

Book Review: Dominique Poulot (ed), *L'effet musée: Objets, pratiques et cultures*, Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2022, paperback €22, pp.336

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In this book on *L'effet musée*, Dominique Poulot has brought together texts by his colleagues and students of the École doctorale Histoire de l'Art at the Université Paris Panthéon-Sorbonne, many of whom have used the expression 'museum effect' in their essays. This publication will probably mark a milestone for the definitive dissemination of this terminology in the museum studies field, as happened in 1989 with Peter Vergo's *The New Museology*. The latter ratified the English use of a designation previously employed in French or in other languages. Now the reverse is about to happen: a term that is fairly widespread in English and other languages will be consecrated in French bibliography, associated with the name of one of its most prestigious museologists, Dominique Poulot.

The book begins with an introduction by Poulot, entitled '*Penser l'effet musée*', tracing the origins of the 'museum effect' concept, used with positive or negative connotations by museum supporters and detractors. Furthermore, Poulot remarks on the importance of the German term *Musealisierung*, which carries a double meaning: it designates both the relocation of cultural objects in a museum and the transformation of their status in such new settings. Museums transform things into heritage, a process that in French could be described as *effet patrimoine* or *effet muséal* (Macdonald, in Mairesse 2022: 236). In English, the expression 'museum effect' was famously employed by Jeffrey K. Smith in his book *The Museum Effect: How Museums, Libraries, and Cultural Institutions Educate and Civilize Society* (2014). He used this concept to celebrate the effect on people of cultural venues, where paying attention to things that would perhaps have gone unnoticed elsewhere is a common practice (Smith 2014). Nevertheless, Dominique Poulot pays more explicit homage to a short essay by Svetlana Alpers, who used the expression 'museum effect' when referring to the conceptual transformation of objects that, detached from their original function and context, are perceived in the museum only as works of art (Alpers 1991: 26-7). Implicit in her notion of the 'museum effect' is the separation of the museum from the world outside it.

'Context', immersion and detachment are key issues here. The book's introductory pages offer an erudite historical review of the efforts that, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, were made to display exhibits in historical settings in universal exhibitions and museums (Costa et al. 2016). Poulot warns about the contradictory nature of such immersive historical exhibitions because visitors normally have to share the experience with others. In my own view, this has its advantages, because it makes visitors more self-aware to the point that they develop a critical detachment as they wander from one room to the next.

The 'museum effect', which began as a reference to a change in the status of heritage assets, should therefore increasingly focus on visitors and on curatorial processes in relation to collections of objects. This seems to be confirmed by the sections – and their titles – that structure the book. Under the heading *Acquérir, collectionner*, the first section brings together five essays, among which I would highlight that of critical museologist Judith Dehail. She problematizes the 'museum effect' even in the title of her article, '*L'effet musée en question*', where she addresses the case of the musealization of musical instruments, which visitors would like to play – or would at least like to see in operation – suggesting that museum pieces should not necessarily be removed from the outside world.

The second section comprises four essays, entitled *Exposer, expliquer*. This title inspires Aziza Gril-Mariotte to reflect on the 'museum effect' in the decoration of historical interiors – specifically the eighteenth-century rooms that became so fashionable in France

during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, giving rise to the reconstruction of domestic interiors with original or renovated furniture and decorations not only in museums, but also in private homes. These emulated museographic period rooms and would often end up being opened to the public as museums.

The reconstruction of habitats is also the central argument of Raymond Montpetit, who focuses more specifically on museums of history and ethnology. Here, displaying objects and specimens in shop windows and the use of dioramas with stuffed animals, mannequins and dressed actors are common practices employed to evoke domestic settings – the so-called *muséographies analogiques* that expand the ‘museum effect’ beyond the artistic field to which Svetlana Alpers’s definition was circumscribed.

Cultural metaphysics are one of the lines of thought addressed by the four chapters in the following section, *Émouvoir, mobiliser*, a title particularly relevant to the essay by Sandra Costa. She associates the ‘museum effect’ with shared emotions and skills, as exemplified in the nineteenth century by a guide to museums in Italy produced by Louis Viardot.

Finally, the section *Reconstruire le passé au musée* contains two articles. One of these is a paper by Noémie Étienne focusing on the notion of ‘museum effect’, which she likens to a ‘Frankenstein effect’: being an assembly of detached pieces, every display is necessarily fragmentary, she argues.

In this context, it is important for me to cite a couple of sentences from the book *Destination Culture* by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett: ‘The museum effect works both ways. Not only do ordinary things become special when placed in museum settings, but the museum experience itself becomes a model for experiencing life outside its walls’ (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 51). In her book, she studied many examples located outside the walls of museums. Perhaps, while expanding the concept of the ‘museum effect’, Poulot and the other authors in this book fail to give proper consideration to the ‘museum effect’ outdoors, which, in fact, constitutes a key topic in the historical reinterpretations of Nordic open air museums, in the *musealizzazione* of Italian town centres after the advent of mass tourism, and elsewhere (Zuliani 2009). Hopefully, this aspect will also be included henceforth in the French notion of *effet musée*.

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