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## The Concept of “Universal Museum”: The Significance and Possibility of Exhibiting Tactile Culture

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Modernization/civilization can be defined as “an effort to visualize the invisible.” We live in a modern world where we can find 24-hour convenience stores everywhere and can watch various types of TV programs anytime we want just by pressing buttons of a remote control. Our daily lives are surrounded by lights and moving images, which have estranged us from “darkness.” Museums may symbolize these aspects of modernization/civilization. The purposes of the exhibits in museums are to “visually” introduce rare things in foreign countries that we cannot visit frequently, achievements that our predecessors have made, or phenomena happening inside our body or in space that are invisible to the naked eye. Through the exhibits in museums, we can fully experience the joy of visiting museums where we can freely move in time and space. The basic premise of museums has been that visitors are supposed to “look at the exhibits,” which is a reflection of our modern civilization that puts more significance on vision. In order to fundamentally question such a stereotypical assumption that has embraced the exhibits of museums, “The Concept of Universal Museum” will be presented in this paper.

A Universal Museum means a museum that has incorporated universal design (UD), namely, a museum anyone can enjoy. Since the 1990s, it has become the norm to incorporate UD into the design process of public facilities. The museum that anyone can enjoy requires to be designed a variety of visitors in mind such as children, elderly people, the persons with disabilities and foreign visitors, as well as the development in tangible aspects like equipment and facilities. Some of the efforts the Universal Museum include brochures in braille, training staff that can use sign language, organizing workshops for children, multilingual captions for exhibits, etc.

The Universal Museum, however, is meant not just to take physically impaired minorities into consideration. The ultimate goal of the Universal Museum activity is to re-evaluate the properties of “the invisible,” which have been forgotten during the course of modernization/civilization, or in other words, to reinstate “darkness.” This paper will first focus on the history of the visually impaired in order to explain the theory of the Universal Museum and some of the practical examples. The purpose of this paper is not to prove the fact that taking good care of “the visually impaired” will embody a museum anyone can enjoy. We firmly believe that their unique way of life “without vision” will give us an important clue for new ways of displaying exhibits in a museum in the 21st century.

## 1. The Results and Challenges from the Experiential Program: “Touching the Goze Culture”

The National Museum of Ethnology (Minpaku) organized an experiential program titled “Touching the Goze Culture” on the fourth Saturday of each month from April till July in 2013. A goze is a visually impaired female strolling musician, and in the Edo Period, trading guilds called “goze nakama” were organized under the wing of each feudal Domain. During the Early Modern Period, gozes travelling all over Japan with a shamisen (three-stringed Japanese lute) were depicted in many paintings. Goze’s songs were a type of story-telling entertainment and also improvisational music created and passed on in response to the needs of ordinary people.

After the Meiji Restoration, goze guilds became rarely seen except for those in snowy regions like Niigata Prefecture (mainly in Takada and Nagaoka), and by the 1970s strolling gozes had disappeared. Kobayashi Haru, known as “the last goze,” died in 2005, which means the complete disappearance of gozes from the Japanese society. Our experiential program at Minpaku was meant to offer an opportunity for many visitors to tell the roles gozes played, and at the same time an opportunity for all of us, including visitors, to ponder over why gozes have been swept away into oblivion in the age of highly advanced information.

There are two commonly accepted theories as to why gozes have disappeared from Japanese society: (1) The visually impaired now have wider career choices thanks to the improvement in the welfare systems and education in schools for visually impaired people after the World War II (From heterogeneity to homogeneity). (2) The spread of TV and radio has changed the forms of popular entertainment, which then has made goze songs unnecessary (From interactivity to unidirectional).

Patrick Lafcadio Hearn, who heard goze songs in Kobe during the Meiji Era, writes, “I have never heard such a beautiful song before. In that song, woman’s voice were resonated all the sorrows and beauty of life, and all the difficulties and joys of life.” The “resonance” that Hearn sensed may be an audio resonance created through actual experiences of those with visually impaired who led a lifestyle without vision, that is relied solely on tactile and auditory senses. Modernization/civilization may, in a certain sense, be summarized as a process in which the visually impaired (minorities) have lost their identities, and have become assimilated with the non-handicapped majorities; In this paper, we may refer to those majorities as the visually non-handicapped). In our experiential program at Minpaku, we aimed to share the resonance of goze songs with participants (the sorrows and joys of the visually impaired) to further test the Universal Museum theory.

We used as a venue for “Touching the Goze Culture” a folk house from Akiyama-go (Sakae-mura, Nagano Pref.) restored in an exhibit space of Minpaku. Elderly people in Akiyama-go (which is sometimes referred to as one of “Japan’s unexplored regions”) clearly remember gozes’ regular visits deep in the mountains in Akiyama-go up until the 1940s. It was unfortunate that we had no choice but to play those recorded goze songs on CD instead of having live performances by gozes at Minpaku. However, it seems that the experience of listening to those goze songs while sitting around the fireplace installed inside the restored folk house had an impact on the visitors’ imagination and creativity. About 50 participants gathered from all over Japan for each session, and they recognized the real potential ability of the goze culture. The following are some of the feedback found in the visitors’ questionnaires.

- As I had no previous knowledge about gozes, the experience felt quite fresh to me.
- I had a preconception that gozes were visually impaired and miserable. However, this program helped me get rid of that misconception and I have realized that they were merry (and trained) entertainers.
- I got to know the rich world of the visually impaired not from the perspectives of welfare and discrimination.
- I was allowed to touch things gozes had actually used, and I was made aware of gozes and I became quite impressed.
- It was nice listening to goze songs today. I had imagined that goze songs would be more melancholic, but they were actually rather naive and seemed to represent the ways they led their daily lives without making a fuss.

We still have some problems to be sorted out, such as how to operate the program when there are more participants than we can handle. However, through the success of “Touching the Goze Culture,” we have realized that “making the invisible visible” is not the only way of organizing exhibits in a museum.

The themes of “Touching the Goze Culture” can be summarized into the following two aspects: “From homogeneity to heterogeneity” and “From unidirection to interactivity.” Actually these two aspects overlap with our basic concept of the Universal Museum activity discussed in this paper in terms of raising objections against modernization/civilization. In the next section, we will discuss the ways in which visitors can voluntarily learn the basic concepts of the Universal Museum, or the specific techniques to introduce tactile culture.

## 2. What is Tactile Culture?

In March 2012, an exhibit space of “Touch the World: The World Expands by Sensing” was newly set up in the information zone of Minpaku. The main purpose of the space is to tell all the visitors of the charm and the depth of tactile culture (the things unknown unless touched, and the characteristics of those things that can be recognized only when touched). We carefully selected 17 objects from our collection including a carved Japanese crested ibis (Toki), a piece of Inuit talc sculpture, folk musical instruments, masks, and various equipment for rituals and for living. These are permanent exhibits in a free zone, so a whole variety of visitors, or literally men and women of all ages, can come and enjoy seeing or touching the exhibits displayed in a universal space.

In this space, braille captions and audio guidance are available to everyone, and we tried our best to reduce the differences between the amount of information the visually impaired can get on their own and that the visually non-handicapped can get. As discussed above, our activity for the visually impaired is not an effort intended for welfare purposes. Displaying tactile culture will evoke a variety of human senses, and will have the significance to broaden the rich potentials that our exhibits have in a museum in which observation/viewing, namely visual experience, has been its norm.

If traditional museums are defined as that all the visitors should observe or view the exhibits in a same way when appreciating, Universal Museums are where different groups or individuals including the visually impaired can enjoy the exhibits on their own style. Since its opening, the “Touch the World” exhibition space has attracted many groups of the visually impaired, and has fully played a role in raising an issue of “Transition from homogeneity to heterogeneity.” Learning and enjoying by touching is, of course, not a special way of appreciating exhibits limited to the visually impaired, but one that will surely bring intellectual excitement which expand the world by “sensing the world” for the visually non-handicapped.

Then, how can our second concept of “From Unidirection to Interactivity” be realized in this exhibit space? Umesao Tadao, the first Director-General of Minpaku, put much value on the idea of “dialogues with objects” when thinking about how to display the objects in the museum. Each cultural materials displayed in a museum has a story behind the ethnological materials, for example, stories of people and cultures that created them, used them, and passed them on. “Dialogues with cultural objects” mean to thoroughly explore the stories by questioning “how did they use them?”, or “where they came from?”

How much information, or “invisible stories,” can be elicited from exhibited cultural materials that do not actually utter words may be a key to “Dialogues with objects.” Through the practice of “Dialogues with objects,” Umesao really wanted visitors to enhance their own imagination and creativity. In order to realize this, it is necessary to select materials with various stories behind them and to display them with concise captions. It may be true that persons of Umesao’s caliber can enjoy “dialogues with objects” just by gazing at exhibited objects. However, “dialogues with objects” cannot be easily achieved, because in general most of the visitors tend to feel as if they have understood by just aimlessly reading captions for exhibited objects.

A visual display of objects tends to be a unidirectional provision of information from the exhibitors (museum staff) to the viewers (visitors). These days, museums throughout Japan offer events such as gallery talks and guided tours explaining the exhibits, and communications between museum staff and visitors are more increasing. The point in giving gallery talks or guided tours is to create effective situations where visitors can enjoy “dialogues with objects” rather than situations where “staff teaches visitors and visitors are taught by staff.” Museum staff has to be clearly aware of their role as mediators between visitors and exhibited objects.

Obtaining information by the eyes has an advantage in taking a lot of information faster, while it often ends up taking in what is seen just passively. Observation/viewing can be an extremely efficient way for an unspecified large number of visitors to try to understand the intent of the exhibits in a short space of time. On the other hand, obtaining information using the tactile sense is certainly less effective in terms of the volume and speed. But the way extending arms to search with our own will by moving them back and forth and around is so active that people can be free their body and mind from daily restraints. Also, visual information can be obtained only by the eyes, while a great advantage of the tactile sense is distributed throughout the body, and is not limited to the hands.

In the experiential program, “Touching the Goze Culture,” which we have described in the previous section, we coined a phrase, “Touching the sound,” and proposed a way to appreciate the resonance of goze songs, and the realities of the invisible world through the sense of touch. Beyond a visual display of the exhibits that requires only vision (= unidirectional), visitors have dialogues with artifacts by making full use of physicality and motility. Visitors are required to imagine and create the world of the invisible by trying to reach for them, rather than trying to visualize the invisible. These are the aspects of the tactile culture (= interactive) exhibition, which are the ultimate ideal of the Universal Museum.

Since its opening, Minpaku has allowed visitors to “touch the objects displayed within their reach” in the main building. It may be absolutely natural for visitors to appreciate these exhibits by using the tactile sense to examine those artifacts local people made by hand, used, and passed on. However, in recent years, the meaning of touching objects displayed in the museum has unfortunately become ambiguous due to the necessity to preserve cultural materials. An increasing number of curators seem to think “touching” is simply an aid to seeing, or in other

words, touching is a tool to make sure of what the eyes have seen. The exhibition space “Touch the World” is also trying to revitalize “dialogues with objects” that Umesao proposed the value of the tactile culture. In the next section, we will discuss the relation between “Touch the World” (the permanent exhibits) and “Touching the Goze Culture” (an experiential event) in detail.

### 3. Manners for Touching

“Touch the World” has so far been favorably evaluated and accepted by visitors, but the biggest future challenge is to disseminate and establish manners for “touching.” Among elementary school groups, not a few number of children tend to think that touching represents playing and we often see the children who deal with our exhibited material quite roughly. Some artifacts were damaged. In contrast to children who were excited about touching the artifacts, we were surprised to see large number of adults passing by, after just glancing at the materials. We have found it quite strange that they do not try to touch the materials despite of the big title showing “Touch the World.” An unspoken rule that exhibited materials should not be touched might have been imprinted in those adults.

Our exhibition, “Touch the World,” has two sections, so that visitors can freely “touch the displayed artifacts.” One is a section of “touching while seeing” and the other is “touching without seeing.” We selected cultural materials with the intention of comparing visual sense and tactile sense in the “Touching while seeing” section, and concentrating on tactile sense in the “Touching without seeing” section. It seems to take a while before visitors become fully familiar with “tactile” exhibits and the concept of the tactile culture.

We ask visitors to perform in a proper manner such as “touching gently” or “touching slowly” in order to enhance and recreate “dialogues with displayed artifacts.” However, no matter how carefully visitors try to touch the materials for appreciation, adverse effects on the displayed objects due to visitors’ oily hands cannot be reduced, and there is no way to prevent the risks of being defaced or damaged. Exhibiting tactile culture has an aspect which cannot meet the necessity in preserving materials.

Paradoxically speaking, “touching gently” is important to develop a manner of facing to those who made and used the artifacts sincerely. Touching materials gently will foster a sense of respect to artifacts within visitors’ minds. If people pay respect to stories hidden behind the artifacts, and lives and culture of those who made, used and passed on the artifacts, it would be impossible to deal with them roughly. Indeed, “touching may cause the artifacts to break.” However, we assume that what is important is the process during which the artifacts are being damaged. Here we must emphasize that touching culture exhibits potentially includes an “invisible” force sending a message with love from museum to the society and a kind of dynamism to change our society.

The next concept is “touching slowly,” which is quite contrary to the accepted idea of observing/viewing “more materials and more quickly.” Our 17 cultural materials exhibited in a corner of the “Touch the World” may be quite small in number, compared to the whole collection of Minpaku; however, if visitors have dialogues with each material by touching gently and carefully, seventeen should not be a small number at all. During the visit to museums on a school trip or a school excursion, elementary/junior high school students are normally encouraged to see as many objects as possible within a limited span of time. We often come across children trotting through the large exhibit space of Minpaku. It may be important to see an overwhelming number of artifacts, but we wonder how much they will remember about those many things.

“Appreciating fewer and slower” is a creed for our tactile culture exhibition, which emphasize physicalization and activeness. It takes time to translate dot information, which is acquired through one’s palms, into linear, two-dimensional, and three-dimensional information. “Touching slowly” is an active way of learning for visitors to explore the texture, functions and forms of objects by fully using hands and senses. In modern civilization which puts emphasis on speed, taking time is considered to be disadvantageous. Our tactile culture exhibition promotes the idea of “touching slowly,” and raises a question about the nature of the modern civilization.

“Touching gently” and “touching slowly” are the concepts we have developed based on the results and problems of hands-on exhibitions practiced not only in Japan but also all over the world. Exaggeratedly speaking, to be gentle and act slowly means to have a paradigm shift that requires the modern civilization to reflect on itself. Therefore, extending and establishing a “touching” manner within a short space of time must be not so easy.

We have chosen to continuously organize experiential programs and workshops in a step-by-step manner, so that visitors can readily sympathize with the idea of “being gentle and acting slowly.” It may also be essential to promote “touching” manners through lectures, articles, and books for enlightenment, but nothing can compare to the tactile culture, directly passed on from one person to another. Gozes are the first guides to introduce our first experiential program based on their know-how of “touching gently” and “touching slowly.” This is because it was gozes that set an example of practicing “touching gently” and “touching slowly.”

In our experiential program, “Touching the Goze Culture,” we aimed to have visitors touch tools and costumes gozes actually used. Each of those invaluable materials were handed gently and slowly to appreciate the exhibits from our voluntary staff operating the program to participants. Their proactive physical movement of handing materials in turn seemed quite helpful in generating communication between them. Especially, the unique atmosphere of the old folk house of Akiyama-go lasting from the Edo Period, helped to make our new experience in museum promote “gentleness” and “slowness.”

At present, manners of “touching gently” and “touching slowly” cannot be fully accomplished without the help of our voluntary staff. However, unlike other rules imposed by authority, manners should be created naturally from visitors. We believe that museums will grow with those who visit the museum and turn into genuine cultural entities by continuously organizing experiential programs like the “Touching the Goze Culture.” By organizing unique experiential programs based on permanent exhibits and the programs in themselves enhance the concept of the permanent exhibits. These continuous innovations will develop unconventional Universal Museums.

#### 4. Conclusion

In recent years, museums throughout Japan have organized various types of exhibitions in their effort to be a Universal Museum. Minpaku also called for persons involved in the museum sector to establish the “Universal Museum Research Group,” and has continued joint research since the FY2009. There are a number of special exhibitions and workshops that we would like to introduce as practical examples. However, honestly, it is hard to decide which ones to pick up due to space constraints. Please see the reference documents for individual reports for the pursuit of a Universal Museum from each perspective.

Lastly, we would like to point out one thing that needs to be considered for the development of the exhibits in Universal Museums. This means that “dialogues

with the displayed objects” derive from “dialogues with people.” Let’s think about this in reference to examples of exhibits overseas.

The Art Institute of Chicago, which has one of the greatest art collections in the U.S., has the “Touch Gallery,” which exhibits four busts with different textures made of different materials. The caption in the gallery begins with the following statement: “This gallery offers a valuable opportunity for visitors to experience how much the act of ‘touching’ can enrich art appreciation. Through touching, people will become able to recognize works of art in terms of forms, lines, sizes, styles, temperature, and materials. These are things that cannot be sensed merely by vision.”

As the Touch Gallery is located next to the free zone beside the Main Entrance of the Institute, anyone can enjoy the arts like Minpaku’s “Touch the World.” We should use as reference the statement in the caption mentioned above, which has summarized the significance of tactile culture exhibits in museums. However, we are wondering if it is enough to exhibit just four sculptural busts. All the exhibits do not have to be a bust if visitors are to be encouraged to appreciate the different types of tactile textures. Also, we have to mention that only four busts are not enough to expand and deepen visitors’ imagination and creativity, even though the busts are supposed to be touched gently and slowly.

We need to take personal differences into consideration, of course, but we are wondering if it is really appropriate to exhibit busts for those with congenitally total blind or partially-sighted who have not clearly seen a “human face,” as artifacts to be appreciated for the development of imagination and creativity. We assumed that the Institute took little account of the opinions of general visitors, including the visually impaired, for the selection of the exhibits in the Touch Gallery. Imposing a pedagogical logic by museum staff will not generate “dialogues with artifacts” that encourage visitors’ voluntary learning.

Busts are appropriate in size as exhibits in that visitors can use their hands in order to grasp the whole. And from the educational standpoint, massive exhibits whose whole cannot be sensed by touching may be inappropriate as exhibits for tactile appreciation. However, learning and enjoying by touching should be flexible and dynamic. If the essence of the tactile culture lies in the flexibility to imagine and create “what can be invisible,” it may at times be appropriate to have an opportunity to touch and tackle massive exhibits using the whole body of each visitor.

As we have discussed so far, we would like to add as a summary of this paper that “dialogues with objects” is fostered by the mutual contact (interaction) between visitors and museum staff.

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