

Book Review

***Museums and the Public Sphere.* By Jennifer Barrett. Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011. Pp. viii + 198.**

Born in the late eighteenth century and linked to the era's changing conceptions of 'the people' and the state, public museums continue to be important cultural institutions. Reflecting broader social and cultural developments of the late twentieth century and influenced by the 'new museology,' contemporary museums aim to better engage, represent, and understand their various publics. They increasingly seek to incorporate diversity, accessibility, democratic principles and alternative perspectives that challenge traditional museum practices. According to Jennifer Barrett, however, the relationship between the museum and the public is under-theorized. She argues that without a critical engagement with the notion of 'the public' and related terms such as 'democracy' and 'community,' museums run the risk of repackaging old practices in new guises without making any significant changes. She argues that more nuanced understandings of 'the public' and 'the public sphere' are necessary if museums are to understand their relationship with their visitors, have realistic expectations about what they can achieve and how they can achieve it, and realize their democratic potential. In short, such an approach is necessary in order to better link theory, research and practice.

Barrett draws on Habermas to move beyond established critical discourses that evoke the more authoritarian aspects of museums. She explores the museum's role as an institution of the public sphere that has the potential to effectively incorporate more democratic principles and relationships in its practices. In so doing she makes an important and timely contribution to the field. Barrett argues that although museum specialists commonly refer to museums as significant public institutions, they have not explicitly engaged with Habermas' influential work on the public sphere. She further claims that although Habermas' work references locations wherein public discourse takes place, he does not fully engage with space and visibility in his theorizing. His limiting notion of the *literary* public sphere fails to recognize non-literary forms of discourse, which are an important aspect of modern public life. As such, he overlooks museums as significant public institutions. Barrett draws on scholarship from a range of disciplines, particularly art history, to rework Habermas' notion of the public sphere as a *cultural* public sphere in order to better understand the relationship between museums and the public in modern societies. In so doing, she effectively bridges the cultural and political domains and demonstrates, in a concrete manner, how museums have been, and continue to be involved in political processes. Her more flexible conception of the public sphere allows room for non-literary forms of discourse as well as non-universal, competing, and counter-publics.

Chapter One offers a detailed critical review of Habermas' conception of the public sphere as outlined in his *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989). The public sphere is a metaphorical space between the people and the state in democratic society, where state and civil society intersect and where issues of public significance are debated and discussed through speech and writing. Drawing on the work of critics such as Eley, Fraser, and Benhabib, Barrett argues that in privileging literary discourse Habermas' public sphere is exclusionary, while it fails to adequately explore the central role played by space, visibility, and non-literary forms of discourse, such as art. Moreover, Habermas' emphasis on rationality relegates art to the realm of the irrational and subjective, and as such, to the private sphere. Barrett argues that spatiality was an important aspect of modernity, as public

spaces in the city as well as world fairs, museums, arcades, and the like, provided spaces in which the bourgeoisie came to understand itself as a public. Significantly, in the same era which salons, cafés, and other spaces conducive to public discourse emerged, so too did public museums.

Chapter Two draws on museum scholarship from Bennett, Duncan, and Hooper-Greenhill, among others, to extend the author's main argument and outline the evolution of the modern museum as a key public institution from the late eighteenth century onwards. Since their emergence in the late eighteenth century, museums have been an important aspect of modernity and social life, reflective of changing ideas about the relationship between state and society. Museums are widely recognized for their educational and civilizing functions, as well as their role as disciplinary institutions and instruments of governance that served to display the power of the state to the people. Barrett considers museums from an alternative, Habermasian perspective as part of the public sphere of the nineteenth century. She turns to art history to demonstrate the significant role played by visual discourses in modern public life and to extend Habermas' notion of public discourse to include the cultural. Her analysis of representations of the public sphere in eighteenth and nineteenth century paintings, including David's *The Tennis Court Oath, 20th June 1789* (1791) and Boilly's *Interior of a Parisian Café* (1815) demonstrates the importance of art in communicating ideas about social and political life to the public during this time period.

Chapter Three delves more deeply into the idea of public space. For Habermas, it is the rational discussion of public matters within a space that determines its 'publicness'; the physical site itself is irrelevant. According to Barrett, however, the physical aspects of public spaces 'are far more central to the production of the public sphere, and to our understanding of democracy, than [Habermas] or his critics imagine' (p. 97). Though museums are commonly understood as spaces of public significance within museology, they remain neglected by scholars on public space in geography and political science. Scholarship from theorists such as Zukin, Deutsche, and particularly, Foucault, is used to highlight the importance of material space in modern society. Foucault's notion of heterotopias, Barrett argues, can complement the Habermasian public sphere by accommodating the contestable, heterogeneous nature of democracy as experienced in everyday life.

The final two chapters turn from theory to practice to explore approaches to understanding the museum's public through visitor studies, as well as the role of the museum curator in the twenty-first century. Using Bourdieu's pioneering 1960s work on museum-goers as a starting point, Barrett critically evaluates different approaches to audience research. In general, visitor studies to date have aimed to reduce complexity through quantitative survey methods at the expense of more in-depth understandings of the museum's various publics. Barrett argues that research should embrace complexity in order to better understand museum audiences. To do this, fundamental concepts such as 'public,' 'audience,' and 'community' must first be explored in greater detail in order to foster more nuanced understandings of the relationship between museums and their visitors. The final chapter questions the efficacy of the discourse within the new museology that presents curators as barriers to museums being 'public.' Outlining the different roles played by curators in anthropology, art, and social history, Barrett advocates that curators should continue to play an active role in contemporary museums as public intellectuals while respecting an ethos of participation, debate, and recognizing diversity. The author concludes by re-asserting the need for a 'post-Habermasian,' *cultural* conception of the public sphere that allows room for the processual and heterogeneous nature of democracy.

Barrett's work is well informed, strongly interdisciplinary, and theoretically rich. Her detailed treatment of Habermas and examination of key theoretical concepts move far beyond the superficial to explore some oft-neglected assumptions about the role of the modern museum in public life. Not only does her work contribute to museum studies, but also to social and political theory through her reformulation of Habermas' public sphere as a cultural public sphere. Moreover, although the book is theoretical in its orientation, it goes beyond the speculative by examining the methodological implications of its theoretical propositions. The result is an excellent theoretical synthesis and reconceptualization of past scholarship that also serves as a solid starting point for conducting empirical research. Finally, the book

captures the interesting position that museums hold at the intersection of disciplines that range from art history to political science. As such, it is of interest to a wide range of scholars concerned with the relationship between culture, space, and political processes, as well as museum specialists and practitioners.

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