objects in art galleries: material interpretation and theological metaphor* (Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leicester, 2016) <http://hdl.handle.net/2381/37942> (p.17).

Indeed, the provision of sensory engagement opportunities has dwindled for the 'general' and older visitors and 'handling collections' may attract pejorative connotations around notions of simple, basic and not serious, deep engagement. As the scale and size of the furniture in figure 46 illustrates, tactile or handling opportunities are more often than not designed for children rather than adults.<sup>493</sup> However, this approach risks ignoring our ongoing fundamental experiential relationships, as human beings, with the material environment around us and how we come to understand it. 'I definitely had fun deducing, or falsely deducing', said one smiling participant, 'what was from when, which parts belonged to where, what part of the country.'<sup>494</sup> 'If this was available in a museum, I would probably go to a museum every day! I would go as often as I could just to touch. I would spend hours there... And that's how I'd spend my pastime. I was still wondering what this thing is in the middle. But now I think it is just the skin by itself... You can see the marking in the middle. Maybe it's the spine? Spine, yeah?'<sup>495</sup> Thinking with objects can be fun and informative for people, whoever they may be, and from whatever background they might come, as this participant's comments indicate. This study shows that there is an appetite for materially oriented creative exploration and absorbing encounters between people and objects within interpretive settings.

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<sup>493</sup> How many references to handling collections has the reader come across that are not illustrated with images of school children?

<sup>494</sup> Post-encounter interview UA 190418(a).

<sup>495</sup> Film review interview UA 19/04/18(a).





Figure 46: A 'handling' opportunity at Hepworth Wakefield<sup>496</sup>

## vii. Conclusion

Throughout this chapter we have seen how the confluence of people and manuscript materials afforded participants an alternative to contemplating the object at a distance. Instead, the rewilded displayscape enabled a 'community of substance', which provoked curiosity, questions, corporeal examinations and gestural figuring. Participants had time to dwell and be with the manuscript's materials – to twiddle, touch, sniff, taste and listen. In other words, participants could embark and spend time asking their own questions, which often arose from dynamic interactions between them and the materials they were with. Importantly, too, they could speculate, ruminate and come to their own conclusions free of the opinions and views of external authorities.

This process generated understandings of the manuscript and its materialities which went beyond the textual content of the page, ignited empathies with past lives,

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<sup>496</sup> Not untypically, tucked away in a corner of the gallery space it is 'in miniature', scaled down for children's use rather than to encourage adults to engage in tactile activity and employ their sensory modalities beyond sight. This was the perception of haptic interventions noted by a number of participants in this research study.

labours and experiences and, in many cases, shattered preconceptions of these past lives, human and non-human, and the historical category we label 'medieval'.

*This is the first fox skull I ever found, explains Chris Packham pressing his nose against it. It still smells dry and meaty. [For me] It is the smell of the 1960s!*

Chris Packham, 'Asperger's and Me' BBC4 broadcast, 18/10/17

## **10.Touching the past: creative and imaginative interpretations**

### **i. Introduction**

Participants' material engagement gave rise, in many instances, to imaginative and creative, as well as historical and contextual interpretations. Rewilding the encounters between participants and objects created an environment with potential for affective experiences. Multi-sensational engagement with manuscript materials – tangible, aural, visual and olfactory – afforded participants opportunities to garner 'powerful and empathetic connections with the objects and the stories associated with them'.<sup>497</sup> This study's displayscape offered a space for imagination – a portal to inaccessible pasts - in which participants could step outside of chronological narratives of history and create their own understandings, weaving prior knowledge, memories and fantasy, induced by sensory stimuli.

However, not all of the participants found that the rewilded displayscape unleashed their imaginations. The absence of textual information, or a contextual marker of some kind, continued to undermine some participants' attempts to know and understand the manuscript. Asked if haptic and wider sensory engagement with manuscript materials had sparked imaginings, one contributor replied, 'Not necessarily. As I said, I prefer to know, to read about the history and everything. It was interesting, the video though, because of the associations on the video; there are monks and when they are reading it, there's different languages being read [sic]. But I noticed that I really perked up when it came into English, because that's obviously what I understand and that's what I was looking for, was more understanding, a bit more clarity.'<sup>498</sup> It seems as

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<sup>497</sup> Sandra Dudley, 'Materiality Matters: Experiencing the Displayed Object' in *Working papers in Museum Studies*, Number 8 (University of Michigan, 2012), (pp.3-4).

<sup>498</sup> Post-encounter interview GP 16/04/18(a).

though this individual's sense of confusion was overwhelming to the point of stifling his/her capacity to 'inhabit' the displayscape. This is not dissimilar, to a degree at least, to Pierre Bourdieu's observation of encountering a work of art. 'A work of art', he posits, 'has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded... A beholder who lacks the specific code feels lost in the chaos of sounds and rhythms, colours and lines, without rhyme or reason....'<sup>499</sup> As a result of the fact that the rewilded interpretive setting did not possess a scheduled 'code', this participant expressed valid concerns about how to behave, what to do, and what to conclude, possibly based on wider socio-cultural conventions, which associate knowledge and understanding with what we see and read, rather than what we feel or even hear.<sup>500</sup>

## **ii. Substantial materialities: tangible and tactile catalysts for creative imaginings**

Not all of the participants, however, felt quite so lost and excluded by the wild 'chaos'. 'I prefer it', declared one participant on being asked how this experience compared to prior visits to interpretive settings, 'because it uses your creativity and imagination. When you read about something [in a museum] you don't think about it anymore... I was having a lot of fun, trying to decide for myself where and when it was from.'<sup>501</sup> 'First of all I was trying to be tender with it (referring to the vellum), then I had a rush of excitement because I could touch things'.<sup>502</sup> The deregulated distribution of the manuscript materials offered chances for action and engagement in a 'more playful, sensual fashion than is usually afforded in the smoothed over space of much [interpretive] space'.<sup>503</sup> 'It was really fun and I'm really glad I got the chance to do it!'. I think I would have loved a few more hours. I'd have loved it!' <sup>504</sup> To echo poet and writer, David Almond's observation, by accepting that life is messy we may release our

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<sup>499</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), (pp.2-3).

<sup>500</sup> Rowan Watson, 'Some Non-textual Uses of Books, in Eliot, Simon and Rose, Jonathan, eds., *A Companion to the History of the Book*, (Maldon, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 480-491.

<sup>501</sup> Film review transcript UA 19/04/18(a).

<sup>502</sup> Film review transcript UA 19/04/18(a).

<sup>503</sup> A debt is owed to Tim Edensor, who explores this very notion within the decay of the ruined industrial landscape. See, Edensor, Tim, 'Waste Matter – The Debris of Industrial Ruins and the Disordering of the Material World', in *Journal of Material Culture*, 10, (2005), 311-332, (p.325)

<sup>504</sup> Film review interview UA 19/04/18(a).

creative potential and thereby have the chance to forage, rummage, explore and investigate; to probe, prod, pour, rub, shake, bend, spill, spin, roll, sip, rattle, tap and sniff. These affordances not only released participants' creativity and imaginations, but, as one the above participants implies, it provided food for thought and reflection, which simply reading someone else's interpretation may not.<sup>505</sup>

This is the antithesis of what we encounter in conventional displays of manuscripts where all of this messiness is cleaned up, concealed and contained with perfect jars of pigments, inks and quills suspended delicately behind glass, and the parchment is conserved, polished and in the vitrine to belie the gruesome reality of the processes and interactions that crafted this final form. The manuscript becomes a 'Pandora's Box', which *contains* the manuscript materials. We open it at our peril: '[I] didn't think urine smelt pleasant but (participant, sniffs and moans), ...but I think it, it lets you play, and it lets you be imaginative. Not like in a safe space, but it makes it OK for you to imagine. Because sometimes...in a museum sphere; "imagine, blah, blah, blah" and like, I don't know, it's not, I don't know. It made a... What am I trying to say? Sometimes, when they say, "imagine this..." and you go, you can only imagine one thread. But this just really opened-up everything. It opened-up so many potentials and it wasn't...limited. So, it did let you imagine in different ways – yeah, a very unlimited imagination, if that makes sense?'<sup>506</sup> If not always pleasant, or safe, this participant's words attest to the potential of the rewilded interpretive environment to ignite imaginations through sensory experiences. If we think that manuscripts should only be beautiful and delightful, we are missing out. Participants' responses remind us that, as Susan Sontag asserts, 'real art has the capacity to make us nervous. By reducing the work of art to its content and then interpreting that, one tames the work of art. Interpretation makes art manageable, conformable'.<sup>507</sup> The same can be said for the manuscript in this study. If we resist the temptation to interpret only its textual content, visual imagery, or historical and cultural context, the object becomes less manageable – the materials did not conform to participants' preconceptions and their

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<sup>505</sup> David Almond interview in *The Northern Review*, Byre, Liz, "'You write with the body. It's a physical act" – David Almond Interview', <http://northernreview.co.uk/david-almond-interview> Viewed August 2018.

<sup>506</sup> Film review interview OQ 25/04/18(a).

<sup>507</sup> Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, (London: Vintage, 2001), (pp.4-5).

experiences defied expectations. Sometimes, with risk comes reward: 'I feel as though I am in, erm... not a chemistry lab, I feel I am in a perfumery. As if I am looking at ingredients at Chanel or Dior, to make new scents, not manuscripts.'<sup>508</sup> If we did not know that this participant was encountering a manuscript and its materials, it is likely that we would find it difficult to guess that s/he was within an interpretive environment of any kind. His/her words evoke exploratory and experiential settings, far removed from the normative experience of encountering a manuscript - looking at it through a glass barrier and reading text about it.

This sense of adventure and surprise was expressed by another participant: 'I definitely got a sense of exploration. I didn't quite know what to expect when I first entered the room'.<sup>509</sup> 'It was like I was in a new forest', said another participant excitedly, 'and everything around me was unknown. I just want to go here, go there, which way am I going? What am I finding?'<sup>510</sup> As one participant explained: 'I was looking at things and I wanted to pick [them] up, but I wasn't sure if I was going to damage [them] by touching'. But then, obviously, then as things went along, I got more confident, definitely, doing that.'<sup>511</sup> The feeling of crossing a threshold, being on the edge of a new discovery or experience, created a frisson of uncertainty and excitement. The creative, imaginative possibilities of journeying off the beaten path are foregrounded here. Participants, freed from adhering to signposted directions, were able to lose themselves in the company of the materials and dwell on the edge of a forest of possibilities. 'I started to file through everything I know', said one participant. 'Where does it fit in? Where does it go? Roman? Viking? Crusaders? I was trying to map everything out... what was from when, which parts belonged to where, what part of the country [or], [what] was made in different parts of the world... The most fundamental thing, reading, was not possible' (because textual information was absent). Instead, this participant discovered that, 'you could touch it, feel it, think about it yourself, deduce things yourself, decide things yourself, use your imagination to decide how it works and then, huh, compare ...'.<sup>512</sup> Curiosities and imaginations

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<sup>508</sup> Walkalong interview GW /04/18.

<sup>509</sup> Post-encounter interview SW 23/04/18(a).

<sup>510</sup> Film review interview UA 19/04/18(a).

<sup>511</sup> Film review interview SW 23/04/18(b).

<sup>512</sup> Film review interview UA 19/04/18(a).

were piqued, not by an imposed interpretive narrative but by the object itself, the patina of stories adhering to the manuscript's materiality: 'How many people had handled these material substances across the eons?' pondered one participant, imagining others doing just as she was doing. S/he continued: 'But, you know what? I don't think I've ever thought about that: if it's me physically inserting myself into the past or just thinking about it...That's another thing I am going to take from this. What might it have been like to talk to those people? It's almost like a conversation with the past.' These reactions point to participant experiences of perceptual immersion; 'social presence', 'social realism' and 'co-presence', and 'transportation'. In this case, the manuscript materials generated a perception of being in another environment, of communication with past events and entities. The distinctions between actual physical location and imagined environments began to be blurred within the displayscape.<sup>513</sup> This participant not only weaved herself into the fabric of past lives and eras but suggested that this was a reciprocal act. The past thrust itself into his/her life in the modern world, evoking Mill's assertion that material things can retain their potency for affect in the present: 'they meant then; they mean now; they will mean again'.<sup>514</sup> As Gosden and Marshall point out, 'renewals [of meaning] are never really complete, they bring with them fragments of old lives, threads of earlier meaning'.<sup>515</sup>

On encountering *MS210* one participant was moved to say how it made her/him feel: 'It's a bit mixed, because it's an object and I want to handle it. I am a little bit distanced and, yep, because it's in its box (vitrine). But those drawings that it's showing...it's almost like somebody's notes on one side, so somebody's added...Whatever it was before, it's got this extra thing'. 'I know it's got a history and sometimes it's not a pristine thing that's been kept singular. But now it's a shame that it's being kept...I know you can't have everyone handling things... It's a sacred book, because this is a kind of relic, so, it's a special object.'<sup>516</sup> Aarthi Ajit refers to this sense of presence that

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<sup>513</sup> This notion of presence is usually used to refer to human perceptions being mediated by technologies; however, interactions with material objects and interventions such as dramatic performances can act similarly to potent emotional valences. See, *The Concept of Presence* <https://ispr.info/about-presence-2/about-presence/>. Viewed August 2018.

<sup>514</sup> See, Robert Mills, *Derek Jarman's Medieval Modern*, (Cambridge: D S Brewer, 2018), (p.90).

<sup>515</sup> Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall, 'The cultural biography of objects', 1999, *World Archaeology*, 31 (2), 169-178 (p.177).

<sup>516</sup> Post-encounter interview, DdC, 240418(a).

attaches to objects from the past, asserting that personal experiences and shared experiences of communities can be carried by biographical objects. 'The histories of objects and people', Aijit contends, 'are tied together as objects, animated by various kinds of value, going forward in time as material testimonies of bygone era[s]'.<sup>517</sup> A sense of this was expressed by one participant, whose comments revealed an appetite for this kind of somatic embrace centring on an appreciation of shared 'life' experiences: 'I want to kind of feel how bashed it is. There are holes in it and I want to know what the edges of the holes feel like and, as I say, because this is an Ethiopian document, I kind of imagine just a little bit more, well, my past experience of manuscripts is that there's bits that other people have been touching in the past. It's got a life history, so, it must have some kind of feelings....'<sup>518</sup> This evokes the intensity with which objects can resonate, as noted by Jules Michelet when he refers to the "'residual memory of past bodies" cling[ing] to them'.<sup>519</sup> And this participant's reaction also brings to mind Roland Barthes' assertion that, 'the historical mass is not a puzzle to reconstitute, but a body to embrace', which not only alludes to the corporeal, visceral connections that we can make to past lives and eras, but also to the emotional ardour that encounters with the past can involve.<sup>520</sup>

Katherine Rudy uses the term, 'frozen' to describe the fate of a manuscript when it enters a public collection. No longer the object 'whose content and structure were dynamic', the manuscript becomes 'a static entity', 'stabilized, frozen, preserved'.<sup>521</sup> As one participant termed it, *MS210* seemed hitherto 'out of use' and in the 'tomb-like' archives.<sup>522</sup> But, crucially, what lies at the heart of this process of ossification is an absence of social interaction. Moving around the case a full 360 degrees, one participant exclaimed: 'It's looking quote lonely by itself. I'm kind of used to the idea

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<sup>517</sup> Aarthi Aijit, 'Oral heirlooms: the vocalisation of loss and objects' in *Oral History*, Autumn 2015, 70-78, (p.71).

<sup>518</sup> Walkalong interview DdC 24/04/18(a).

<sup>519</sup> See Caroline Dinshaw's discussion of this issue through the work of Jules Michelet in Dinshaw, Carolyn, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre-and Postmodern*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), (pp.46-50).

<sup>520</sup> Roland Barthes (*Camera Lucida*, 1981,) cited in Dinshaw, Carolyn, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre-and Postmodern*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), (p.47).

<sup>521</sup> Kathryn Rudy, 'Introduction: A new approach to codicology' in *Piety in Pieces*, (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2016), 1-13, (p.2).

<sup>522</sup> Film review transcript DdC 24/04/18(b).



that they are in libraries, that they are together. I think I am privileged at times for holding things that other people can't, but I am comparing it to other manuscripts in my head and this one's little and I want to know why. I mean...I kind of want to now know some of the sounds (of the text spoken)'. It doesn't say (in the annotations) "Johnny was here, 1920", or whatever. Or whatever equivalent is in Ethiopian. It might be there, but I want to know it's provenance, both its written one and its - where it was before it was here, before it... I mean...because this is a display, I expect that at some point in Leicester it is being kept in a dark, closed archive and it doesn't sit with the other books and its friends. Sounds silly, but I am guessing about the person, who brought it but I kinda [sic] want to know, why they brought it and why they gave it to Leicester and how it travelled, I guess from Ethiopia to here. But where did it go between that?'<sup>523</sup>

These comments allude to a wish to get to know the manuscript, almost to befriend it. True, this participant might be projecting feelings and meaning onto the manuscript as Knell suggests, but equally, would this participant have acted in this way if the manuscript were not what it is? Remember, the participants were not given any contextual information. They knew nothing of the manuscript's life story at this stage. Therefore, it seems that it may have been the manuscript's material physicality that demanded the participants' responses. Squatting low, so as to be at eye level with the manuscript, one participant gazed attentively at *MS210* in the glass case. '[I think it sounds] Crinkly but stiff. But I don't want to make it make that sound because I know I would be hurting it.'<sup>524</sup>

The reflections of another participant also testify to our entangled existence with, and experience of, objects in the world: 'It's making me a bit sad, thinking of all the manuscripts that didn't get chosen. Like this one (*MS210*), everyone auditioned for the final show, but only one could go on the main stage. But I also feel like it's done it's time and it's been on a long journey and deserves to be highlighted and venerated once again.'<sup>525</sup> These words point to the manuscript's two-way affective presence,

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<sup>523</sup> Walkalong interview DdC 24/04/18(a).

<sup>524</sup> Walkalong interview DdC 24/04/18(a).

<sup>525</sup> Walkalong interview OQ 25/04/18(a).

engendering feelings, but also being affected. It affected then; it affects now. These comments remind us that the manuscript's temporality transcends human lifespans and that, if we think of *MS210* lying dormant in the basement of the University Library, we should not necessarily conclude that it has reached the end of the social life that enlivened it.<sup>526</sup> This apparent state of dormancy may only be temporary; simply another stage in its biographical journey. This notion is explored in the sublime BBC television series, 'Detectorists', which subtly picks at the warp and weft of the human and object worlds. In a climactic episode, a detectorist, having given an Anglo-Saxon object that he has discovered to the British Museum, worries that he has removed the artefact from its vital trajectory and stifled its life by placing it in a collection. The museum curator, however, reassures the detectorist that he has not sealed the object's fate in a vitrine, and that, rather than being the end of the artefact's life cycle, its period in the museum may just be a further chapter in its continuing biographical journey.<sup>527</sup>

This next participant too, sewed his/herself into the biography of the manuscript, into its creation, through sensational engagement: 'Imagination and creativity is very important to me, so I tend, I have a bit of a flair for the dramatic, if you hadn't noticed (chuckles). I always try and put myself in someone's position and imagine what that was like. So, it made me feel closer because I could visualize what it was like being that person, doing these different processes. Erm, I was thinking about how exhausted you would be, and I think I mentioned I was thinking, "God, that your hands would have been in such a state, regardless of which part of this process you were doing". And when I was imagining the mortar and pestle thing with the grinding. It's really easy to think, because I can still remember the physical sensation of what I was doing with my hands when I was doing that, but I am not quite sure where I recall it from.'<sup>528</sup> Again, evoking David Almond's contention that we and the world are messy; 'that our minds and lives are messy.... What a mess!' this participant feels her/his way into the past lives of others, but also relives personal experiences, while simultaneously intuiting the

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<sup>526</sup> See Appendix 7: Object biography.

<sup>527</sup> *Detectorists*, BBC Four

[https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06tdq5d?ns\\_mchannel=YT&ns\\_source=bbc\\_four&ns\\_linkname=description\\_link](https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06tdq5d?ns_mchannel=YT&ns_source=bbc_four&ns_linkname=description_link) Shown 10.00pm 23/12/15.

<sup>528</sup> Post-encounter interview AT 25/04/18(a).

bodily effect of the substances with which s/he and the manuscript makers before him/her, literally, came into contact. Reminiscent of the approach of the artist, Wolfgang Laib, to his work, the rewilded displayscape presented *MS210*, not as a 'creation', but as a process of 'participation' with materials. Laib eschews narrative to enable his installations to offer a space to contemplate matter and self and to explore 'passage[s] to another world'.<sup>529</sup> Without the framing, containing vitrine, the manuscript's materiality was released to become more than a solely visual entity; a multi-sensory phenomenon, providing a rich intensity of experience and emotion.

Olfactory experiences, in particular, seemed to be especially absorbing and beguiling: 'And some of those smells, I want to know what they are meant to be. They are there and they are quite interesting... I am a bit lost in them at the moment.'<sup>530</sup> Another participant described the potency of the odour as a catalyst for his/her imagination: 'I definitely think the smelling helped a lot more (than even touch in perceiving a sense of the manuscript). It gives you an idea what it was like working with them. The smells would be all around you and everything.'<sup>531</sup>

'It smelt kind of like spices and things', said another participant who spent some time inhaling the resinous scents of materials in the drawers. 'It smelt like incense or something, which, in my head is what they would have around, I suppose, in the monasteries and things'.<sup>532</sup> These participants' comments attest to the importance of olfactory experiences in disrupting ideas of the past as distant and devoid of sensory stimuli. In these instances, the past is no longer an absent concept but perceivable through smell, as well as being rendered colourful and sonic. Both the manuscript object and the participant (subject) shared the present moment, clear and keen. This ruptured the preconceptions voiced by the participants prior to their experience of the displayscape, in which 'dusty', 'musty', 'dull' and 'grey', were the dominant terms. One participant, on reviewing his/her actions revealed by the subcam, attributed them to smell: 'I guess because of the scent. I have got a quite strong sense of smell, so

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<sup>529</sup> Wolfgang Laib, *Without Space, Without Times, Without Body*, Hepworth Wakefield. Visited July 2019 <https://hepworthwakefield.org/artist/wolfgang-laib/> Viewed 13/11/19.

<sup>530</sup> Walkalong interview DdC 24/04/18(a).

<sup>531</sup> Post-encounter interview UA 19/04/18(a).

<sup>532</sup> Film review interview SW 23/04/18(b).

smelling it made me think more about what the manuscript would smell like. So, I was thinking, no, it wouldn't smell like an old book, it would smell like this instead.'<sup>533</sup> Here, the sense of smell not only elicited physical responses from this participant, but also disrupted linear notions of time by presenting it not as smelling old and aged, as s/he had imagined it might now, but as smelling 'young', as it might have then. Thus, the olfactory present was thrust into the past and *vice versa*.

This additional dimension to experiencing the manuscript both surprised and challenged perceptions of the manuscript and the past: moth balls may have been expected, but considering manuscripts and soy sauce simultaneously is unusual and challenges us to relocate the manuscript, conceptually, geographically, and temporally. While specific scents (Frankincense, urine, hide and blood, for example) were present in each drawer, these all seeped beyond the confines of the cabinet over time and infused the whole displayscape with a potent and puzzling effect. Stooping to smell the urine taper with some vigour, one participant said that it was 'more like preservatives. If this is what it (*MS210*) really smells like it makes me think of moth balls. But it may be just clichés because I know I am smelling things from old.'<sup>534</sup> Another participant pondered, 'that tea smelt like soy sauce. Well, it reminded me of soy sauce so....'<sup>535</sup> She concluded that his/her difficulty in deciphering one odour from the other was 'due to intermingling of scents to create a new olfactory experience'.<sup>536</sup> Layered with digital interventions and other sensory stimuli the olfactory impact was magnified: '...When you walk into this room, it's immediately different. It feels like a completely different space. So, you had the music, and the audios. I remember, as soon as I walked in, it was the piece of audio, the spoken bit, where they're talking about this scraping of the flesh and being stretched across the frame, it's all...And the smells - that's what made me think of saying this - you can smell kind of incense and other stuff you can't quite place, and with that and the music and the spoken word stuff, it just feels like a different space, altogether from what's outside the door. And I think that's quite a powerful thing.'<sup>537</sup> These words testify to the 'profound kind of emotional

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<sup>533</sup> Film review interview SM 23/04/18(b).

<sup>534</sup> Walkalong interview and subcam film GW 24/04/18.

<sup>535</sup> Film Review interview EJ 18/04/18(b).

<sup>536</sup> Walkalong interview EJ 18/04/18.

<sup>537</sup> In email response to post-encounter questionnaire from AT.

authenticity'<sup>538</sup> that encounters with sensory simulacra can engender; sounds and smells have the capacity to reach out and touch us. Literally, inhaling scents and hearing sounds are penetrative experiences, a 'slippage from the outside in', but, emotionally and imaginatively, as sensory 'intra-actions', they also ignite affective responses. This is an important lesson for interpretive spaces attempting to foster understandings of the past. Holistic, embodied approaches to the interpretive environment reflect our experiences in everyday life, in which we are constantly exposed to a range of sensory stimuli, which are layered and competing. Yet, too often, it seems, the silent, sterile, white cube in which we often see manuscripts, omits this potentially potent ingredient of what the interpretive setting has to offer.

This next comments also allude to the immersive potential of physical and sensory encounters: 'When I was doing the pre-thing (pre encounter questionnaire),' said one participant, 'I was thinking of the Viking TV show and the Book of Kells, but when (referring to physical, sensory material encounters) – I remembered like the smells of [from a trip to] India. But a lot of it, I don't think I was thinking of any movies. I was very much, 'in the moment'. Which is so exciting! Just to explore. And even when I was imagining, like a monk escaping with a book or something, that wasn't from a movie or anything. Because normally I would do, in day to day conversation, I'd be like, "that TV show or that book". But, yeah, I wasn't...I think, maybe, I mediate through popular culture sometimes. It might even be a way to connect with other people, because they might have a shared knowledge of popular culture but not of the thing I'm talking about, so it's a connection, a bridge, if you will, to the other person. But I didn't need that for this.'<sup>539</sup> Time and opportunity to *be* with materials can, in this way, be seen to facilitate 'internal time travel'. In this case, the participant loses him/herself in past memories and imaginings. 'A dreamer', Bachelard contends, 'can reconstruct the world from an object that he transforms magically through his care of it'.<sup>540</sup> Sometimes I find with multi-sensories that is this thing that you tack on at the end, where it's like, "Oh,

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<sup>538</sup> I have transposed Auslander's reference to dramatic intervention with the intervention of sensory stimuli. Mark Auslander, 'Touching the Past: Materializing Time in Traumatic "Living History" Re-enactments' in *Signs and Society* Vol. 1, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 161-183 <http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/670167> (Viewed 06/08/17).

<sup>539</sup> Post-encounter interview OQ 25/04/18(a).

<sup>540</sup> <https://www.brainpickings.org/2015/06/01/gaston-bachelard-the-poetics-of-space-housework/>.

feel this thing and it might remind you of this”, but the multi-sensory experience really situated me in the creation of the manuscript and it made me really, really think about those, the tiny little things that were needed, like the beeswax to put on the hemp, so, it was a very... I really do feel like I have experienced a manuscript. Like, it’s a little bit of time travel!’<sup>541</sup> Bachelard’s ‘care’, in this instance, was manifested through attentiveness to an object, or objects, and rather than reconstructing ‘the’ world, this participant reconstructed a world, ‘magically’ through his/her imagination, which was ignited by the sparks of sensory stimuli.

The ‘bridge’ that this participant described connecting him/her to another person, a past life, evokes Carolyn Dinshaw’s definition of ‘touching the past’. Dinshaw describes this as partial connections being made between ‘incommensurate identities’ and ‘communities’, which transcend temporal barriers. ‘Identities are built up of crossings “back and forth between yourself and the world” – built up that is, of relations between aspects of individual existences and other phenomena: creatures, books, people, religions, eras’.<sup>542</sup> We may only get a glimpse of the beginning of this process through this participant’s experience, but, nonetheless, we can discern her/him making connections and creating identities with things and across temporal divides. And, it serves to remind us of Sennett’s contention that, in being with things, making things, we learn, not just about other things in the world, but also about ourselves and how we relate to and with those things.<sup>543</sup> In this way the rewilded displayscape facilitated explorations, both outward and inward.

Further testimony to the powerful potential of physical presence and embodied encounters with manuscript materials is given in this next participant’s recollections: ‘There was something about that smell, I don’t know, [that] just evokes for me, that sort of, a real – I don’t know, it gets me really excited about being and thinking in a different frame of mind. So, being able to smell that whilst also touching and feeling different things did really put me into that mode of curiosity. I do feel that sense of wonder, so, having that smell and putting me back in that context, sort of gave me that

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<sup>541</sup> Post-encounter interview OQ 25/04/18(a).

<sup>542</sup> Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre-and Postmodern*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), (p.170).

<sup>543</sup> Richard Sennett, Richard, *The Craftsman*, (London: Penguin, 2009), (p.11).

sense of wondering and that made me want to explore more and feel and think about things in a different context... It kind of puts you back into the mindset of whoever was writing it at the time.<sup>544</sup> The extent and depth of enthrallment referred to by this participant evokes Mitchell's recollection of an emotionally and temporally transformative experience handling an object in a museum store. She also spoke of an exhilarating moment: 'I feel as if I climb inside time... that real time carries on around me, while I am elsewhere...'.<sup>545</sup> Objects like *MS210* are both 'reminders' and 'remainders' of the past, but they are also 'affected with futurity'. When we do get to touch *MS210*, for example, we can only touch it *now, in the present*. Any past we connect to is one of our own creation, in the moment. Yet, what we touch somehow reaches out to us, impressing itself upon us and bridging the temporal divide. This connection with the past is not just metaphorical, precisely because of the very materiality of the object and of the person touching it. Time cannot be divorced from the material or social worlds of the object, but, rather, as medieval philosopher John Duns Scotus put it, time unfolds and enfolds with 'individuations', creating "haeccities" or individual peculiarities and variances.<sup>546</sup> This notion of personal temporal connection is picked up by these next comments: 'I caught myself thinking, "what it would be like, just sitting down and painting with all those colours and stuff". And, yeah, I was just thinking of *stuff*...It felt like *I wasn't even in the room at points*, randomly just looking at how and what they were doing, like making the arrow [whittled hazel stick to carry thread]' (Researcher's emphasis).<sup>547</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes this sensation as 'flow'; when awareness and conduct converge. It seems apt, in the context of our ecologically inspired analogy of rewilding, to draw on Sarah Maitland's experience of walking in remote landscapes, to highlight this point. Her description of 'slipping gear' and, as she puts it, 'suddenly and unexpectedly...there was not me and the landscape but a kind of oneness: a

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<sup>544</sup> Post-encounter interview and film review interview SW 23/04/18(a).

<sup>545</sup> Sharon Blakey, Liz Mitchell, 'Unfolding: A multisensorial dialogue in "material time"' in, *Material Thinking* Volume 17, (p.11)  
[https://www.materialthinking.org/sites/default/files/papers/SMT\\_Volume17\\_Paper%2001\\_FA2.pdf](https://www.materialthinking.org/sites/default/files/papers/SMT_Volume17_Paper%2001_FA2.pdf)  
 Viewed June 2019.

<sup>546</sup> John Duns Scotus referred to by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, in Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome, (ed.), 'Introduction' in *The Post-Colonial Middle Ages*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2000), (p.9).

<sup>547</sup> Post-encounter interview ZA 19/04/18(a).

connection...' corresponds with many of the participants' accounts of their experiences with the materials within the displayscape.<sup>548</sup>

These participants talked of being in a different place imaginatively and emotionally. But, as William James reminds us, emotional experiences are always embodied. Each emotional experience, he contends, 'is an experience by which both the body and what affects it produce each other'.<sup>549</sup> These participants' allusions to historical emplacement summons Jem Fraser's comparison of an exhibition to 'a dramatic production that can enable visitors to explore their feelings, values, identities and knowledge, just like the audience in a play'.<sup>550</sup> While the notion of an interpretive setting as a 'drama' is, as we can see from the participants' responses, commensurate with the potential offered by a rewilded displayscape, Fraser's analogy is perhaps too preponderant on the act of looking.<sup>551</sup> If the display space is a dramatic production, then the visitor's role should not be confined to that of a spectator, but should involve him or her as actor, a participant in the drama. This not only places the museum (or the wider interpretive setting), as Fraser advocates, as a 'potential source of experimentation, creativity and possibility', but, as the participant data from this study shows, it better situates the visitor to 'use, refine and enhance their [individual] interpretive strategies'.<sup>552</sup> However, if the visitor is an actor in the 'dramatic production' of the encounter, this study also demonstrates that s/he must come, not with a set of stage directions, but, rather, as an unscripted embodied presence in the interpretive setting, enabled to experience through 'the sensuous, sensing and sensed

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<sup>548</sup> Sarah Maitland, *A Book of Silence*, (2008), Sharon Blakey, Liz Mitchell, 'Unfolding: A multisensorial dialogue in "material time"' in, *Material Thinking* Volume 17, (p.8) [https://www.materialthinking.org/sites/default/files/papers/SMT\\_Volume17\\_Paper%2001\\_FA2.pdf](https://www.materialthinking.org/sites/default/files/papers/SMT_Volume17_Paper%2001_FA2.pdf) Viewed June 2019.

<sup>549</sup> William James (in Vinciane Despret, *Our Emotional Make-up*, 2004) cited by Norrie Neumark *Voicetracks* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), (p.5).

<sup>550</sup> Jem Fraser 'Museums: Drama, ritual and power' in Knell, Simon, MacLeod, Suzanne, Watson Sheila (eds.) *Museum Revolutions: How Museums change and are changed*, (London: Routledge, 2007), 291-302, (p.300).

<sup>551</sup> Kate Gregory and Andrea Witcomb 'Beyond Nostalgia: The Role of affect in generating historical understanding at heritage sites' in Knell, Simon, MacLeod, Suzanne, Watson Sheila (eds.) *Museum Revolutions: How Museums change and are changed*, (London: Routledge, 2007), 263-275, (p.274).

<sup>552</sup> Jem Fraser 'Museums: Drama, ritual and power' in Knell, Simon, MacLeod, Suzanne, Watson Sheila (eds.) *Museum Revolutions: How Museums change and are changed*, (London: Routledge, 2007), 291-302, (p.300).



body'.<sup>553</sup> As Merleau-Ponty points out, we encounter things because we are encounterable. And, he contends, it is this embodied experience, rather than the immaterial mind, that is the basis of our knowledge. 'It was as though our vision were formed in the heart of the visible, or as though there were between it and us an intimacy as close as between the sea and the strand.'<sup>554</sup> The participants' narratives and post event comments highlight how our sensory modalities trigger memories, past references, previous understandings and knowledge, as well as our imaginations, and this skein of experiences and meanings framed their respective interpretations of the manuscript they encountered. As Christopher Tilley puts it, 'the past influences the present and the present rearticulates the past'.<sup>555</sup> 'The past and present fold in on each other' in the moment of encounter<sup>556</sup> and, as one participant reflected, produced a 'very memorable note'.<sup>557</sup>

### iii. Memories

The rewilded displayscape aimed to draw on, and link to, participants' experiences and to provide an environment for them to explore memories and ideas and create their own meanings and context. As graphically illustrated in figure 47, memories embedded in formative years, prior knowledge and past experiences were reawakened through intimate interactions between the participants and manuscript materials. The feel of beeswaxed hemp held by one participant awoke long forgotten memories of learning to play the violin. The waxed fibres reminded him/her of the texture of horsehair strings: 'It makes me think of the violin... It's been a long time since I played the violin, but everything about it has that sort of...' s/he said, drifting off into past experiences.<sup>558</sup> 'I think it was good because it meant that you were able to kind of understand it at a much deeper level than just seeing the object', said another participant, who went on to explain, 'I was also finding [that] I was remembering

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<sup>553</sup> Christopher Tilley, 'From Body to Place to Landscape', in *The Materiality of Stone: Explorations in Landscape Phenomenology*, (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 1-12.

<sup>554</sup> Sarah Bakewell, *At the Existentialist Café: Freedom, Being and Apricot Cocktails*, (London: Vintage, 2017), (p.236).

<sup>555</sup> Christopher Tilley, 'From Body to Place to Landscape', in *The Materiality of Stone: Explorations in Landscape Phenomenology*, (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 1-12.

<sup>556</sup> *Ibid.* 1-12.

<sup>557</sup> Post-encounter interview SM 23/04/18(a).

<sup>558</sup> Walkalong interview AB 25/04/18(a).

things I'd known years ago...It was actually really interesting to get a chance to see it and to see all the materials and stuff and, erm, like, I'd read something about them when I was 10 or so, so I found I was remembering it when I was actually seeing the objects'.<sup>559</sup>

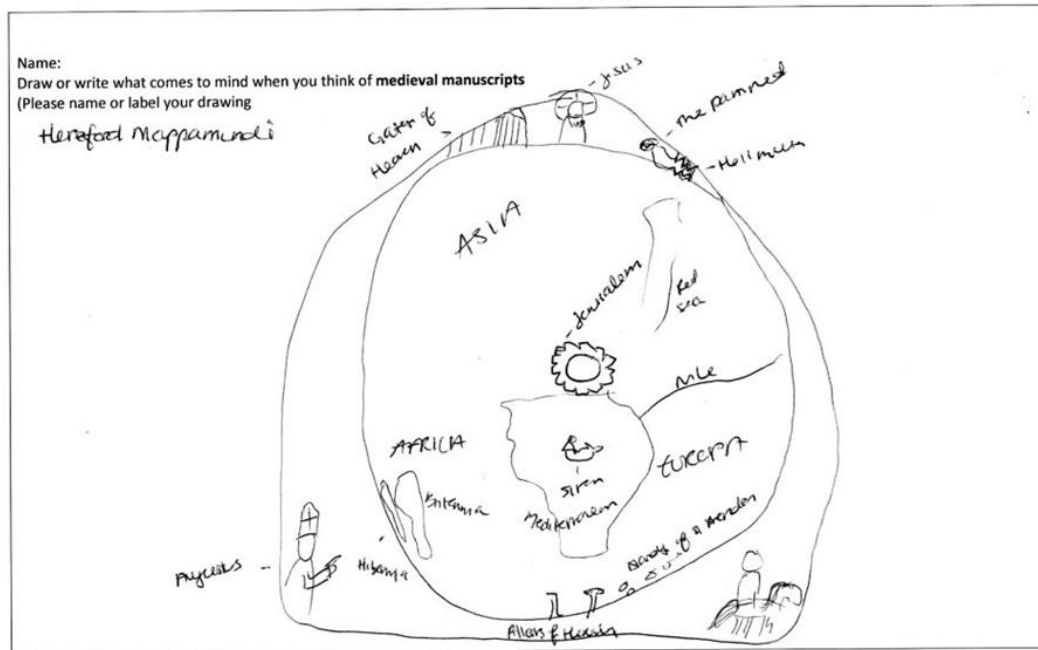


Figure 47: One participant's graphic description of what came to mind when s/he thought of a medieval manuscript. An example is given here of how previous memorable encounters enwrapped his/her experiences in this research study. See also figure 52

'The scent really drew me in, and I wonder whether that's just because, I dunno, [sic] for me, scent is one of the things that attaches myself to memories. I can smell old things and instantly put myself back.'<sup>560</sup> Sarah Blakey contends that this flux between past and present 'emplaces' the perceiving person 'in the now and in their own memory store of personal experiences'.<sup>561</sup> This notion of 'emplacement' was exemplified by one participant's brief, yet, emotive recollection elicited by the texture and scent of the resins s/he encountered in the displayscape: 'My grandmother bought

<sup>559</sup> Post-encounter interview JH 17/04/18(a).

<sup>560</sup> Film review interview SW 23/04/18(b).

<sup>561</sup> Sharon Blakey, in Blakey, Sharon and Mitchell, Liz, 'Unfolding: A multisensorial dialogue in "material time"' in, *Material Thinking* Volume 17, (p.5)

[https://www.materialthinking.org/sites/default/files/papers/SMT\\_Volume17\\_Paper%2001\\_FA2.pdf](https://www.materialthinking.org/sites/default/files/papers/SMT_Volume17_Paper%2001_FA2.pdf)  
Viewed June 2019.

me some Frankincense as a gift when I was a child because...Erm, I am not sure'.<sup>562</sup> The sensory stimuli provided mnemonic portals to autobiographical remembering for other participants too:<sup>563</sup> 'I actually forgot to say this but, erm, in my home town there's Sir Oliver Plunkett, I won't know if you've heard of him? He's a few hundred years old now. But he was hung, drawn and quartered and set on fire by the protestants. His head is in a box, in the church, in my hometown. And we just grew up with his head in the church and nobody really, 'yeah, yeah, it's his head.' It's so part of our vernacular that we don't we don't think about it. But whenever people that [sic] visit – he was like, 'it's fake' and I was, 'no, it's not, it's his real head'. But I am wondering now, when you ask these questions, what is would be like to smell that head. Because his teeth look like beans. His face is all decimated [sic], like, you know, almost waxy paper and so on, like pockmarked, and he's got no eyeballs because he'd been burned. So, it's interesting because I never thought about his head in that way. But this process has made me think more about those multi-sensory possible experiences with old things, old religious things, I think. I wouldn't touch his head.'<sup>564</sup> Materially oriented sensory encounters could be emotionally stimulating for participants and weave physical engagement with the manuscript substances in the present into past personal experiences with things. The following remarks provide a vivid example of this. Talking about tasting the dry mix 'ink', this participant noted how, 'it was the grit of it that made me think of people using a mortar and pestle to grind', (which, interestingly, is exactly how the mix was prepared for this field work). 'That's what it made me think of. And, it's weird, because I don't actually remember, I think I may have used a mortar and pestle once, maybe in cookery at school? But I seem to have a physical memory of doing it, which is something I'd forgot I'd even ever done.'<sup>565</sup>

This visceral memory evokes Christof Mignone's sensuous musings on the mouth, in which he posits, 'the mouth is a meeting place of the sacred and the profane',

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<sup>562</sup> Walkalong interview EJ 18/04/18.

<sup>563</sup> Sharon Blakey, and Liz Mitchell, 'Unfolding: A multisensorial dialogue in "material time" ' in, *Material Thinking* Volume 17, (p.5).  
[https://www.materialthinking.org/sites/default/files/papers/SMT\\_Volume17\\_Paper%2001\\_FA2.pdf](https://www.materialthinking.org/sites/default/files/papers/SMT_Volume17_Paper%2001_FA2.pdf)  
 Viewed June 2019.

<sup>564</sup> Post-encounter interview OQ 25/04/18(a).

<sup>565</sup> Walkalong interview AT/AB 25/04/18(a).

immediately alerting us to the ‘unheimlich’ interconnections between the embodied, material, practical, aesthetic, affective and imaginative.<sup>566</sup> Aural sensations triggered haptic reminders, muscle memories, or, as McFarland notes, a ‘ghost sense’ in participants’ hands and arms. Indeed, one participant’s experience melded an array of the emotional, somatic, creative, memorious and metaphysical. Evoking Stephane Mallarme’s poem, *L’Après-midi d’un faune*, in which the central character awakes to reflect on whether events were the content of a dream or actually occurrences, this participant was uncertain whether this activity was real or imagined.<sup>567</sup> In his/her post-encounter interview, s/he reflected further: ‘But you are not actually sure, that they’re your physical memories, or if they are things you are imagining, or if it’s pulling it from something else, some kind of shared consciousness. I don’t know if I was actually recalling something, or, if it is pure imagination, I don’t know. Which is interesting. Makes me think about past lives and reincarnation and stuff.’<sup>568</sup> Walter Benjamin’s theorising on the ‘constellation’ of history is useful here to demonstrate how we might consider how the past is made in the here and now. Challenging the ‘positivistic relation of past events to each other and to the present, the [constellation’s] starry lights are emitted at different times even as they are perceived at once, together events in the past and present’.<sup>569</sup> To further warp the notion of a linear chronology, we might note that as we gaze upon them, some starry lights come into brighter, sharper focus as others fade or disappear. Similarly, the above participant’s experience of his/her past was created in the ‘now moment’ of embodied experience. The interaction of physical properties and sensual imagination ignited flickering stars of memories, feeling and emotions, which perdured in the starry constellation but advanced and receded from his/her perception.

‘So, I think when you were... outside the door, it had got the smell and the sound – it was like a dusty academic space. It’s like a library, it’s what I would expect. It’s like your classic library study area. [But] when you walked into the room, it was

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<sup>566</sup> Christof Migone, *Sonic Somatic: Performances of the Unsound Body*, (LA, Berlin: errant bodies, 2012). (p.67).

<sup>567</sup> Stephane Mallarme, *L’Après-midi d’un faune*, 1876.

<sup>568</sup> Film review interview SW 23/04/18(b).

<sup>569</sup> Walter Benjamin referred to by Carolyn Dinshaw in, Carolyn, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre-and Postmodern*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), (pp.17-18).

immediately different. It felt like a completely different space.’<sup>570</sup> These words indicate how, for this participant, at least, the object filled space transformed, physically, temporally and emotionally. For some participants the displayscape of this study seemed to become ‘a place where time seems to slow down—and as the urgency of its forward trajectory diminishes’, so it appears ‘somehow to spread, laterally, acquiring an almost viscous consistency’.<sup>571</sup>

Another participant noted how it ‘gum[med] together’ past and present, people, places and things in its ‘viscosity’,<sup>572</sup> and summoned childhood readings of *Horrible Histories*. S/he went on; ‘It definitely gave me a much more kind of vivid image of the creation of the manuscript and the steps involved, including, the preparation of the parchment with the metal thing that I was looking at, which probably has a very fancy name that I don’t know. But it felt like it didn’t matter so much that I didn’t know what the fancy name is’.<sup>573</sup> This participant’s response valorises experiential knowing, which can often be suppressed by the prevalent teleological ‘story bias’ in interpretive settings and beyond. This is a different sort of knowing born of the participant’s sensational and imaginative interpretation of the object, rather than the conventional historical and contextual interpretations, typically conveyed by museums and elsewhere. The participant him/herself here, bodily, became the site of interpretation, the ‘relay point or surface of historical convergence’.<sup>574</sup> Hilde Hein talks of the ‘museum in transition’ as shifting the focus from the object to the experience of the subject.<sup>575</sup> However, the evidence of this research project shows a more complex interweaving of object and subject experience. In the rewilded setting, experience is not the focus *over* the object, but *together with* the object. A manuscript is an object

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<sup>570</sup> AT/AB email to author after taking part as research participants.

<sup>571</sup> Blakey, Sharon and Mitchell, Liz, ‘Unfolding: A multisensorial dialogue in “material time” ’ in, *Material Thinking* Volume 17, (p.3) [https://www.materialthinking.org/sites/default/files/papers/SMT\\_Volume17\\_Paper%2001\\_FA2.pdf](https://www.materialthinking.org/sites/default/files/papers/SMT_Volume17_Paper%2001_FA2.pdf) Viewed June 2019.

<sup>572</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

<sup>573</sup> Walk along interview JH 17/04/18(a).

<sup>574</sup> See Carolyn Dinshaw’s discussion of Barthes and Michelet in Dinshaw, Carolyn, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre-and Postmodern*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), (p.47).

<sup>575</sup> Hilde Hein, *The Museum Transition*, (2002) cited in Ana Souto, ‘Experiencing memory museums in Berlin. The Otto Weidt Workshop for the Blind Museum and the Jewish Museum Berlin’ in *Museum & Society*, March 2018, 16 (1) 1-27, (p.3).

of 'so many layers' - material, spatial and temporal - 'pressed down'.<sup>576</sup> Folios layered one atop another, compressing inks, pigments, the dirt and detritus of use and travel, geographical locations, lives and eras.<sup>577</sup> 'Introduce a living human body though, a storehouse of autonoetic consciousness', and this compression becomes expansion, as material encounters 'beget new beginnings', and generate heightened experiences, which may be emotional, imaginative and, or, visceral.<sup>578</sup> Rather than enabling participants simply to gaze upon a stationary manuscript, as is the inclination in conventional modes of manuscript display, the rewilded displayscape situated participants bodily, 'in the middle'. As Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari point out, 'it may not be easy to see things from in the middle, rather than looking down on them...or up to them, or from left to right or right to left, but if you try it you will see, everything changes'.<sup>579</sup>

Manuscripts have been described as 'a powerful way of touching the past'.<sup>580</sup> The problem with the concept of 'touching the past', however, is twofold. Firstly, it suggests that, in reaching back, the agency involved resides exclusively with the subject. Secondly, it implies reaching *backwards* to apprehend something that is distant and passive. Yet, as this study's participant encounters highlight, *MS210* exists in contemporary relation to those of us who encounter it. The past, embodied in the manuscript, exists in the now, thus disrupting the backwards narrative inherent in the term 'touching the past', and blurring the notion that agency is expressed by the human subject stretching out a hand from the present behind to the past. The

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<sup>576</sup> A notion borrowed from Sharon Blakey and Liz Mitchell, who talk of a box of cloth in a museum store) Blakey, Sharon and Mitchell, Liz, 'Unfolding: A multisensorial dialogue in "material time" ' in, *Material Thinking* Volume 17, (p.7) [https://www.materialthinking.org/sites/default/files/papers/SMT\\_Volume17\\_Paper%2001\\_FA2.pdf](https://www.materialthinking.org/sites/default/files/papers/SMT_Volume17_Paper%2001_FA2.pdf) Viewed June 2019.

<sup>577</sup> Kathryn Rudy's Leverhulme research into parchment DNA and pollen in manuscript codices, *Measuring medieval users' responses to manuscripts: new technological approaches*, <https://www.leverhulme.ac.uk/major-research-fellowships/measuring-medieval-users%E2%80%9999-responses-manuscripts-new-technological> Viewed April 2019.

<sup>578</sup> Liz Mitchell 'Unfolding: A multisensorial dialogue in "material time" ' in, *Material Thinking* Volume 17, (p.7) [https://www.materialthinking.org/sites/default/files/papers/SMT\\_Volume17\\_Paper%2001\\_FA2.pdf](https://www.materialthinking.org/sites/default/files/papers/SMT_Volume17_Paper%2001_FA2.pdf) Viewed June 2019.

<sup>579</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari quoted at [www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2008/08/opening-up.html](http://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2008/08/opening-up.html) Viewed on 29/07/2017.

<sup>580</sup> Jonathan Wilcox, 'Introduction' in Wilcox, Jonathan (ed.), *Scraped, Stroked and Bound: Materially Engaged Readings of Medieval Manuscripts*, (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2013), (p.1).

manuscript object is here now; we do not need to reach temporally backwards to encounter it. In 2003, astronomers examining a black hole discovered sound waves pulsing through the intergalactic gas, ‘resounding a note with a ten million year period of oscillation’.<sup>581</sup> If we compare the instant at which the sound was created to the moments of *MS210*’s creation, and the sonic reverberations from the black hole, to the manuscript’s biographical trajectory, it is possible to discern parallels in how they have travelled across time and space. Emitted or made at one particular time, they defy temporal boundaries and endure across historical epochs and multiple ‘modernities’, which eclipse human timescales. Therefore, we no longer need to reach backwards or stretch to touch the past because its presence is present – it reaches towards us in the now. Figure 48 shows time, not as a linear concept but around us, and the past as apprehendable still through the objects which transcend human chronologies and historical categories. *MS210* is a polychronic object, physically existing in the present, as surely and certainly as it did in the past. In this sense the manuscript is neither distant nor passive, but immediate and vital in its actuality, a physical entity with a latent presence. Being in the middle can cause unease, apprehension and uncertainty, as attested to by some of the participants. But it can also be enthralling and exciting and enable touching the past to be an eminently contemporaneous experience.

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<sup>581</sup> Referred to by Jim Drobnick, in Drobnick, Jim, (ed.), *Aural Cultures*, (Ontario: YYZ Books, 2004), (p.9).

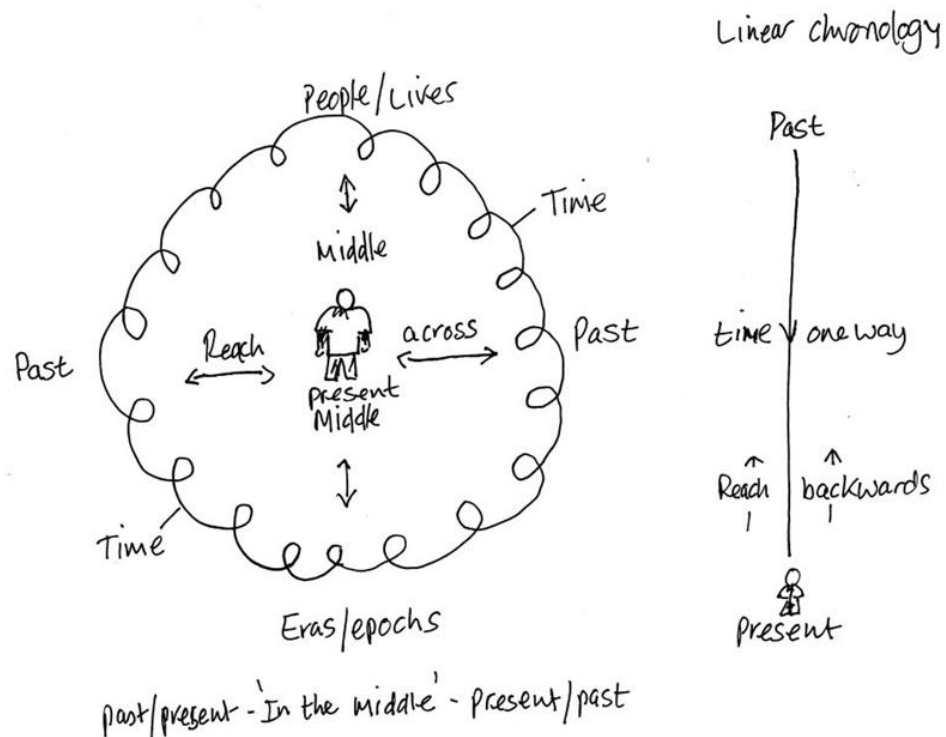


Figure 48: Past/present - In the middle – Present/past. Being 'in the middle: The notion of time oscillating rather than running in a linear chronology

Although it is something that is often obscured by the strict order and rigid regimentation of conventional manuscript exhibitions, the space of display is a liminal one - both in terms of how it positions people and objects in close yet separate proximities, but also in its juxtaposing of past/present, public/private and active/passive. This idea of the liminal and of a threshold, particularly around subject/object and spectacle/audience, is one explored in, and evoked by Susan Sontag's description of the Sixties' esoteric phenomenon, 'Happenings'.<sup>582</sup> Unconventional, 'object-clogged', sonic, tactile and visual, with no prescribed narrative or plot, a 'happening' was a series of actions and events, a performance. But 'the most striking feature of the Happening is its treatment of the audience', points out Sontag. In Happenings, the audience are not spectators but are involved. The more involved a Happening makes the audience, the more 'dense and compelling' it is, she asserts.

<sup>582</sup> Susan Sontag, 'Happenings: an art of radical juxtaposition' in *Against Interpretation*, (London: Vintage, 2001), (pp.263-274).



Subjects and objects interacting make up the ‘dramatic spine’ of the Happening.<sup>583</sup> In the same way that this study’s rewilded displayscape enabled a journey but provided no ‘sweet conclusion’,<sup>584</sup> Sontag’s Happenings are ‘improvised’, ‘without climax or consummation’. And like the Happening, the deregulated materials of the manuscript created ‘an asymmetrical network of surprises’.<sup>585</sup> The rewilded displayscape eliminated the distances and barriers between subjects and objects in the same way that in the phenomenon of the Happening the spectacle envelopes the spectator. People and objects amalgamate; the one intimately entwined with the other.

#### **iv. Digital materialities: sonic and visual catalysts for creative imaginings**

Digital technologies provide us with a sharp tool with which to better probe these concepts of envelopment in and amalgamation with the displayscape. At first glance, this may seem an odd assertion, not least because of the association of the digital, primarily with visual engagement, and because of the pessimistic jeremiads that have been voiced over recent years about the death of the book in the face of the inexorable rise of digital technology.<sup>586</sup> Much of the angst generated by the proliferation of digital surrogates has centred on notions of authenticity and trust. Commentators have typically reached for Walter Benjamin’s ideas around the loss of the aura of the original through reproduction. However, the data generated by this study indicates that digital technologies have the capacity to create a sense of ‘material proximity’, and supports Ross Parry’s assertion that the digital can significantly enhance experiences of the ‘real thing’.<sup>587</sup> If, as Ross Parry argues, advancing digital technologies such as virtual reality provide a ‘liminal space between the tangible and imaginary’<sup>588</sup> then this study suggests that they are perfectly equipped to place participants on the threshold between here and there, now and

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<sup>583</sup> *Ibid.*, p.265.

<sup>584</sup> Robert Mills referring to Derek Jarman’s ‘The Garden’ in, *Derek Jarman’s Medieval Modern*, (Cambridge: D S Brewer, 2018), (p.132).

<sup>585</sup> Susan Sontag, ‘Happenings: an art of radical juxtaposition’ in *Against Interpretation*, (London: Vintage, 2001), (p.266).

<sup>586</sup> Jonathan Wilcox, ‘Introduction: the philology of smell’, in Wilcox, Jonathan, ed., *Scraped, stroked, and bound: materially engaged readings of medieval manuscripts*, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 1-13, (pp.2-3).

<sup>587</sup> Ross Parry, *Recoding the museum: digital heritage and the technologies of change*, (London: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>588</sup> *Ibid.*, p.72.

then. The digital can help immerse the visitor and, in a similar way to a 'Happening', transform the spectator into the performer. This study points to digital technologies, not as a revolutionary threat to the 'real thing', but as an evolutionary step in the ever shifting and complex relationship between manuscripts and people.

## **v. Digital gimcrack**

Much of the criticism directed towards digital renderings of manuscripts is rooted, as Andrea Witcomb points out, in the sense of dualism that surrounds the idea of the 'real' and the 'virtual' in museums.<sup>589</sup> The former, she contends, is considered to carry 'weight, aura and knowledge', while the latter is associated with the immediate, superficial and temporary.<sup>590</sup> On the one hand, as, Eric Gable and Richard Handler suggest, objects like medieval manuscripts are repositories of the "'auras" of the really "real"'<sup>591</sup> but on the other, as Ross Parry points out, the digital landscape has been accused of being one of 'pervasive deceit', breaching the walls of the 'fortresses of the authentic'.<sup>592</sup> Concerns around the notion of authenticity have been expressed by Christopher de Hamel, who asserts that, while digital copies may have made some of the world's great manuscripts familiar to a much wider audience, 'the experience of encounter is entirely different'.<sup>593</sup> 'Facsimiles', he contends, 'are rootless and untied to any place... No photographic reproduction can convey the patina, the texture, the character, of the page of a manuscript.'<sup>594</sup> This apparent incapacity of the digital to achieve and sustain the gravitas of the 'real' would seem to be supported by the fact that even the once ground-breaking 'Turning the Pages' has been criticized as 'trivializing' the materiality of manuscripts.<sup>595</sup> And, indeed, in this study, one participant rated the digital *MS210* as only third behind the 'real' object and the audio-

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<sup>589</sup> Andrea Witcomb, 'The Materiality of Virtual Technologies: A New Approach to Thinking about the Impact of Multi-Media in Museums', in Kenderine, Sarah, (ed.), *Theorizing Digital Cultural Heritage: A Critical Discourse* (Boston: MIT Press, 2007) 35-48 (pp.34-35).

<sup>590</sup> *Ibid.*, p.35.

<sup>591</sup> Eric Gable and Richard Handler 'After authenticity at an American Heritage Site', in Knell, Simon, (ed.), *Museums in the Material World* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 320-334, (p. 321).

<sup>592</sup> Ross Parry, *Recoding the museum: digital heritage and the technologies of change*, (London: Routledge, 2007), (p.63).

<sup>593</sup> Christopher de Hamel, *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts*, (Allen Lane, 2016), (p2).

<sup>594</sup> *Ibid.* p.4.

<sup>595</sup> See, Jonathan Wilcox, 'Introduction: the philology of smell', in Wilcox, Jonathan, (ed.), *Scraped, Stoked, and Bound: Materially Engaged Readings of Medieval Manuscripts*, (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2013), 1-13, footnote number 9 (p.3).

visual installation in terms of how engaging these interpretive interventions were for her/him.<sup>596</sup> Another commented on the limits of 2D technology to captivate viewers: 'because the iPad there was, it's just the pictures all one after another'.<sup>597</sup> Swiping the screen to turn the pages is no longer a sophisticated method and, arguably, stands in comparison to the traditional mode of displaying a manuscript in a vitrine. Both methods can now legitimately be claimed to be restrictive and directive. However, it is worth noting that these remarks may well reflect not the validity of the concept of a digital object, but what would now be considered the conventional rendering of it.

One participant's comments elicit wider concerns within the field of heritage interpretation around the use of digital technologies within the display space. S/he noted how the immediacy of the objects and interventions, for him/her, engendered a feeling, not of immersion, but of submersion; not of being enabled, but of being overwhelmed. Referring to his/her experience in this study and to other occasions when he/she had encountered manuscripts, as well as other objects and digital interventions in interpretive settings, this participant noted, 'I've gone to look at something else and I've gone back to look the manuscript again'. But, s/he went on, 'You know... I'm a bit overwhelmed because it's all in the one place, [and] I can't isolate the bits off...'.<sup>598</sup> As with any other physical intervention, or design feature, digital technologies can be perceived as a distraction, threatening to overshadow and compete with the 'the actual museum object' for the visitor's attention. As Anita Kocsis points out, digital devices often feature as awkward additions, illustrations or supplements, vying for space and attention with the displayed object.<sup>599</sup>

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<sup>596</sup> Post encounter interview AR 17/04/18(a).

<sup>597</sup> Post encounter interview EJ 18/04/18(a).

<sup>598</sup> Film review interview DdC 24/04/18(b).

<sup>599</sup> Anita Kocsis, Carolyn Barnes and Sarah Kenderdine, (2012) 'Digital Mediation and Museum Space', *Interiors*, 3:1-2, 107-125.

## vi. Digital access and embodied engagement

Despite concerns about the mass of materials, 2-D gimcrack renderings and reproductions riding roughshod over originals, the potential of the digital manuscript (shown in figure 49), to destabilize the withdrawing, distancing function of traditional glass cases was evident both from participants' attentive interactions with the digital object and how they approached the 'mixed materials' setting.



Figure 49: iPad: MS210 as a digital object

In their study of how art objects are perceived, Sweetman and Hadfield concluded that there appeared to be more potential for learning through mixing visual, tactile and digital materials within the space of display.<sup>600</sup> This finding is borne out by this project. The close proximity of the digital to the manuscript in vitrine and the dispersed manuscript materials, and the nearness of the audio-visual elements of the displayscape, created an immersive environment that set it apart from the space beyond.<sup>601</sup> For instance, glancing between the manuscript in the vitrine and the digital object, one participant reflected, 'It looks different on here (the digital), it looks clearer

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<sup>600</sup> Sweetman, Rebecca and Hadfield, Alison, *et al*, 'Artefact or art? Perceiving objects via object-viewing, object-handling, and virtual reality', *University Museums and Collections Journal*, Volume 10, 2018, 46-65, (pp.58-59).

<sup>601</sup> See, for example, post encounter interviews AS/AB 2504/18(a), SW 23/04/18, OQ 25/04/18(a).

and everything than it does in real life’’<sup>602</sup> Another participant, when reviewing his/her film, noted how the digital object became a kind of trig point, which s/he and a number of other participants bodily moved to and away from, referencing other points of interest within the displayscape: ‘So, on this page when I’m looking at it (on the iPad), there’s the writing on the actual wooden boards and then I go back and try and look at it on the object but because, I mean, it’s because you’re giving me that view that I’m not seeing that’.<sup>603</sup> This participant was referring to the fact that the detail revealed on the iPad was not accessible on the actual manuscript as displayed in the vitrine. This was something s/he clearly found frustrating.

Another participant’s detailed engagement with the digital attested to its capacity to permeate the vitrine: ‘I think, if I had more time I would have gone through every single page (of the digital object) on the iPad, so, at least, I could have looked at it. Probably spent hours poring over every detail and every millimetre of the page. Ah, that’s something I wish I could have done.’<sup>604</sup> This comment highlights three key points: firstly, that the digital object provided an option for an interactive interrogation of the manuscript, which *MS210* in the vitrine could not; secondly, that the digital *MS210* could be physically affected through participants’ haptic engagement, insofar as its cover boards and folios could be turned and physical points of interest ‘pulled close’ for attentive looking. Although, just like the ‘real thing’ was behind the glass of the display case, the digital *MS210* was behind the glass of the iPad screen, its tactility, dynamism and interactivity dissolved the glazed barrier to a significant degree. Participants had the option to simply flick through the pages and move on or, as this participant suggested, dwell and ‘drill down’. This leads us to the third point. The digital enabled access to the other ninety-eight per cent of the manuscript and revealed material details of *MS210*, which the traditional mode of display concealed from the gaze of the participants.

One participant was quite clear about how encountering the manuscript, conventionally displayed, was a source of frustration: ‘I want to handle it; that feeling

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<sup>602</sup> Walkalong interview GP 16/04/18(a).

<sup>603</sup> Post-encounter interview DdC 24/04/18(a).

<sup>604</sup> Post-encounter interview UA 190418(a).

of maybe handling it and having a go, but at the same time, as I say, because I can't understand it, I am a little bit distanced and yep, because it's in its box (vitrine)'.<sup>605</sup>

Another expressed frustration at having to reply on the judgement of others to determine what folios and features of the manuscript s/he could apprehend: 'Why was this page chosen? Or, is there no reason why? I think that's the most annoying thing, that you've got all these pages and you just want to flick through them. That's what I wanna do, and you can't. So, I wanna know, why this page, I guess.'<sup>606</sup>

While the digital *MS210* did not enable the tactile encounter with the 'real thing' that the first participant desired, nonetheless, the iPad's glass screen, smeared with the oil of fingers and layered with the patina of fingerprints, did attest to the haptic engagement that could be performed by participants with the physical carrier of the digital manuscript. And, the digital did provide access to *MS210* in its entirety, and also evoked Walter Benjamin's observation that, 'every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its image or, rather, its copy'.<sup>607</sup>

Participants were no longer shackled to the opened folio, but were able to rummage through the whole manuscript. Every point became an epicentre for looking. 'I do like that', said one participant approvingly, 'that's really good! Because I always want to know what's on the other pages, and you can't see them (when on display in a vitrine)....'<sup>608</sup>

Crucially, any feature that caught the eye or sparked curiosity became 'a point from which to begin an enquiry, the start for a series of rotations and turns that lead to knowing'.<sup>609</sup>

Ah, ha!' exclaimed one participant on discovering the digital object on the iPad. Without hesitation, s/he began to scroll through the images. 'I don't know what this says about me, but I find this easier to interact with than the actual manuscript.' On being asked why s/he thought that was, he/she replied: 'I think it's

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<sup>605</sup> Walkalong interview DdC 24/04/18(a).

<sup>606</sup> Walkalong interview DdC 24/04/18(a).

<sup>607</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, (London: Pimlico, 1999), (p.223).

<sup>608</sup> Walkalong interview EJ 18/04/18 Moore, Catherine, 'The Material in the Immaterial – The Powell-Cotton Oukwanyama Film Archive and some Contemporary Material Responses among the Community it Depicts' in *Museological Review*, Issue 15, University of Leicester, 2011, 72-82, (p.72).

<sup>609</sup> Bill Endres 'More than Meets the Eye: Going 3D with an Early Medieval Manuscript'. In: Clare Mills, Michael Pidd and Esther Ward. *Proceedings of the Digital Humanities Congress 2012*. Studies in the Digital Humanities. Sheffield: HRI Online Publications, 2014. (p.10) <https://www.hrionline.ac.uk/openbook/chapter/dhc2012-endres> Viewed November 2014 and 14 March 2017.

because it is more tactile, it's because I am touching it and I can zoom in if I want to and I can see more clearly, I can go right up close to it. With that (pointing to the vitrine) you've got the glass there and I can't peer over the top and look at it from a different angle so easily.'<sup>610</sup> Another participant said that s/he, 'would be too scared' to touch the 'real thing. I'd be scared of damaging it, whereas this (the digital *MS210*), you can.'<sup>611</sup> The digital form was familiar to this participant and facilitated 'a way in', haptically. It was an important means with which 'to interact with the object beyond simply viewing it from the other side of a pane of glass'.

Indeed, as Christopher de Hamel also points out, 'no one can properly know...a manuscript without having seen it and held it in the hands... On the table in front of you, you do not merely see it, as under glass, but really get to touch it.'<sup>612</sup> That may, indeed, be so, and de Hamel's passion for encountering the physical object in a fully sensorial way is unequivocal. However, for most of us, when we encounter a medieval manuscript, it is encased in glass and roped off, as remote from our touch as it is from the time and place in which it was created. Moreover, if there is a suggestion of a degree of fetishisation of the object in de Hamel's words, that is perhaps because they reflect Benjamin's point that 'the concept of authenticity transcends mere genuineness'.<sup>613</sup> This raises the idea of 'existential authenticity' and so it might be useful to reflect here on Baudrillard's assertion that for post-modern generations there may be no distinction between the virtual simulacra and the 'real thing'. 'Originality, as Baudrillard contends, 'becomes a meaningless concept'.<sup>614</sup> If Baudrillard's view contains a hint of negativity, Gilles Deleuze's assertion is more positive: the simulacrum challenges and overturns the accepted and privileged ideal.<sup>615</sup> The digital can challenge the authoritative mediation and sobriety of the display space, while contextualising *MS210* in the here and now, enabling visitors, as Sweetman and Hadfield suggest, to find connections with the object that resonate with their own

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<sup>610</sup> Walkalong interview GP 16/04/18.

<sup>611</sup> Walkalong interview GP16/04/18.

<sup>612</sup> Christopher de Hamel, *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts*, (Allen Lane, 2016), (p.2).

<sup>613</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, (London: Pimlico, 1999), 211-244).

<sup>614</sup> Jean Baudrillard Referred to at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/simulacrum> Viewed March 2014.

<sup>615</sup> Gilles Deleuze referred to at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/simulacrum> Viewed March 2014.

lives.<sup>616</sup> Brief though they are, not only do these contributions indicate the potential of the digital to engage participants kinaesthetically with the digital manuscript, (for example, turning folios, and zooming in to interrogate physical details and then out again), they also show how a digital object, even a simple digital rendering of *MS210* on an iPad, can facilitate an embodied interaction within the wider displayscape.

For most of the participants, the digital *MS210* suggested not only a credible, 'real' artefact and concomitant participant experience, but also evinced the potent and potentially transformative potential of digital technology in interpretive settings. However, the 2D technology available for this project lags behind the latest digital technologies, which can provide much greater degrees of interaction. Tangential to this project, some proof of concept work was undertaken, exploiting Reflective Transformation Imaging (RTI), photogrammetry and spectral imaging, which can dramatically reveal the physical materiality of *MS210*, eliciting its depth, texture and three-dimensionality, otherwise hidden to the human eye and undisclosed by 'standard' digital reproduction methods. Figure 50 demonstrates how RTI technology can transform a seemingly flat page of *MS210* into a dramatically textured landscape. The excess of 3D and mixed reality technology enables us to view the page from the perspective of the scribes and artists who created the manuscript. The ability to manipulate the manuscript enables the viewer to experience the page as its execution unfolded, from every point touched by the quill or brush. Advancing technologies can enable 'the layout of the page to unfold in a sequence of altering shapes and perspectives'.<sup>617</sup> It can be 'made and remade', as Bill Endres points out, 'and paths of enquiry are available for thought, reflection and knowing'.<sup>618</sup> Haptic and mixed digital technologies provide a radically different aesthetic experience of the manuscript and offer opportunities for tactile encounters beyond actually touching the objects

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<sup>616</sup> Rebecca Sweetman & Alison Hadfield et al, 'Artefact or art? Perceiving objects via object-viewing, object-handling, and virtual reality', *University Museums and Collections Journal*, Volume 10, 2018, (p. 49).

<sup>617</sup> Bill Endres 'More than Meets the Eye: Going 3D with an Early Medieval Manuscript', in Clare Mills, Michael Pidd and Esther Ward. *Proceedings of the Digital Humanities Congress 2012. Studies in the Digital Humanities*, Sheffield: HRI Online Publications, 2014. (p.12) <https://www.hrionline.ac.uk/openbook/chapter/dhc2012-endres> Viewed November 2014 and 14 March 2017.

<sup>618</sup> *Ibid.*, p.13.



themselves, which recent studies, for example the Tate Britain's study of mid-air haptic engagements, have shown to engage people with art and artefacts emotionally and to create transformative, memorable experiences.<sup>619</sup>

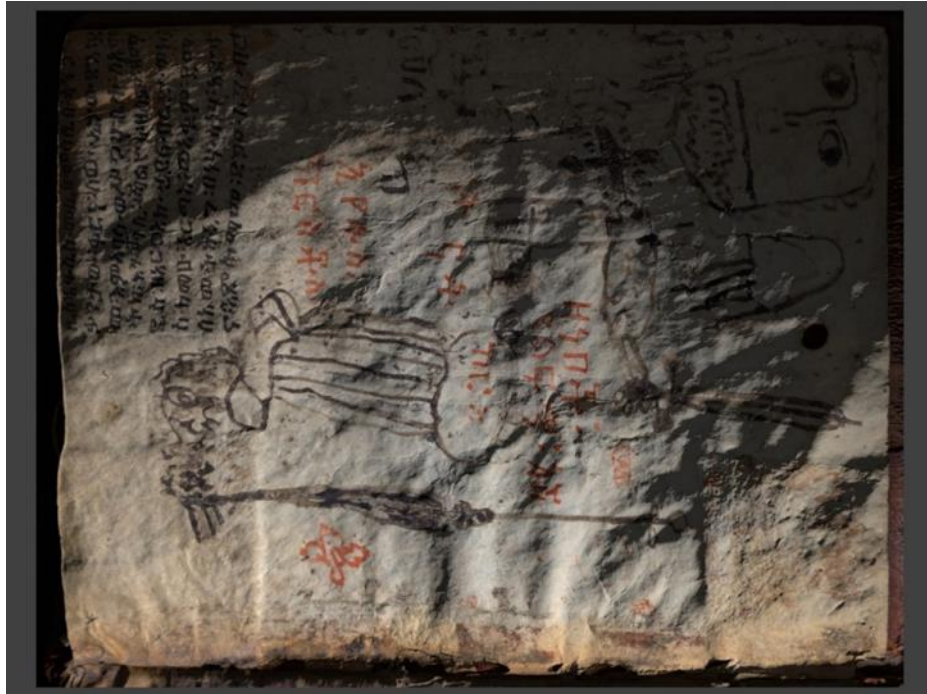


Figure 50: A folio of *MS210* rendered using reflective transformation Imaging<sup>620</sup>

Age and materiality do not, in themselves, convey originality, and reality itself is a shifting, fluid notion, which is spatially and temporally located. As sociologist Richard Peterson articulates, albeit with reference to production and reception within a quite different genre – country music - ‘authenticity is not inherent in the object or event that is designated authentic, but is a socially agreed upon construct in which the past is to a degree mis-remembered.’<sup>621</sup> We are reminded of this as we look to the socio-cultural context in which most manuscripts were crafted. Reproduction was a fundamental aspect of medieval manuscript production and reflected wider cultural

<sup>619</sup> Chi Thanh Vi *et al*, ‘Not Just Seeing but also feeling art: Mid-air haptic experiences integrated in a multi-sensory art exhibition’, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhcs.2017.06.004> Viewed 27/02/18.

<sup>620</sup> This, literally, highlights the wealth of texture and rich multi-dimensionality of the surface of a manuscript page – something orthodox display techniques present as a flat surface for carrying text and image content.

<sup>621</sup> Richard Peterson quoted in Rubin, Rachel Lee, *Well Met: Renaissance Faires and the American Counterculture*, (New York: New York University Press, 2012), (p.34).

and religious concerns. As Sara Lipton points out, in the medieval world, notions of the unique and innovative were frowned upon in favour of consistency and continuity.<sup>622</sup> It is not too fantastical, then, to frame the ‘authentic’ manuscripts themselves as early incarnations of the digital surrogate. If, within an interpretive setting, we are faced with a copy of *MS210*, itself a copy of earlier manuscripts with the same textual content and physical form and substance, alongside the digital *MS210* featured in this study and, next to that, *MS210* rendered using RTI and photogrammetry, with another visible in all shades of the colour spectrum, we may well ponder where the ‘original’ and authentic might reside.

An alternative approach, however, might be to consider that we are faced, not so much with unpicking the ‘real’ from the ‘fake’, but by a number of objects, each of which represent performative ‘spaces’, which are culturally specific, authored and subjective. The ‘repatriation’ of Ethiopian manuscripts as part of the British Library’s ‘Heritage Made Digital Project’ implies both that some notion of actuality inheres in the digital manuscripts, and that a perception of ‘realness’ is attached to these digital ‘objects’ by those who apprehend them. Interestingly, these digital objects are not simply sent via computer, but, (and notwithstanding issues related to courtesy), as if to reinforce the objectness of the digital, the manuscripts are returned by hand, in person, by a curator from the library.

Digital and virtual reality technology may be considered as further steps in the long and ongoing development of the manuscript as a performative, interactive space – touched, kissed, held, enacted, vocalised, and so on. The digital phase of *MS210*’s life story demonstrates that often, as Richard Sennett observes, ‘the histories of things follow a different course, in which metamorphosis and adaption play a stronger role across human generations’.<sup>623</sup> Moreover, the theorizing of critics such as Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man and others encourages us to look again at the digital *MS210*, not merely as an echo of the ‘real thing’ but, rather, as a creative performance

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<sup>622</sup> Sara Lipton, ‘Images and objects as sources for medieval history’, in Rosenthal, Joel, (ed.), *Understanding Medieval Primary Sources*, (London: Routledge, 2012), 225-242, (pp.225-227).

<sup>623</sup> Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman*, (London: Penguin, 2009), (p.15).

in its own right.<sup>624</sup> For some of the participants, the notion of ‘realness’ was not located in an accurate reflection of a historical past, or a temporal or geographical location, but, rather, hinged on the opposite of authenticity; that is, on a sense of ‘realness’ that attached to theatricality and performativity, which it engendered and which, in turn, enabled them to ‘escape’ the modern world, the now, for a moment or two.<sup>625</sup> The potential of advancing technology lies not least in its capacity to ‘allow us to do things *differently*’.<sup>626</sup> Digital technology invites new ways of looking and knowing. Both the manuscript in the vitrine and the digital *MS210* provided a portal to otherworldliness. The ‘real’ object and the virtual technology contrived to create a ‘pointed frisson’ with their current context.

### **vii. Digital vibrancy**

Lacking the resources to develop a mixed or augmented reality intervention, the film sequence and soundtrack provided an additional experiential layer. Aimed at evoking past worlds, eliciting personal and cultural influences, and challenging preconceptions, it provided a ‘space’ in which visitors could assemble and explore ideas and, it was hoped, the potential for arousing imaginative, creative and exciting encounters between participants and objects.

The following participant’s comment exemplifies how, for a number of participants, a degree of uncertainty adhered to the audio-visual experience: ‘It was a bit weird because, obviously, like I didn’t know exactly what it was all about but, erm, I could tell that it was really old. There wasn’t anything modern. *Like a trip back in time* or whatever. Yeah, it was really interesting.’<sup>627</sup> However, this participant’s reference to time travel indicates that, if it was puzzling and mysterious, it could also be transformative. This participant’s response evokes the notion of ‘telepresence’, in which, ‘even though part or all of an individual’s experience is generated by or filtered

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<sup>624</sup>Sara Lipton, ‘Images and objects as sources for medieval history’, in Rosenthal, Joel, (ed.), *Understanding Medieval Primary Sources*, (London: Routledge, 2012), 225-242, (p.232).

<sup>625</sup> Discussed by Rachel Lee Rubin in relation to the 1960s Renaissance Faires in the USA. See Rubin, Rachel Lee, *Well Met: Renaissance Faires and the American Counterculture*, (New York: New York University Press, 2012), (pp.34-38).

<sup>626</sup> Michael Goodman, ‘Ways of Seeing’ <https://cardiffdigitalnetwork.org/2016/09/05/ways-of-seeing/> Viewed 07/04/17.

<sup>627</sup> Post-encounter interview ZA 19/04/18(a).

through technologies, the individual's perception... overlooks the role of technology in the experience'. While scholars of 'telepresence' consider technologies, from virtual reality to painting and sculpture, to filter or mediate 'natural or normal' experiences of the 'true nature of the world', this study suggests that these experiences not only enhanced and deepened participants' perceptions, but were, in themselves, genuine perceptive experiences.<sup>628</sup> Another participant referred to how the ambient film and audio afforded 'an important way to connect', suggesting that this form of dramatic intervention has the potential to elicit and enhance a sense of touching the past.<sup>629</sup> The digital objects worked as an anachronistic device, resetting the temporal context and conveying a sense of the manuscript's enduring contemporaneity - it belongs as much to our own time as to any past time. The digital also helped the manuscript to perform in past and imagined environments. 'It [the digital]', claimed one participant, 'definitely helped me to think of the text within an environment, as in, it's not just a book but a collection of those who wrote it, made it, of what they were writing about, where it was created and themes they were writing about – which might not have been in the same place or time they were creating it'.<sup>630</sup> For some participants in this study, *MS210*'s digital life seemed to draw in and allow access to past worlds, places and lives – the social life of the manuscript, both real and imagined. This supports Mark Auslander's observations of the impact of dramatic intervention as a means of providing a potent emotional valence for visitors to heritage sites.<sup>631</sup> It also points to digital technologies as perfectly placed to partner encounters with material objects and to enhance understandings of the fleshy materiality of a manuscript and its wider contextual environments. The 'mixed realities' that digital technologies, even at their most quotidian audio-visual level, can produce, 'plays into a deep and longstanding capability of the human mind to aggregate the physical and the imagined'. If introducing technology brings concerns about how the imagined dilutes the authentic past, we might consider that this mix of fantasy and reality in creating meaning and

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<sup>628</sup> See <https://ispr.info/about-presence-2/about-presence/>.

<sup>629</sup> Post-encounter interview CM 24/04/18(a).

<sup>630</sup> Walkalong interview with SM 23/04/18.

<sup>631</sup> Mark Auslander, 'Touching the Past: Materializing Time in Traumatic "Living History" Re-enactments' in *Signs and Society* Vol. 1, no. 1 (Spring 2013) 161-183, (p.161) <http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/670167> (Viewed 06/08/17).

understanding is not a new concept. Humans have been doing it for as long as they have existed. As Kevin Ashford-Rowe reminds us, the concept of Dreamtime is a highly complex notion, in which the first Australians interlace virtual (imagined or unseen) layers to the natural landscape, 'thus augmenting reality' to support and deepen a range of understandings.<sup>632</sup>

Although audio has become an increasingly familiar feature within museum exhibitions over recent years, galleries featuring manuscript displays typically remain silent spaces. There are exceptions, of course, one of the highest profile examples being the IWM North. Nonetheless, consider for a moment that, if asked what we have seen in an exhibition, it is likely that we would have no problem recounting it, but if the question were what have we heard (or smelt or felt or tasted for that matter - even supposing such experiences were made available), we would probably be bemused by it.<sup>633</sup>

Film and audio, however, introduce colour, movement and sound, which can work to disrupt notions of the dormancy and greyness of the past, noted by the participants,<sup>634</sup> and challenge what Mills has identified as a common misconception of the past as profoundly silent.<sup>635</sup> On entering the display space, one participant, for example, was stopped in their tracks and exclaimed, 'wow!' in response to the impact of the audio-visual content of the room. While some participants found the omnipresent sounds and sonic anachronisms, at times, demanding and distracting, others found them quite compelling and engaging. During a post-encounter interview one participant noted: 'I liked the poem about the actual manufacture of the book (the prosopopoeic, 'Riddle 26'). Again, I remembered that, and I think it worked really well. I was less sure initially about the monk-like figure... but after a little while it was actually quite atmospheric. So, I think once you're almost more focussed on the object, then that worked quite well.'<sup>636</sup> For one participant, who was without sight, aurality was a key tile in the

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<sup>632</sup> Kevin Ashford-Rowe, 'Augmented and Mixed Reality: The why, when and how of situated learning in authentic contexts', in *EDUCAUSE Horizon Report: 2019 Higher Education Edition* 36-41, (p.36).

<sup>633</sup> See, Lawrence Kramer's *The Hum of the World* for more detailed discussion of using hearing to dissolve longstanding hierarchies of the senses. <https://www.ucpress.edu/blog/42222/sound-as-a-path-to-knowledge/> Viewed 02/06/19.

<sup>634</sup> See pre -encounter questionnaires, Appendix 6.

<sup>635</sup> Mills, Robert, *Derek Jarman's Medieval Modern*, (Cambridge: D S Brewer, 2018), (p.59).

<sup>636</sup> Post-encounter interview JH 17/04/18(a).

interpretive mosaic of this rewilded displayscape: 'I get what that's about now, the sort of audio, so what's being described is the process that the manuscript actually goes through, I think. I love that. I love that, it's really interesting. I can really imagine someone working with things like that.'<sup>637</sup> In the rewilded displayscape, the participants became actors engaged in a corporeal dialogue with the material substances that typically constitute a medieval manuscript. The following participant's comments highlight the layered nature of this corporeal dialogue. Without sight, s/he engaged haptically and aurally, and wove these sensations together to create meanings and understandings rooted in the materiality of the things in the displayscape: 'For me, actually, I think it's a lot more about stories. A lot more about the context of why it was done. So, I was sort of thinking about, erm, the physical experience of sitting – because, it's funny, when we were talking later on, erm, - the idea of sitting on the ground and everything being a bit chaotic. Like when I was touching the small chips of wood and things, that's what it brought to mind for me – the floor and kind of sitting around with all these dyes, parchments around you and trying to make sense of all these different elements. So, for me it was stories, I like to know what people were thinking when they were doing this, what their motivations were, what the context was. So, I was imagining all these, slightly romanticised, ideas of Anglo-Saxon life (chuckling) and what was going on and what was being written. Erm, one thing I.., I don't know if you've read any of the Ellis Peters' stuff'

Researcher: *Cadfael*?

Participant: Yes, exactly. *Cadfael*, I was thinking about a lot and those types of settings.<sup>638</sup>

The multiple material stimuli ignited this participant's understanding of the manuscript's physicality and its creation, underlining Andrea McCartney's assertion that sonic qualities can also intensify tactile encounters and engage the whole body.<sup>639</sup> Alluding to a sense of warmth emanating from within the displayscape, another contributor spoke of how the audio-visual presence 'generally made it [the past] seem

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<sup>637</sup> Walkalong interview AT/AB 25/04/18(a).

<sup>638</sup> Post encounter interview AS/AT 25/04/18(a).

<sup>639</sup> Andrea McCartney in Drobnick, Jim, (ed.), *Aural Cultures*, (Ontario: YYZ Books, 2004), (p.11).

more alive'.<sup>640</sup> This participant engaged imaginatively, but also on a bodily level with the sound and images, which in turn, elicited a sensual response.

Aurally and haptically foraging, the previous commentator drew, in addition, on memories and prior knowledge as well as cultural references. When this participant mentioned 'Cadfael', the early medieval monk and apothecary characterised in the novels of Peters, it was probably not a random connection. Indeed, it seems likely that it was this participant's physical and sensory interaction with plant substances and minerals, under or overlaid with the sound of Old English spoken and monastic chanting, which played a key role in inviting these memories and imaginings. These instances demonstrate how sound, in this instance hearing Old English voices, evoked emotions connected to a sense of the past,<sup>641</sup> and how some participants enwrapped this experience with their own memories (real and imagined), emotions and previous experiences of history. As Sheila Watson observed in her study of the Cabinet War Rooms, in the absence of personal memories, imagination, fuelled by film, art, literature and popular media, created a 'false memory'.<sup>642</sup> Experiencing and creating understandings of the past then, is not simply an intellectual process, but can be an emotional and physical event.

The rewilded nature of this study's displayscape afforded such serendipitous encounters, associations and understandings, not least because, drawing on Jim Drobnick's notion of 'listening awry', it created an environment in which things could be attended to, 'not straightforwardly, but from an angle'. In contrast to the typically hushed, ordered galleries in which we find manuscripts, within this study's displayscape, objects, materials, voices and sounds emerged from everywhere and reverberated around. The rewilded displayscape was an expression of the 'hum of the world'. The above comments refer to 'everything [being] a bit chaotic', but not in a pejorative sense.<sup>643</sup> This was 'chaos' as a messy process filled with creative potential. A manuscript packaged and presented as an art object, or historical artefact, displayed in

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<sup>640</sup> Post-encounter interview SM 23/04/18(a).

<sup>641</sup> Sheila Watson, 'Myth, Memory and the Senses in the Churchill Museum' in Dudley, Sandra, (ed), *Museum Materialities: Objects, Engagements, Interpretations*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 204-223, (p.205).

<sup>642</sup> *Ibid.*, p.213.

<sup>643</sup> Post-encounter interview AT/AB 25/04/18(a).

a vitrine under a sanctifying halo of light, masks processes and stifles the potential of interpretive settings. David Almond exposes how the endurance of the completed physical form often hides the context of creation within the context of writing. Material qualities and substances, such as colours and sounds, ‘help me imagine’, he says. ‘It’s a way of releasing what might be in my mind.... When I’m doing this I’m staring into space, I’ll be chewing my pencils, I’ll be wondering, I’ll be dreaming. Central to it is this vast scribbling and...the movement of the hand is really important. Writing is a physical thing. You write with the body. It’s a physical act.’<sup>644</sup> Almond’s words are useful here, both to highlight the messy reality of creative and imaginative processes, but also to emphasise the embodied nature of imagining and creating. Almond speaks of writing, but whatever means we engage in, whether it is simply spoken, or just remains as an image, thought or idea *in our head*, it is in the flesh, it is embodied. ‘Flesh’ as Merleau-Ponty notes, ‘is not a substance in between the body and the world but is an element in which we live and move...What is one’s own and what is not, constantly overlap. Being made of the same stuff, body and the world are part of the “flesh”’.<sup>645</sup> It is this sense of immersion that rewilding advocates.

The above is participant’s experiences remind us too, of the materiality, not only of what we touch, but also of what we hear. Usually we do not think of sound in the context of material encounters yet sounds resound and reverberate through our material bodies. Indeed, recent research, as Nina Eidsheim remarks, suggests that hearing begins early in foetal development, through the skin and skeletal structure.<sup>646</sup> Hearing relies not only on ‘excited eardrums but also on sound conduction and vibration throughout the body’.<sup>647</sup> We may think of materiality then, as being in the very airwaves around us, pulsing and vibrating through the matter of our bodies. As this notion implies, there is a material quality to sound – from its point of origin it

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<sup>644</sup> David Almond interviewed by Liz Byrne, ‘“You write with the body. It’s a physical act” – David Almond Interview’, *The Northern Review*, 16 July 2018. <http://northernreview.co.uk/david-almond-interview> Viewed August 2018.

<sup>645</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, (1968), (p135), quoted in Olga Belova, ‘The event of seeing: A phenomenological perspective on visual sense-making’, in Dudley, Sandra, (ed.), *Museum Objects: Experiencing the Properties of Things*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 116-133, (p.121).

<sup>646</sup> Nina Sun Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practice*, (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2015), (p.54).

<sup>647</sup> *Ibid.*, p.54.



moves across place and time to, quite literally, touch us. But, as Gabor Csepregi notes, sound too, can have potent affective qualities.<sup>648</sup> One participant, for instance, noted how ‘it (a specific piece of audio) made me think of monks and this very tranquil life and the fact that they were copying all the time’.<sup>649</sup> The reactions of the participants to the sonic drift within this project’s displayscape supports Csepregi’s point that ‘sound atmospheres’ exert power over the activities and sensibilities of the people within it. This extends to vocal sonicisms, as Georgina Kleege points out. The voice, she argues, retains its potency as a creator of mental imagery both in the reader (the voice in one’s head) and the listener to the spoken voice.<sup>650</sup> Investigating the extent to which this potency remained with the readers for this project was beyond its scope; however, the incorporeal voices exercising mysterious words did instil a sense of affective presence in some participants, as this exchange between two of them exemplifies:

AD: ‘And the first thing I heard was the sound.’

AS: ‘The first thing I heard when I came in was some quite dramatic description (the spoken word translation of Old English Riddle). Something going on, he’s talking about wood stain and so on, but with us describing the visual, I am not quite sure what that was about. And, obviously, this language that is being spoken now, (Old English), I don’t understand.’

AD: ‘It’s very ominous.’

AS: ‘It makes me wonder if he is telling some kind of Viking story.’

AD: ‘Or, casting a spell.’<sup>651</sup>

A: Like *World of Warcraft*!

Emanating from bodies, voices, argues Norie Neumark, carry bodies with them. ‘Voice is haunted by the body’.<sup>652</sup> If the embodied voice is ‘uncanny’, then the digital voice is

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<sup>648</sup> Gabor Csepregi discussing the ‘affective qualities of sound’, referred to by Jim Drobnick, *Aural Cultures*, (Ontario: YYZ Books, 2004), (p.11).

<sup>649</sup> Walkalong interview CM 24/04/18(a).

<sup>650</sup> Georgina Kleege, ‘Voices in my head’ referred to by Jim Drobnick, *Aural Cultures*, (Ontario: YYZ Books, 2004), (p.10).

<sup>651</sup> Walkalong interview AS/AD 25/04/18(a).

<sup>652</sup> Norie Neumark, *Voicetracks* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), (p.9).

even more ‘unheimlich’, leaving its home or body twice – the second time being the realm of 1s and 0s that it leaves to reverberate analogically. This, Neumark argues, amplifies the sense of haunting because we know from where the voice comes but we cannot go there.<sup>653</sup> Indeed, the above exchange evokes Carolyn Abbate’s discussion of ‘Debussy’s Phantom Sounds’, in which words are more than the speech of a human being, and ‘become symbols that detach entirely from an agent of utterance to take on other meanings’.<sup>654</sup> Referring to the audio, one participant stood gazing at *MS210* and said, ‘it’s kind of hypnotic...At this point I must say I was getting into like a trance and I was, like, whoah!’<sup>655</sup> Another participant, gazing at *MS210* in the case, suddenly exclaimed; ‘Whoa! Ugh! That music there! That sound is unsettling, which is making me feel different about the book’.<sup>656</sup> The sonicisms shattered notions of monks in peaceful contemplative surroundings and provoked alternative understandings of the manuscript.

One contributor recalled conflicting ideas and images provoked by the audio. Equipped with preconceptions around manuscripts, she noted: ‘I think of the media connotations of monks and monasteries and everything, so that’s in my head while I am looking at things’. But then, the Old English spoken over a sampled soundtrack by ‘an “uneasy listening” outfit’<sup>657</sup> prompted him/her to say, ‘This, I thought, the sound in the background, when it first started made me think of *Rammstein*’. ‘Rammstein’ are a heavy metal, or Gothic metal band, leading the genre of rock labelled ‘Neue Deutsche Harte’. Just like its conventionally tangible counterparts in the displayscape, the audio presented familiar, perhaps expected qualities, such as an excerpt of medieval Plain Song, but it also included the strange and unexpected; at times synchronous with, and at times juxtaposed to, the flow of images. Sonic anachronisms offered ‘discordant objects’, which acted as a pause for thought, challenging the projection of participants’ realities onto the past<sup>658</sup> and inducing powerful imaginings. The dissonant ‘mix of

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<sup>653</sup> *Ibid.*, p.9.

<sup>654</sup> Carolyn Abbate, ‘Debussy’s Phantom Sounds’, *Cambridge Opera Journal* 1988, 10, 2.

<sup>655</sup> Walkalong interview EG 16/01/18(a).

<sup>656</sup> Walkalong interview EJ 18/04/18(b).

<sup>657</sup> <https://www.undertheradar.co.nz/news/8988/Listen-The-Dance-Asthmatics---Liquid-Lunch.utr>  
Viewed 16/10/2019

<sup>658</sup> See, Robert Mills *Derek Jarman’s Medieval Modern*, (Cambridge: D S Brewer, 2018), (pp.45-90)

visual, verbal and aural signifiers' worked to 'shake participants out of their historical safety nets' and provoke them to reflect on the contemporaneity of the sounds and images projected.<sup>659</sup> With the addition of visual and sonic drama came the potential to create a highly charged performance space, which was a catalyst for imaginings and provided the opportunity for different experiences and emotions – spontaneity, awe, trepidation, amusement, intimacy and so on - experiences that may be beyond those offered by a mono-faceted encounter with a manuscript sealed in a case.

#### **viii. The eerie**

The audio-visual digital content and participants' responses to it also raised the concept of the eerie. This concept is usually applied to landscapes or 'urbanscapes', but it applies equally, it seems, to the rewilded displayscape. This is because of the apparent capacity of manuscript materials and digital interventions to evoke the spectre of the presence of others (human and non-human) from other places and times (see figure 51 for an illustrative impression of this notion).

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<sup>659</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.55 and 59



Figure 51: The eerie, presence and absence

Poet Richard Skelton describes historical landscapes as ‘enigmatic’ because they are places we did not know, and they witnessed events in which we did not partake. This, he points out, leaves ‘space for imagination to breathe’ and to ‘infuse with our own ideas, desires and fears’.<sup>660</sup> Similarly, rewilding is a new imagining of a ‘rawer’, more magical, mysterious and exciting encounter between subject and object within the interpretive ‘landscape’. Digital technologies are perfectly positioned to reawaken the long tradition that museums have of ‘walking the line between fact and make believe’ and the power of manuscripts to create a skein of myth and fantasy – to create an

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<sup>660</sup> Richard Skelton speaking on, *Into the Eerie*, BBC Radio 3 broadcast 03/03/19  
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0002zmr>.

environment that is wild and imaginative enough to enable the Kraken, or Basilisk, or, as figure 52 illustrates, other mythical creatures, to rise again.<sup>661</sup>

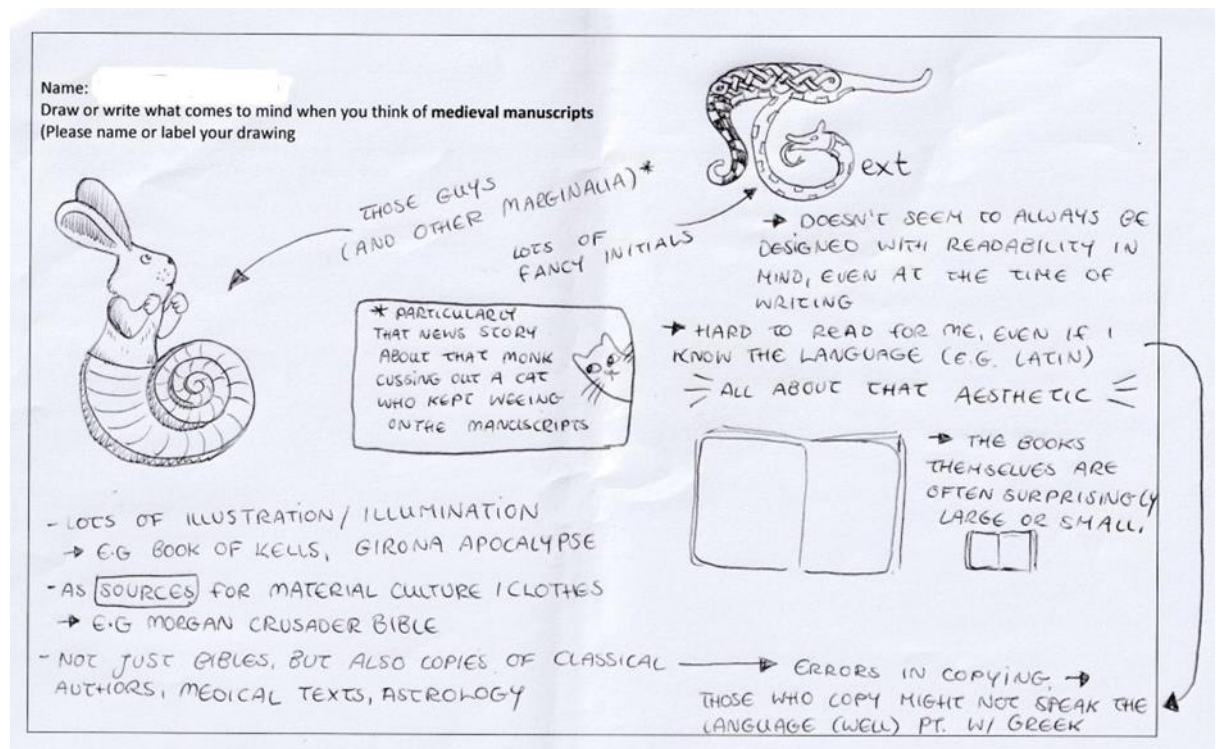


Figure 52: Alice's Adventures in Wonderland meets the Book of Kells, meets *MS210*, meets... sensorial encounters triggered powerful imaginative reactions and enhanced understandings of the manuscript

Similarly, the manuscript itself, all too often approached as a veneer of silent, uninhabited page surfaces, holds rich potential as an object full of happening. As this study shows, *MS210* is something we know – it is that most common of things, a book, and many of its material substances we recognize. And yet, it eludes knowing – we cannot read it, most of us do not understand when the words are spoken. Its materialities are both concealed beneath its form, yet puzzling when deregulated and dispersed. A once living body and inanimate object merge in the *corpus* of the manuscript.<sup>662</sup> In the same way that landscapes retain physical evidence of the

<sup>661</sup> This notion of walking the line between fantasy and fact is referred to by Ross Parry, *Recoding the museum: digital heritage and the technologies of change*, (London: Routledge, 2007), (p.73).

<sup>662</sup> An 8<sup>th</sup> century manuscript associated with Bishop Hildebald of Cologne (788-818) in which the manuscript is referred to as a 'corpus', that is, a 'body'.

<https://emea01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.ceec.uni->

intrusion of fleeting modernities, manuscripts too, retain patinas of the past – *MS210* is its own ‘memorious earth’.<sup>663</sup> Bodily presences are ghosted in and on parchments, wood, ink and so on, as surely as they may be conjured by our imaginations. In the same way that the ‘wild things’ have been pushed from our hills and woodland, so the eerie has been fenced off, contained and managed by prevalent modes of displaying manuscripts. If the poetic environmental notion of the eerie evokes the prospect of those animals exterminated by human actions returning to ‘exact bloody revenge’, the concept of rewilding the place of display draws on J G Ballard’s notion of replacing dull routine with thrill and risk, which is captured in his lines: ‘The suburbs dream of violence. Asleep in their drowsy villas, sheltered by benevolent shopping malls, they wait patiently for the nightmares that will wake them into a more passionate world’. The rewilded interpretive setting is the provocateur, challenging interpretive settings, not to coddle and reassure, but to inject a frisson of excitement and the uncertainty that might accompany it.

If, within an interpretive setting, we were to consider the ‘real’ object and the digital object, not as competing elements, nor as mutually exclusive, but as complementing each other, we would, this study suggests, better equip visitors to respond in their own way, and augment and intensify multi-sensational engagements with physical objects. By releasing the manuscript materials from their restraining glass case, the rewilded displayscape created fertile terrain for a myriad of meanings and imaginings, each as individual as the participant, for whom past eras and lives were thrust, to a lesser or greater extent, into the modern world. Digital and manuscript material engagements afforded participants a chance to be ‘untimely’ and place themselves outside of the constraints of the present, or of linear, categorized notions of history.

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[koeln.de/2Fceec-cgi%2Fkleioc%2F0010%2Fexec%2Fpagepro%2F%22kn28-0063\\_003.jpg%22%2Fsegment%2F%22body%22&data=02%7C01%7Cafdf2%40leicester.ac.uk%7C5d5247973c674137864108d69e2b29ac%7Caebeed6a31d44b0195ce8274afe853d9%7C0%7C0%7C636870305567158732&sdata=tSUDFslFgRzSTJXoh%2FHmLe%2F2vuMvArdZrZcH67ew3NI%3D&reserved=0](https://www.koeln.de/2Fceec-cgi%2Fkleioc%2F0010%2Fexec%2Fpagepro%2F%22kn28-0063_003.jpg%22%2Fsegment%2F%22body%22&data=02%7C01%7Cafdf2%40leicester.ac.uk%7C5d5247973c674137864108d69e2b29ac%7Caebeed6a31d44b0195ce8274afe853d9%7C0%7C0%7C636870305567158732&sdata=tSUDFslFgRzSTJXoh%2FHmLe%2F2vuMvArdZrZcH67ew3NI%3D&reserved=0) In addition, recent and ongoing DNA analyses of manuscripts have found both human and non-human DNA, implying that the boundaries between the reader (human subject) and manuscript/ dead animal object are blurred, thereby evoking the idea that bodies are impossible to disentangle and touch across time.

<sup>663</sup> Term used by Richard Skelton to describe the history-seeped landscape. Richard Skelton speaking on, *Into the Eerie*, BBC Radio 3 broadcast 03/03/19 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0002zmr>.

## ix. Conclusion

This chapter revealed how, for some participants, a dearth of textual information could frustrate their attempts to establish understandings of the manuscript. But it has also shown that for the majority of participants, rewilded encounters between manuscript objects generated affective experiences. Potent empathetic links with objects, lives and times and the stories surrounding them were ignited by sensory engagements and corporeal presence. These same encounters stimulated creative and imaginative interpretations and a breadth and depth of understandings and meanings unlikely in conventional manuscript display settings. Participants' physical encounters elicited memories, prior knowledge and cultural influences, which were woven into their respective interpretations of *MS210* and effected the timbre and pitch of its resonances with each of them. Their responses and reactions to the digital and material objects in the rewilded displayscape of this field research suggests that embodied encounters with manuscript materials 'actual' or digital may sometimes be transformative. In general, participants' experiences are a tilt at the windmill of convention, pointing to a notion of the past not as distant and receding, but as a series of fleeting presents, apprehendable now in the materiality of objects such as *MS210*, which have transcended time and geographical space. This past may also be perceived through human memories and imaginations, which are themselves materially situated.

## 11. Conclusion

### i. Introduction

The aim of this research was to explore if and how physical, sensorial encounters with manuscript materials might afford meaningful experiences for people. It asked how we might 'dissolve' the vitrine and remove the barriers that restrict our capacity to use all of our sensory modalities. And, if we do enable embodied engagements, to what extent, if any, can these encounters inspire emotional and imaginative understandings beyond, or, in addition to, the contextual and historical interpretations often provided by institutions?

This thesis used a case study approach, taking the manuscript *MS210* as its object focus. Using a theoretical framework informed by phenomenology, and strands of thought that may be grouped under the umbrella of posthumanism and that are heavily influenced by the ecological concept of rewilding, this research study created a 'displayscape' to facilitate close and less mediated encounters between people and manuscript objects.

Using the notion of *rewilding* is tantamount to an acknowledgement of past practices of museums and similar interpretive settings, which permitted visitors tactile encounters with objects and displayed things, not only as punctuation marks behind glass, or illustrations in narrative stories, but as material objects with inspirational and awesome potential. Rewilding is also an adjuration for interpretive institutions to embrace the role of our senses in how we experience and interpret the world around us and the part our proprioceptive awareness plays in how we create meanings and understandings of the material world around us. However, rewilding takes a further step and more radical step – off the beaten track: it is an enjoinder for museums, libraries, archives and other settings in which manuscripts are displayed, to throw off the cloak of predictability, resist the temptation to be comfortable, safe, benign spaces and realize their potential to provide surprising, challenging and invigorating experiences for visitors. This thesis has shown that, even within the relatively riskless



environment of confronting a manuscript, the unexpected and unknown can be unsettling, creative and transformative.

## ii. Findings

‘When I got home, all I had retained from the hours spent in the museum was the memory of one picture: the *Mona Lisa*. Mortified, I understood that without preparation, without apprenticeship, without reading, you don’t see anything when you visit an art gallery.’ These remarks are Jacques Bonnet’s reflections on spending ‘half a day in the Louvre’.<sup>664</sup> Bonnet is not alone. In the same way that Bonnet encountered difficulties trying to make sense of the artworks he discovered in the Louvre, some participants in this research study found it frustrating trying to glean meaning from *MS210* using only their sensory engagement with the manuscript materials. As we saw in the chapter, ‘Confusing encounters’, in the absence of the orthodox interpretive filters they found that the disordered manuscript objects and the immediacy and intensity of their physical engagement, along with the multiplicity of simultaneous sensory stimuli could be overwhelming and confusing. The sense of eeriness, in part elicited by the images and music content of the audio-visual features, but, in particular, evoked by the vocalized ancient languages, may have ignited creative imaginings for some participants, but for others, as their responses detailed in the chapter, ‘Touching the Past’, indicated, it served only to deepen this sense of uncertainty, discordance and disorientation.

This research revealed that most of the participants, to a lesser or greater degree, were uncomfortable about confronting the manuscript without the ‘preparation’ to which Bonnet alludes – the cultural and historical narratives, and contextual information normally provided by the gatekeepers of interpretive institutions – curators and their counterparts. As we saw in the section, ‘Dependency on external authorities’, without this code to unlock the meaning of the manuscript some participants clearly felt that they lacked the ‘cultural competence’ that Bourdieu speaks of as often being necessary to appreciate or feel comfortable when confronting cultural phenomena. In the section, ‘Wayfinding disorientation’, it was clear that,

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<sup>664</sup> Jacques Bonnet, *Phantoms on the Bookshelves*, (London: MacLehose Press, 2008), (p.75).

plunged into the displayscape without conceptual or wayfinding guidance, even that most familiar of objects - the book - became a puzzling abstraction. Minus the 'crutch' of contextual information, participants were forced into the unusual and uncomfortable scrutiny of their own perceptions.

Some participants' apparent want and need for explanations of the values, meanings and contexts of *MS210* points to our wider dependence and reliance, both within interpretive settings and beyond, on layers of information. Though contextual information may be essential to an overall understanding and interpretation of the manuscript, there is a risk that if it is presented prior to, or even instead of, engaging with the nature of the manuscript itself, it may screen us from the complexities of the object's materiality and the potential that experiencing its physicality holds for enriching our understandings of the manuscript.

However, this research also demonstrated how space, time and the opportunity to be corporeally in the company of manuscript materials, not simply passing by and gazing at, but physically *being with* another material object, though sometimes difficult and challenging for participants, also afforded them the chance to forage, to probe, and to re-imagine the idea and the reality of the manuscript. Indeed, it was, to some extent, precisely because the displayscape was challenging, unknown and unpredictable that participants were able to explore and make new and surprising discoveries. In the chapter, 'Embodied encounters', participants were let loose from normative behaviours, to go and wander wherever they wanted and to get to grips with whatever caught their attention – not only by sight, but via sound, smell, texture or taste. In an environment without instructions and directions, participants' corporeal curiosity, the urge to, quite literally in some instances, sniff out answers to their own questions, blossomed: 'What does it feel like? How does it taste, or smell?'<sup>665</sup> These questions did not have to remain hypothetical but could be answered empirically.

Released from the narratives in which manuscripts are often interpreted as art objects, religious texts or historical artefacts, *MS210* was allowed to 'unbecome' - to deregulate and disperse its material substances and reorient and re-permutate with

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<sup>665</sup> Walk along interview UA 19/04/18(a).

new potentials within the rewilded displayscape. Material time afforded participants the chance to fold back the layers of interpretation that typically protect manuscripts and engage with and understand *MS210*, not solely as a ‘musty’ ‘yellowed’, ‘fragile’ historical and cultural artefact, but also as a composite of collaboration between fleshy, bony, woody, oozing, earthly things.<sup>666</sup> This research demonstrates that both visitor and manuscript are intrinsically active within the fabric of the material environment of the displayscape. The rewilded displayscape fostered a coupling of subject and object and made it difficult to sidestep the reality that as people, we are material too. The boundaries between subject and object blurred. As participants touched, they were touched back, never knowing quite what it would feel like, or what responses their sensory engagement would engender – physically or emotionally.

This research demonstrates, for example, in the chapter ‘Provocative objects’, that the material qualities of the manuscript *acted* in defining participants’ experiences of the object. It also shows that knowing and understanding can be achieved through embodied encounters *with* materials. Sweetman and Hadfield posit that ‘sensory content on its own is not going to deepen one’s understanding of the object’. This is enhanced, they argue, through the provision of ‘more contextual detail’.<sup>667</sup> While the responses of some participants in this study support the contention that additional contextual information can be a crucial element in supporting, understanding and meaning making, they also indicate that contrary to Sweetman’s and Hadfield’s assertion, intimate sensory engagements with manuscript materials can generate powerful creative and imaginative kinds of knowing, and that these are equally valid responses to the object and can be both as informative and transformative as an appreciation of contextual knowledge. This thesis does not suggest that we should abandon historical, social and cultural contexts for manuscripts (or other objects), but that corporeal encounters with the thing itself can be valuable in their own right, provide alternative meanings and deepen understandings. Embodied experiences are a provocation to thought but also ignite emotional and imaginary reactions. This thesis

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<sup>666</sup> Luci Attala and Louise Steel, (eds.), ‘Introduction’ *Body Matters*, <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Body-Matters-Exploring-Materiality-Human/dp/1786834154> (unpaginated) Viewed 07/11/19.

<sup>667</sup> Rebecca Sweetman and Alison Hadfield, *et al.* ‘Artefact or art? Perceiving objects via object-viewing, object-handling, and virtual reality’, *University Museums and Collections Journal*, Volume 10, 2018, 46-65, (p.58).

highlights the physical *and* mental activity that contributes to learning processes and the cognitive and corporeal aspects of developing understandings.

While Bonnet asserts that it is imperative to be 'prepared', well read and informed in advance, if we are to make any sense of our encounters with art objects in galleries, this study proposes that surprising, unexpected somatic confrontations may also play a pivotal role in making meaning. In the chapters, 'Embodied encounters' and 'Touching the past', serendipitous, adventitious, challenging confrontations triggered thoughts, memories, and arousals, which themselves informed the meaning making process for most of the participants in this research study. Physical and sensory engagements 'in the moment' provoked memories and conjured up prior knowledge and experiences, which were all interwoven to make sense of the manuscript. If 'factual' knowledge, and historical and contextual direction are both required and valuable in developing an understanding, this research has shown that there is also some significant value in affording people opportunities to perceive manuscripts beyond the intellectual, and/or in addition to solely visual apprehension.

In the chapter, 'Thinking with things', this research highlighted that thinking with our 'visceral brain' impacts on learning and understanding and allows for highly individual and personalised meaning making. Knowledge is not only conceptual but also corporeal. It is significant that some of the sensory stimuli that are rarely ignited when we confront a manuscript behind glass proved to be powerful catalysts. The penetrative experiences of aural, olfactory, and taste offered new, deeper and more intricate engagements with the manuscript, which in turn prompted more profound, extensive and ardent feelings and understandings of the manuscript with the power to rupture conventional paradigms of the relationship between past and present and the dualism of human subject and non-human object. Sensory experiences shared across time dissolved boundaries of geographical space and time, eliciting, for many participants, a sense of connection, or empathy with past eras, past communities and past lives, both human and non-human.

This research found that imaginations were also fired by the digital content layered with the material substances of the manuscripts in the displayscape. While the iPad may have held less wide-ranging and engaging appeal than say a 3-D, mixed reality

*MS210* might have, nonetheless, it enabled access to the manuscript that would otherwise have been prevented by the conventional mode of display employed. In 'Digital access and digital and embodied engagement', we saw how the digital provided another kinaesthetic, sensory layer of self-directed interaction and exposed hitherto unapprehendable details and qualities of the manuscript's physicality. The digital *MS210* broadened horizons and better enabled networks to be created.

Authenticity, which, it has been argued, is fundamental to positive engagement with historical artefacts, did not emerge as an issue in this research.<sup>668</sup> If notions of authenticity and the aura of the real thing pivot around display techniques that establish the 'museum effect', underpinned by textual information and confirmation, this research points instead to the locus of authenticity as being between manuscript beholders and the very materiality of the manuscript materials themselves.

Perceptions were raw and physical, and it was in instances of perception, as we saw in the sections, 'Rethinking preconceptions' and 'Digital access and embodied engagement', for instance, when the materiality of both object and subject 'intra acted', that ideas of authenticity were formed. Encounters with the manuscript substances, material and digital, 'real' and simulacra generated a strong sense of emotional authenticity for a number of participants. They were touched by them. This was the nexus of emotion and imagination, materiality and meaning.

The difficulties that museums and elsewhere face in being both attractive and accessible without losing intellectual content have been well-documented ever since Eileen Hooper-Greenhill highlighted the issue two decades ago.<sup>669</sup> This study suggests that enabling a layered approach to interpretation, which incorporates sensorial and digital encounters, does not diminish the intellectual content of the experience but, rather, enhances it. As this participant's remarks highlight, understanding and enjoyment make convivial companions: I thought it was a really fun experience, as well, actually. Which is not something, I won't deny it, it's not something I associate

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<sup>668</sup> M.B. Stogner, 'The Media-enhanced Museum Experience', *Curator: The Museum Journal* 52, 3(2009), 85-397 2009 (p.391) cited in Sweetman, Rebecca and Hadfield, Alison, *et al*, 'Artefact or art? Perceiving objects via object-viewing, object-handling, and virtual reality', *University Museums and Collections Journal*, Volume 10, 2018, 46-65, (p.58).

<sup>669</sup> Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*, (London: Routledge, 2000), (p.7).

with Museum Studies, particularly. But, no, I thought it was really, really enjoyable, interesting experience.’<sup>670</sup> Museums have a long tradition, not only as places of expertise, knowledge and authority, but also as catalysts for imaginings. While manuscripts like *MS210* are tangible realities from the past – the past in material form, as demonstrated in ‘Touching the past: creative and imaginative interpretations’ - they are also the locus of the fantastic, the improbable and the extraordinary. When participants talked of time travel and of touching the past, they were referring to a process constructed as much from the experience of embodied engagement as from their imaginations.

This research also suggested that rather than contradictory, manuscripts and advancing digital technologies can be highly compatible and complementary elements within the displayscape.<sup>671</sup> Together, they offer alternative routes to accessibility, add various layers of interest, and provide varying sources of motivation and attraction. Enabling access to elemental sensory encounters alongside advancing digital technologies, therefore, parallels the rich, diverse and surprising range of objects and stimuli we are likely to find beyond the managed conservation area, in a rewilded landscape. Just as manuscript codices radically changed the way people knew and understood the medieval world, so our ways of apprehending and knowing will be forever different due to digital technologies

Neither the ‘real thing’ behind glass nor the digital object appear to be enough on their own. However, together they form a fascia of sensory stimuli and emotional arousal. Opportunities to interact with manuscript actualities, and the digital in the presence of *MS210* itself, allowed participants to employ a range of senses and provided a solid anvil on which understandings could be forged. This multi-layered approach also enhanced accessibility. One of the key findings of this research is that affording encounters beyond the ocular centric and enabling people to use a range of sensory modalities is likely to ensure that an interpretive setting is far more accessible to far more diverse audiences, whatever their range of sensory capacities. Sensory and

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<sup>670</sup> Post-encounter interview AT/AB 24/04/18(a).

<sup>671</sup> As some commentators worry that digital technologies and manuscripts might be. See, Gary Frost, ‘Material Quality of Medieval Bookbindings’, in Wilcox, Jonathan (ed.), *Scraped, Stroked and Bound: Materially Engaged readings of Medieval Manuscripts*, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 129-134.

embodied encounters with objects in the world around us are fundamental to our human experience, so by affording opportunities for such encounters, access to manuscripts, even to those who have never encountered one before, becomes possible.

### **iii. Contribution**

This thesis adds to the ongoing and still current debate about what a museum is.<sup>672</sup> It challenges interpretive settings, such as museums, libraries and archives, to re-think one of their central roles; that is, their function to catalogue, classify and select. While this thesis recognizes the importance of these tasks, alongside the necessity of ensuring that manuscripts are secure and preserved, it suggests that these ‘behind the scenes’ activities and the ethos that motivates them often seep too deeply into the interpretive practices within the space of display. What if we entertained the idea that things had ‘the ability... to surpass the classification schemes imposed upon them by humans’? What if, within the museum and elsewhere, ‘the world was not simply reducible to human categories of history’?<sup>673</sup> This thesis has posited some answers. Manuscripts would then become apprehendable to all, whether or not we use sight to perceive the world. The potential for beholders of the manuscript to experience deep and intricate understandings, which interweave highly individual, physical and sensory responses, personal emotional memories, prior knowledge and cultural influences, might generate new resonances and relevancies. And, we could enable experiences that are essential to the human condition – material engagements with the objects in the world together with us. We could know the manuscript rather than just reading about it. This research found that it is not enough to provide the manuscript as a distanced, passive object, but nor is it sufficient to provide its digital twin in a passive way either. Rewilding implies stepping back from the too often over-restrictive processes of order and regulation in order to better facilitate an interpretive landscape in which there is room for the unexpected, the surprising and the challenging; an

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<sup>672</sup> The very definition of museum is a hot topic of discussion and controversy for the International Council of Museums (ICOM). See, <https://uk.icom.museum/news/view/?title=/why-icom-postponed-the-vote-on-its-new-museum-definition/> See also S. Conn, *Do Museums Still Need Objects?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

<sup>673</sup> Questions posed by Robert Mills with respect to the study of the past in general. Mills, Robert, *Derek Jarman’s Medieval Modern*, (Cambridge: D S Brewer, 2018), (p.132).

environment that enables essential processes of active physical exploration to unfold, and in which non-human objects are afforded opportunities to act back – provoking, shocking, stimulating and inspiring. Let us reach out to touch the manuscript, not knowing what the response to that touch will bring.

Commenting on exhibiting ‘unremarkable manuscripts and other quotidian objects’, Daniel Wakelin notes with concern that exhibitions can often feel like the end of a journey. The sense of finality and the authoritative comment and description that often accompany an object can appear to conclude and draw a line under the debate. Not only does this notion of conclusion limit the potential for individual exploration and discovery, it also implies that on the other side of the line drawn under the matter, other ideas and possibilities are left out. This thesis argues that encounters with a manuscript should heed Wakelin’s concern and move to ensure that when we encounter exhibited manuscripts, it marks not the end, but the start of an open-ended journey of discovery. Rewilding creates interpretive spaces of manoeuvre rather than of mediation, in which fewer intermediary layers of direction and interpretation are set to liberate visitors to become wayfarers and seekers. But if this notion of space to roam conjures notions of a white cube full of nothing, be warned, the rewilded displayscape is one full of things – objects of enticement and revulsion, delight and disdain. However we might experience them, objects demand or absorb our attentions. Our perception of them, as this study shows, provides impact. This research has shown that a move towards more materially engaged encounters with manuscripts in interpretive settings would better position those settings to realize their potential to become more socially inclusive spaces. In the absence of a prescribed conclusion there is potential for visitors to find their own rich, physical and emotional, personal experiences.<sup>674</sup> The rewilded displayscape made it possible for the participants in this study to get close to and bodily engage with the manuscript’s materialities and thus form their own questions, ideas, fantasies and interpretations.

This study suggests that there is some merit in interpretive settings considering a major shift in how they approach subject and object (visitors and collections). More

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<sup>674</sup> Sandra H. Dudley, *Museum materialities: objects, engagements, interpretations* (Routledge, 2010), (p.4).



transformative, meaningful encounters might be realised if institutions focussed on the experience that human subjects have *with* objects. This object centred foundation holds manuscripts neither solely as exemplars or historical artefacts, nor primarily as treasures, but as things with agential potential. So, to follow Dudley, a manuscript becomes not simply part of an 'object- information package' but an essential actor 'within an object-subject interaction'.<sup>675</sup> In John Maynard Smith's thought experiment, in which history is condensed into a two-hour film, only a few seconds at the end are taken up with the shift from domesticating plants and animals to the discovery of atomic energy.<sup>676</sup> If culture's time is so short, then, as Richard Sennett notes, materiality makes it long. 'Solid objects are something we can return to time and time again'.<sup>677</sup> We do not know how long digital objects will last but this research suggests that it is not too soon to reflect further on Dudley's call to 'redefine what we regard by the "object"' <sup>678</sup> Her notion of the object as a manifold of the interaction between the thing being observed and the human subject doing the observing is a firm foundation on which to build, but, this research suggests, we might also need to consider projecting the digital into the definition. This promises a rich field for further research as 3-D, immersive and mixed realities help us re-imagine how we can apprehend and experience manuscripts. Released from the tight shackles of historicism and heritage that bind so many interpretive settings displaying manuscripts, both object and subject can unfold as co-conspirators in meaning making, igniting imaginations and inspiring emotions, and creating empathetic and experiential understandings.

#### **iv. Limitations**

There is some degree of irony in presenting this research in the form of a written thesis when, at its core is an adjuration to shift ocular-centric, information-focussed interpretive approaches to allow more experiential centred methods to develop. In keeping with the creative approach that this thesis set out to take, as explained in the methodology section, it has, therefore, incorporated links to film, audio and references

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<sup>675</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5.

<sup>676</sup> John Maynard Smith cited in Sennett, Richard, *The Craftsman* (Penguin, 2009), (p.15).

<sup>677</sup> *Ibid.* p.16.

<sup>678</sup> Sandra H. Dudley, *Museum materialities: objects, engagements, interpretations* (Routledge, 2010), (p.5).

to more poetic and imaginary evocations of touching the past and engaging with historical objects.

The scope of this research was, out of necessity, limited. As a well-defined and delineated case study it makes drawing grand generalisations difficult. However, as explained in the Research Approach and Design chapter, as a close-up, intimate study it is rich in qualitative detail and texture, and provides a wealth of data. The data generated is important and raises several significant issues that warrant further research. The most obvious and, in some ways, most pressing of these is the impact that more advanced digital technologies might play in both facilitating embodied encounters and eliciting emotional responses arousals, and, therefore, personal meaning making and understanding of the manuscript.

This wealth of data was also an issue in and of itself. The subcaming, audio recording and transcription were highly time consuming and generated volumes of information, parts of which remain lightly used because of the limited scale of this research. The 'triangulated' approach adopted for this qualitative research project employed observation and questionnaires alongside film and audio recordings. This alone produced enough data to inform a further thesis and thus was only touched on in this work, which drew mainly on the rich data supplied by the subcam film footage, audio recordings and interviews.

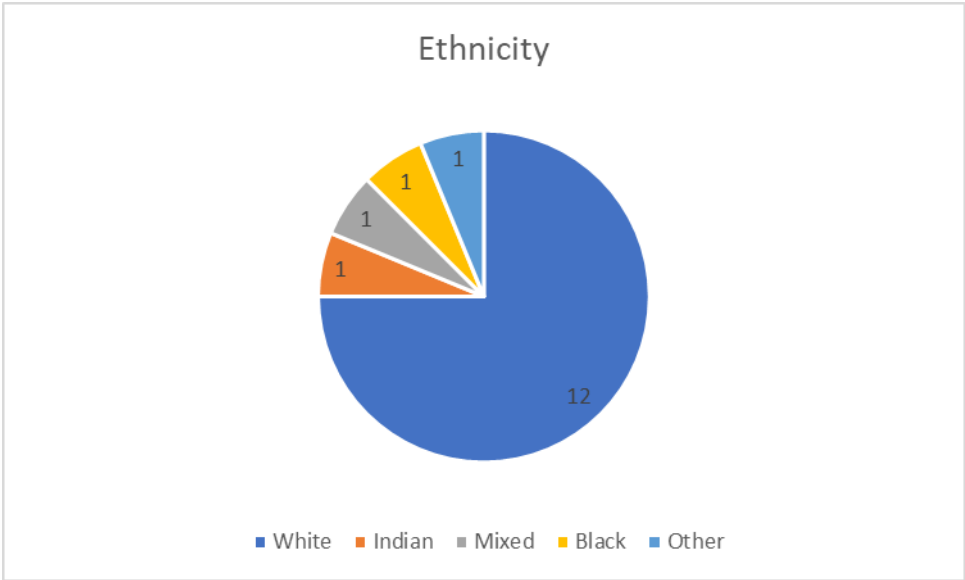
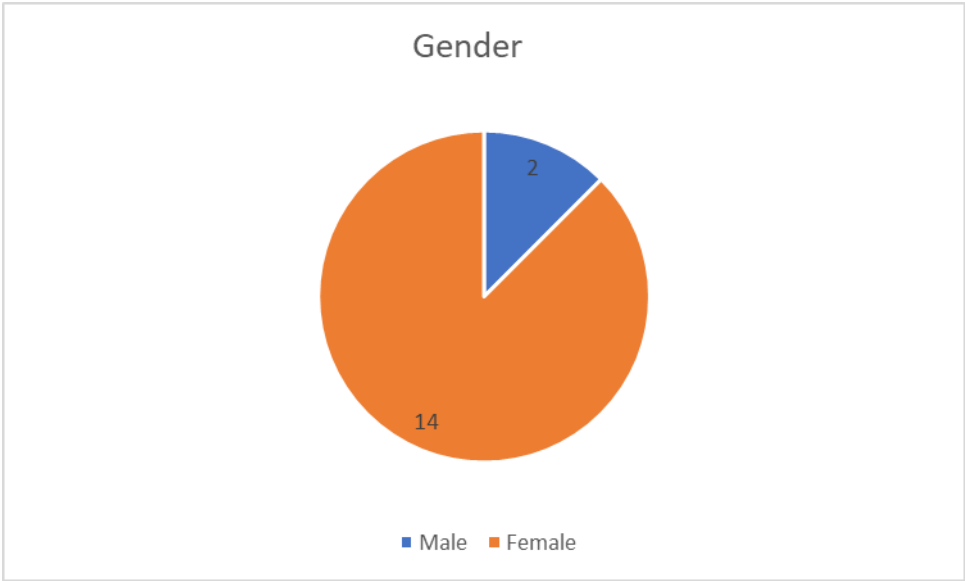
The defined and delimited nature of this research project's rewilded displayscape afforded participants the chance for time indulgent, material-oriented engagement with the things themselves. This thesis recognizes and acknowledges that within much larger interpretive settings, with all of the strategic and daily demands on time and resources and the necessities of security and preservation, there are practical limits to the application of this method beyond the bounds of this case study. However, this does not diminish the potential offered by this study. Integrating opportunities for material engagements with manuscripts is feasible and there are examples and instances within this study that can be applied, relatively simply, across a range of settings. If interpretation enables an experiential dimension that offers the visitor the opportunity to apprehend *MS210*, or other manuscripts, with greater sensory embodied understandings, then preconceptions can be turned upside down, new

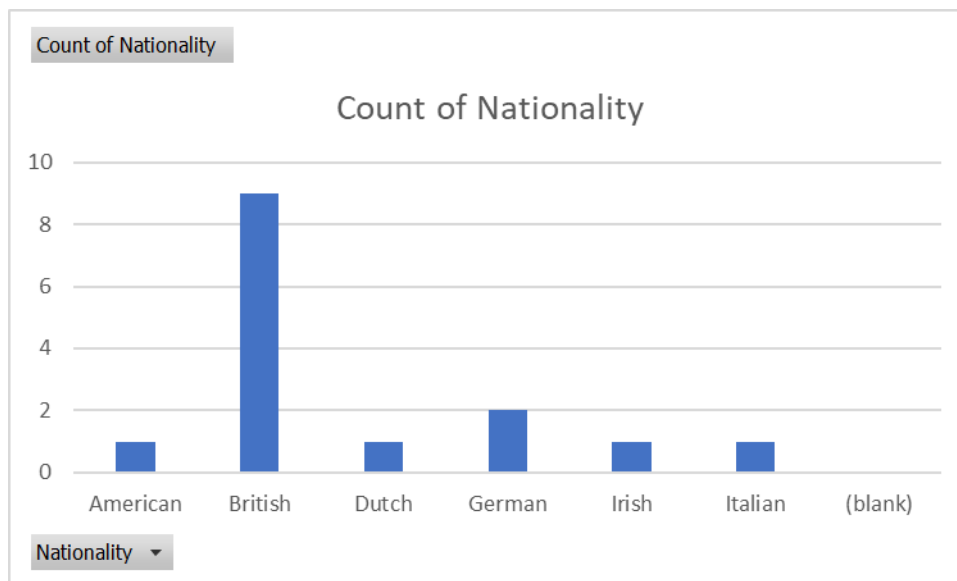
personal relationships with materials can be built up - material that might make us look, think, approach, desire to touch and shrink back - and emotional and imaginative responses can affect new meanings and relationships. This research is an appeal for us to at least begin to try to create an environment in which we can experience a less prescribed encounter with manuscripts and embark on an adventure of 'open ended seeking', without certainty or pre-defined conclusions. We do not have to abandon myth and dream to understand manuscripts, any more than we have to forsake cultural or historical contexts to foment our imaginative capacities. This research is simply an invocation to relax the rigid 'rules of engagement' within the medium of the display space and to reinvigorate it to enable fundamental processes of sensory and emotional interaction between visitors and the material properties of manuscripts. In this way, emotional, imaginative and cognitive knowing, understandings and meanings can flourish concurrently.

*Will you search through the lonely earth for me?  
Climb through the briar and bramble?  
I'll be your treasure.  
I felt the touch of the kings and the breath of the wind.  
I knew the call of all the songbirds. They sang all the wrong words.  
I'm waiting for you. I'm waiting for you.  
  
Will you swim through the briny sea for me?  
Roll along the ocean's floor?  
I'll be your treasure.  
I'm with the ghosts of the men who can never sing again.  
There's a place follow me, where a love lost at sea,  
Is waiting for you. Is waiting for you.  
  
'Detectorists', Jonny Flynn. (Theme to BBC4 series 'Detectorists')*

This prosopopoeic song riddle appears to be a 21<sup>st</sup> century descendant of the Anglo-Saxon object riddles contained in the Exeter Book.

Appendix 1: Summary of fieldwork – participants





## **Appendix 2: Subcam film excerpts**

<https://youtu.be/j-lvHuzpBxA>

<https://youtu.be/jfjNmAtefow>

<https://youtu.be/oK4foKJx3uw>

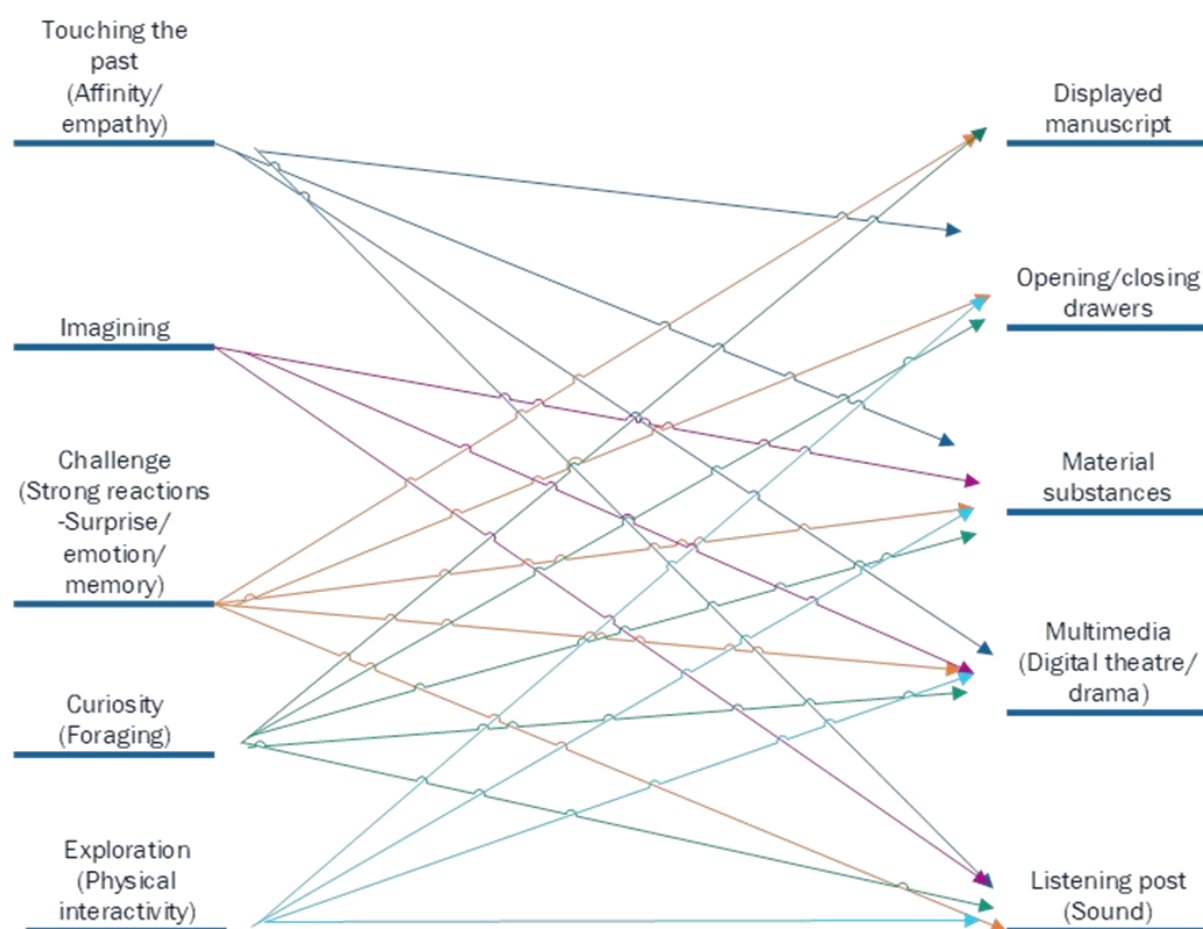
### Appendix 3: Observation schedule

An example observation schedule to record events, actions and responses.

	Observed Participant <i>Name/ID:</i>
Touching the past	
Imagination	
Challenge (Surprise, emotion, memory)	
Curiosity	
Exploration	



## Appendix 4: Mapping exercise



## Appendix 5: Pre and Post-encounter questionnaires

### Pre-encounter questionnaire

Name:	Please circle the age range that applies to you:
	16-25
Please tell me	
three things about	26-35
yourself:	36-45
1.	46-55
	56-65
	66-75
2.	If you are a student: Undergraduate / Taught Postgraduate /
	Postgraduate Research
	If you are a member of staff: Schools & Colleges / Professional
	Services / Other
3.	Gender:
	Ethnicity:
	Nationality:

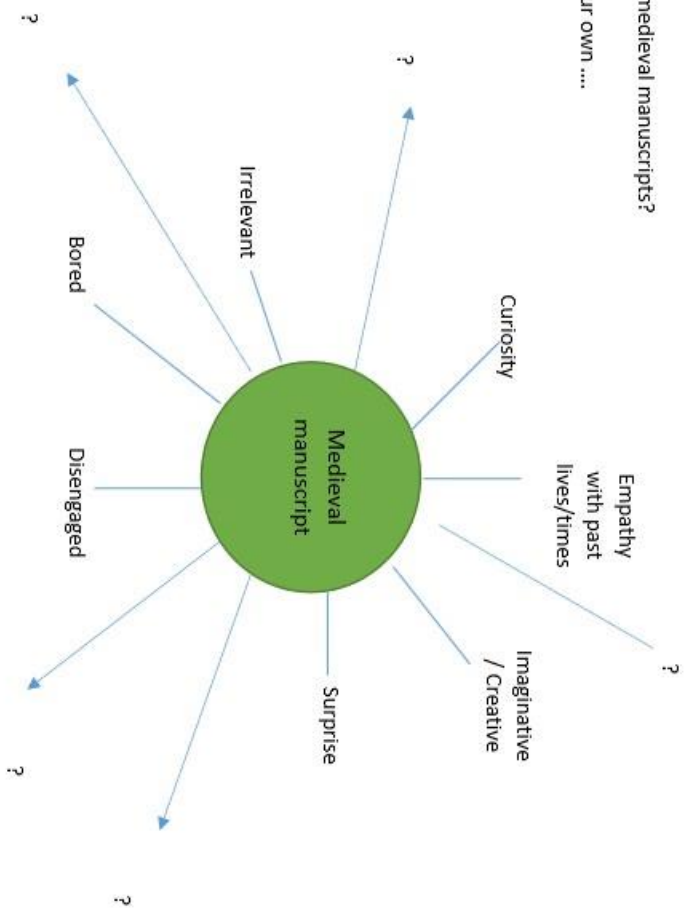


Name:

Draw or write what comes to mind when you think of **medieval manuscripts**

(Please name or label your drawing)

What best describes how you **feel** about medieval manuscripts?  
Please circle all that apply and /or add your own ....



### Post-encounter questionnaire

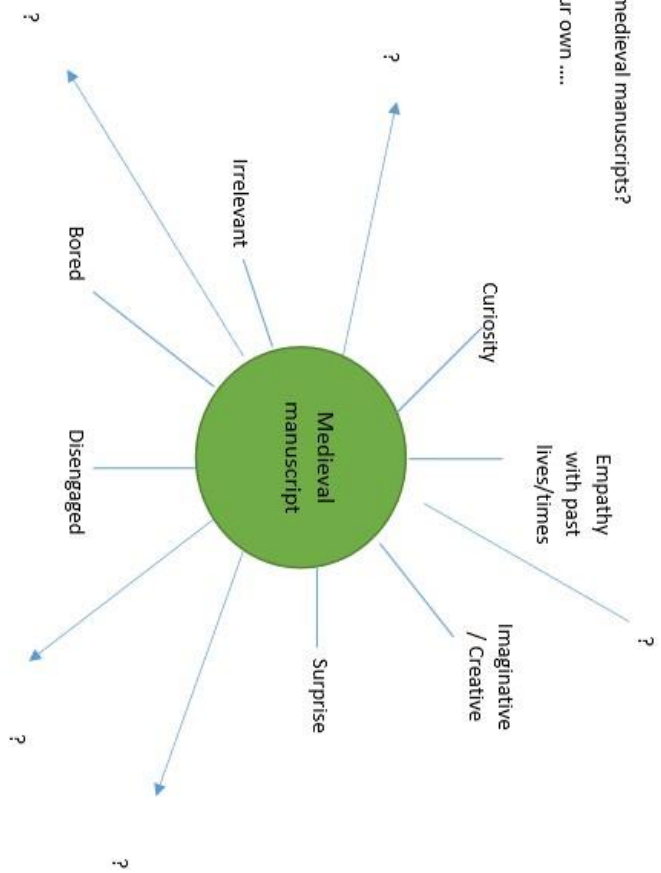
Name:

Draw or write what comes to mind when you think of **medieval manuscripts**

(Please name or label your drawing)

What best describes how you feel about medieval manuscripts?

Please circle all that apply and /or add your own ....



## Visual liking

How much do you like the actual manuscript (visually)?





## Visual liking

How much do you like the digital manuscript (visually)?



### Multi-sensory liking

How much do you like the multi-sensory experiences created by the content of the drawers?



### Multi-sensory liking

How much do you like the sensory experiences created by the sound content of the display?



### Multi-sensory liking

How much do you like the sensory experiences created by the digital content of the display?



## Intensity

How intense was the multi-sensory experience created by the content of the drawers?



## Intensity

How intense was the sensory experience created by the sound content of the display?



## Intensity

How intense was the sensory experience created by the digital content of the display?



How important were each of your senses in this experience? (1 = not important, 5 = very important)



1 2 3 4 5 6

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1 2 3 4 5 6

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1 2 3 4 5 6

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1 2 3 4 5 6

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1 2 3 4 5 6

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Rewilding the manuscript display	Characteristics of a 'rewilded' space	How will the characteristics be presented?	Method. How it is tested?
	Presents challenges and provokes responses (surprise, emotion, memory).	Manuscript in display cabinet. Opening/closing drawers. Haptic, aural and, or, other sensory engagement encounters with a range of material substances. Interrogating digital manuscript object.	First-person filming. Questionnaires. Interviews.
	Encourages curiosity / foraging.	Seeing the 'real thing'. Digital media (iPad with 'turning the pages' and projected film). Opening and closing drawers. Encountering physical substances. Listening to recorded sounds.	First-person filming. Questionnaires. Interviews.
	Enables exploration and discovery (Physical interactivity).	Pulling open and pushing closed drawers. Bending, reaching, to visually examine, touch, feel, smell, taste, hear the manuscript's material components, e.g., urine, blood, lime, quill, ink, parchment, pigment, flax, leather, wood, oak galls, minerals and vegetation.	First-person filming. Questionnaires. Interviews.

		<p>Haptic engagement to 'turn the pages' of the digital simulacrum.</p> <p>Placing earphones to listen to the manuscript 'talk' and 'breathe'.</p> <p>Physically manoeuvring in response to digital drama.</p>	
	Ignites imagination.	<p>Drama and theatre of digital media and aural content.</p> <p>Engagement with materials which may be reminiscent of magic potions/spells. Sounds of the manuscript may conjure memories, past experiences, and perceptions of a medieval world.</p>	<p>First-person filming.</p> <p>Questionnaires.</p> <p>Interviews.</p>
	Fosters potential for a potent sense of 'touching the past' (empathy or affinity for past lives and epochs).	<p>Multi-sensory encounters with the manuscript akin to those experienced by medieval craftspeople and users invoking a sense of intimacy and immediacy, together with a sense of dynamism and vitality enhanced by dramatic intervention and digital media.</p>	<p>First-person filming.</p> <p>Questionnaires.</p> <p>Interviews.</p>

## Appendix 6: Importance of senses to participants

(1 = not important, 5 = important)

How important were each of your senses in this experience? (1 = not important, 5 = very important)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
	6	5	5	6	5	5	6	6	4	6	6	4	6	4	4
	4	3	4	4	3	2	5	6	5	4	4	3	3	4	3
	6	2	5	2	4	4	5	6	6	6	6	3	5	6	6
	5	4	5	1	2	2	5	1	5	6	5	2	4	6	5
	3	5	6	6	6	6	6	5	4	6	6	5	2	6	6

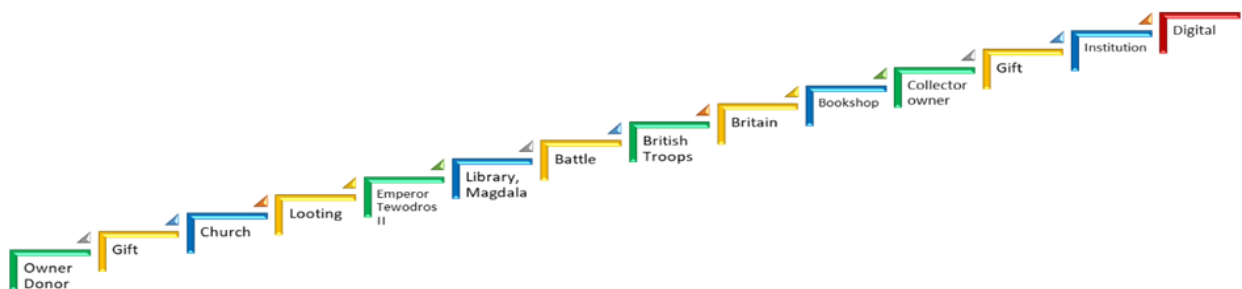
Participant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
How much do like the actual manuscript (visually)? Scale 1-6	5	5	4	6	6	3	4	6	4	6	5	3	4	6	6
How much do you like the digital manuscript (visually)? Scale 1-6	2	5	5	4	3	5	5	6	5	3	4	4	4	4	5
How much do you like the multi-sensory experiences created by the content of the drawers? Scale 1-6	6	4	5	5	5	6	5	5	5	6 ++	6	4	5	6 ++	6
How much do you like the sensory experiences created by the sound content of the display? Scale 1-6	5	3	4	4	4	5	4	6	5	4	5	1 + 4	2	4	5
How much do you like the sensory experiences created by the digital content of the display? Scale 1-6	3	3	4	5	3	6	5	5	3	4	5	4	4	4	5
How intense was the multi-sensory experience created by the content of the drawers? Scale 1-6	4	4	4	4	4	5	4	4	6	6	5	2	4	6	5
How intense was the sensory experience created by the sound content of the display? Scale 1-6	4	2	3	4	4	4	4	5	5	3	4	5	6	4	4
How intense was the sensory experience created by the digital content of the display? Scale 1-6	5	2	4	5	3	2	4	4	4	3	5	1	3	3	4

## Appendix 7: Object biography

### i. Introduction

This chapter looks at how the manuscript, *MS210*, has been exchanged, how it is enmeshed within social relationships, and how it was affected by and affected the people and other things it has come into contact with over the period of its existence. Combined with object centred explorations, this can help us to theorise about our relationships with *MS210* (and other objects) and to better understand how these inter-connections feature in the values attributed to the manuscript and the meanings attached to it across time and geographical space. This approach brings into focus the idea of *MS210* having not just a life story, or biography, but a social life. This approach illuminates how objects ‘become invested with meaning’, not just through physical modification, but also ‘through the social interactions they are caught up in’.<sup>679</sup> An overview of the biographical trajectory of *MS210* is encapsulated in figure 53.

#### Biographical Trajectory of MS210



<sup>679</sup> Ruth Tringham in C. Gosden and Y. Marshall, ‘The cultural biography of objects’, 1999, *World Archaeology*, 31 (2), 169-178.

Figure 53: Biographical trajectory of *MS210*

## ii. Fundamental mysteries

We know almost nothing of the early 'life' of the manuscript, which is now held in the University of Leicester's Special Collections. The manuscript, enigmatically known as '*MS210*', comes complete with its own set of mysteries and uncertainties. It has existed for at least 300 years. Since the 1950s the catalogue entry for *MS210* has given its date of manufacture as around the beginning of the eighteenth century and the place of its creation as somewhere in what we now know as Ethiopia. Written in the ancient Coptic Christian language, Ge'ez, primarily, it relates the story of 'the martyrdom of St Cyriacus and his mother St Julitta'. However, it is interesting to note that the typed label attached to the manuscript's leather slipcase indicates, in complete contradiction to the 'official' library catalogue entry, that the manuscript is 'Armenian' and from the 'fourteenth century'. Which are we to believe? Perhaps, quite simply, the manuscript was wrongly identified at some time in the past and the identifying label on the slipcase has remained stubbornly attached. Or, even though they fit like hand-in glove, maybe the slipcase was never made for *MS210*, but for a different manuscript altogether?

These are fundamental uncertainties - where and when is the manuscript from? Yet, in the event, not a single participant in this research study questioned the contradiction represented by the label adhering to the slipcase, and either the catalogue entry that featured with the digital manuscript, or my explanations at the end of each session. This problematises one of the most fundamental and pervasive methods of interpretation - the text label - both as a source of authoritative information and as a filter through which our impressions of objects are processed and influenced. But this may not be such a bad thing, simply because it encourages us to move beyond the label and attend to the thing itself in order to discover our own and alternative 'realities' for the manuscript. It is important to note that while the date and geographical location of its manufacture may have a significant impact on the values and meanings associated with the manuscript, the general concept of biography and social life remain pertinent, nonetheless. Whichever explanation offered by

the labels we favour, the manuscript's very materiality testifies to its physical existence over a long period of time. We know from the inscription on folios 56r and 86r that the name of the person who commissioned the making of the manuscript was 'Bakwera S'eyon' and that its scribe was Newaya Maryam'.<sup>680</sup> Documentation associated with *MS210*, suggesting that since it was made, the manuscript has have passed from the hands of the craftspeople who made it, through the hands of various different people who owned it and read it, and across a wide expanse of geographical locations to find itself today, in the Library of the University of Leicester, is supported by the patina of age and wear inscribed in the physical materiality of the object. These stages of making, use, journeying and changing roles can be thought of as *MS210*'s life story. Although we know relatively little about the manuscript, and some of the information attached to it is contradictory, we do know enough to know it has a biography and we can begin to piece this together.

### iii. Contested object

Underlining the notion that the biographies of people and things are inextricably interwoven, the scant documentation accompanying *MS210* suggests that the manuscript was taken as a memento 'from an Abyssinian chief' by a 'well known war correspondent', following a British military campaign in 1868.<sup>681</sup> The famous Victorian Journalist and explorer, H. M. Stanley recalled that in the aftermath of the Battle of Magdala, 'the roll of the drum assembled all the officers and crowds of onlookers around the piled treasures of Magdala, which covered half an acre of ground... Bidders were not scarce. Every officer and civilian desired some souvenir of Magdala.'<sup>682</sup> According to contemporary reports, it took 15 elephants and 200 mules to carry away the loot captured by Anglo-Indian forces at the end of the Battle of Magdala in 1868. We have no way of knowing for certain how or why *MS210* arrived in Leicester, or exactly where it came from, but an undated type-written note suggests that the manuscript might have been part of this 'Magdala treasure'.<sup>683</sup> Whether the officer who probably took it considered this manuscript as one of the 'treasures' on

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<sup>680</sup> Edward Ullendorff, Department of Oriental Languages, St Andrews University, in notes accompanying *MS210*, 29 November 1953.

<sup>681</sup> Typed note accompanying *MS210*, undated, signed, 'T.M.B.'

<sup>682</sup> <https://www.nam.ac.uk/explore/abyssinia> Viewed 10/12/2018.

<sup>683</sup> Edward Ullendorff, Department of Oriental Languages, St Andrews University, in notes accompanying *MS210*, 29 November 1953.

offer, or a comparatively modest souvenir, we will never know, but what this episode does exemplify is how *MS210* became enrolled into another human project and, over time, a 'contested object'.<sup>684</sup>

The collections of a number of major British libraries and museums now hold objects acquired as a result of this military campaign, including an estimated 400 manuscripts.<sup>685</sup> These objects have long been the focus of attempts to repatriate them.<sup>686</sup> We might consider them as passive recipients of human attention under these circumstances, or, we could look at these objects as actively embroiled in this controversy and demanding of our attention, compelling us to respond to their biographical experiences.<sup>687</sup> Human responses to what the V&A's Director has termed, the 'difficult past' these contested objects have had, have come in the form media discussion and exhibitions, such as the V&A's 'Magdala 1868', which explored the issues surrounding the looting of objects from Ethiopia following the military action of that time.<sup>688</sup> In France, calls to restitute artefacts to Africa have been discussed as an 'act of soft power aiming to revalorize France's image to an African generation of youth' and an attempt to 'institute new relational ethics between peoples by helping to give back to them an impeded or blocked memory'. Bénédicte Savoy and Felwine Sarr hope that the return of artefacts 'does not imply a new form of enslavement to cultural identity, but rather bears the promise of a new economy of exchange'.<sup>689</sup> They go on to state that 'the act of restitution cannot imply that "cultural heritage objects only retain their

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<sup>684</sup> Research undertaken by the University of Hamburg suggests that manuscripts such as MS210 were twice looted objects. Once taken from the possession of the church by the Emperor Tewodros and then taken from the Emperor by British forces. <https://www.aai.uni-hamburg.de/en/ethiostudies/research/ethiospare/pdf/ppp-ancel-2013-hamburg.pdf>

<sup>685</sup> See, Stephane Ancel, *Travelling Books: Change of Owner and Library in Ethiopian Manuscript Culture* <https://www.aai.uni-hamburg.de/en/ethiostudies/research/ethiospare/pdf/ppp-ancel-2013-hamburg.pdf>

<sup>686</sup> <https://www.msn.com/en-gb/news/world/ethiopia-requests-emperors-lock-of-hair-back-from-london-museum/ar-BBLTtUb?li=BBOPWjQ&ocid=wispr> Viewed 14/8/18. <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/ethiopia-claims-ten-commandments-tablet-hidden-in-westminster-abbey> Viewed 17/7/18. <http://uk.icom.museum/news/view/?title=restitution-report-museum-directors-respond/> Viewed 10/12/18.

<sup>687</sup> According to Tristram Hunt, Director of the V&A. <https://www.msn.com/en-gb/news/world/ethiopia-requests-emperors-lock-of-hair-back-from-london-museum/ar-BBLTtUb?li=BBOPWjQ&ocid=wispr> Viewed 14/8/18.

<sup>688</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>689</sup> Bénédicte Savoy and Felwine Sarr quoted in <http://uk.icom.museum/news/view/?title=restitution-report-museum-directors-respond/> Viewed 18/12/18.



legitimate life within their original geo-cultural environments”’.<sup>690</sup> This statement implies, positively, that museums still have a role to play in situating artefacts within broader narratives, but, significantly, it also alludes to the biography of objects and their continued vibrant social lives. The V&A’s *Magdala 1868*’ points to the object as a current force – a potent and relevant actant, way beyond the historical moment of creation - and it further testifies to the power of objects to engender human modes of behaviour and to direct human actions.<sup>691</sup> The British Library’s approach is to ‘repatriate’ the manuscripts it holds in digital form. The manuscripts involved in its ‘Heritage Made Digital’ initiative to return manuscripts taken from Ethiopia play a role in prompting and provoking human actions and reactions. Objects depend on people (and on other objects), just as people depend on objects (and on other people).<sup>692</sup> This initiative also raises significant issues about the very notion of ‘objectness’ in relation to digital and material manuscripts. The V&A’s reflections on the ‘complex and difficult issues’ of objects’ life stories and the responses of the British Library to the social lives of its Ethiopic manuscripts imply that the conventionally held boundaries between the human and object worlds may be more porous than we tend to assume. They point to our interactions with objects, as influential elements in the evolution of our personal social selves and identities but, also, as key components in the development of wider community and national identities.

It is impossible to untangle the ‘difficult past’ of these objects from the past of those communities and nations that shared that same past.<sup>693</sup> From this perspective, all aspects of an object’s life are significant and crucial features in the development of an understanding of the object itself. As Igor Kopytoff argues, understanding objects involves looking, not just at a single point in their existence, but, rather, at their whole history, during which meanings can be acquired through processes of exchange, consumption and re-

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<sup>690</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>691</sup> *Magdala 1868* at the V&A April 2018 to June 2019. <https://www.vam.ac.uk/event/14gkkD4W/magdala-1868-updated> Viewed April 2018.

<sup>692</sup> Ian Hodder, cited in Rebecca Sweetman & Alison Hadfield et al, ‘Artefact or art? Perceiving objects via object-viewing, object-handling, and virtual reality’, *University Museums and Collections Journal*, Volume 10, 2018, (p. 49).

<sup>693</sup> Tristram Hunt, Director of the V&A. <https://www.msn.com/en-gb/news/world/ethiopia-requests-emperors-lock-of-hair-back-from-london-museum/ar-BBLTtUb?li=BBOPWjQ&ocid=wispr> Viewed 14/8/18.

contextualisation.<sup>694</sup> Kopytoff's contention that the importance of an object is adjusted with every change in its context appears to be borne out in the episodic life of *MS210*.<sup>695</sup>

#### **iv. A re-setting of location and value**

The cataclysmic events of the 1868 Battle of Magdala, which apparently resulted in the disappearance of *MS210* from Ethiopia, constituted what Gosden and Marshall observe as the 'sharp break which may occur in a biography', which often generates a 'radical resetting of meaning'.<sup>696</sup> Following its departure from Ethiopia, *MS210* reappeared in the 'for sale' catalogue of a bookseller on 'St John's road, Clapham Junction, 28 June 1897'.<sup>697</sup> The geographic and temporal relocation of *MS210* probably saw it shift, from a sacred, auratic object, to a commodity for transaction. Within the context of Marcel Mauss's theory of exchange, *MS210* transformed from an 'inalienable' to an 'alienable' object. It seems the manuscript was then bought and brought from London to Leicester where it found its way into the hands of local collector and bookseller, Caleb Robjohns. This move entangled *MS210* in a new skein of social relations. Objectified, the manuscript became a desired artefact. Its worth lay not in any inherent value, but, rather, in its resistance to the desires of human subjects to possess it.<sup>698</sup> It was to be regarded as important, not simply because of its historical content, but because of its growing cultural significance as an object. Reflecting values held today surrounding manuscripts, it is possible to detect a certain kudos attached to its possession - perhaps even an element of connoisseurship as 'social posturing'.<sup>699</sup> With its apparent inclusion in the catalogue of a book collector and seller, the manuscript was inducted into a disciplinary framework with its own cultural and historical values.

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<sup>694</sup> Igor Kopytoff, in C. Gosden, and Y. Marshall, 'The cultural biography of objects', 1999, *World Archaeology*, 31 (2), 169-178, in unit five, reading two (University of Leicester, 2011), (p. 5-362).

<sup>695</sup> Igor Kopytoff, 'The Cultural Biography of Things: commoditization as process', in, Arjun Appadurai, (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), (p.80).

<sup>696</sup> C. Gosden and Y. Marshall, 'The cultural biography of objects', 1999, *World Archaeology*, 31 (2), 169-178 (p.172).

<sup>697</sup> Each time the researcher travels from the port city of Southampton to Leicester passing through Clapham Junction ignites some reflection on whether he is loosely following the journey taken by *MS210* once it had reached Britain's shores.

<sup>698</sup> Definition of value by Georg Simmel, 'The Philosophy of Money', 1978 in Arjun Appadurai, (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), (p.3)

<sup>699</sup> Simon Knell, 'Museums, reality and the material world', in Simon Knell, (ed.), *Museums in the Material World*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 1-28, (p.13).

In the same way that, as Patrick Geary argues, public ritual discovery and the examination of medieval relics was key to creating and strengthening their cult and potency, the very process of the loss and rediscovery of *MS210* worked to cement its value anew within its biographical cycle.<sup>700</sup> When *MS210* was bequeathed as part of a significant collection to the embryonic University of Leicester in the 1920s, it was valued, not as an object key to the personal eschatological concerns of its owner, but as a historical document evidencing the past; a material witness to past events and to the ‘provincial’ traditions of the non-European world.<sup>701</sup> Rather than expunging previous meanings and values, the ‘re-discovery’ of *MS210* in a university collection added fresh layers of meaning and value within the book’s new social context.<sup>702</sup> *MS210* ‘re-emerged’ within a new system of understanding, dominated by what Michel Foucault might term, a new, or different, ‘discourse’ or ‘system of knowledge’, one dominated by imperialist attitudes that positioned the West as the key protagonist of modernity. A residue of this attitude might account for the tone of the notes accompanying *MS210*, penned in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Although credited as an exemplar of Ethiopic (‘oriental’) manuscript production, the overriding sense, conveyed through the uses of terms such as, ‘crude’ and ‘mediocre’, is that the manuscript was not ‘outstanding’. The implication could be seen as ‘oriental’ manuscripts being considered as inferior in comparison to their Western European counterparts.

## **v. The social life of *MS210***

What quickly begins to emerge as we explore the biographical trajectory of *MS210* is that it is closely *involved with* people and not a remote, dead object. People made it, people used it, people coveted it, people valued it and people still do – as evidenced by the fact that *MS210* forms a focus of this study. As Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall point out, ‘at the heart of the notion of biography are questions about the links between people and things’.<sup>703</sup> The manuscript becomes a trigger for our imaginings of the mid-Victorian military

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<sup>700</sup> Patrick Geary, ‘Sacred Commodities: The Circulation of Medieval Relics’ in Arjun Appadurai, (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), (p. 178).

<sup>701</sup> See a discussion of this notion in relation to art history and art objects in Julien Chapuis, *et al* (eds.), *Beyond Compare: Art from Africa in the Bode Museum*, (Berlin: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 2017), 169-191.

<sup>702</sup> Patrick Geary, ‘Sacred Commodities: The Circulation of Medieval Relics’ in Arjun Appadurai, (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 169-191, (p.170).

<sup>703</sup> Gosden and Marshall (p.172).

officer, or war correspondent, who might have picked up or bid for it following the Battle of Magdala. In the context of the University of Leicester's early years, it is connected with a local book collector and University benefactor, Caleb Robjohns. In this way, we can see *MS210* as an object that carries with it representations of the past – of places and eras and lives we can imagine and fantasise about. Applying the notion of 'life history' rather than 'life use' has, as Ruth Tringham argues, 'more historical and humanistic significance'.<sup>704</sup> It enables us to consider the 'duration' of the book, the 'continuity of generations' connected to the book, the 'memories held [or have been recorded] by its actors', and the 'ghosts' held within its cover and between its pages. We know the name of the manuscript's scribe, and of the person who commissioned it. It seems reasonable to assume that each person, in their own way, had close physical and, or, emotional relationships with the manuscript. Perhaps this modest sized manuscript was privately held by 'Bakwera S'eyon', who had it made, and it became an intimate companion, an object he carried with him as a valued, or even sacred possession. While the manuscript might have been an almost constant companion and used daily, it is likely, nonetheless, to use Durkheimian terms, to have been 'set apart', above the mundane.<sup>705</sup>

Indeed, 'Madhur', the Amharic term for the case in which *MS210* and countless other manuscripts would have been carried by their owners, connotes closeness and intimacy, pointing perhaps both to the relationship of these objects with their owners, and to the relationship between the two objects – one sliding into, concealing and protecting the other. Maybe the manuscript's owner was a priest and, slung across his or her shoulders, it accompanied him/her on his/her peregrinations through the countryside. The nomadic traditions of the region meant that it was common for people to travel frequently, never staying in one place for too long, carrying with them all of their possessions. A person's most useful and treasured possessions were the ones that travelled with them. As Janet Hoskins found, objects can retain a potency and significance as definers and reinforcers of

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<sup>704</sup> Ruth Tringham in C. Gosden and Y. Marshall, 'The cultural biography of objects', 1999, *World Archaeology*, 31 (2), 169-178, in unit five, reading two (University of Leicester, 2011), (p. 5-361).

<sup>705</sup> The use of manuscripts by Coptic Christians in Ethiopia would often be a practice 'set apart', with incense (e.g., Lubanja) being burned when the manuscript was read. Eyob Derillo, Curator, African and Asian Studies, British Library, in conversation with author, February 2018.

identity. Far from being ‘innocent’ they can become pivotal in human biographies.<sup>706</sup> Object and human subject gather time together and each, as Gosden and Marshall point out, can be transformed through the complex relationship with one another. This point is picked up by Arjun Appadurai, who notes that commodities exchanged and circulated within communities can shape human subjects, rather than exclusively the other way around.<sup>707</sup> Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff assert that an object cannot be fully understood at any single moment in its existence, ‘but should be understood as belonging in a continuing process of production, exchange, usage and meaning’.<sup>708</sup> This view holds that objects are enmeshed, and active participants in social relations and ‘not merely passive entities in these processes’.<sup>709</sup> *MS210* has existed and moved through lives with people; it has had a social life.

## vi. Metamorphosis

Contrary to popular conceptions, manuscripts were rarely the ‘realisation of more than one moment of production’.<sup>710</sup> Unlike a modern printed book, which generally rolls off the press and is completed in a single process, manuscripts were often crafted, written and compiled over a long period. A manuscript’s capacity for physical morphosis often ensured that not only did it usually outlive its initial owner, but, as Kathryn Rudy points out, ‘probably its next ten owners’. Such shifts in ownership were important moments in the biography of a manuscript as they often acted as the catalysts for physical changes. Alterations, additions, or subtractions would often be made to keep a manuscript relevant to a new owner, decades or even centuries after it was made.<sup>711</sup> ‘Physical material, texts, images and objects, and with them layers of meaning’ were added by generations of owners of a manuscript, seeking ‘devotional upgrades’ to their prayer books.<sup>712</sup> Rudy’s examination

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<sup>706</sup> Janet Hoskins *Biographical Objects* (p.4 and p.24).

<sup>707</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (1986).

<sup>708</sup> Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart, ‘Photographs as objects’, in Edwards, Elizabeth and Hart, Janice, (eds.), *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 1-15, (p. 4)

<sup>709</sup> *Ibid.*, p.4.

<sup>710</sup> Christopher de Hamel, *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts*, (Allen Lane, 2016), (p.8).

<sup>711</sup> This was also common practice in Ethiopia <https://www.aai.uni-hamburg.de/en/ethiostudies/research/ethiospare/pdf/ppp-ancel-2013-hamburg.pdf> Viewed 7/12/18.

<sup>712</sup> Kathryn Rudy, ‘Introduction: A new approach to codicology’ in *Piety in Pieces*, (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2016), 1-13 (p.2).

of the physical emendations and augmentations made to manuscripts by their owners reveals that strong emotional and social forces were at work. The practices of adding, removing or altering folios and bindings not only continued beyond the Middle Ages, but are still evident in the use and exchange of Ethiopian manuscripts today. Manuscripts passed from one owner to the next, and were and are physically altered to ensure they retained efficacy as talismans and protective agents.<sup>713</sup> And as Sandra Hindman and Nina Row point out, there are many widespread and recent examples of such dramatic physical and material changes to manuscripts and books wrought by human needs and desires. From the comparatively small-scale removal of folios from manuscripts to mass extractions, collectors have, and still do, glean folio bound images in response to changing tastes and personal desires.<sup>714</sup>

In *MS210*, the drawings and prayer-like annotations imply inter-actions between person and manuscript. The sense of activity is generated through the movement and dynamism captured in the illustrations penned on the folios shown in figure 54.



<sup>713</sup> Example of text addition to a 17<sup>th</sup> century Ethiopic manuscript: “This book is of fitawrari ʾAbbay, and his wife is Wälättä Mikaʾel, with his father Gäbrä ʾĒgziʾabəḥer and with his mother Wälättä Šəllase, and with his children Wäldä Šəllase, Wälättä ʾAbiyä ʾĒgziʾ, Wälättä Täklä Haymanot, so that it might be for them the salvation of their souls, for ever and ever. Amen.” Stephane Anclé. See <https://www.aai.uni-hamburg.de/en/ethiostudies/research/ethiospare/pdf/ppp-ancel-2013-hamburg.pdf> Viewed 05/12/18.

<sup>714</sup> Sandra Hindman and Nina Rowe cited in Rudy, Kathryn, ‘Introduction: A new approach to codicology’ in *Piety in Pieces*, (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2016), 1-13, (p.4).

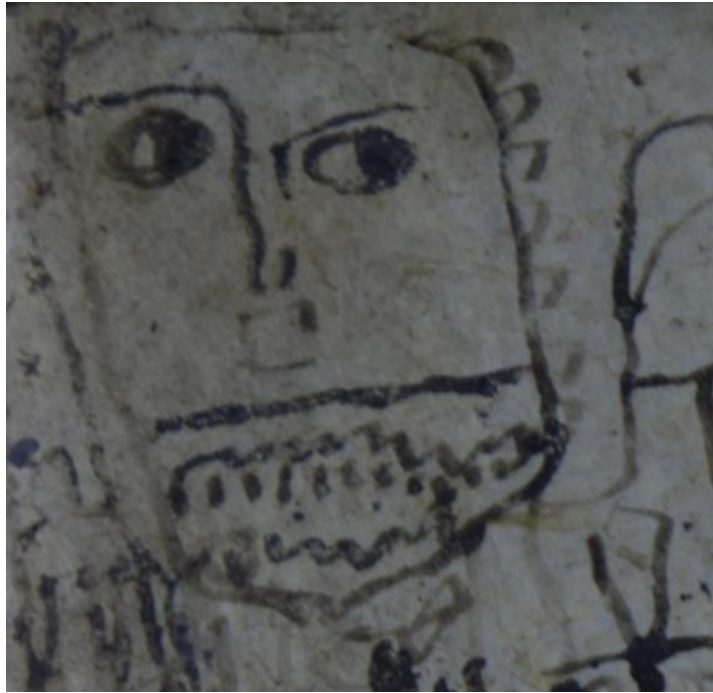


Figure 54: *MS210*: Images as evidence of embodied presence. Crude or essential?

These additions, it seems, were made by a user of the manuscript, and while Edward Ullendorff's description of these images as 'crude' may address the technical skills, or lack of them, exhibited by the manuscript's owner, it ignores the essential emotions, desires and concerns expressed so openly and honestly through the simple line drawings.<sup>715</sup> The unpolished, uncomplicated lines resonate with an immediacy and reveal both the imagination of the owner and also his or her emotions, hopes and fears. In turn, these additions exemplify how strong human desires impacted on the physicality of the manuscript, showing a direct correlation between the needs of the subject on the one hand and the reaction, in the shape of the material form of the manuscript, on the other. Human desires and concerns can be found among the material layers of the manuscript - the one interwoven with the other. Evidence of these emotional connections is not limited to inks and parchment but are expressed on the wooden book boards too. Arguably, these speak most loudly of the bond of affection and connection between the manuscript and a former

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<sup>715</sup> Edward Ullendorff, Department of Oriental Languages, St Andrews University, in notes accompanying *MS210*, 29 November 1953. (p.1).

owner or owners. The boards have at some time in the past split entirely along their length. In response, they have been repaired, albeit crudely. Yet, this basic repair speaks of an urgency to fix or heal the manuscript and get it back into action and effective use. Such emendations and adjustments were, Rudy postulates, attempts by manuscript owners to manipulate the past, and, or, to 'control the future'.<sup>716</sup> Significantly, it also implies that the manuscript's owner entrusted it with powers to act and affect change. For example, on folio 1r of *MS210*, mirroring the curious drawings, is a 'magical' prayer-like text that beseeches deliverance from evil (see figure 55).<sup>717</sup> This connotes a degree of agency with the object, for the manuscript must have been 'understood as having the power to convey [protection] if the inscription was to be at all effective'.<sup>718</sup>

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<sup>716</sup> Kathryn Rudy, 'Introduction: A new approach to codicology' in *Piety in Pieces*, (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2016), 1-13 (p.2).

<sup>717</sup> See, Edward Ullendorff notes accompanying *MS210*, 29 November 1953. (p.1).

<sup>718</sup> See, Catherine Karkov's examination of an Anglo-Saxon brooch inscribed with a curse directed to potential thieves. Anglo-Saxon Art in Paz, James, *Nonhuman Voices in Anglo-Saxon literature and material culture*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), (p.11). The curse contained in *Textus Roffensis* damning whoever might steal the object away from the monastic foundation in Rochester, similarly connotes agency. The curse was meant for no one but potential thieves, implying that only in the event of theft and upon those who might steal it would its power be enacted. The curse is reproduced in Lawrence Stern's *Tristram Shandy*.



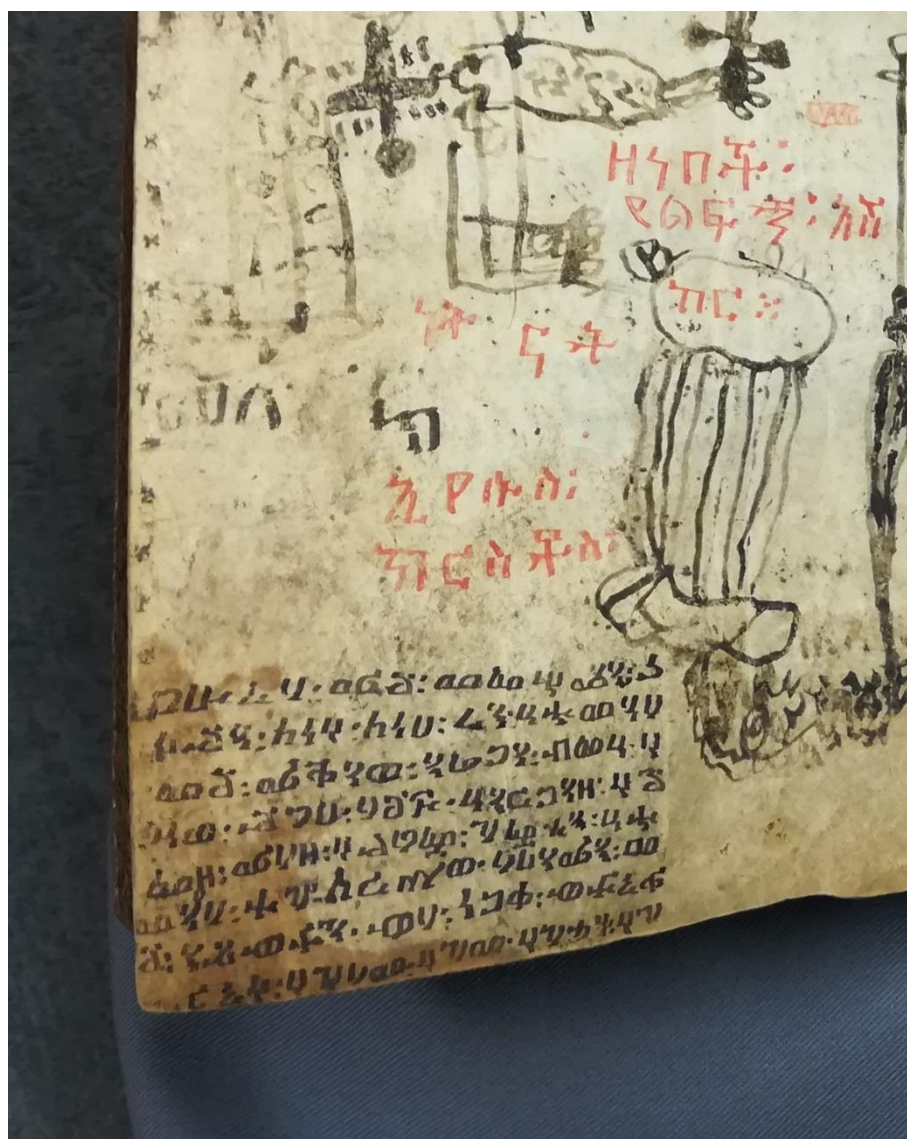


Figure 55: This charm, written upside down to make it more efficacious, appeals to St Cyriacus to ward off misfortune for the manuscript's owner

It is possible, if not probable, that the annotations and drawings evident in *MS210* are evidence of such a process of amendment, annotation and alteration, as it passed from one owner to the next. The physical changes that manifested in the added text and images indicate that a new owner may have decided that s/he wanted to add to, and, or, reinforce the existing content. 'Making the effort to add something' is both productive and, as Rudy

asserts, 'fundamentally active'.<sup>719</sup> But if this idea of human directed modification and material change to the manuscript implies that the latter is a simply the static recipient, it might be useful for us to reflect for a moment on the last time we tried to thread a needle, extract a reluctant nail from a piece of wood, get a key into a keyhole, or undo a knotted lace. Even these simple tasks are apt to elicit a complex dialogue, verbal and gestural, between person and object, in which expressions of will, resistance and/or, submission are displayed. Materials may submit to human wishes, but they may also resist our intentions. This is a point that archaeologist Tim Ingold picks up on. In exploring the process of basket weaving, he considers the object's final form to be the result, not simply of human design, but of a compromise between human plans and the physical forces inherent in the materials.<sup>720</sup> In the cockling of a manuscript's folios or the caustic effect of iron gall ink on parchment, we see materials that are oblivious to human intentions.

During the second half of the twentieth century, *MS210* seems to have fallen into disuse and disappeared from view. Obsolete in terms of its original function, it resided in relative obscurity, 'frozen' in the company of hundreds of other objects as part of the University's 'Special Collections', and only rarely, it seems, used by academics or consulted by scholars.<sup>721</sup> Based on Stephane Ancel's study of the trajectories of Ethiopian manuscripts taken at Magdala in 1868, it seems reasonable to surmise that *MS210* journeyed across what Michel Foucault describes as 'a hierarchy of sacred and profane spaces'; moving from the possession of an individual donor or owner to a church or monastery and, via war, to an institution.<sup>722</sup> While we can delineate what Foucault termed a transition towards 'de-sacralization' over time, this, it seems, was checked at the point the manuscript entered the library because, according to Foucault, such a location maintains a sense of a *espace*

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<sup>719</sup> Kathryn Rudy, 'Introduction: A new approach to codicology' in *Piety in Pieces*, (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2016), 1-13, (p.5).

<sup>720</sup> Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*, (London: Routledge, 2013), (pp.22-25).

<sup>721</sup> Kathryn Rudy, 'Introduction: A new approach to codicology' in *Piety in Pieces*, (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2016), 1-13 (p.2).

<sup>722</sup> Stephane Ancel, *Travelling Books: Change of Owner and Library in Ethiopian Manuscript Culture*, July 2013 <https://www.aai.uni-hamburg.de/en/ethiostudies/research/ethiospare/pdf/ppp-ancel-2013-hamburg.pdf> Viewed 07/12/18.

*exceptionnel*.<sup>723</sup> The implication for *MS210* is that when it arrived at Leicester University it retained, or regained, something of its 'halo-effect';<sup>724</sup> if not frozen, then certainly rare and aloof.

The most recent phase in the biography of *MS210* has, however, thrust it back into the limelight. Taking its place, both as a focus of this research and on the digital stage, has extended the manuscript's capacity to engage and ignite the imaginations of those who encounter it. However, the notion of contestation once again attaches to the very latest episode in the biography of *MS210*. Much of the concern centres on the idea of the dilution of the potency of the 'real thing', and, if, as Susan Hazan argues, the ambience of the institutional environment is a fabrication, then digitally locating the manuscript, rather than 'enlivening' it, simply represents yet further dislocation.<sup>725</sup> However, the concept of object biography provides us with an alternative framework within which to view this latest episode in *MS210*'s trajectory. If 'a manuscript', as Christopher de Hamel notes, is a bit like a building or a piece of large hand-made furniture, which can be left for a while, or it can be partly taken apart again and reconfigured, with additions or removals, forever being adapted to the whims and needs of its successive owners,<sup>726</sup> then *MS210*'s digital metamorphosis, like its presence in this study's rewilded displayscape, seems to be just another phase in its biographical trajectory and social life.

## **vii. Conclusion**

As an object *MS210* cannot be fully understood at any single point during its existence, but rather it 'should be understood as belonging to a continuing process of production, exchange, usage and meaning'.<sup>727</sup> By exploring the biographical trajectory of *MS210*, we can see how exchanges and shifts in its geographical and temporal locations affected the values and meanings of the manuscript. The lifespans of objects can transcend those of

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<sup>723</sup> Susan Hazan, 'The Virtual Aura: Is there space for enchantment in a technological world? Museums and the Web', Seattle, Washington, 17 March 2001, *Archives and Museum Informatics*, 1-76.

<sup>724</sup> Alfred Gell in *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>725</sup> Susan Hazan, 'The Virtual Aura: Is there space for enchantment in a technological world? Museums and the Web', Seattle, Washington, 17 March 2001, *Archives and Museum Informatics*, 1-76.

<sup>726</sup> Christopher de Hamel, *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts*, (Allen Lane, 2016), (p.7).

<sup>727</sup> Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart, 'Photographs as objects', in Edwards, Elizabeth and Hart, Janice, (eds.), *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 1-15, (p. 4).

human subjects, linking us with past lives, places and eras, and projecting them into entangled, complex and dialogic relationships – material and imaginative – with us and other things. The notion of biography has enabled us to explore the idea of the social life of *MS210*, not only in relation to human subjects, but also in relation to other objects. It has also opened up the idea that the boundaries placed between subject and object by conventional approaches may be more porous than we might at first think. ‘Things matter’ as Cohen asserts, whether they are subjects or objects. The manuscript’s reader, the goat and sheep, the tree, and stone; ‘the parchment and the wood gnawed by the bookworm...they are not simply inanimate.’<sup>728</sup> Cohen goes on to argue that things have ‘complicated agency’, noting that ‘humans are not simply called upon to save, preserve, or conserve a lifeless material world (what hubris), but to recognize the life that already pulses within organic forces, manufactured and found objects, nature, and things’.<sup>729</sup>

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<sup>728</sup> Heidi Estes, *Anglo-Saxon Literary Landscapes*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), (p.153).

<sup>729</sup> Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert, (eds.), *Elemental Ecocriticism: thinking with earth, air water and fire* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), (p.3).

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