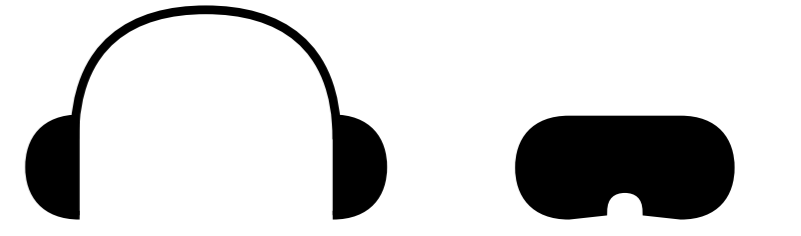




Newham Sensory Deprivation Map

by Christian Nold



Normally we perceive our surroundings using 5 senses: sight, sound, smell, touch, taste. What happens when we explore our environment without sight and sound?

The Newham Sensory Deprivation Map is the result of an intensive workshop with 34 students from Newham Sixth Form College in London. The students were divided into pairs, one of whom was blindfolded and given ear defenders so that they could not see or hear. The other student was given a Global Positioning System as well as pen and paper. Together the two explored the local area around the college for up to an hour. The idea being that the blindfolded and deafened student verbally relates their sensory experience to the other student who is taking notes and making sure they are safe during the journey. On their return the geographical data from the GPS is downloaded and all the sensory observations made during the walk are spatially recorded. This map here shows the combined annotations of all the students and forms an alternative sensory map of Newham.

Sensory Language

With the two primary senses of sight and sound disabled, the often neglected senses of smell, touch and taste come to the fore. Looking at the map we can see that the vast majority of the comments refer to the sense of smell. Whilst the human nose can apparently differentiate between 4,000 - 10,000 smells our verbal language for smells is very limited. The naturalist Diane Ackerman goes as far as to suggest that smell "is the master sense, the one without words". The students had the difficult challenge to find descriptive words that capture the essence of the sensations as well as their feelings towards it.

Sensory Pollution

Examining the comments in more detail it is interesting to note how 50% of the sensory experiences were negative whilst only 28% were positive. In addition many of the negative sensations seem to be man-made. Whilst with taste and touch we can make active choices about our sensory experiences with others we are the passive recipients. For example with hearing it is hard to avoid loud noises. We have a recognised way to measuring sound levels which allows a legal safety limit of 85dB to be set. Yet we have very few measurements for other sensory pollution. For vision there are no accepted measurements for visual pollution. Whilst some people consider graffiti to be horrible others worry more about the billboards and litter. How for example might we measure the sensory pollution caused by the animated adverts currently being introduced on the London Underground? For smell the measurement system is even more very complex and subjective. In fact most of the volatile substances that are actually harmful to our health, have no odour, so we can't detect them with our noses.

Sensory Politics

The current political language and legislation for sensory experiences of the body is very crude and unevenly focused. Whilst painfully high levels of noise seem to be permissible on the London Underground, the British police have just been given new powers to evict people from their houses in just 48 hours for causing nuisance noise. Most of the political language appears to be focused on the traditionally identifiable 'polluter' and not on systemic sensory pollution. For example, a study in the Lancet suggests that living with the air pollution and passive smoking in cities cuts life expectancy by more than the radiation exposure of emergency workers sent into the 19 mile exclusion zone around Chernobyl.

A very extreme example of our lack of sensory choice are the bizarre sensory torture techniques being employed in Guantanamo and Abu Graib. Detainees are restrained and forced to endure loud music at unbearable levels. This is interspersed with detainees being deprived of all sensory experiences. This technique first developed by a Dr. Hebb in 1953 involved taking people and placing them in comfortable air-conditioned cubicles whilst making them wear goggles, gloves and ear muffs. After 24 hours these participants started having hallucinations and after 48 hours suffered a complete personality breakdown.

These examples imply that the enforced removal of bodily sensations can be as physiologically damaging as the enforced exposure. This suggests a space for a body-centred politics that advocates the human right to sensory choice for our own bodies. This 'Sensory Politics' starts from the subjective basis that each person experiences stimuli very differently, and thus claims an absolute right for people to modulate their own sensory microcosm.

Christian Nold, 2007

Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs

