

Book Review

Janet Marstine, *Critical Practice: Artists, Museums, Ethics*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2017, paperback £31.99, pp. xiv+211

Museums are problematic institutions. Of this, there is little doubt. Their ability, however, to reflect on and address these problems is an endless source of possibility. One way museums are addressing their underpinning ideological frameworks is through developing increasingly collaborative relationships with artists. Claire Robins (2013), for example, looks at the underpinning pedagogic role of interventions, while Matilda Pye and Linda Sandino (2013), evoke the broader history and context of museums both working with and employing artists. With a key focus on ethics in her research, Janet Marstine's most recent book is a rich and welcome contribution to this growing body of literature dealing with the range of ways in which artists have engaged with the problematic nature of museums. Through this lens of ethics, the possibility that the book offers is one of 'reconciliation' between museums and communities.

Investigating the relationship between artists, museums and ethics, Marstine draws on peace and reconciliation studies to evaluate ways in which 'critical practice fosters a discursive space defined by reflection and critique concerning how the institution situates itself' (Marstine 2017: 163). In particular, how such reflexivity enables imbalances in power with artists and publics to be 'renegotiated' (163). This is the significant contribution of this book; woven throughout is a carefully constructed sense of the artist as 'negotiator' within dialogues that, rather than seeking 'resolution', are reflective of an agonistic process which desires 'more ethically engaged institutions' (53). Importantly, Marstine clarifies her approach to the artist: 'whilst not romanticising the artist as the sole conscience of the museum, my goal is to demonstrate the potential of the artist's voice as a driver for ethical change' (21).

Founded on the methodology of extensive semi-structured interviews with a wide range of stakeholders, 'critical practice' is conceptualized as the convergence of socially engaged practice and institutional critique, with a key driver of producing organizational change within an ethical framework. This ethical framework is represented through three carefully constructed approaches, corresponding to the main body of the book, in Chapters 2-4. Marstine's approach, drawing also on the notion of 'gesture' from peace and reconciliation studies, productively sidesteps an art historical framework. Instead, through her analysis of projects that can be seen as 'symbolic acts to make amends and to repair rifts' (29), the book works through ways in which critical practice can not just shape the institutional structure of museums, but can act to dissolve the boundaries between 'insider and outsider positions' (22).

Chapter 2, 'Changing Hands', considers ways in which 'artists introduce critical practice to advance ethical stewardship towards reconciliation' (47). Here, the structure used throughout becomes clear. Each chapter is structured around an introductory 'case study' which sets the context; followed by further case studies which, through Marstine's careful analysis, elucidate key issues. Thus, Chapter 2 begins with an analysis of 'Spoils' (2011) by the Chicago based artist Michael Rakowitz, in which the artist served a dinner of Iraqi food to American diners on plates looted from Saddam Hussain's palace, subsequently bought by the artist on eBay. This is followed by 'Recycle LACMA' (2009) in which the Los Angeles artist Robert Fontenot purchased and repurposed deaccessioned textiles from Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the 'Manchester Hermit' Ansuman Biswas who during his residency at Manchester Museum in 2009 publicly threatened to destroy 40 objects from the collection. The complex

and poetic critique inherent in these projects is matched by Marstine's analysis, which draws out the broader civic, political implications of repatriation, deaccessioning and destruction of museum collections.

The second key theme is 'hybridity' which, citing Homi Bhabha, Marstine argues is still a valid methodological approach, despite Bruno Latour's argument that it maintains difference (84). Here, 'hybridity' is a persuasive theoretical framework within which to understand the contributions artists make in pluralising museum narratives; for example, as an antidote to the erasure 'of those who lived outside the mainstream' (101) which the artist Matt Smith argues is implicit within unified museum narratives.

The final structuring theme is the concept of the 'platform' which Marstine describes as 'an emancipatory strategy that designates space for critical discourse concerning the distribution of power and alternative modes of democracy that empower divergent voices to take part' (125). This chapter begins with the 'platforms' of Liam Gillick; however, I felt it was Goshka Macuga's 'The Nature of the Beast' which more fully demonstrated relational engagement between the institution and its communities. This installation by Macuga was the Whitechapel's re-opening commission in 2009, which addressed the historic specificity of the gallery as a site of political protest and incorporated contemporary parallels with grassroots political activism in the Whitechapel neighbourhood. Marstine skilfully works through several strands of analysis of Macuga's work, including the way in which Macuga responded when she felt the Whitechapel had contradicted its support for her political project by using her installation as a backdrop for 'fundraising galas' which were, in the artist's eyes, 'neutralising the political ramifications of the work' (144).

It is here that I began to wonder whether Marstine was neglecting an institutional voice, as a key implication is that artists cannot alone dismantle the problematic neoliberal frameworks within which museums are confined; organizational change is needed at a fundamental level. The reader is only able to speculate on the view the Whitechapel took of Macuga's critique of its use of her work. However, Marstine does offer a key institutional case study, that of the Van Abbemuseum in the Netherlands; an insightful analysis of an institution which systematically addressed its relationship to its communities and, arguably, went too far, too quickly. A reminder that 'creating the conditions for reconciliation, even for the most committed and risk-taking discursive museums, is a complex and ongoing process' (185).

As a further contribution to the literature which explores artists and museums, including Joanne Morra's newly published book on 'site-responsive' work at the Freud Museums (2017), Marstine's approach, through the lens of ethics and reconciliation, offers a very particular, and productive framework within which to think about museums, communities and artists. As Mark Dion has put it, 'being critical may also be just another way to love these museums' (Alberro and Stimson 2009: 383).

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References

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