

Sensory Aesthetics and Multisensory Curation of the Amazônia Exhibition of Sebastião Salgado: A visual documentation and ecological affect

Silviana Amanda Aurelia Tahalea^{1*}, Erlina Novianti¹, FX. Damarjati², Siti Febrina¹

**Corresponding Author*

¹ Faculty of Art and Design, Universitas Trisakti, Jakarta, Indonesia

² Faculty of Technology Information and Communication, Institut Teknologi dan Bisnis Kristen Bukit Pengharapan, Karanganyar, Indonesia

silviana@trisakti.ac.id, erlina@trisakti.ac.id, damarjati@bukitpengharapan.ac.id, siti.febrina95@trisakti.ac.id
Tel: +6281280171486

Abstract

Photography is the central medium in Sebastião Salgado's *Amazônia*, creating an immersive and affective exhibition space. This qualitative case study examines curatorial and multisensory strategies, encompassing large-scale photographs, ambient soundscapes, and spatial design that promote ecological awareness and emotional engagement. Drawing on Baumgarten's sensory aesthetics, Dorrian's concept of museum atmosphere, and Nannini's theory of embodiment, the study brings to light the ethical dimensions of visual representation. The findings underscore the power of the exhibition space to invite reflection on humanity's relationship with nature, serving as a powerful curatorial framework that integrates art, knowledge, and environmental activism through affective, multisensory experiences.

Keywords: Sensory aesthetics, photographic curation, multisensory experience, Sebastião Salgado, art exhibition

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1.0 Introduction

Environmental problems have become one of the most prominent issues in modern art, particularly in visual forms such as documentary photography. In today's context of growing environmental challenges, devastation of natural habitats, and erosion of local cultures, artworks are no longer isolated as privileged mediums of individual expression. They have become powerful vehicles of communication and catalysts for awareness. Sebastião Salgado is a towering figure, a visual documentarian whose work represents an aesthetic, a way of being, and a mission. In monolithic projects like *Genesis* and *Amazônia*, Salgado's documents threatened lands and peoples not merely for aesthetic purposes, but to visually convey ecological crisis. In *Amazônia*, the subject of Gold's (2011) case study, Salgado presents striking portraits of the Amazon rainforest and its Indigenous peoples, creating an experiential environment where audiences sense the problem affectively. His visual grammar functions not merely as documentation but as an ethical encounter, evoking solidarity rather than spectatorship.

Photographic exhibitions have evolved from two-dimensional presentations into physical, multisensory experiences. Digital and multimedia technologies now place audiences at the centre, stimulating the senses through vision, sound, scent, or touch. This shift blurs boundaries between entertainment and aesthetic contemplation, fostering emotional and cognitive involvement (Carr, 2011). Exhibitions no longer only invite viewing but encourage sensorial engagement through dramatic lighting, ambient soundscapes, and

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large installations (Funch, 2022). Curatorial practice has shifted from visual logics to immersive, multisensory experiences (Kolomiets, 2020), thereby increasing awareness and empathy toward sensitive issues such as climate change (Carr, 2011). This evolution aligns with the rising expectations for participatory and transformative encounters in contemporary art spaces, where audiences are co-constructors of meaning.

Such curating also enhances inclusivity. Engaging multiple senses makes exhibitions accessible to diverse audiences, including those with sensory disabilities (Maclagen, 2001). Salgado's *Amazônia*, a seven-year project (2013–2019), features hundreds of black-and-white images of rainforests and Indigenous tribes, highlighting fragile ecological coexistence (Gold, 2011). Displayed on a large scale with Jean-Michel Jarre's sound composition, the exhibition's nonlinear layout reflects the Amazon's complexity and invites audience immersion (Nair, 2012). Alexander Baumgarten's aesthetic of the sensible, revisited in contemporary curatorial practices, emphasises sensory knowledge (*scientia cognitionis sensitivae*) and the union of cognition and affection (Schusterman & Eagleton, 1991). This perspective supports twenty-first-century artistic interventions that value embodied perceptual experience, where intertwined visual, auditory, and spatial elements foster new modes of sensing and knowing (Kolomiets, 2020; Nannini, 2022). Baumgarten's legacy thus provides a philosophical foundation for understanding curatorial work not just as arrangement, but as epistemological and phenomenological configuration. This paper examines (1) *Amazônia*'s visual and atmospheric multisensory aesthetics, (2) Baumgarten's sensorial aesthetic theory as applied to exhibition spaces, and (3) a framework linking aesthetics, affect, and ecological consciousness. These insights have implications for curation, art education, and environmental communication (Wang, 2024).

This study addresses a gap between two bodies of scholarship that are rarely brought into dialogue: critical studies of Sebastião Salgado's documentary photography and theories of sensory and affective curatorial practice. While existing research on Salgado has focused largely on narrative, ethics, and visual representation, and curatorial theory has examined atmosphere and embodiment mostly outside the field of ecological documentary photography, this paper connects the two. By analysing the *Amazônia* exhibition through Baumgarten's sensuous aesthetics and theories of museum atmosphere, the study reframes Salgado's work as a multisensory curatorial system that produces ecological meaning through affect and embodied experience, rather than through images alone.

2.0 Literature Review

Although the narrative and ethical facets of Salgado's work have been widely researched, there has been limited exploration of how aesthetic experiences are shaped through curatorial and sensory strategies. However, recent art historical theory has instead stressed the importance of providing a visitor experience that is immersive and affective. In this sense, curatorial procedures have shifted away from the traditional two-dimensional visual display format toward the development of multisensory experiences, aiming not at scenographic displays created using dramatic lighting, ambient soundscapes, spatial architecture, and even olfactory and tactile effects (Born, 1998; Carr, 2011; Funch, 2022). Kodrat et al. (2024) show that chromatic and achromatic colour control in virtual space shapes emotional perception and intensifies sensory focus (Kodrat P et al., 2024). Their findings parallel the curation of Sebastião Salgado's *Amazônia*, where monochrome imagery and controlled visual atmosphere heighten ecological effect. Both studies demonstrate that limiting colour can deepen multisensory engagement, shifting attention from visual decoration to embodied ethical awareness and environmental empathy. The same manoeuvre is, of course, heard in the contemporary renaissance of Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's doctrine of sensuous aesthetics. For Baumgarten, beauty is not something visual (or only visual) but the outcome of a perfected bodily perception and an affect (Nannini, 2022). In current discussions, Nannini (Nannini, 2022) and Bencard (Bencard, 2018) further develop this idea, highlighting how physical encounters between human beings and artefacts, whether through touch, sound, or atmospheric conditions, allow for a more physically embodied and whole-person mode of knowing. This way of thinking unsettles the visual supremacy of Western aesthetics, creating a space for affective interpretations that involve both the body and the mind.

In 21st-century curatorial practice, the concept of the museum's mood has been key in modulating the emotional appeal of the exhibition space. Dorrian (2014) argues that spatial, architectural, lighting, and acoustic aspects do not merely serve the art but actively produce aura, affective intensity, and a prescribed emotional distance (Dorrian, 2014). This is evident in the curatorial strategy of *Amazônia*, designed by Leila Wanick Salgado, where darkened rooms, large prints, and sound compositions by Jean-Michel Jarre serve as affect. These tactics also align with Stallabrass's (1997) assertion that art galleries curate not only the objects they exhibit but also the feelings viewers are meant to experience (Stallabrass, 1997). However, the multisensory turn in curatorial practice has not been without its critics, particularly regarding ethnographic representation conveyed through documentary photography. Rushing (2024) argues that some of Salgado's representations of Indigenous communities, as though they are, underscore the ethical necessity for representational consciousness. Wang (2024) extends this discourse from a neuroaesthetic perspective, discussing how aesthetic characteristics, such as sublimity and beauty, can evoke feelings like awe and elicit existential experiences (Wang, 2024). Such affective responses can create a more profound cognitive approach to global issues, effectively turning art exhibitions into powerful educational and advocacy tools. This is to emphasise that aesthetics is not just about form but about how meaning is mediated by affect and sensuousness. Borselli (2022) views *Amazônia* as a "portable exhibition" whose visitors are invited to travel around and interact with. The form system of the book is successfully designed to lead the narrative and establish a visual rhythm, as well as to create a sincere private space (Borselli, 2022). This shows that curating is not limited to the material walls of galleries but is just as evident on the page and screen, where sensory experience remains the core of the aesthetic encounter.

3.0 Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative research method in the framework of a single-case study to analyse how sensory aesthetic experiences are mobilised in the construction of the exhibition “Amazônia” by Sebastião Salgado. This method is considered suitable for addressing complex issues involving visual, affective, and spatial aspects that are not amenable to quantification (Creswell, 2003). The case study is especially appropriate since it revolves around a particular incident within a context that is “socio-culturally rich” (Yin, 2018).

If the Amazônia exhibition is taken here as a single object of study, a symbol of today’s curative practices resulting from a ‘sensosensate’ aesthetic, it is to remind us that extractivism and the exploitation of tropical nature are, after all, not a thing of the past. The aim is to acknowledge how visual installations, sound, spatial environment, and representational politics craft aesthetic experiences and produce ecologically engaged visitors. Three primary sources were triangulated to obtain data:

1. Visual records and digital collections: The exhibition website and hosting organisations, Science Museum London, National Museum Singapore, and Museo Nacional de Antropología Mexico, provide visual documentation and official records. We sourced material from photographs of the exhibition layout, spatial design drawings, and the Amazônia photobook.
2. Secondary interviews and public media: Media is part of the domain of study through a) reviews of interviews of Sebastião Salgado and Leila Wanick Salgado published in media such as Peta Pixel, El País, and The Guardian.
3. Finally, art critics’ and audiences’ responses in the press act as narrative sites and indexers of public opinions. Academic texts and other sources, like peer-reviewed journals on sensory aesthetics, curatorship, and documentary photography, were used to better understand the themes found in the research data.

4.0 Findings

The Amazônia exhibition is a multisensory experience. It integrates the body with the eye. It invites visitors to experience an immersive environment created with large-scale photography and carefully layered sound and light. Meaning is induced through physical engagement, how visitors move through the exhibition, and how they listen. The exhibition space functions as an experiential environment where knowledge is felt. This is akin to Baumgarten’s idea of knowledge by the senses.

The exhibition space is an active participant in the meaning of the images and the exhibition as a whole. It demonstrates Leila Wanick Salgado’s curatorial practice as an affective and epistemological act. The structured sequence of the rooms, the strategic spacing of the image prints, and the purposeful guidance of the flow of visitor movement all contribute to how visitors experience the Amazon. It narrates the complex sensory story of the Amazon’s rainforest ecology.

Salgado’s well-known portrayal of Indigenous communities creates some emotional unease or discomfort. Though “documentary beauty” as a concept reveals much to us, it also obscures much. The art of an “exotic gaze” captures the beauty of communities, while turning everything about the culture into a representation to be observed. There is uneasiness in this conflict, a discomfort. Building off this idea, the beauty of documentary representation is clear, while critical reflection is built from representation and emotional experience. This logic continues across the gallery and into The Amazônia photobook. The dimensions and physicality of the book, and the experience of ‘reading’ it, make the experience physical. The pages facilitate a slow movement through the gallery. The book embodies and carries the ecoaffective weight beyond the gallery, turning the book into a nomadic exhibition. The experience from the gallery is allowed to remain, move, and be revisited.

5.0 Discussion

5.1 Sensorial Aesthetics and in the Amazônia Exhibition Immersive Experience

Sebastião Salgado’s Amazônia showcases a profound shift in the practice of documentary photography from a standard two-dimensional display to a multisensory, embodied aesthetic experience. This shift is influenced by the Russian avant-garde, a movement that believed art could transition from an epistemological plane of perception of visual objects through the sensation of sight to emotional and spatial sensations. Based on Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten’s theory of aesthetic sensation, exhibited in the rediscovery of aesthetics as a matter not of formal beauty but of sense-derived knowledge (Nannini, 2022).

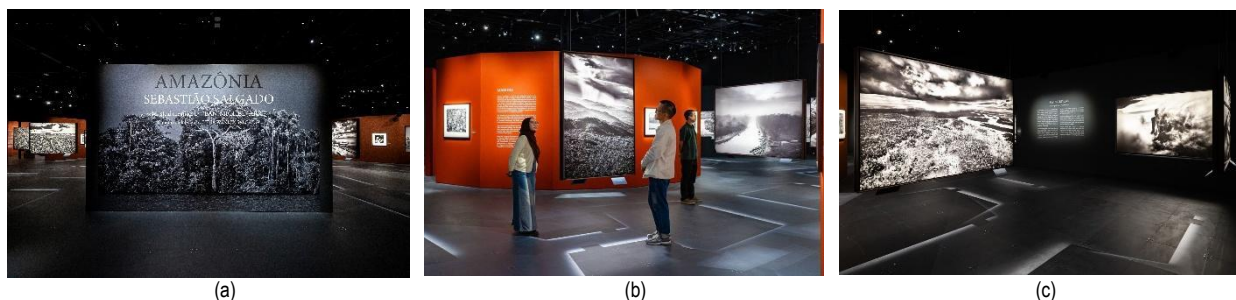


Fig. 1. (a) Amazonia exhibition documentation #1; (b) Amazonia exhibition documentation #2; (c) Amazonia exhibition documentation #3.
(Source: Singapore National Museum documentation)

The opening image of the exhibition, as seen in Figure 1a, is a pivotal element in creating an immersive atmosphere. It serves as a monumental visual identity, with a backdrop of dense forest imagery that both envelops the observer and dwarfs the human scale. The scale disparity between the human form and the towering rainforest background metaphorically underscores the sublimity and ecological enormity of the Amazon. The audience are not just looking at the forest, but it feels as though they are about to enter it. This psychological and sensory threshold at the entrance to the exhibition is a result of the theatrical presentation and the application of the concept of 'affective architecture'. This initiates an emotional interpellation, establishing an emotional connection even before any photographic narrative unfolds. Figures 1b and 1c depict the gallery interior space, which plays a significant role in supporting the exhibition's sensory reasoning. The dim lighting, the walls and space shrouded in darkness, and the non-sequential arrangement of the images all contribute to evoking the ever-changing nature of travel through the jungle. The black and white photographs, often taller than the viewer, create an all-encompassing visual experience. The affective gradient and fluid grounding of the images encourage bodily navigation and unhurried observation, a type of attention uncommon in traditional photography shows.

The gallery was not just a space but an immersive experience, a mode of affective space, a sound of darkness. It was not just dark but also silent, with the sounds of the earth as part of the Jean-Michel Jarre soundtrack, creating a sensurround experience that appealed to both aural and emotional senses. Other stimuli, such as intense light and a sense of smell, on top of these, mimicked the physical sensations of really being in the Amazon rainforest. This is consistent with Bencard and Akesson (Akesson, 2013; Bencard, 2018), who suggest that direct sensory perception of art and space facilitates understanding and emotional resonance. Beyond merely showing us pictures, the positioning of a large community of black-and-white photographs, in combination with an absorptive articulation of the space, creates a vibrant, affective situation that encourages reflection. The introductory image of the show creates the impression of feeling "all hell's going to break loose," and that what is on display is not only visually appealing but also stirs up ecological awareness and emotional intensity (Wang, 2024).

5.2 Affective Curation and Spatial Narrative Design

The curatorial presence of Leila Wanick Salgado played a key role in the actualisation of this affective curatorial strategy. However, her work has expanded beyond image assembly to an emotional scenography, incorporating lighting design, wall-spanning prints, ambient music, and a non-linear spatial arrangement. This shift is exemplified by the transition from object-based to experiential curatorial practice (Stallabrass, 1997), where the exhibition space becomes an active generator of meaning through a narrativising process. This immersive curatorial logic is not confined to the physical gallery alone. It is extended and rearticulated through the *Amazônia* photobook, a large-format volume that functions as a portable exhibition, as shown in Figure 2. Unlike standard photobooks, this edition is not just a collection of images but a physically imposing object; its substantial scale immediately activates a sensory awareness. The act of opening and turning its expansive pages demands bodily engagement: arms stretch, shoulders shift, and the weight of the book anchors the reader in a slower, more embodied mode of interaction. This material scale becomes a curatorial device in itself, compelling the reader to confront the images not as detached reproductions but as enveloping, almost architectural presences.



Fig. 2. Amazonia exhibition documentation #4
(Source: Singapore National Museum documentation)

The book, therefore, is not just an aesthetic artefact but also an affective mechanism designed to decelerate visual consumption and intensify the viewer's relationship with the depicted Amazonian topographies (Borselli, 2022). This is a dialogic kind of curation, one where visitors write the stories into being themselves. Instead of the hegemony of a single message, the exhibition space is an open space for interpretation. This helps to support Dorrian's (2014) argument that curation is an epistemological practice, a place of making meaning through lived experience and reflection on the self (Dorrian, 2014).

5.3 Ecological Representation, Visual Sublimity, Critique

Amazônia's most compelling feature is its immersive nature, drawing viewers into a world of profound beauty and awe. The landscape photographs of Rio Negro, for instance, use the sublime to divide the landscape, evoking feelings of awe, fear, and a sense of insignificance in the face of nature's beauty (Wang, 2024). This style not only captivates the eye, but it also encourages a continuous contemplation on existence and awareness of the surroundings, fostering a sense of responsibility for the environment. Forces of Nature, presented in a large-scale cinematic style, come to life in complete darkness and spatial choreography, making viewers sensory participants rather than mere observers. This immersive approach strengthens the impression of sublimity. The emotional pictures are not just to be looked at; they are to be experienced, heard, and felt. This immersive function of Amazônia as an environmental education strives to enlighten the viewer and reframe their place in the planetary ecosystem (Wang, 2024).

The Amazonia project has its critics, especially when it comes to showing Indigenous people. Some people, especially reporters for The Guardian, have said that Salgado's photos show conventional notions of strange and primitive people. Rushing (2024) has conducted an in-depth examination of the aestheticisation of suffering and the portrayal of individuals as 'primitive' in documentary photography, arguing that these attributes obscure the complex socio-political contexts underlying the development of such subjects (Rushing, 2024). That puts itself in your ear, and it aligns with Rushing's criticism, providing a comprehensive picture of how people reacted to the show.

However, she also notes that the Amazônia exhibit demonstrates a deliberate approach to incorporating local perspectives. It features the voices of Indigenous people, ranging from traditional music to wisdom offered by community members. *Poética del conocimiento* is a type of prose that combines art and knowledge in multiple voices, each with its poetic horizon. Local and scientific knowledge or art (Bacca, 2025). Although this method does not involve a large number of people, it demonstrates that an increasing number of individuals are aware of the moral implications of creating visual art. Amazônia illustrates how beauty and ethics, visual attraction and representational accountability, can be at odds with each other. The exhibition is more than simply a presentation; it also aims to engage people and encourage them to take action by offering immersive experiences that draw them in and inspire them to participate (Bacca, 2025).

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

The case of Amazônia demonstrates that Sebastião Salgado's exhibition functions not merely as a display of documentary photographs, but as a purpose-built, multisensory environment in which ecological meaning emerges through atmosphere, scale, sound, and embodied experience. Under the curatorial direction of Leila Wanick Salgado, photography is transformed into an affective space that enables viewers to engage with the Amazon experientially rather than solely through visual observation. When analyzed through Baumgarten's sensuous aesthetics and the theory of museum atmosphere, the exhibition is positioned as a site of knowledge production where perception, affect, and ethical awareness are closely interconnected.

Several limitations of the present study must be acknowledged. The analysis relies primarily on visual evidence, curatorial texts, interviews, and media reports, as direct observation of visitors was not conducted to assess audience experience. The focus on a single major international exhibition also limits the generalizability of the findings beyond this specific context of environmental photography and curatorial practice. This research, therefore, serves as a foundation for future studies that could incorporate visitor-based methods such as interviews, sensory ethnography, and affective response tracking, as well as comparative analyses across different cultures and geographic regions with varied ecological exhibition content. Such approaches would enable a more nuanced and robust understanding of how multisensory curating shapes ecologically informed perception within contemporary photographic exhibitions.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This research is situated at the intersection of studies of Sebastião Salgado's documentary photographs and theoretical discourse on sensory, affective curatorial practice. Although Salgado's images have been the subject of much critical writing on narrative, ethics, and visual representation, and academic curatorial studies have focused on atmosphere, embodiment, and affect in exhibition space, neither camp tends to unite these two discourses within a reading of ecological photography. By examining Amazônia as a multi-sensory curatorial system rather than an image collection, this research demonstrates how photographs, space, sound, and bodily movement collaborate to form ecological meaning. In the process, it shifts the focus from what is depicted in a photograph to how photographs function within an affective and spatial environment, providing new ways to think through documentary photography as an embodied and ethical form of knowledge.

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