

Review article: reviewing museum studies in the age of the reader

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Gail Anderson (ed.) *Reinventing the Museum. Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift*, Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2004, pp 402.

Bettina Messias Carbonell (ed.) *Museum Studies. An Anthology of Contexts*, Malden MA: Blackwell, 2004, pp 640.

Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago (eds) *Grasping the World. The Idea of the Museum*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004, pp 779.

This is the Age of the Reader. With this no doubt overly portentous (not to say pretentious) beginning, I wish to point out the massive proliferation of hefty tomes of collected, previously published essays that have come to be called 'readers': the kinds of books that are under review here. Publishers' lists are increasingly filled with such recycled, reassembled material, while authors complain of the difficulties of finding publishing outlets for scholarly monographs. There is an economic impetus for this – such readers are good business – but this itself may be symptomatic of a different kind of 'rise of the reader', a rise which we might even venture to link with the alleged 'death of the author'.

It might initially seem perverse that such books are called 'readers'. They are so large that it is unlikely that they will be read in toto (except by a particularly diligent reviewer). Even the shortest of the volumes reviewed here has more than 400 pages. Neither are such books very 'reader-friendly' in physical terms. (It took me longer to review them than I had hoped partly because they were so inconvenient for lugging on train and plane journeys.) Even the lightest of them weighs almost a kilo; and the heaviest – *Grasping the World* – is nearly 1.5 (in paperback). If readers (in the book of essays sense of the term – what I will henceforth call 'readers-as-books') advocate a particular kind of reading, it is of a 'dip into', 'pick-and-mix' – rather than linear 'beginning to end' – kind. This is, perhaps, a style of reading especially attuned to our more distracted age of lower concentration spans and time-poverty; and it recognizes that readers (in the person sense – henceforth 'readers-as-persons') may be accustomed to the shorter chunks of text and hyperactivity of the web. Moreover, not only does the format of readers-as-books not assume that readers-as-persons will start at the beginning and read on until the end, it invites readers to select for their own particular interests. People are thus, in contemporary cultural studies parlance, prompted to be active in relation to the text – a move that has been celebrated in other cultural circles, not least the museum (an analogy to which I return below). All of the books reviewed here recognize that they will be engaged with in partial and perhaps eclectic manner by their readers.

This suggests, then, that readers-as-books are indeed aptly named after all. They recognize a person's activity. While interpreting 'activity' – and its assumed failed alternative of passivity – in this way is surely overly simplistic (in the museum as much as with books), it is clear that these texts perform a useful service. Readers-as-books are conveniently compiled to save people the time that going to find all these individual items would take. Moreover, the reader-as-person may benefit from the editors' selections, comments and organization – or may choose to ignore these. Given the enormous expansion of published material and of diverse outlets (especially journals) for publishing (anything other than monographs), simply

keeping track of what is (in tellingly diffuse terminology) 'out there' is an increasingly difficult task. Here reader-as-book comes in, acting like an especially discriminating search-engine, sifting and collating. People usefully have their work cut down and ready sorted. On the evidence of the extremely wide range of sometimes fairly obscure sources from which the articles in these three volumes come, this is an important service indeed – especially while most of such items can still only be tracked down in paper form.

That last point brings me, however, to another consideration. What we are seeing in the proliferation of these kinds of books may, perhaps, be a final fling before their demise. With more and more material available electronically, what use will there be for these kinds of books? What use readers-as-books if people can, from the relative ease of their desks, search the web, through the more semantically discriminating search-engines that are promised, and make their own selections (in which journals such as *Museum & Society* might provide helpful indicators)? Are we, perhaps, seeing a last ditch cut-and-run on the reader-as-book front, hoovering up the relevant non-electronic (and even some electronic) material, before this window of publishing opportunity is superseded? Perhaps... though perhaps not. To answer this question definitely we probably need more knowledge of reading practices and people's desire for materiality and the comforting sense of sheer weight – a desire that seems more entrenched than might have been imagined, as the continuing popularity of (even weighty) museums seems to indicate.

For now, however, these sorts of books undoubtedly serve a useful function – as exemplified by the three under review here, all of which were published in 2004. All three seek to provide a collection of key texts on the nature and challenges of museums. They all include articles concerned with museum history and context and a good many that address some of the particular concerns of museums over the last twenty or so years – a period that Gail Anderson characterizes as one of 'paradigm shift'. Interestingly, however, there are very few articles and even authors to be found in more than one volume – and none that feature in all three. Among 129 articles in total (excluding editorial introductions) there are only three that are included in more than one volume: Paula Findlen's 'The museum: its classical etymology and Renaissance genealogy' and Annie E. Coombes' 'Museums and the formation of national and cultural identities' are included in both *Museum Studies* and *Grasping the World*; and Lisa Corrin's 'Mining the museum: artists look at museums, museums look at themselves' is in both *Museum Studies* and *Reinventing the Museum*. John Cotton Dana, Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach crop up in more than one volume – though not with the same essays – and editor Donald Preziosi is represented in Bettina Messias Carbonell's volume, even though he modestly does not include any of his own difficult but intellectually stimulating work in his own co-edited one, though some of his arguments are represented in the introduction and indeed the whole thrust of *Grasping the World*. The variety and breadth of articles in these volumes is, surely, an encouraging indication of the vibrant nature of museum studies as an interdisciplinary field and the fact that it has not solidified into an accepted canon of key texts.

Despite their shared general subject matter, the three books reviewed here each takes something of a different approach and to some extent envisages a different audience. Gail Anderson's collection consists primarily of articles by museum professionals – past and present – almost all US-based. She lists (in an order I found curious) the hoped for audience as 'trustees, volunteers, museum students, and professionals' (p.xi); and in general this volume is concerned more with museum practice than the academic analysis represented in the other two. It begins with John Cotton Dana's 'The gloom of the museum', written in 1917, whose title, as well as some of the content, is perhaps reassuring for museum professionals today in illustrating that not all was perceived as rosy in the past. Dana's is a remarkable piece which reveals the longstanding nature of several major contemporary concerns and the prescience of some of Dana's recommendations – how to make collections 'relevant', comparisons with the department store, recommendations for branch museums and object loans. But it is also fascinating in its institutional critique. It begins with an account of museums as means by which 'the rich and ruling class must always keep itself distinct from the lower classes in its pleasures and pastimes' (p.14), of how acquiring 'ancient, rare, and costly objects' helps the rich to 'mark them as superior to the poor and weak' (p.15), and addresses 'the peculiar sanctity of oil paint on canvas' (p.16). But although a subsequent subheading of the article is entitled 'Do we need museums at all?', the answer is a resounding – though not entirely convincingly argued – 'yes'.

Fascinatingly, this pattern of provocatively introducing elements of a strong institutional critique – though without either fully working it through or following up on its iconoclastic promise – is repeated in a number of articles in *Reinventing the Museum*, leading me to reflect after reading the anthology that I felt that I now understood a good deal more about the rhetorical tropes – many longstanding – of museum-professional-speak!

Reinventing the Museum is divided into five parts. The first, which begins with the Dana article, is entitled 'The role of the museum: the challenge to remain relevant'. It presents nine articles in chronological order, including Theodore Low's educationally-oriented 'What is a museum?' (1942); two pieces – Alma Wittlin's 'A twelve point program for museum renewal' and Duncan Cameron's 'The museum, a temple or forum' – from the early 1970s; and five from the 1990s, the most recent being Harald Skramstad's 1999-published 'An agenda for museums in the twenty-first century'. What all of these articles share is a concern with the museum as a social project. All express varying degrees of disenchantment with what they characterize as the elitism of museums and make suggestions for broadening the museum's appeal; articles by Michael Ames and Amalia Mesa-Bains, in particular, also highlighting the colonial inheritance of many museums and the perceived need to represent cultural diversity in other ways.

Articles in the rest of the book are primarily from the 1990s and pick up various of the themes of Part I. Part II, 'The role of the public: the need to understand the visitor's perspective', makes the case for trying to study the public and presents some models for doing so. The most obvious way in which museums engage with visitors is via exhibitions and this is addressed in the following Part: 'The role of public service: the evolution of exhibitions and programs'. Articles here look especially at education, though there is some reference to institutional critique or what is sometimes called the reflexive turn, in which museum exhibitions address the institution of the museum itself. The prime example is Lisa Corrin's account of Fred Wilson's famous installation, *Mining the Museum*, in which he raised questions about the content and exclusions of museum's collections by, for example, placing slave-shackles among the exhibitions of fine metalwork.

Gail Anderson characterizes the 'paradigm shift' that constitutes the 'reinvention of the museum' of the reader's title, as a 'shift from collection-driven institutions to visitor-centered museums' (p.1). Objects and collections are not, however, forgotten in the volume, which addresses them in Part IV, 'The role of the object: the obligation of stewardship and cultural responsibility'. The principal emphasis here, in line with the argument that the museum must pay more attention to its social remit (which seems to be what Anderson means by 'mission'), is on how collections should be managed in order to help them best serve communities. Thus as well as raising general – though rarely very deeply probing – questions about the purpose of objects and collections, articles in this part of the book also consider the vexed matters of repatriation and cultural restitution, conservation and deaccession.

The final section of *Reinventing the Museum*, 'The role of leadership: the essential ingredient', is concerned with how to manage some of the challenges described in the book thus far, and in particular what various authors here call 'the new accountability' (in which museums seek to be accountable to the public). I found this last part in particular slightly disappointing in its under-analysis of the contemporary museum predicament. What predominates are brief summaries of dilemmas – and sometimes elements of provocative institutional critique as noted above – together with typically rather piecemeal recommendations, delivered in somewhat resigned tones, on how to tackle them. The concluding article, by Robert Janes, is telling in this regard, for it is essentially an argument for living with – accepting – what he calls 'paradoxes' (e.g. of museums being called upon to prioritize the public while having to cut the amount of time for dealing with visitor enquiries) of museum practice. These 'paradoxes' are what others might well call 'contradictions' or, following Max Weber, 'irrationalities of rationalization'; and which they might prefer to try to eliminate, challenge or at least reduce rather than accept. And while Janes concludes by saying that organizations need to engage in 'continuous learning', it is tempting to turn the quoted question that concludes his article – and the book as a whole – back on itself: 'Is that all there is?' (p. 393).

Janes' concluding comments are also dismissive of 'culture critics' by which, presumably, he means many of the contributors to the other two collections under review here: *Museum*

Studies: An Anthology of Contexts and *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*. While I understand why museum professionals can often feel as though cultural commentators have an easy time of it by only generating criticisms without offering solutions, the mass of wonderfully interesting articles in these two books must surely convince even the most sceptical that such cultural research is worth doing. Certainly, my overwhelming sense after reading these two books was just what richly fascinating institutions museums are.

I couldn't help thinking about the books themselves as exhibitions – as displays of commentaries about museums, an analogy recognized by Bettina Messias Carbonell, who refers (with an intriguing use of upper case) to Museum Studies as 'a Museum of Museology' (p.2), and by Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago (p.8). From this perspective, *Reinventing the Museum* seemed a bit like a well-organised 1990s exhibition, with its aims and objectives clearly stated, conveying an overwhelming sense of social responsibility and public service, with content carefully oriented to the aims and everything written in straightforward language – but somehow a bit dull and lacking in vitality or surprise. It said lots of worthy things and raised relevant questions but it was rarely very intellectually stimulating. I didn't usually want to visit pieces more than once. By contrast, the other two volumes were more like treasure-trove exhibitions, packed with wonderfully fascinating things that are sometimes rather unpredictable and leave you thinking. They share the same sense of being perhaps a bit over-stuffed but are all the more compelling for it. No doubt mine may be an idiosyncratic response (to museums as to anthologies) but it seems to me that both of these volumes succeeded better in demonstrating why museums matter, and why we should cherish them. What emerges most strikingly from *Museum Studies* and *Grasping the World* are not jaded paradoxes or rather obvious statements about the need for clear communication but thought-provoking and sometimes even unsettling complexity.

This is well evident in *Museum Studies: An Anthology of Contexts*, which editor Carbonell characterizes as an 'eccentric space', one that revels in its eclecticism and resistance to possible 'enclosing designs' (p.1). This follows from an approach to museums that understands them as likewise 'resistant to enclosing designs', and that is able to 'treat museums/exhibitions as ends in themselves, not means to ends sought by ideology and/or theory' (p.4). The anthology thus seems to be primarily a collection of pieces that she simply likes – an approach that brings together some real gems, some relatively unknown (at least to me). These include, for example, Pitt Rivers' curator Henry Balfour's presidential address to the Museums Association meeting in Maidstone in 1909 in which he proposed a British National-Folk Museum or Zora Neale Hurston's witty parody, the imagined 'American Museum of Unnatural History', with exhibits to depict 'the convenient "typical" of different peoples: 'In there is the "typical" Oriental, Jew, Yankee, Westerner, Southerner, Latin, and even out-of-favor Nordics like the German. The Englishman "I say old chappie", and the gesticulating Frenchman. The least observant American can know them all at a glance' (p.217). Hurston's piece is included as what is called a 'meditation' – a short relatively literary or perhaps playful article at the end of each section of the volume. Others include the poem 'At the Holocaust Museum' by Alice Friman, and James Fenton's poem about the Pitt Rivers Museum. Their inclusion is characteristic of the literary bent of Carbonell's interests (evident in the introduction) and her attempt – through the sometimes surprising inclusions and juxtapositions – to inspire reflection rather than to try to lead us to a particular position. To this end, there is a wide range of material presented here (53 articles in total), which range in date from 1792 (a letter by Charles Willson Peale published in Dunlap's *American Daily Advertiser*) to several in 2001, with a preponderance, shared by the other books reviewed, of pieces published in the 1990s – a decade in which, Preziosi and Farago note, 'more has been written about museums... than in the previous century' (p.1).

Despite the wide coverage of *Museum Studies*, Carbonell's own particular areas of interest come through strongly. Thus, there is a predominance of material on the representation of race, ethnicity and nation, and also a fair amount on gender. What I particularly like, however, is that the articles included do not all just repeat familiar laments over the racism and sexism of the museum. The inclusion of the Balfour and Hurston pieces mentioned above, for example, cheekily inverts the whole question of representing peoples, making us think about the exclusions as well as strategies of representation. Likewise, Gyan Prakash's 'Museum matters'

does not simply lambast the colonial inheritance of the museum (which would merely be 'repeating monotonously the criticism of the museums' role in the history of Western domination' (p. 214)) and call for it to become 'open to diverse communities'. Rather, he dissects the complex roles that objects can play in telling different stories – stories which may well be 'discordant' or may 'reveal the distance between cultures' (p. 215) – and so not easily patched up by a strategy that Preziosi and Farago nicely characterize as the 'classic map-territory problem of representational adequacy' which perceives the problem at hand as one of how to 'teach... museums to become better representatives of a wider (multi)cultural world' (p.2). Similarly in relation to gender, while *Museum Studies* contains Gaby Porter's insightful account of the gendered representations of many social history and technology museums, it also includes Jordanna Bailkin's thoughtful and scholarly discussion of women's patronage of art (an account that challenges the assumption of women's lack of power), and Janet Wolff's reflection on her own uncomfortable decision not to go ahead with an exhibition of works by women artists at the Whitney because she thought – at the time – that the works were simply not good enough.

Testament to the fact that it is possible to find multiple connections between the articles in *Museum Studies* is that each of the last three mentioned is in a different section of the book. Thus Gaby Porter's is in Part I: Museology: a collection of contexts; Jordanna Bailkin's in Part III: The status of nations and the museum; and Janet Wolff's in Part V: Arts, crafts, audiences. The other two Parts are: Part II: States of "nature" in the museum: natural history, anthropology, ethnology; and Part IV: Locating history in the museum. The rather disparate titles of these parts (e.g. why is audiences with arts and crafts?) seems like a symptom of what in a museum context I have called 'object love' – curators liking particular pieces so much that they have to try to weave a narrative around them later.¹ So too, perhaps, is the 'alternative taxonomy' of contents that Carbonell provides, and with which, one suspects, she began: museum history, museums in theory, museum practices, museum poetics. Elegant though these are, few articles easily fall into only one, as is evident in the list provided. Within the introduction and introductory sections too, while there are many interesting points and reflections, the linkages between paragraphs are often rather loose and – in some ways reasonably and even refreshingly – there is little attempt to provide an overview or synthesis.

This contrasts with *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, edited by Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago, which appears to have been compiled with a surer sense of organisation and direction – though with a similar intention of trying to understand the museum in its complexity, and to avoid reducing it to a single function or project. *Grasping the World's* main introduction and section introductions are collectively twice the size of those of the other two books and there is more sense here that they could form the basis of a stand alone book. That the Parts are here called 'chapters', and that articles may start part way down a page rather than always on a fresh one (as though separately cased), is also appropriate to a book that seeks to be an original argument as much as a collection of significant works. That argument is difficult to summarize concisely but central to it is a perspective that sees the museum – or 'the idea of the museum' as in the book's title – as thoroughly implicated in, and even productive of, ways in which we think about (or 'grasp') fundamental aspects of the modern world and contemporary personhood. As the introduction explains: 'More than a genre, and more than simply one institution on a par with others, museums are essential sites for the fabrication and perpetuation of our conception of ourselves as autonomous individuals with unique subjectivities' (p.3). This has far-reaching ramifications for how we think about key concepts such as time and history; the nature of 'evidence', 'objectivity' and 'art'; 'the "secularization" of society' (p.5); distinctions between selves and others, and the inclusions and exclusions that that entails; and the whole difficult business of representation in its various senses. These are addressed – and the argument developed – through a set of neat, carefully conceptualized chapters: I Creating historical effects; II Instituting evidence; III Building shared imaginaries/effacing otherness; IV Observing subjects/disciplining practice; V Secularizing rituals; VI Inclusions and exclusions: representing adequately.

Each of these chapters contains a selection of well chosen articles – 42 in all, two of which have not been published previously. The fact that Preziosi and Farago are constituting an account that is 'bigger' than the subject of museums themselves – though in which they argue museums to be central – is evident also in the inclusion of some articles that do not actually

mention museums (or exhibitions, galleries, objects, art, or curiosity cabinets) at all. Indeed, the volume begins with Hayden Whyte's 'The fictions of factual representation', which establishes the importance of thinking about how 'facts' come to be constituted as such without once mentioning the museum; and this is followed by Michel de Certeau's elucidation of different types of historical description and temporality – 'Psychoanalysis and its history' – which mentions museums just once and in parenthesis. Likewise, Mary Carruthers' sensitive 'Collective memory and memoria rerum: an architecture for thinking', Michel Foucault's 'Texts/ contexts: of other spaces' and Paul Q. Hirst's commentary on Foucault's ideas about architecture (especially the prison), 'Power/knowledge – constructed space and the subject', do not address the museum directly. Yet as the editors explain, and as also becomes evident through the thoughtful assembly of articles (for example, the Foucault and Hirst are followed by Tony Bennett's well-known 'Exhibitionary complex' which draws upon them more directly in relation to the museum), all have very important things to say for our understanding of the museum and its significance.

It should perhaps be noted that while *Grasping the World* has a strong theoretical drive, and while it contains many theoretically sophisticated articles, it is by no means lacking in examples and discussions of particular exhibitions. Indeed, like *Museum Studies*, it contains proportionately more of these – and with greater geographical range – than does *Reinventing the Museum*. They consist both of historical examples, ranging from a number of pieces on curiosity cabinets, several on colonial exhibitions and Sandra Esslinger's specially commissioned article on museums and the museal in Nazi ideology, through to more recent ones, such as Ruth B. Phillips' account of exhibitions about Africa, Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge on heritage in India, and Andrea Liss's 'The identity card project and the tower of faces at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum'.

In conclusion – and in awareness of the fact that the proliferation of readers-as-books is undoubtedly likely to continue for some time yet – it might be useful to comment on some of the organizational and presentational aspects of these books, in the hope that other compilers will follow the best practice here. I liked the fact that all of the books under review not only had a main introduction but also section introductions. I also liked the suggestions for further reading that all included – Preziosi and Farago in a fairly compact list; Carbonell in a considerably more lengthy bibliography divided into sections; and Anderson in short but useful lists at the end of each section. All of the volumes provide some details about authors and original publication. Preziosi and Farago give scantiest author details – providing only passing information within their commentaries – though they do give a useful chronological index of the texts. *Reinventing the World* nicely lists original publication dates of articles in the list of contents as well as including a note on this and on the author alongside each article – a strategy that I found particularly helpful, though that would have been improved had these been a little longer and always included the most relevant information (e.g. I was surprised that there was no mention of Stephen Weil's practical museum experience, as deputy director of the Hirschhorn in Washington, in either of the notes accompanying his pieces on museum management). *Museum Studies* provides a 'Notes on contributors' section, with a line or two about each and usually a short list of their publications.

Of the three books, only *Grasping the World* includes any illustrations at all (and even these are very few). This is a shame given the visual nature of the subject, especially in the case of articles that were originally published with them. I particularly missed them in pieces such as Enid Schildkrout's discussion of the controversial *Into the Heart of Africa* exhibition at the Royal Ontario Museum, in *Museum Studies*, and the discussion of Fred Wilson's work in both *Museum Studies* and *Reinventing the Museum*. Given that books of readings typically make a good deal of money – very little, if any, of which goes to the original authors of the articles included or to the original editors who may have put considerable work into helping the authors to produce the work reproduced here – publishers really should be able to afford to include some pictures in such books.

Also only included in one of these three books – in this case *Museum Studies* – is an index. Again, I think this really should be standard in a reader. These are massive volumes to leaf through to try to find that example, or nice reflection, that you came across earlier but cannot now place – as this reviewer found on several occasions. Moreover, as I have suggested, one

of the values of books such as these is that the text can be interrogated in ways that go beyond the organizational structure created by the editors. To do so, however, a good index is indispensable.

Overall, these are all books that provide a considerable service; and all deserve a place as part of a personal or institutional museum studies library. *Reinventing the Museum* is particularly valuable as a documentation of the views of museum professionals, and the challenges as perceived by them, especially in the 1990s; and it offers useful introductions to debates on some of the most pressing matters, such as cultural restitution, deaccession and so forth. *Museum Studies* and *Grasping the World* present broader accounts of museums, offering a greater range of thought-provoking examples and challenging perspectives, while also – especially in the case of *Grasping the World* – giving useful theoretical perspectives for analyzing the museum and its significance. I would like to think that these, as much as *Reinventing the Museum*, will be devoured by museum professionals, for in their own way they offer just as much – and in some ways even more – to inspire ethically sensitive and innovative museum practice. For teaching, I would be torn between *Museum Studies* and *Grasping the World* – and ideally would want to draw on both. If really pressed, though (and in recognition that students are unlikely to buy two such anthologies), I would probably opt for the *Grasping the World* because it includes some pieces (e.g. Tony Bennett's 'Exhibitionary complex', Timothy Mitchell's 'Orientalism and the exhibitionary order' and James Clifford's 'Histories of the tribal and modern') that seem to me to be near essential on the kinds of (more anthropologically-oriented) courses that I teach. But those teaching museum studies within more of a literary frame, or with more emphasis on either art or American Studies, might find *Museum Studies* more appropriate. Such is the flexibility of the reader-as-book format that both of these collections could be used for introductory courses but also for advanced ones.

Moreover, as all of these books have been put together as the result of what appears to be considerable research and knowledge on the part of their editors, they offer even relatively well-read and traditional readers, as well as 'active' and distracted ones, much to engage their interest. If we do come to the end of the Age of the Reader, these will surely be a fitting and lasting testament to this museum-like form.

Note

¹ In S. Macdonald, *Behind the Scenes at the Science Museum* (Oxford: Berg, 2002).

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