

## Book Reviews

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**Paul Basu and Sharon Macdonald (eds), *Exhibition Experiment*, London: Blackwell Publishing, 2007, hardback, £19.99, pp.xiii +254**

*Exhibition Experiments* is an edited collection of philosophical musings and practice-based discussion about the potential of museum exhibitions to think through different aspects of theory and practice of representation in experimental ways. The concept of experimentation here refers both to the speculative and multifaceted process of discovery and knowledge production and to a willingness to push the boundaries of conventional exhibitionary forms. Although many different exhibitions are discussed, the editors draw explicitly on the insights of Science Studies theorists such as Bruno Latour and John Law who analyse scientific practice as a space for critical investigation and creative practice in (an often reflexive) social and political context. The museum is conceived as a kind of laboratory in which contemporary exhibitionary practice is 'also an experimental practice... a site for the generation rather than reproduction of knowledge and experience.' (Basu and Macdonald, introduction: 2). In this laboratory, 'various 'actants' (visitors, curators, objects, technologies, institutional and architectural spaces, and so forth) are brought into relation with each other with no sure sense of what the result will be. The exhibitions discussed are, it might be said, 'experiments in meaning-making' (*ibid*: 2-3).

The essays in the volume go on to describe a number of different 'exhibition-experiments' taking place in different museum-laboratories in many different countries. Indeed, one of the strengths of the volume is the diversity of different projects discussed and the different perspectives and museum cultures brought together. The prevailing context is the art museum, a space that generates a very specific attitude to experimentation (although chapters by Nuno Porto, Anne Lorimer and Alexa Färber, describe exhibitions in the Museum of Anthropology in Coimbra the Chicago Museum of Science of Industry and the Hanover Expo 2000 respectively). It must be said that there seems to be a greater flexibility in the idea of experimentation in the context of an art museum. In science centres, experimentation is intrinsic to the form of the institution (see Hein 1996), and natural history museums still tend to forgo display on science as process in favour of science as product (Pearce 1996, Macdonald 2002). In this context of the art exhibition, experimentation has a looser feel and visitors are more receptive to its charms and reflexive potentials. It is not surprising that the only chapter in which the audience felt confused or 'spooked' by the novel exhibitionary practice was in display on the human brain at the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry in which the artistic installation of white figures was referred to by visitors as 'ghostly' – an unintended effect (Lorimer, this volume). In turn, Xperiment's narration of their exhibition, *Good Bye Tomato – Good Morning Rice*, stands out as a fascinating musing of the way in which artists can collaboratively engage with scientific experiments (in this case, the genetic modification of rice), and exhibit this in such a manner as to encourage critical scrutiny and to present unexpected results to the public.

However, in the other chapters less focus is made on the uncertain or unpredictable results of these experiments, and more on the self-awareness of the experimenters, either institutional or curatorial. The term 'experiment' is used to signify a loosening of the representational authority of curator, artist and institution (gallery or museum) and a critical examination of these previously authoritative actors. As Cummings and Lewandowska note in their chapter (which examines their work with the Tate Gallery and the Bank of England in the exhibition *Capita*/amongst other projects): 'we attempt to collapse those spaces and participants down, so that exhibition is reconfigured as a conscious site of creative exchange for the

collaborative negotiation over the “making” and remaking of the work of the work of art.’ (p. 151). The results of these experiments are therefore somewhat foreclosed or predetermined: these exhibitions demonstrate that the museum gallery is like a science-studies view of laboratories (rather than a real laboratory), places where knowledge is produced collaboratively and exploratorily with continued self-reflection by those inside of it. In this context, the conventions of contemporary art exhibition provide a panacea to our representational dilemmas – the art exhibit allows for the representation both of knowledge and the means by which it is produced.

Not all of the chapters explicitly engage with the idea or form of the scientific experiment. Michelle Henning and Mieke Bal’s chapters focus on the ways in which new media (digital, film, and photography) are used in novel way within museum exhibitions; Paul Basu’s chapter focuses on the aesthetic of the labyrinth with specific reference to the architectural work of Daniel Liebeskind; and Peter Weibel and Bruno Latour describe how the exhibitions *Making Things Public* and *Iconoclash* were assemblages that in turn created the assemblage of the public. In this way, the notion of experiment is expanded, both viewed ‘as a process of discovery which comes from translating concepts into material form, in order to see how different aspects of this materiality may interact with each other in complex, not fully anticipated ways, and to thereby gain new insights into both these underlying concepts and the nature of immanent materiality itself.’ (Lorimer, this volume: 215).

The volume is a welcome addition to the growing body of readers addressing critical exhibitionary practice. Unlike many other edited texts, it unites work undertaken in art and science contexts and is practice based – the reader really gets the feel of exhibition makers thinking through their processes and productions.

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## References

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**Arthur MacGregor, *Curiosity and Enlightenment: Collectors and Collections from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth century*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007, hardback £45, pp. x + 386.**

Arthur MacGregor has spent over two decades on *Curiosity and Enlightenment*, and produced a monumental history of museums that will take another 20 years to surpass. Not since David Murray’s *Museums: Their history and their use* over a century ago has a single Anglophone author covered so much ground, spanning countries, centuries and disciplines. Although MacGregor has not solved all the problems posed by such an ambitious remit, this is nevertheless a landmark in the history of museums.

The book begins and ends with inclusive surveys discussing the broad collecting landscape in the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries respectively, sandwiching five discipline-specific chapters that explore the intervening period. After glancing at the Ancient and medieval predecessors of modern collections, he devotes the longest and most thorough chapter to cabinets of curiosity, which is unsurpassed in the rigour of its analysis of the exhibitionary rationales. MacGregor then sets out the core chapters a typology that he himself admits is partial, separating objects of art, nature, medicine, antiquity and technology. These specific collections emerged from and alongside the miscellaneous cabinets, and MacGregor’s accounts of them are comprehensive (especially impressive given his geographical scope) and

learned, outlining modes of collecting, strategies of display and audience constituencies. In the final chapter, by contrast, MacGregor never seems comfortable, admitting its partial coverage of the early nineteenth century rather than seeking to balance it.

Although the overall structure is helpful to the reader, within the sustained narrative over such a timescale there are hints of teleology, with periodic references to disciplinary 'progress' and particular attention to the emergence of systematic arrangements. He does, however, emphasize the endurance of earlier forms of governance, collecting and display even as new forms emerge. Although I do not presume to propose an alternative to his typological framework in such a Herculean task – he readily admits it has 'little significance beyond the method or organization of the present volume' (237) – it inevitably leads to biases and lacunae. I would have been interested, for example, to see more attention to exotic collections that we would now class as anthropology. Within his macro-structure, MacGregor exercises freedom to dip at will into particular episodes or collections (which is beguiling but frustrating in equal measure), at other times simply presenting the key collections of a particular type in series. The subjects of his digressions can be fascinating, such as Carl Schilbach's 'wooden library', in which each volume was created from a different species of tree, the wood forming the spine and covers that encased the preserved fruits and leaves. Such tangents do not, however, lend themselves to a coherent narrative whole.

The periodic detours do not distract from the wonder of the sheer expanse of the subject matter, and the skill with which MacGregor adjusts his scale of focus. At its grandest, *Curiosity and Enlightenment* discusses the intellectual unpinning, national agendas and governance of museums (he is especially interested in the shift from private to public). The author seems to take greatest delight, however, in exploring the nitty-gritty of museum work, the preserving, modelling, lighting and arranging. Cabinets, collections and museums are nicely contextualized through comparison and connection with gardens, libraries, universities and other sites. MacGregor weaves adeptly back and forth from object to image and especially from thing to text: his ongoing discussion of the meaning, use and production of catalogues that runs through the volume is especially original and valuable. In this and other respects, this work not only synthesises but adds to what we know about early modern collections.

Ironically, however, especially given the thousand-odd works cited, MacGregor is guilty of sins of bibliographic omission. Many important texts from this decade are absent, and he has chosen to eschew the literature and methodology of those who approach the history of museums from a museological perspective. No mention is made of Tony Bennett, Simon Knell or Eilean Hooper-Greenhill; the only reference to Susan Pearce is to an article in *Journal of the History of Collections*. And yet however grave one considers its faults, they fade when one considers *Curiosity and Enlightenment* in totality. It is a beautifully produced, wonderfully illustrated, and above all a scholarly work, written calmly with MacGregor's characteristic dry wit. This is perhaps not a book that one would want, or need, to read cover to cover; rather, it is an essential reference work that every museologist should have on their shelf.

This year marks the silver jubilee of the conference that MacGregor and the late Oliver Impey organized that gave rise to *The Origins of Museums*. That volume launched a fresh wave of historical scholarship on collections; *Curiosity and Enlightenment* will provide a new generation of museum historians with a starting post.

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**Richard Sandell, *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference*, London: Routledge, 2007, paper £22.99, pp. xiii+223**

This is an essential book for those interested in the roles museums play in society. Therefore, it is important reading for museum practitioners, policy makers and academics. It is based upon the results of empirical research carried out at St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art, Glasgow and Anne Frank House, Amsterdam. The second part of the book is based upon *Buried in the Footnotes* – an AHRC-funded research project undertaken by the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries at the University of Leicester.

There is a clear ideological thread running through this book that is made clear by the author. Sandell argues that museums can counter prejudice through specifically designing exhibitions and activities to achieve that end. Laudably, he states that he did not gather evidence to prove a particular position, but inevitably the design of the research, the case studies chosen and the analysis have been shaped by that starting point and the assumptions that underlie it. This does not invalidate the approach but the reader needs to be very conscious of the reference points in order to place the work in context.

This book is an example of what has been described by Dibley (2005: 6) as a redemptive narrative. The assumption behind it is that 'the museum is an institutional form that can be redeemed from [a] legacy of racism, classism and sexism'. This position is one that can be clearly identified in the literature and is bound up with assumptions about the democratic potential of museums. Inevitable concerns can be raised that the moral difference between using museums consciously to pursue a political objective and their traditional position of unconsciously reflecting a dominant ideology might be a fine one. Who decides upon the stance to take, and by what right do they make that decision? Sandell discusses this dilemma but concludes that museums nevertheless are obliged to attempt to shape the ways that difference is viewed (p. 195). Cultural intermediaries have always played this role and it is refreshing for a commentator to be clear and unapologetic about the position being taken.

A problem that Sandell himself identifies (p. 15) is the unpredictability of the response of visitors to museum displays. He states correctly that there is evidence (empirical and theoretical – some of which Sandell offers through his study) that 'a degree of influence on the part of cultural producers' can be identified. I agree with the assertion that production is important in understanding the influences that govern the responses of visitors (p.175), but feel that Sandell overemphasises its importance. Visitor responses to displays vary across people and contexts. For example, in some situations the curatorial voice could strongly influence visitor experience, but in others visitors might privilege personal interpretations of museum representations. These differences might be explored in a Bourdieuan sense, by considering the different extent to which people's individual histories of cultural engagement render them more or less able and inclined to 'master' curatorial codes. While there will be commonalities between individual responses there may also be considerable differences. As an example (p. 90) Sandell discusses responses that he describes as prejudiced and illiberal.

The empirical research carried out at St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art and Anne Frank House has been well constructed and effectively carried out. It would have been interesting to have known more about respondents so that their comments could have been placed in context to a greater degree. Their responses might be understood more effectively if short interviews had been undertaken to allow them to talk freely about themselves and their motivations. However, despite this reservation the quotations provide a fascinating insight into the attitudes of these particular respondents. The range of theoretical approaches used to analyse the data, such as performativity, constructivism, and encoding and decoding, amongst others, are appropriate, but it might have helped to give a rationale for the approaches taken.. In what way do particular theoretical tools help to resolve the aims of the research? Why were some included and others left out? Some of these approaches have been used elsewhere, for example Bella Dicks (2000) explores the use of encoding and decoding in her study of the Rhondda Heritage Park and this might have been usefully referred to as a precedent.

Other recent studies that might have helped to provide further insight are large-scale quantitative studies of cultural consumption, for example, *Social Status, Lifestyle and Cultural Consumption: A Comparative Study* (<http://users.ox.ac.uk/~sfos0006/status.html>). This

demonstrates that cultural consumption and social stratification do not map onto each other in a simplistic way, suggesting that the relationship between producer and consumer is even more complex than previously thought. It also questions the assumed extent of the ability of museums to influence society. The results show that less than 40% of their respondents visited a museum or gallery in the last 12 months. This makes some of the rhetorical claims made for museums in this area hard to justify.

The structure of the book works quite well but perhaps would have benefited from a more logical flow. A clearer description of aims, methods, research frameworks, analysis and conclusions would have made it easier to navigate. Greater links could have been made between the second half of the book (dealing with cultural production) and the first. The introductory section might have explained this more fully. It might have also helped to have defined some of the terms used.

Sandell is a strong and effective advocate for the conscious use of museums to address questions of difference. Having a strong personal stance inevitably makes objectivity in research difficult to achieve and sometimes interferes with the judgements that a researcher makes. The author is conscious of this and has tried to prevent it from happening although it is impossible to stop it entirely. If a different starting point was used for the research the result might look quite different. The question is whether this has overly influenced the conclusions drawn. Ultimately, I do not feel they have: the analysis draws on well known approaches that have been used many times elsewhere and Sandell uses them effectively. However, a greater reliance on careful argument rather than exultation might have made the case stronger.

This work adds to our knowledge of the roles museums play in society and their potential for changing attitudes. However, much more needs to be done to fully appreciate the role they play in everyday life.

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## References

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