

Book Reviews

Claire Robins, *Curious Lessons in the Museum: The Pedagogic Potential of Artists' Interventions*, Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2013, hardback, £55, pp. 241

The growth of artist's interventions in museums and historic sites is a significant phenomenon. Whilst this can be traced back at least to the early twentieth century, it has become almost ubiquitous within interpretive programmes in recent years. It is, for example, a key focus of the National Trust; showing and commissioning contemporary art through their Trust New Art programme is a core audience development strategy of the Trust. Of course, Trust New Art is a provocative title because it can be read in many ways; for me, there's a silent question mark. Should we trust art interventions? Trust them to do what exactly? Apart from the perhaps classic books by McShine (1999) and Putnam (2001), and pockets of critical analysis from writers such as Susan Pearce (1999) and Hal Foster (2004), there has been a noticeable lack of major publications in this emerging field of research that might provide a context in which these questions could be considered. Claire Robins asserts that her new book is positioned as a serious contribution, a corrective measure. I have to agree. Tracing a critical path from the early twentieth century 'confrontational aesthetics' (53) of Duchamp and the Surrealists, to the early twenty first century 'cosy rapport' (199) between museums and artists, *Curious Lessons* is a thoroughly researched, well-written, detailed analysis of the development of artists' interventions in museum spaces.

Divided into three sections, Part One sets the underlying context, that of museum pedagogy, and traces the development of interventions in the early and mid twentieth century. It is notable that the recent instrumentalization of interventionist practice grew out of education staff seeing the potential of working with artists, such as the Contemporary Arts Programme of the Brontë Parsonage Museum started by Andrew McCarthy in 2004 when he was an Education Officer. Also, the fact that many artists also work in museums was a fact significant enough within this relationship to warrant a conference at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2012. However, Robins quite rightly articulates that interventions need to be set in a much broader conception of museums as inherently pedagogical institutions. Building on the now well-documented shift from collections to audiences represented by Vergo's 'New Museology' (1989), Robins examines the ways in which artists are implicated in this shifting epistemological territory. She notes that 'the spirit of institutional critique and effective methodologies for achieving destabilization of institutional discourse are established' (57) amongst artists such as Duchamp and the Surrealists early in the twentieth century, but argues that it is later during the 1970s, through the work of artists such as Buren, Asher, Haacke and Broodthaers the real power of institutional critique was established.

Part Two, with its focus on humour, irony and parody, explores the ways in which these strategies used by artists form part of the complex ways meaning is created in museums. Echoing my initial question of trust, Robins asks what are visitors supposed to learn if many of these interventions are unpicking the very fabric of the institution on which they could rely? She suggests 'that their disruptive registers are a counterpoint to didacticism and moreover provide an impetus for independent learning' (86). It is in this section that Robins includes her own work as a case study and this is, in fact, a particularly useful chapter. The analysis of her 'faux' tour of the William Morris Gallery in 2005, *An Elite Experience for Everyone*, beautifully reveals the rich complexity of staff, artist and visitor relations. The fact that Robins is speaking from her own experience as the 'artist', means she is able to rigorously unpick the script she

developed for this performance; it is both hilarious and deeply revealing regarding the audience response to her use of 'trickster' tactics and parody.

Part Three, *Contemporary Museums and the Role of Artists' Interventions* focuses on both well known, and more obscure case studies from the 1990s onwards, such as Susan Hiller's 1994 exhibition *At The Freud Museum*; Hans Haacke's *Mixed Messages* exhibition at the Serpentine and Karen Ingham's 2009 work *Narrative Remains* at the Hunterian Museum. I wondered about the inclusion of a detailed analysis of Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum* project in this section, as it is already a very well documented case study and Robins 'does not attempt a comprehensive survey' (11); it is, however, one of the most important and celebrated interventions and as such, deserves its place. I felt that the more recent case studies Robins deals with in the final chapter – The Affable Interventionists – were more useful in relation to the book's stated aim of contributing new research. Here, Robins considers Jeremy Deller's powerful *Baghdad 5th March 2007*, shown at the Imperial War Museum, which she argues demonstrates the shift away from didacticism towards work which enables 'more general and speculative debates' (203). With an analysis of Willem de Rooij's installation *Intolerance* at the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin in 2010 Robins, perhaps drawing on Heidegger's consideration of what constitutes the 'work', notes that the artists are less interested in the status of the objects they exhibit, but in 'museum space [as] just one of many within wider systems of production, human relations and knowledge production' (211). As Bourriaud suggests, museums are just another kind of raw material (2002: 9).

For those exploring this emerging field of practice, whether student, academic or museum employee, Robins book is an undeniably long-overdue contribution with a rich bibliography. She argues powerfully that, no we should probably not trust artists' interventions, artists never were geniuses with greater insight than ordinary mortals and artworks can still be contradictory in their ability to alienate audiences at the same time as having a role in communicating with them. However we should, through encounters with these interventionist tactics, be much more enabled to embrace constructivist meaning making processes which have formed the ideological basis for contemporary museum pedagogy, and thus learn to trust ourselves in an environment where the lines between inside and outside the institution are much more blurred.

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Elizabeth Edwards, *The Camera as Historian – Amateur Photographers and Historical Imagination, 1885-1918*, London & Durham: Duke University Press, 2012, paperback £19.99, pp. v+326

Elizabeth Edwards' most recent work comprehensively documents the role and concept of the amateur photographic survey movement in nineteenth and early twentieth century Britain. It is a compelling and fascinating account that evidently reveals both the author's labour of love for this field, and her desire to further knowledge within it. Photographic history and visual culture remains Edwards' area of expertise, as Research Professor of Photographic History and Director of the Photographic History Research Centre at De Montfort University in Leicester. She is thus able to engage with, and build substantially upon, the ideas surrounding the form and complexity of photographs raised in her previous works. This particular monograph would appeal primarily to historians examining this Victorian era and those working within the fields of photography and visual culture, but would also be of relevance and benefit to museologists, historical geographers and more general readers.

In essence, this volume critiques the role of these groups of amateur photographers, and the power of their photographic collections and themes they depicted, by analysing modern memory through the lens of the local. This is simultaneously placed within broader discussions regarding issues of cultural identity and 'Englishness' as a form of nationhood. Such an approach is strikingly refreshing for those more familiar with imperialist narratives of this period, with Edwards noting, 'What is striking throughout the discourse of survey, there was an almost total absence of empire in an overtly imperialist form' (158). A focus on the 'historical imagination', and its interaction with photographs, remains a running thread throughout the volume. It is used to illustrate how this generation dutifully confronted the rapid change of the Victorian era by capturing 55,000 images from around 1000 amateur photographers. It is notably apparent that the debates raised in Chapter 5 about the tensions of a nostalgic sense of loss in contrast to forward-thinking visions of the future, that brought about a sense of photographic preservation through leisure practices, seem equally relevant today; the intention of photographically capturing a passing, disappearing landscape for the benefit of future generations seems to echo eerily with the multitude of contemporary snapshots captured by frenzied cameras and mobile phones.

Edwards delves into significant detail, yet skilfully draws out over-arching themes throughout this tome. Towns, cities and village features were all recorded, though many of the photographs were '[...] not particularly good by any standard, technical or aesthetic' (xii). Instead, the author emphasizes the important trope of scientific accuracy and precision in their production, raises valid issues of authenticity and regulation (80), and promotes their educational role as larger collections. These photographs were to represent truthful and objective yet framed depictions of a past for subsequent generations, as both discourses of a local and national history. The other noticeable critical motif is the egalitarian and democratic nature of these societies, who endeavoured to act as a collective. Furthermore, Edwards' commentary sheds light on the act of selecting a site and photographing it as a popular grassroots Victorian pastime, in conjunction with the survey movement's rather lofty ambitions. Through her exploration, one is able to gain a real sense of these participants and groups, with their motivations being '... a sense of the local that drove the historical and preservationist concerns' (160). In turn, these photographers were '... legitimating certain forms of historical knowledge and preserving aspects of cultural heritage within certain institutional structures' (227).

Chapter 6 meticulously examines the relationship of custodial responsibility that institutions have with their own photographic collections as historical sources. This section is dedicated to critiquing the function of the photographs as 'public history' (209), when reproduced in the public domain in spaces of knowledge production. This perspective feeds into subsequent analysis surrounding notions of social duty amongst other values of the survey movement, as heavily circulated within the photographic press (216-217). Further contextual examination of dissemination and display demonstrates how these collections were utilized and controlled within '[...] a complex network of competing and at times contradictory' institutional spaces, as public records and displays (242). It is worthwhile knowing that it is this topic that forms the subject of the author's next work, *Uncertain Images: Museums and the Work of Photographs*

(Ashgate), due out at the end of 2014. Nevertheless, as one of the volume's core themes, this illustration of the tangled and interconnected relationships between producers and consumers – between photographer and audience – comes through strongly, and is valuably aided by the monograph's empirical richness.

The book's title is taken from a 1916 publication, and captures the feel of the earlier public mood during this era – that is to say, the popular desire to utilise the technology and mass ownership of early cameras to pictorially capture the English landscape. As its title reveals, its lifespan was predominantly from 1885 to the end of the First World War. This reviewer was particularly interested in Edwards' discussion about the impact of this latter event on the photographic movement (244-251). Whilst the notions of moral duty found within the movement were harnessed in order to contribute towards the war effort on the Home Front, emphasis after 1918 was quickly ushered onto the collections as records of preservation. From here, as Edwards comments, the changed social and political context meant 'many of the concepts that had underpinned survey endeavours at the local level were absorbed into a more overtly national agenda' (245); its efforts were subsequently lost to the 'increasingly centralized scienticity of town planning, education and social welfare' and regional planning (246). In turn, this led to the movement, loss and 'archivization' of these photographic collections, now pieced together and recovered by the efforts of the author. The final chapters touch upon recent digitization projects, and the online return of some collections to the public domain. Edwards soundly analyses the implications of this, and writes eloquently about her experiences of trawling through the archives researching the photographic collections. Her observations on the protocols of viewing largely unexamined and fragmentary material from these vast, largely untouched archives convey their remarkable intricacies: such an account of practicing the archive will surely provide valuable words of encouragement and inspiration to future researchers.

The volume's lavish high quality illustrations, distributed throughout, make it visual appealing, engaging, and unusual to so many academic publications on the market today. Drawing on a wide range of scholarship, the text is passionately argued, coherent, and moves seamlessly between theory and practice, giving it a strong intellectual rigour. Acting as a 'historical ethnography of a given moment in the cultural history of photography' (xii), the author gives voices to understanding this movement as a whole, and through this framing, enables the reader to engage in deeper critical reflection on wider themes. Perhaps a slight concern might be the density of the language for novices trying to grasp the subject for the first time. Even so, this extensive examination and thorough exploration synthesizes various interlinked ideas, reflecting its author's latest worthy contribution to this field, and such new knowledge commands due respect. It is a most commendable piece of scholarship.

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Francesca Monti and Suzanne Keene, *Museums and Silent Objects: Designing Effective Exhibitions*, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2013, hardback £60, pp. xviii+333

It is always with great interest that I anticipate Suzanne Keene's new publications, having been particularly influenced by her important 2008 *Collections for People* report, which also included contributions from this book's co-author, Francesca Monti. Another topic with great contemporary resonance, *Museums and Silent Objects*, with its back cover endorsed by Stuart Frost, Head of Interpretation at the British Museum, and Nick Merriman, Director of The Manchester Museum, promises much. It is a useful book, both for academics interested in topics about objects (particularly Ancient Egyptian ones) and their display, as well as for practitioners wanting to make more engaging exhibitions for visitors. On reading its synopsis, it appears that the volume will make a significant contribution to current thinking about materiality in museums (such as Dudley 2010 and 2012), by suggesting new ways that visitors might interact with objects in exhibitions.

The volume describes itself as 'giving voice to the silent objects' within museums – by which the authors mean making those things visible and captivating which may, at first glance, be dull, inconspicuous or ignored: things in museums that are 'not exceptionally large or small, colourful, artistically noticeable, obviously ancient or precious looking...' (1), in other words, things that most visitors walk past. Such a study is welcome within museum studies literature, which all too often focuses on the iconic, and even then not so much on the materiality of the objects themselves. Interestingly however, we hear little more about the 'silent objects' of the title until almost halfway through the book, and many of the chapters focus on whole displays to a greater extent than just these forgotten objects.

Research findings reveal some important home truths, or 'bad news' (139) for museum professionals about silent objects. Shabtis prove ripe for exploration. One visitor points out: 'It takes too long to understand them; manufacture is not so good... anybody could have made them', while another suggests that 'there are too many of them' (139). Intriguingly, this last finding is at odds, for example, with current highly successful modes of dense aesthetic display of shabtis in the *Exploring Objects* gallery at the Manchester Museum (Price 2012).

Data for the volume, both quantitative and predominantly qualitative (undertaken through interview and observation) were mainly collected over nine years ago in 2005 and the resulting book is a complex piece of collaborative work between co-authors Monti (who conceived, organized and undertook much of the fieldwork as part of her PhD at University College London) and Keene, who organized and edited the final text.

The structure of the book feels slightly awkward: it lacks a certain flow, and is somewhat rigid in its use of certain 'key concepts' and models. Each case study is interrogated through (at least) four different lenses or theoretical framings: architecture (particularly 'space syntax'), design (including colour), cognitive science (concepts around beauty, usability and flow) and museology (museum learning and object biography).

At the same time however, the book somewhat contradictorily claims that it starts from the 'atomic theory of a museum visit' (10) in which one visitor and one object (rather than space and social interaction) are the start point for a four-stage museum experience. These claims and theories make the scope for this project seem ambitious: perhaps a narrower focus may have helped keep the 'silent objects' of the book's title at the heart of the research, which in many respects feels like a visitor study rather than an analysis of silent objects using the above key concepts.

As a result of these complex themes, each chapter has numerous sections and sub-sections, often with headings that feel more like arduous stumbling blocks giving rise to a very short paragraph summary, than clear signposts within a narrative pointing towards a conclusion. This structure may leave one wondering whether the book could have been richer were it arranged by concept, and not by somewhat repetitious case study. However, several illustrations and tables do helpfully add to the data.

Several generalizations and disputed terms mark the text. For example, 'museum studies (also termed museology)' (71), 'regarding learning, there are again two positions...' (78), and 'touch is the sense least employed in exhibiting museum objects' (153), are phrases given no critical consideration.

Case studies however, are fascinating and rich, and include rooms 63 and 61 at the British Museum, and displays at the Petrie Museum at UCL, and in the Horniman Museum. Some parts of the book are written as a direct result of distinct evaluation projects undertaken at and commissioned by these institutions (such as Chapter 9: Hands On the Past at the British Museum). That such research has been actively commissioned and used by these institutions to help develop new policy is a clear strength of the book, and this particular chapter provides interesting recommendations, including drawing attention to 'horror vacui' or 'empty desk syndrome' as a big deterrent in visitor engagement with handling collections (161). Of all the themes covered within the book, perhaps it is the work on handling collections that has most resonance amongst current literature and practice (Chatterjee 2008: 2013).

A helpful accompanying website is mentioned throughout the text: <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/silent-objects>. This provides supplementary material, additional data not published within the book, and also various observation checklists for current professionals to use for their own

visitor studies and object analysis. This is perhaps one of the most important elements of the research and its legacy in providing new research methodologies.

While there is much to be learned from this book by professional and academic alike, *Museums and Silent Objects* leaves the reader wondering whether it may have been better published as a series of shorter journal articles, rather than an attempt at a forced grand narrative and cohesive whole in which the objects remain all too silent.

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Hilary Iris Lowe, *Mark Twain's Homes and Literary Tourism*, Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2012, hardback \$40, pp. ix+246

Hilary Iris Lowe, Assistant Professor at Temple University, researches how humans use places and material culture to connect with literature and the past. This is her first book, and it is an impressive piece of scholarship – years of documentary research, interviews and spatial exploration crammed into less than 300 pages.

The book begins with an introduction to literary houses in the US, and the concept of literary tourism. It then considers four of Mark Twain's homes: the birthplace in Florida, Missouri; the boyhood home in Hannibal, Missouri; his iconic Gilded Age adult home in Hartford, Connecticut; and finally, Quarry Farm, the home of his in-laws in Elmira, New York, where Samuel Clemens – the real man behind Twain – spent many happy summers. The volume ends with a conclusion that raises many questions about literary house museums, and how much has been learned, in this book, about Samuel Clemens himself.

Whilst Lowe never lets existing theory overwhelm her, we can observe a strong grounding in both historical and heritage theory. In the first chapter, she evokes Santesso's model of literary tourism. In the third, she demonstrates the ways in which positivism and New Social History have been applied to the display and supporting philosophy of the home in Hartford. This is not a book of theory, however, but analysis, and it is in her own critiques of documents, material objects, and places, where Lowe's skills of perception really shine.

In three areas in particular, Lowe's critical ability is brought sharply into focus. Firstly, her interrogation of the physical sites themselves. Her descriptions of spaces speak of phenomenological influences, but are always questioning and subtly analytical. Hannibal, in

particular, must have proved difficult to come to some kind of stable understanding of, for it is a place in which the real world of Samuel Clemens is situated alongside the fictional worlds he created as Mark Twain.

Lowe also provides some nuanced evaluations of the displays and the way each venue is arranged in order to enact a particular role. Her critical analysis of a scene at the Birthplace, related to Jane Clemens, Samuel's mother, is one example of how attuned she is to the material artefacts which inhabit any given space. Her discussion of Quarry Farm – a distinctly different venue, laid out for atmosphere-inspired scholarship – is equally as subtle and interesting, focusing on tiny details like period sewing machines and photographs of Clemens in or around his other homes.

There is a broader point made by Lowe: that historic houses may be read either as literary texts or historical documents, but that despite their more physical reality, they are no more reliable than the written word. Lowe recognizes historic venues as one actor within the network through which versions of history are made, but which are easily opened up to reinterpretations and romanticisms: a point which should be at the forefront of the mind of any museum maker who reads this volume.

Yet this is not just a focused study of the houses, but also an historical sociology of the areas in which they are located. Hannibal and Hartford are particularly interesting, as both towns have suffered racism, riots and economic deprivation. In Hannibal, living African-American people were used as avatars for the black characters in Twain's books. The sentimentalization and fictionalization of genuine suffering, and the use of a whole group of people as a tourist attraction is only one of a number of shocking revelations uncovered in the history of heritage in the Southern USA. It is here that we see quite how far Lowe's historical research extends – down deep into the underbelly of each town itself.

This analysis reminds us of the social nature of these houses, and heritage sites in general. Though it does not mention actor-network theory explicitly, this book is reminiscent of the work of Bruno Latour. This becomes particularly obvious when Lowe turns to people. One of this book's most interesting features is the way it discusses the roles and motivations of the individuals and groups involved in Mark Twain's homes. This could be hugely presumptive, and go so very wrong, and yet Lowe gets it very right. However, Lowe makes no really explicit comment as to the potential flaws of her primary sources, which is something of an omission.

Lowe also extrapolates more general questions. What is the role of place in historical understanding – including that of the academic and their process? What is the role of social context, race and poverty in the creation of place? How much understanding of historical figures can be gained from an analysis of their homes? This last question is raised only at the very end of her conclusion, and is the one point that seems shoehorned in. It is as though she makes the statement that it is impossible to pin Clemens down for the benefit of Twain scholars, when this is, in fact, more than a book about finding Twain, or even Clemens: this is a book about exploring homes important to the American sense of self.

For the museologist or museum maker, there is a lot to be learned here, and not just about the nature of homes as museums. It is possible to learn about methods for critiquing buildings, objects and displays, how to use historical records and conduct institutional histories.

Crucially, it is a book which, in its final main chapter, exhibits a subtle self-reflexivity. In a piece of what might be termed meta-academia, Lowe uses Quarry Farm's use as a scholarly archive and retreat as a springboard from which to question the nature of academic activity, and its relationship to emotion and obsession. For those readers who have come to know a subject inside and out, fixation, love, joy, apathy and hate are all part of the haptic experience of scholarship, and for its reflectiveness on this, this book is especially valuable.

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