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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Holding Your Loved Ones through a Museum Exhibit

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## Abstract

How do we kiss through a museum's walls, roughly 8,000 miles away? This is a museum exhibit's journey, from loneliness and longing to togetherness. An art museum, with its predisposition to distance and sterility, softens its stance and opens itself just a little; the exhibit about Long-Distance Love brings forward familiar, loving voices that are a reminder that we are not alone.

**Keywords:** art museum; distance; exhibit; longing; love

The way the light fell on the name of my lover on the wall made me smile. His eyes – no, the shape of his name – moved me towards him, it. You're not supposed to touch museum walls. Human hands have oils that attract dirt and dust, and it could get on the artwork. How stirring this direction, but also how sanitary – we want to keep this art as clean, as safe, as cozy, and as protected as possible.

If you were not so far away, we'd (probably) be standing together in the lobby of the museum, the front desk to our left. We'd be looking at a large white wall with Annette Lemieux's *Weight* hung on it. The artwork is massive; you could easily climb inside it, and it'd be spacious for a short person like me. Maybe the two of us could even fit in there, cozily. It is roughly divided in half by a horizontal line, the top half-ish an inky, dense black, the bottom part – what looks like the bottom half of a photograph of a person (pants) standing in an urban space (buildings) surrounded by rock pigeons.

> *The person standing in the image (below) gives very little away about who they are, owing to the artist's use of a found photograph as her source material. The concrete structures in the background – perhaps the feet of buildings – and the way the rock pigeons flock there is at once intimate and isolating. Maybe this is what it feels like to live – and love – alone in a city.*
>
> (From the entry wall exhibit, *Long-Distance Love)*

On the wall next to *Weight* stands a five-foot-tall piece of text titled *Long-Distance Love.* It's sprinkled with quotes, names, and interpretations of the artwork, typical of a museum text that accompanies an exhibit – except those names are the names of my family. Our

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individual interpretations – Aai's, Baba's, Shamoo's, Shantanu's, and mine – spread out on that entry wall as if we are lounging around a table with a cup of tea, talking about love and distance.

I work in an art museum. I usually describe my work as *making the museum juicy*, mostly so people might pause and giggle about it or spend time wondering what that means. I consider *juiciness* a connection with romance, where we acknowledge our undeniable desires; in scholarship, it might be when we respond to these desires with abundant sensual joy and romance in our texts, our critiques, and our theses; in a museum, it might look like bringing my actual long-distance romance to my workplace with me and putting it on the entry wall, the desire of closeness easily legible through the text. Museums are frequently rigid spaces – though they pose as fluid and open portals for inspiration, for someone looking to have a memorable cultural experience, this strictness is evident in the first encounter. The entrance of a museum, sometimes grand, sometimes quiet, is nevertheless daunting; we are asked to *already know* before we even enter. It is juicy, then, to wield the museum as an artistic material, to see what's mischievously possible, to stretch so it can accommodate some of the things we may want to feel at that junction. Maybe we want to feel welcomed in. Language and art educator Allison Yasukawa, in her ongoing work *Sneak: A Pedagogy*, tells me to slip through the tiniest cracks and make this mischief a part of how we face the institution, bringing with me what I need to survive. Through working on this exhibit, the museum fundamentally changed for me; I brought my faraway loved ones into this public-not-public place, on a museum wall we aren't supposed to touch, so I could see them every day, a soft landing into an otherwise hard place full of craggy surfaces and bottomless holes.

I work on the education side of the art museum; my colleagues and I do not typically curate exhibits or put shows together unless it is with schools we work with or sometimes local artists. Long-Distance Love, my multi-year virtual tour project, did not have a physical presence in the museum; my colleague Kamila Glowacki suggested I curate a short-term exhibit on the entry wall to give this work a temporary site. The virtual tours highlight the connections that we – migrants, immigrants, refugees, wage workers, and anyone who might be far away from home and facing restrictions of movement – maintain with our homes, our families, and our loved ones. Each year, I schedule the tours to be accessible across five time zones over a period of two weeks so that loved ones can join at a time that suits them. The Long-Distance Love project connects people across great distances and time. The icy museum melts to meet its visitors.

Distance and longing are intrinsic parts of how a museum operates. Objects are kept away from fingers, bodies, and breath, often flattened and divorced from how they are possibly meant to be handled. This is true of ancient artifacts and contemporary artworks alike. In feeling through these distances in the museum, *Silenced #1*, an artwork by Sonny Assu, swims into my brain.[1] Four flat, cylindrical hide drums, stacked in decreasing size, sit on a low platform in the museum. These drums that are and are not meant to be played speak to Assu's Kwakwaka'wakw heritage, which informs his art, a witty and wry commentary on being an indigenous Canadian artist today. A set of hand drums on a platform in a museum becomes immediately inaccessible, sterile, preserved (and so, pushed into the past). Perhaps silence and distance aren't too different here.

[1] Assu 2009.

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A museum invites diverse embodiments of desire and longing across cultural realms, since its collection draws also from wide cultural roots.[2] The museum "needs to be cited as a public space for public address where the central concerns are its representation, history, collection, and display."[3] It is a well-documented fact that museum collections came into being under violent circumstances, looted, stolen, grabbed; "objects didn't simply fall into museums."[4] Perhaps these objects far away from their homeland yearn for home too. The emotional conjuring on the entry wall of the Long-Distance Love project became a method of acknowledging some of these distances and asserting – no, affirming – presence; what or who wasn't there appeared, real enough to kiss.

## 1. In/active display

In an informal lecture I witnessed some years ago, I heard artist, critic, and educator Luis Camnitzer say something about how the museum is dead until someone walks in. I recall stepping into an expensive "world-class museum" in the United States and wondering what I was expected to see, do, and look like I was doing. I followed my art school training and spent time staring, writing, sketching, and feeling like I was both audience and actor in a stodgy and colorless performance. It took a lot for me to conjure up any life or vibrancy to meet the objects at their experiential potential. There was something that the rarified atmosphere of the museum did to deaden the magical encounter that could be possible between us – a kiss, a glance, a brush of an arm, or someday, maybe a tender embrace? You know how a place or a thing comes alive when someone you love tells you a story about it? In that museum encounter, I felt the need for something like that to remind me that the magic does, in fact, exist.

## 2. Seeing through long-distance love glasses

Since I moved to the US, Long-Distance Love is always on my mind. This project about finding many ways of enacting love, romance, and care across the large bodies of land and water is embodied in its experiments and iterations, each a technique of waiting. The virtual museum tours are facilitated for us to link across time and space with our kin and experience a museum tour together, while the exhibitable objects, like the entry wall exhibit, are the things we might do to pass the time while we stay in love, lingering in the longing that distance makes ample.

While choosing the artwork that would go on the entry wall, I did not know exactly what I was looking for, except that I was seeking an image that supported the story of the project in a softened way that echoed distance, memory, or longing. A lovely moment that stays with me: myself and three colleagues – one curator, one educator, and one collections manager – standing in the museum's on-site storage, cool and softly lit, talking about *Weight* (then, installed sideways on a sliding channel). Coupled with two artworks already on view – Anna Ruysch's *Still Life of Flowers in a Glass Vase on a Stone Table Ledge* from the 1690s and Feliciano Centurión's *Untitled* from 1994 – Lemieux's *Weight* would feature in the virtual tours that tuned into connections between audience interpretation, artist context, and personal experiences of loving across distance and time.

[2] Desai 2017.
[3] Desai 2017, 21.
[4] Curry 2023.

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## 3. Whose voices?

Rather than interpreting the entry-wall artwork myself, it felt delicious to invite my four closest long-distance loves to contribute their interpretations. Writing the curatorial-interpretive text for an exhibit could be described as an exercise in piecing together its story, albeit in a form that draws the reader in without divulging everything, adopting this methodology of collaborative writing aligned with my desire to center distance and love in the project while destabilizing a self-assured museum voice.

My husband – roughly 8,000 miles away – asked me to WhatsApp him the image during his nighttime (and my daytime) so it could be the first thing he saw when he woke up. Sleep and wakefulness are factors in even our most scholarly pursuits; we had to be strategic about the state he'd be in to receive the image. "I prefer to absorb new information in the morning," he told me later. I remember reflecting on the nature of our staggered awakeness, a consideration so routine for someone loving someone else, many time zones away. The next day, I received a sleepy voice note with his impressions and interpretation of *Weight.*

My other three long-distance loves – my parents and sister – had an encounter with the artwork in person while they were visiting me (Figure 1). A few days later, while on that trip, we were at O'Hare International Airport – Aai, Baba, Shamoo, and I, on our way to Atlanta to meet cousins. Our flight was delayed, plans thrown off, a meal in Atlanta already missed with the family. The airport – a place in between places – was the perfect liminal space to talk about distance, love, and gather my family's impressions of *Weight.* It may have felt synthetic to an onlooker, but I like staging gestures like these with my family, and they usually play along. Sitting there at an empty gate, I showed them the artwork on my phone to refresh their memory. It felt wonderfully bizarre hearing the stories they built around the painting and the ways they connected long-distance love to the artwork I loved so deeply. I should say here that both my parents and sister are trained, practicing artists/ designers and are very comfortable reading visuals and discussing artworks. Still, I was moved by how much they were able to receive and willing to share.

Artist and filmmaker Camille Billops, when interviewed by bell hooks about her documentary filmmaking, said, "Put all your friends in it, everybody you loved, so one day they will find you and know that you were all here together."[5] Through her work, Billops practiced an attuned archiving of herself and her community, documenting the relationships, conversations, and people – a way of placing them indelibly in history. At the museum, we often ask – *Whose voices are telling this story?* Having my closest humans' words on the entry wall of the museum next to this artwork felt both like I was following Billops' directive as well as making a sort of art-gesture, a small piece of juicy mischief that altered the museum in my eyes. The reason I wanted them to contribute was not to uncover some stable and unified meaning of the artwork. It was a reason to be together, to spend time *making* meaning, and finding a new entry point into the museum, a place where one might typically find only the voices of so-called experts.

I had never written about an object like this before, working instead in real time with visitors at the museum where all our words hang in the air for the duration of the tour and then quickly disappear. I was happy that I wasn't doing this alone. I had brought my people with me, (and how gloriously brave I felt) helping me articulate the abstraction of longing.

[5] Francis 2019.

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**Figure 1.** Long-distance family looks at Weight by Annette Lemieux. Photo by Ishita Dharap. 2023.

## 4. Seeing connections: the talismanic scroll

The artwork, *Weight*, was made in 1990, the year of my birth. The entry wall text – composed of a specific typeface size, with words flown in from Pune and Mumbai, this loving Frankenstein and Theseus's Ship of a document – was also exactly my height. It's just like me to imbue each of these dry occurrences with a slow-drip longing. An artwork in the *Encounters: The Arts of Africa* gallery in the museum comes to mind – an Ethiopian healing scroll,[6] a talismanic text that is exactly the height of the wearer, since it is made specifically for them by a healer to help fight ailments or demons. Was this text – exactly my height when printed on vinyl and referencing an image born the same year as me – a stand-in for my longing for the actual humans it represented? Did this text ward off the demons of loneliness, of longing? In my heart was a resounding yes. My loves were on the wall in sixteen-point letters, vibrating with life.

[6] Talismanic Scroll, Ca. 1800–1900.

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## 5. PDDA (Publication Display/ Documents of Affection)

I knew it was a foolish thing to attempt documenting this wobbly-soft museum intervention, so I asked a researcher-friend to photograph me with my – our – text, a long-distance hovering kiss between a hand, a wall, and a name. An absurd yet moving series of photos emerged, more emotional evidence of the unlimited ways there are of holding your lover's hand, of hugging your parents, of meeting eyes with your sister, and of greeting your loved one in a doorway that is a portal between knowing and feeling.

My husband was visiting me for a tiny, tiny weekend while I worked on getting this article together. Between holding hands and coaxing my mushy love-brain to focus on my laptop screen to write, I wiggled in and out of that specific state of longing we enter when we know we are going to have to say goodbye soon. The satisfying moment of completing a kiss together is also the moment of bringing this text to a satisfying end, reading a tiny paragraph to him and him smiling at me, the light falling on his face.

**Ishita Dharap** (she/her) is an artist and educator. Her work interrogates personal and communal discomfort through rigorous and playful reflection, often manifesting in drawing, text, performance, curriculum, and installation. She currently works as an Education Coordinator at the Krannert Art Museum at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, where she is in a doctoral program in Art Education.

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