

Book Reviews

Janet Marstine (ed.), *New Museum Theory and Practice: An Introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006, paperback, pp.v + 322.

The idea of frames and framing is a recurrent theme of this book. In the introduction Marstine draws upon Jacques Derrida's work to make the point that the act of framing is not neutral but productive and she applies this analogy to museums:

Frames not only set boundaries; they provide an ideologically based narrative context that colors our understanding of what's included. In fact, rather than isolating a work from the wider world, framing links the two. Architectural features, lighting design, audio-tour headsets, the museum café, and the larger museum itself are all framing devices. Administrative processes such as registration and cataloguing are at least as important as curation and design, those elements visible to the public (p.5).

Framing is an issue which similarly raises its head with any volume which seeks to capture a field as broad as 'new museum theory and practice'. In recent years, there have been many books which have sought to encapsulate the burgeoning field of new museology and inevitably each of them has grappled with the question of where to draw the boundaries, what to include, what to leave out, and how to organise a diverse range of topics for the uninitiated reader. One approach has been to reproduce canonical texts in a reader format irrespective of the diversity of their origins. Another has been to commission new articles across a range of key areas mapping out emerging contours of the field as they currently appear to the editor. This volume has adopted the second route of commissioning 12 new chapters addressing what Marstine sees as key topics for study prefaced by an extensive survey essay in the form of an introduction. Chapters are divided into 2 sections: *Part 1: Defining New Museum Theory*, and *Part 2: Looking to the Future: Theory into Practice*. Part 1 is further sub-divided into *A: Surveys and Groundwork*, and *B: Case Studies in Contemporary Practice*. As the titles indicate part 1 is intended to lay the foundations by introducing key issues while part 2 is meant to help students to see how they might develop their own critiques and new practice.

The volume is explicitly oriented towards the reader coming to this subject for the first time (students and museum professionals) and specifically, although not exclusively, those interested in art. For this purpose each chapter is prefaced by a short introduction from Marstine which summarises the key points and contextualizes each individual author's approach. Chapters are followed by a set of questions for discussion which could easily be used to structure seminars or to support self-directed study. The questions are written so as to check for basic understanding of the key points, probe deeper conceptual engagement, and to encourage critical reflection and discussion. The questions are written to work in a cumulative fashion referring the reader back to the previous readings and thereby encouraging them to link different chapters and case studies. This approach will have its drawbacks for those who wish to read selectively and for readers more familiar with this material. Furthermore, in a few places the questions reference too broad a range of knowledge to be supported by the chapters alone. However, for the student new to museology this book will provide a valuable entrée and teachers will find the format user-friendly.

In the introduction Marstine explains the rationale behind the book's overtly pedagogical structure, her emphasis on developing critical thinking, and what she sees as their common purpose:

As a unity, the essays call for the transformation of the museum from a site of worship and awe to one of critical enquiry; they look to a museum that is transparent in its decision-making, willing to share power, and activist in promoting human rights. The larger goal of the project is to empower the reader to become an advocate for change (p.x).

Lindauer's chapter, the *Critical Museum Visitor* is a particularly good example of this in practice. Her chapter is intended to support the activity of analysing a museum display and, specifically, to demonstrate how to synthesise individual observations about aspects of displays into a coherent and critical argument. It is one of the most effective and readable discussions I have seen on this topic and I particularly like how Lindauer shows the reader how she brings together her analysis of museum design and interpretation with concerns relating to broader cultural politics and the museum's institutional context. Having used this chapter with my own students I can report that they find Lindauer's discussion of real help when engaged in their own critical analyses of displays.

Marstine's own introduction is also of significant value as it serves not just to map out key ideas and debates but to situate those arguments within their different disciplinary and intellectual contexts; something often left more implicit in museological critique but which is, again, of considerable help to students attempting to orient themselves within a new multi-disciplinary field. Marstine's choice to structure her introduction under 4 headings: museum as *shrine*, *market-driven industry*, *colonizing space* and *post-museum* (p.8-9) works particularly well to bring out the often contradictory range of values which circulate around museums and museum work. Similarly instructive is the way Marstine plots the connections between new museology and institutional critique within art since the 1960s. In Lindauer's, Marstine's and a number of the other chapters it is clear that authors are writing from the perspective of having personally taught this subject over many years.

The strengths of this book are therefore that it offers a range of original case-studies from many excellent authors written in a cogent and engaging manner which will be extremely accessible to readers, particularly students in art and museum studies. Eric Gable, Julie McGee, and Moira Simpson's contributions, for example, illuminate many complex and significant challenges to the very idea of the museum. Chapters on conservation and university museums also provide food for thought and are notable additions because they tend not to appear on the usual list of new museology topics. As a whole the book covers a wide spectrum encompassing: museum architecture; feminist art curating; the challenges of conserving art; race, history and cultural studies at Monticello; spectacle and democracy in the museum; knowledge and museums in aboriginal museums; restructuring South African museums post-apartheid; exhibitions analysis; virtual museums; studio art production and critique; university museums and institutional critique; museum archives and institutional identity.

As indicated above, by and large, the chapters work well in their own right and the format establishes helpful links from one to the next. My one reservation is that the book's overall sense of continuity and flow is somewhat disrupted by the change of tone and focus between chapters. In some places authors speak directly and more informally to the student reader offering helpful hints for study and practice. Others adopt a more conventional academic approach and sense of distance. Similarly, it is fair to say that some chapters have more in common than others. A good proportion is primarily concerned with cultural politics and the role of museums in society, while the others are more focused on art-related concerns and professional issues for the student reader or museum practitioner. Clearly, this is one consequence of the pedagogical structure discussed above and, specifically, the two-part arrangement. However, what is lost in terms of overall flow is gained at the level of the individual chapter and the book's pedagogical usefulness. Caveats aside, this book has much to offer and should certainly be of interest to students of museum and gallery studies.

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John Potvin and Alla Myzelev (eds), *Material Cultures, 1740-1920; The Meanings and Pleasures of Collecting*, Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2009, hardback, £55, pp.250.

The working title for this book was *Collecting Subjects in Britain, 1700-1914: The Visual Meanings and Pleasures of Material Culture*, and perhaps that better reflected its ambitious aims and wide-ranging contents. The editors have sought to compile an anthology that challenges and overcomes traditional tropes in literature relating to collecting and collections, and most of the contributors seek to add much-needed complexity to the notions of gender, sexuality, public/private spheres, consumption, compulsion, sociability and aesthetics by which accumulations of material culture have traditionally been analyzed. Refreshingly, the authors tackle mostly the applied and decorative arts, which by their ubiquity include a wider audience in their discursive impact. Despite the great range of periods, objects, subjects, and theories the book covers, chapters are organized so that the logic of their arguments flows from one to the next, entering by association into dialogue with its neighbours, although individual contributions can just as successfully be dipped into according to the reader's relevant interest. In some ways, this is an anthology that wants to be a monograph; the first half of the introduction, whose argument is actually more effective after reading the individual chapters, can stand alone as a confident and frequently insightful critique of collecting literature, and a review of questions that remain unanswered.

Collecting and identity-formation forms a central theme across the chapters in this book, and the authors examine it in various ways. Stacey Sloboda, in her examination of female collectors of porcelain in the eighteenth-century, illustrates how cultural critics of the time defined and characterized porcelain collecting as a feminine and feminizing activity devoid of aesthetic value because of its commodity origins. By contrast, Clive Edwards' review of the rhetoric around female domestic crafts from 1750-1900 redefines a collection as an amassing of objects literally produced by the accumulator herself, who thus independently took on and expressed her identity through the products of her hobbies. Anne Anderson updates Sloboda's chapter by tracing debates around blue-and-white china in the late nineteenth-century, and finding that despite the attempts of art experts like Whistler and Rossetti to elevate its aesthetic status, Victorian "Chinamaniacs" continued to be suspiciously associated with sexual and social deviance and effeminacy. In the same period, John Potvin's subjects, the artists and partners Charles Shannon and Charles Ricketts, defined and negotiated their queer identities through their constructed interiors and displayed collections in a series of shared London residences.

Collecting as a means of forming, controlling, and expressing national identities is also an important theme in the book, touching on Imperial and Orientalist attitudes. Julie Codell's contribution, although not strictly about collecting, traces the association of pre-industrial craft with Indian identity under the Raj; she points out the continued impact of this definition of Indian national authenticity in modern policy-making and scholarship. Likewise, Joseph McBrinn analyzes Irish-made Celtic jewelry as an object of taste but also of national identity – both fraught and heroic as an aesthetic signifier of the Irish subject. Craft and collecting also has a place in Alla Myzelev's chapter on Haslemere Museum's origins in nineteenth-century preoccupations with defining Britain's authentic national identity in a mythical pre-industrial era of peasant craft. She points out its contradictory projection of domestic production within a private sphere into a public discourse about heritage and taste. Elizabeth Kramer's sophisticated history of the fashionable deployment of Japanese textiles in the British Victorian interior uses advice literature and case studies of collectors to challenge accepted binaries of taste across class and gender. Joan DelPlato's contribution considers the painstakingly detailed but misleadingly inauthentic Orientalist harem paintings of the Victorian artist John Frederick Lewis, whose *trompe l'oeuil* textiles fetishized Eastern modes and morals.

The purpose and place of museums is likewise touched upon by many of the contributors to this volume. Anastasia Filippopoliti describes the private museum of natural history created by the Victorian collector John Fiott Lee in his home at Hartwell House, and through the published and archival records of this vanished assemblage shows how it related to existing public museums of the time. The institutional character of this mid-Victorian home contrasts with the choreographed interiors of John Potvin's collectors, who deployed museal conventions to highlight the aesthetic importance of their sentimental objects. Nadine Rottau's chapter is

similar to Alla Myzelev's in that it also traces the didactic function of Victorian museums in defining good and bad taste in design. In discussing the educational goals of the Museum of Ornamental Art (later the Victoria and Albert Museum), she teases out the role of the Museum in popularizing elite understandings of material authenticity in design.

The real contribution of this volume to scholarship is its consistent problematizing of conventional definitions of collecting's function, symbolism, and significance to individuals and society at large. While all the authors reference the important thinkers and theorists of material culture – Appadurai, Attfield, Baudrillard, Bourdieu, Debord, Foucault, Latour, Miller, and Pearce, along with older aesthetic philosophers – the case studies that form the nuclei of most individual chapters prove that reality is more complicated, and that it, like collections, is a fluid bricolage of intentions and outcomes. The many methodologies and theoretical approaches used by the authors are also useful examples to students and early career scholars, to whom this book might bring the most benefit. Rhetorical analysis, phenomenology and psychoanalysis are just some of the approaches brought to bear on a multiplicity of sources ranging from archival manuscripts, images and illustrations, biography, social satire, advice literature, maps, and museum didactic texts. Frequently, contributors use a combination of sources and systems of analysis, which results in satisfyingly nuanced discussions.

The success of this book, however, is perhaps also its simultaneous failure, inasmuch as its scope leaves little room to satisfactorily develop any given theoretical or historical thread, and the editors might have tried harder to contain their authors' ambitions to better support the central contentions of the volume. In reading the chapters, one feels that there remains much more to be said, and many more aspects to the collections and collecting activities described. However, as in the collected object itself, it is the mystery of the unknown that inspires the continuing quest to know more.

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