

Book Review

Fiona Candlin, *Micromuseology: An Analysis of Small Independent Museums*, Bloomsbury: London, 2016, paperback £28.99, pp. 224

This book is the first to tackle micromuseums from an academic viewpoint. Previous approaches to small museums have generally been from a practical perspective (Catlin-Legutko and Klinger 2011), or written for a lay audience (Davies 2010; Redington 2002). Micromuseums are generally considered to be small, single-themed and independent institutions (12). Candlin deepens this definition through her investigation of concepts of size (whether of collections, visitor numbers or physical site), perceptions of thematic displays and levels of autonomy. She aims to question assumptions and dominant debates within museology through her analysis of micromuseums. Her primary objective is to explore whether looking to these types of institutes, rather than 'typical' museums, will broaden thinking in museum philosophy. She asks if the study will 'enable researchers to reconceive notions of curation, collections, the public, of what it means to visit a museum, and of the knowledge that is generated therein' (2). Ultimately, she wishes to demonstrate how the examination of micromuseums 'can impact the international sphere of museology' (5).

This book is primarily intended for academic researchers in the fields of museum studies, material culture studies and anthropology. Candlin, a Professor of Museology at University of London, develops concepts with ease. For example, she examines how people relate to a space through a case study of a visit to the Vintage Wireless Museum (London). Here, she fluidly delves into the idea of the micromuseum as a public space, applying concepts from a wide array of theorists including Tony Bennett, Hannah Arendt, Nancy Fraser and Jürgen Habermas. This book provides an introduction to the prominent theorists in museology discourses (including Tony Bennett and Eileen Hooper-Greenhill), and as it is combined with practical examples, it could be particularly beneficial for new students to the field.

Candlin scoured the UK for micromuseums, and visited over fifty. She goes into detail regarding her experiences at the Bakelite Museum (Somerset), British in India Museum (Nelson), HM Prison Dartmoor Museum (Devon), Lurgan History Museum (Armagh), Museum of Witchcraft (Cornwall), Valiant Soldier Museum (Buckfastleigh) and Vintage Wireless Museum (London), and in her final chapter, she references several more sites. She uses the anthropological approach of thick description to document her responses. She also undertakes semi-structured interviews and includes spontaneous interactions with visitors or staff, and supplements this with the experiences of other visitors gleaned through museum comment books and online research sources such as blogs and TripAdvisor.

Following an introduction to the study, Candlin examines her experiences at different micromuseums through five concepts in five chapters: space, objects, multi-perspectives, donors and display techniques. The first chapter examines the influence a micromuseum owner can have on the particular encounters a visitor has, as well as how people relate to a space. As many micromuseums do not have written interpretation and have non-typical operating hours, the presence of a guide is often required both for physical access in addition to deeper comprehension and appreciation of displayed material. The author examines concepts relating to objects, their circuits of use and whether they retain their potency even when divorced from their intended use and are displayed in a cabinet. Candlin introduces the idea that instead of considering objects as being in discrete live and dead states, a heterogeneous means of exploring object vitality could instead be used to allow for the potentials of objects combining

with other objects and/or site contexts. The concepts of partisan curator and multi-perspective exhibitions demonstrate again how central the people connected to the micromuseum are to the visitor experience. Typically, micromuseums have a single narrative, but following visitor queries, the complexities of the micromuseum's themes can be teased out. The motivations of object donors, rarely referred to in museums, are explored through the meticulous record-keeping of the founder of the British in India Museum. Through reflections on gift giving, Candlin posits that this micromuseum (which displays material according to donor, and not by theme or by arranging it in chronological order) serves the public as a resting place for objects and a 'guarantee against non-existence' (115). Display techniques are analyzed alongside thoughts on objects and interpretation. Candlin highlights the aesthetic pleasure derived from seeing many of one type of object, along with surrealistic responses by visitors to uncanny combinations of material. Armed with these reflections, she questions the well-established museum approach to one object being representational of many objects, or of a theme or an historic episode. In the concluding chapter Candlin summarizes different traits of micromuseums (interior space, landscape, curators, visitors, display and objects) while documenting many of the sites she does not focus on in depth in the previous chapters. One of the strengths of the book is Candlin's ability to reflect on her experiences at these specialized sites and apply them to larger museums. She concludes that they are dynamic places where each visit can be different as it constitutes a personal interaction with a particular world created from a distinctive perspective.

While Candlin situates her analysis of micromuseums in the established canon of museology, it would have been interesting to apply more contemporary debates to her research. For example, when discussing micromuseum locations, she makes the point that museums do have a place in the regions, not only the civic centres, and that museums can influence how people perceive places. This concept of human geography and museums could have been explored in relation to rural museums closing due to lack of funding or the recent displacement of a significant photography collection from Bradford to London (Thorpe 2016). Another aspect that could have been expanded is the suggestion that micromuseums represent elements that are not observed in other museums. An example cited was the caravans of the Gordon Boswell Romany Museum. The material exhibited at the micromuseum is not unique as the Bristol Museum & Art Gallery also have a caravan on display, while the Pembrokeshire Museum Service created a touring caravan that was shortlisted in 2004 for the Museum of the Year award (Barnes 2004). Therefore, the claim that micromuseums display material with no counterpart in other museums could have been further investigated.

The objective of the book is to reignite museum thinking, and key concepts (space, objects, multi-perspectives, donors and display techniques) are examined in each chapter. However, although Candlin articulates the ways in which researchers can rethink the museum, she does not provide clear means to do so. For example, an important element was the humanization of the donors, collectors, curators and owners that is more apparent in micromuseums than in larger, mainstream museums. There were no overt suggestions for readers who may work in larger museums to enable them to humanize their practise, or how to re-orient museology towards that goal. Candlin commences the book wondering what form a micromuseology could take and through her realization of the variety of practices and responses in micromuseums, suggests a less neat approach to museology. She suggests that the messiness of micromuseology could generate awareness of the inconsistencies of how different museums operate. It would have been interesting if Candlin had explored this concept in more depth with arguments aligned to what she considers to be 'neat' museology. The existence of a book that academically investigates micromuseums may be a first step in the author's aim of micromuseums contributing towards museology. Future work regarding the impact of micromuseology on museology with recommendations that researchers could apply and extend from Candlin's findings would be welcome.

References

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