

Embodied Experience of the Exhibition-Goer

This paper investigates the embodied experience of the exhibition-goer at the 1911 International Hygiene Exhibition (IHE) in Dresden. The IHE sought to bring popular hygienic enlightenment to the urban public through aesthetic and experiential means. It defined hygiene as the preservation and care for human health and wellness and instructed visitors on hygienic issues ranging from personal hygiene and nutrition, to basic knowledge about bodily functions. This paper proffers the IHE as an exemplary site for the study of embodied experience. In this venue, gendered bodies, laboring bodies, fetal bodies, unhealthy bodies, and fragmented bodies were put on display for the visitor, who was meanwhile corralled and policed by guards, stanchion ropes, and queues as they navigated the exhibition crowd.

The study of the embodied visitor surfaces but is rarely configured in exhibition studies, though exhibition-going is a physical act where techniques of vision and navigation are deployed in a calculated manner. My exploration of embodied visitor experience analyzes what Jonathan Crary deems the “observing body.” At the IHE, the seeing body of the visitor and the exhibition display were in constant communication. The IHE was staged for the mobile, urban inhabitant who entered the exhibition and activated the display, making sense of its visuals and signs. To investigate embodied visitor experience, I mine the communicative space between visitor and display, between consumption and representation.

First, I explore the bodily experience of *Ausstellungsmüdigkeit*. I investigate visitor reports on this feeling of dreariness and bodily fatigue. Indeed, visitors wrote of the demands on their bodies: of the mental exhaustion, of the weariness from walking the extensive grounds. And in turn, the IHE acknowledged and responded to exhibition fatigue and the “körperliche Arbeit” of exhibition-going. A *Ruhehalle* was provided for visitors, tending to their “seelische Hygiene.” Additionally, exhibition-goers could rent cabins and reclining chairs by the hour. Even the expenditure of the eye was considered in the exhibition’s use of *sachlich* Grotesk type font for display captions. The IHE’s attentiveness to the labor of the body had a unique valence given the nature and thematic focus of the hygiene exhibition itself.

Next, I investigate particular moments of contact between the visitor and display interactives. The IHE pioneered opportunities for exhibition visitor engagement through the development of exhibition apparatuses. Within the popular exhibit “Der Mensch,” for example, the visitor learned about the role of blood in the body. First, the visitor observed blood samples under a microscope—not only a cognitive, but also a sensory experience. An accompanying rubber ball apparatus allowed the visitor to *see and feel* the work of the heart pumping blood through veins and arteries, as a squeeze from the visitor sent blood through glass pipes that ran three meters high along the exhibit wall. Through the embodied practices of seeing and feeling—by walking the grounds and observing fellow visitors and exhibit displays—the peripatetic visitor experienced enigmatic bodily processes on both a personal and sensorial level.

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examines the mass appeal of international hygiene exhibitions and the experience of the exhibition visitor.