

Review article: Museum factions -the transformation of museum studies.

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Ivan Karp, Corinne Kratz, Lynn Szwaja, and Tomas Ybarra-Frausto (eds) *Museum Frictions: Public cultures/global transformations*, Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2006, pp 602.

On the cover of *Museum Frictions*, we see a group of tourists looking at a monument in the New Mexico desert. This nondescript stone cairn marks the spot where the first atomic explosion took place at 5:29 am on July 16, 1945. It is being photographed by a group of people who look Japanese, but might be Native American. They look at us looking at them, framing the scene and drawing attention to its construction, the madeness that is characteristic of all museums and heritage sites. A father and his child pose in front of this testament to the dawn of the atomic age, the girl clutching a toy plane. The Enola Gay flies overhead, a grisly reminder of the culmination of this scientific experiment when America dropped the bomb on Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Now the scene of official military commemoration, the Trinity site is the subject of a powerful artwork called *Nuclear Enchantment* by artist Patrick Nagatani. They are woven together in a thoughtful meditation by Joseph Masco in one of the documents which enlivens the book. 'As comparative modes of display,' concludes Masco, 'the physical site of the first atomic explosion pales in comparison to the photographic fantasy, as Nagatani's ambiguous challenge to the present articulates the vital need for critical public engagement—a sorting out of memory, history, and ideology—in an increasingly nuclear age' (Masco in Karp and Kratz 2006: 106).

This book offers a critical engagement with public cultures and global transformations as they are being played out in contemporary museums and heritage organizations in today's world. It is the third in a well known series, co-edited with various others, by distinguished American scholar Ivan Karp who runs the Centre for the Study of Public Scholarship at Emory University. This work began in 1991 with the groundbreaking *Exhibiting Cultures*, followed not long after by the equally popular *Museums and Communities* (1992), both compiled from papers presented at conferences at the Smithsonian and published by the Smithsonian Institution Press. The two edited collections were widely praised and became standard references in the growing field of museum studies, establishing the agenda for museum practice, research and scholarship in the 1990s. Now we have the last volume *Museum Frictions* (2006), published by Duke University Press, who have happily retained elements of the design and layout that mark the whole series as a unified project. This review assesses the third volume in its own terms, but refers back to the earlier two volumes in order to consider questions about the development of museum studies in the intervening 15 years. How does *Museum Frictions* stand up to its predecessors and the clutch of new museum readers that have appeared in recent years? Perhaps more importantly, what does it say about the present state of museums, and of museum studies?

Museums and globalization

Why museum *frictions*? In the introduction the editors explain that the 'frictions' of the title refers to tensions between the museum and globalization, the 'conjunctions' of disparate 'constituencies, interests, goals, and perspectives'. They and the other co-editors set out to investigate how these frictions play out as 'museum generated social processes and globalising processes intersect and interact' (Karp and Kratz 2006: 2). The big idea of the book then, and one that brings it up to date, is globalization, that most ubiquitous phenomenon of our times. The complex transnational flows of globalization prompted the editors to think of museums in terms

of process and interaction rather than James Clifford's more bounded notion of 'contact zones' (Karp and Kratz 2006: 2). They recognize that globalization has deep historical roots, and try to avoid a triumphalist account of its reach, but nevertheless claim that 'our moment' is a global one of increasing international connections whose affects on museums go unexamined (2006: 9). 'The challenge is to recognise and embrace museum frictions with all their potential and their risk,' they conclude, 'and to find ways to work with them so as not simply to survive but to flourish' (2006: 26).

How is the world today different from that of the early 1990s? A brief survey of current affairs since 2000 is rehearsed in the introduction: the litany of disasters, wars and environmental concerns, along with the major museological events—new national museums, new building projects and exhibit 'makeovers', blockbuster exhibitions and their attendant controversies. In the last 20 years we have seen the emergence of intangible heritage, cultural tourism, cultural landscapes, new media and the world wide web, and the convergence of education and entertainment, public and private, business and culture. A vast network of international cooperation and exchange point to a 'focus on transnational and globalising processes in the museum and heritage spheres' (Karp and Kratz 2006: 9). The editors explain how a series of interesting questions emerged from this line of enquiry about museums and globalization among participants at several conferences that were part of this research project. In what ways is globalization manifested in different parts of the world? What are the tensions between global and local? How do museums and heritage sites articulate with relations that are not national? Why do emergent forms of display, events and management in museums and heritage organizations resemble business corporations?

Complexes, tactics and maps

Museum Frictions is broken up into three sections. Each section has a useful introduction, followed by several illustrated essays which are further broken up by short documents. In the first, 'Exhibitionary complexes', writers explore the question of display taking their cue from Tony Bennett's concept (1995) which has inspired the study of broad range of visual culture: museums, department stores, fairs, tourism, etc. From Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's 'expositionary complex' to Martin Hall's 'experiential complex,' the original idea is pluralized and expanded in the light of globalization. Andrea Fraser comments on the Guggenheim in Bilbao through her 'performance' of a mock guided tour, and Martin Hall analyzes the Guggenheim Las Vegas and a range of themed attractions. Leslie Witz examines old and new images of citizenry in museums in postapartheid South Africa, while in an elegant essay Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett investigates world heritage, and particularly intangible heritage, arguing that it is a mode of cultural production that is essentially museological. 'Once habitus becomes heritage,' she asks, 'to whom does it belong?' (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett in Karp and Kratz 2006: 161)

What is perhaps most interesting in this section is Bennett's own reformulation of his earlier work. His essay signals a significant change in direction for a scholar whose international reputation is based on two major Foucauldian studies of museums in the Victorian period (1995; 2004). If in nineteenth-century Europe museums made peoples through the exhibitionary complex, how might this work in the late twentieth-century museums in the new world? Bennett develops an argument for the museum as social technology, a 'differencing machine' in which exhibits mediate 'the relations between different cultures' (Bennett in Karp and Kratz 2006: 59). This is developed further in a more recent article where Bennett talks about museums in the South Pacific as a 'civic laboratory'. Influenced by material culture studies and actor-network theory, he writes about 'cultural objecthood' in museums which are places where objects are 'resocialised' (Bennett in Healy and Witcomb 2006: 08.7-08.12). Whereas Hall seems to dismiss the 'reappearance of the authentic' in an age of virtual reality (2006: 71), Bennett's thinking has shifted from words back to things, in a fruitful re-reading of the museum not just as a discursive power-house but also a space where people and objects meet and interact.

The second section is called 'Tactical museologies'. Here writers discuss community museums which have a 'frictional relationship to established museums and/or the wider social order', and how they tactically manoeuvre with and against them in what Gramsci once called a 'war of position' (Butinix and Karp in Karp and Kratz 2006: 208). Buntinix writes about

museums in Peru, Muan about museums in Cambodia, and Camarena and Morales about community museums in Mexico. For me the stand-out essay in this section was Rassool's lively account of the District Six Museum in Cape Town, South Africa where a black suburb destroyed by the white regime was reconstructed through an exhibition. This tactical museum sought to 'give voice to and shape the identity of the community that will return to occupy the district' (2006: 209). But the frictions brought out in this case study demonstrate how the understanding of community, one of the central themes of the 1992 collection, has been questioned. 'Perhaps it is the very idea of community—and not just that of the museum,' say the editors, 'that needs to be seriously reconsidered and problematised if it is to remain functional in such devilishly complex times' (2006: 217).

The third section of *Museum Frictions*, 'Remapping the museum', explores the way that the contours of museum practice are being recharted. There are essays on the 'outdoor museum' made up of heritage sites and landscapes at the Kruger National Park in South Africa, a pair of essays on slavery seen through local responses to an exhibition in Ghana and the 'museumification' of slavery in the American South, and another pair of essays on art exhibitions and programmes which reflected the rising status of Australian Aboriginals. I really enjoyed the later essays by Howard Morphy and Fred Myers because they offered intricate histories of particular exhibitions and the way that indigenous people actively mediated their representation. In so doing they reflected critically on the poetics of exhibiting and the politics of indigeneity in ways which reveal the shortcomings of the radical postcolonial criticism of the kind seen in *Exhibiting Cultures*.

In his essay, Morphy recounts his experience of working with the the Yolngu people from Arnhem Land to bring together the exhibition and associated performance *Yingapungapu* at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra in 2001. In contrast to much hysterical criticism of the First Australians Gallery at the new National Museum, the carefully contextualised narrative shows how negotiation and exchange was part of a long history of Aboriginal attempts at 'persuasion', a history which confounds the expectations of much museum studies literature (Morphy in Karp and Kratz 2006: 475). This is a good example of engaged curatorial practice moving beyond a rather crude postcolonial framework with its pessimistic categories such as otherness, primitivism and the fatal impact of colonisation. Perhaps, wonders Morphy, there is no exhibitionary complex, but only complex relations between individuals and institutions which in this case create spaces for indigenous people to reclaim ownership of their collections and influence the stories the museum tells about them (2006: 496).

Fred Myers discusses the symposium held during an exhibition of Aboriginal art in the Asia Society Gallery in New York in 1988. He reflects on the criticism that at these events native peoples were either inauthentic primitives or passive objects of the western gaze. How did Aboriginal acrylic paintings become high art, and how were Aboriginal causes advanced by their active participation in the art world? Adapting Bennett's 'exhibitionary complex' combined with Bourdieu's theory of the 'cultural field' he comes up with what he calls the 'exhibitionary field' (Myers in Karp and Kratz 2006: 505). Rather than the 'textual criticism of representation,' Myers prefers to study exhibitions as an intercultural process. I have found this useful in my own work as a way to theorize institutions and indigenous agency in more open and porous terms. 'When culture making is understood as a signifying practice (a materiality),' writes Myers, 'it warrants a theoretical shift from an emphasis on representation to one on cultural production and a methodological attention to social actors in different sites, relations and fields of production, as well as their collaborations and complicities' (2006: 506).

And one makes three

I have been considering the merits of the book under review in relation to the two earlier volumes of 1991 and 1992. How does it stand up as a reader in museum studies today in a rather crowded market, and what does it say about museums and the field of museum studies in the 1990s and 2000s? Certainly the integrated design and conceptual scope of *Museum Frictions* encourages us to see it as part of a larger and longer project, and seen in relation to *Exhibiting Cultures* and *Museums and Communities* it is a worthy culmination to what must surely be the most important series of books in this or any subject which have done so much to constitute the field that they

examine. Over almost twenty years Ivan Karp and his various co-editors have pulled together relevant, interesting, and challenging work in anthologies which have become indispensable for professionals, academics, students and general readers. In 1991 there were seminal essays by stars like Alpers, Baxandall, Greenblatt, Lavine, Duncan, Clifford, and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett; in 1992 perhaps a less stellar but nonetheless strong line up included Mullen Kreamer, Appadurai and Breckenridge, Kaeppler and others. This volume has important new essays by established scholars and fresh pieces by emerging writers. One of its chief virtues is that it shows how the field of museum studies, which was in part established by the first two volumes, has grown and expanded.

The first book was concerned with the 'poetics and politics of museum display', how 'cultural diversity was collected, exhibited and managed,' while the second examined the 'politics of public culture' through the complex relations of museums and communities (Karp, Lavine and Mullen Kreamer 1992: 1). It seems clear in hindsight that they were framed by postmodernism and the new museology which brought a keen intellectual edge to museum studies, while retaining a close connection with professional practice. In the latest book, we are in the ambiguous period after postmodernism (but still unsure of what to call it) when the not-so-new museology is looking a bit jaded. There is debate within these pages about Habermas's notion of the 'public sphere', advocated by some but eventually rejected by the editors as too idealistic (Karp and Kratz 2006: xxviii) and a certain ambivalence about the academic politics of the 1980s, what Bourdieu called the 'unrealistic radicality' beloved of academics (Bennett in Karp and Kratz 2006: 66). What is clear in several essays is the reassessment of key themes present in the earlier books, such as the politics of representation, the museum as forum, and the exhibition as a contested terrain. The editors themselves argue that the book shifts the focus from processes *within* the museum to 'museological processes that can be multi-sited and ramify far beyond museum settings' (Karp and Kratz 2006 2).

There are a number of areas where *Museum Frictions* surpasses its companion volumes and does indeed move with the times. One of its stated aims is to take as its subject not just museum history and theory, but 'contemporary museum and heritage practice' (2006: 17). Throughout the book, writers talk about buildings, sites, monuments and festivals as well as many different types of museums. This is laudable, as heritage has too long been regarded by academic sceptics as a corrupted form of history, when in fact historic heritage, built heritage, heritage landscapes along with the many forms of public history are important areas of cultural production that are attracting serious and balanced attention from scholars (Smith 2007). Fifteen years ago our field was called *museum* studies, and now it is increasingly referred to as museum *and heritage* studies.

The editors make it clear that while the book is broad in its scope it is not a panorama of the field but a 'prismatic' view from different perspectives 'from macro to mezzo to micro' (2006: 17). 'Such perspectival shifts are essential,' the editors argue, 'to convey the variability and complexity of intersections among museological and globalising processes, and the frictions they provoke' (2006: 17). Again this is exemplary, as the 'institutional and geographic range' of the essays decentre the metropolitan and Anglo-American bias and include coverage of South America, Australia, Asia, and Africa (2006: 19).

However, there are areas where this volume does not live up to the standards of volume one. It does suffer as a result of its long and difficult gestation in comparison with the focus of the first volume where the energy generated by the conference is palpable. The convoluted 'history' of the far flung project culminating in the book is not a good sign for the reader. Not surprisingly the final result is a slightly unfocused with much writing which is knotty and opaque. Some of the pieces strain mightily to describe complex processes in different locations in a comprehensive way, but for me the generalising examples, lists and relative clauses covering every nuance or eventuality stretch the sentences and my patience. At 600 pages this is a weighty tome, the longest of the series but with fewer contributors, which means there are some very long essays.

A reader for our times?

Sharon Macdonald wrote in this journal last year that we live in 'the age of the reader'

(Macdonald 2006b). You could argue that the number of edited collections of museum studies shows the field is healthy, but Macdonald suggests that this could be a late, last flowering of readers before they are superseded by more accessible and immediate online writing. Like the establishment of cultural studies departments in universities, does the burst of publishing in museum studies anticipate the decline of the subject rather than its growth? Donald Preziosi has claimed: 'More has been written about museums in the last decade, it seems, than in the previous century' (Preziosi and Farrago 2004: 1). With this embarrassment of riches, how does *Museum Frictions* compare with the other edited anthologies available on the market? This is undisputably an excellent reader and has many of the merits of other texts by Macdonald (2006a), Marstine (2005) Carbonell (2004), and Farrago and Preziosi (2004). It is noticeable that the original emphasis on anthropology and culture has been broadened here but there is still little on natural history, history and art compared to the diversity of contents in most current collections. As the editors admit, they do not cover education or the visitor experience very well, but they are not alone in this. In terms of charting shifts in museum and heritage studies, *Museum Frictions* is very good, although Corsane (2005) is even stronger on the heritage side of things. It is more international in scope than volumes one and two, but pales in comparison with the extraordinary diversity of *Museum Revolutions* (2007), another new reader from Routledge that is truly global in scope. It is regrettable that scholarship on museums is still split not just between English speakers and the rest, but between American, British and European traditions.

What does the book say about the state of museum studies today? How does the whole series reflect changes in museum studies in the twenty years since the papers in the first volume were first presented at a conference in 1988? Museum Studies has been taught for decades, but it grew dramatically after the 'museum boom' of the 1980s produced a demand for postgraduate study. The burgeoning corpus of academic literature had much to offer a young discipline. Drawing on many related subjects, museum studies quickly developed a diverse and wide-ranging body of work that went some way towards exploring a hitherto undertheorized terrain which critically examined the naturalised conventions of collecting and exhibiting (Macdonald and Fyfe, 1996). Karp and Lavine (1991) and Karp, Mullen Kreamer and Lavine (1992) became essential guides as everything in the museum, and even the museum itself, became an object of study.

Although the turn towards academic theory was necessary it did unhitch much research and writing from current practice. Academics and critics of every stripe have something to say about museums, which furnish convenient manifestations of any number of social and cultural theories of little use to museums, those who work in them or those who use them. Writers from outside the field enthusiastically interrogated museum objects, displays and programmes without ever having worked in a museum, leading to rather too many overtheorized accounts of museums that bore little relationship to internal processes.

So what does this last volume in the series tell us about where museum studies is heading? As a former museum professional and a scholar who teaches museum studies to graduates who want to get jobs in the sector, I have some misgivings about the expansive tendencies in this book which shows signs of a subject over-reaching itself. Friction is all very well, but there is a fraction too much. Whereas volume one and two presented a picture of an energetic subject which benefited immeasurably from infusions of anthropology, cultural studies, literary theory and so on, this volume speaks of a more mature but less cohesive subject, dispersed across a wide compass.

What does museum studies need? Museum studies should not of course revert to museology, the quasi-scientific study of museum techniques, but it does perhaps need to consolidate. We need more attention on *museum studies* than studies of museums. We need more history and a closer integration of theory and practice. I applaud the calls for more integrated ways of studying museums through a closer intersection of theory and practice (Rogoff and Sherman 1994; Labrum and McCarthy 2005). I agree with those who argue that museum studies is a 'reflective practice' which maintains an active interrelationship between academia and its associated field (Teather 1991; MacLeod 2001). As Rhiannon Mason has suggested, a closer relationship between universities and museums might produce a more holistic 'theoretical museology' (Mason in Macdonald 2006: 29). We also need more work on

education, visitors, and visual and material culture. Finally, we need less readers and more monographs and local case studies. I am excited by the appearance of several new monographs, part of a 'historical turn' in the humanities, which test out theories in specific historically-grounded locations (Taylor 1999; Myers 2002; Hill 2005; Whitehead 2005; Henare 2005).

Museum Frictions is certainly a worthy final volume in a fine series of books which have transformed Museum and Heritage Studies in the last 15 years. The essays consider what happens when 'museum-based processes and globalising processes comes together' (2006: 26), drawing on a diverse group of writers across a wide range of subjects. However it has been my contention that an expansive museum studies, in reaching out to the world, risks becoming factionalised. I began this review with Nagatani's powerful critique of the Trinity atomic bomb site. Museum studies needs coherence and focus to achieve the kind of punch that this artwork delivers for its viewers. If museum and heritage studies is going to provide a 'critical public engagement', then it needs to examine the museum and the things in it as well as the society around it.

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