

Book Review

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Nick Cass, Gill Park, Anna Powell (eds.), *Contemporary Art in Heritage Spaces*, London: Routledge, 2020, hardback £120.00, pp. 254, 39 b/w illustrations, available on Taylor & Francis eBooks

Artists' interventions in museums, art galleries and collections have been a cultural practice in the West since the 1960s, documented in books by McShine (1999) and Putnam (2001), and through the writings of practitioners such as Andrea Fraser, Fred Wilson and others. From the 1990s, however, there has been a steady growth in this phenomenon in an increasingly diverse range of 'heritage spaces' including country houses, industrial landscapes and religious buildings. *Contemporary Art in Heritage Spaces* is a significant addition to the body of literature addressing 'art-heritage' (4), drawing on research programmes at the universities of Leeds ('Intersecting Practices', 2014-15) and Newcastle ('Mapping Contemporary Art in the Heritage Experience', 2016-19). Demonstrating the multidisciplinary nature of this field of enquiry, contributors include artists, heritage professionals, historians, sociologists and other scholars, presenting case studies from the UK but addressing issues that form part of a global debate.

The key premise of the book is the complex 'intersection' of contemporary art and heritage, and the dialogue that ensues from the confluence of their associated disciplines and practices. However, in the Introduction, the editors Nick Cass, Gill Park and Anna Powell question this hypothesis, as it suggests a meeting of two separate and, potentially, disparate entities. Instead they propose that 'art-heritage' cannot be disentangled and is defined by the particular spatial, temporal and material context as experienced by the viewer. Anna Powell expands this idea in her essay in the context of an exhibition of Bruce Nauman's work in York St Mary's, the only case study involving existing artwork rather than art made in response to a heritage space. She examines the 'altered encounter' (226) produced as a result of this juxtaposition that subverts the way in which the viewer is conditioned to relate to both contemporary art and heritage sites, arguing this demonstrates art's affinity with heritage as a process of knowing that is activated by the viewer's personal and social conditions.

It is this 'enmeshed encounter' (186) that is the critical point of departure for the majority of essays. Divided into four thematic sections, the first two, 'Reimagining Heritage' and 'Alternative Histories', consider the use of contemporary art to generate new ideas about place and identity as well as challenge authorized heritage narratives. The third, 'Disciplinary Dialogues', investigates cross-disciplinary practices and their contribution to academic research. Finally, 'Liminal Spaces' looks in more detail at the relationship between artwork, site and visitor and how it affects the understanding of both heritage and art.

A useful first chapter outlines the development of 'art-heritage' from its museological origins to the emergence of a 'commissioning industry' (16) and highlights some key debates. Niki Black and Rebecca Farley frame this within socio-cultural changes in the 1980s/90s that underpinned a wider public and critical engagement with heritage, driving organizations to define their operations as much in relation to their audiences as to the material culture in their care. Increasingly, contemporary art was seen as a way to create a more active and emotionally-engaged visitor experience as well as to attract and diversify audiences. The authors discuss commissioning initiatives that became the forerunners of large-scale Arts Council-funded programmes such as Trust New Art (National Trust, 2009 ongoing) and Arts on the Waterways (Canal & River Trust, 2012 ongoing). While acknowledging the

'interlocking' (37) nature of heritage sites and museums, the differing financial and funding models on which many are based has a direct impact on their visitor demographic and could also inform discussions about the motives underpinning the use of 'art-heritage' across these different spaces.

An important debate highlighted in the second section concerns artists' interventions as a critical practice, serving to reveal hidden or marginalized histories, and its sustainability in the context of a 'commissioning industry'. The case studies in Jenna Ashton's and Jo Williams' chapters problematize the use of artists to tackle contentious issues while the underlying power structures and value systems in the institution and its practices remain unchanged. Instead, both Ashton and Williams make the case for working with artists as 'critical friends' rather than 'temporary outsiders' (95-6) helping institutions to engage with issues and inform change in policy and practice.

This echoes Janet Marstine's thesis in her recent book advocating the use of 'reconciliation' tactics to build a new productive relationship between museum, artist and public (Marstine 2017). Similar socially-engaged approaches to contesting authorized heritage narratives are evidenced in chapters by Gill Park and Laura Breen. The projects cited here involved a 'dialogic' art practice (Kester 2004: 24) where artists worked with community participants to facilitate a wider understanding of heritage and stimulate conversations about place and present-day identity.

In subsequent sections, chapters examine the 'productive friction' (60) involved in 'art-heritage' and the merits of producing work 'inspired' or 'informed' (121) by historic sites, the former being a more emotional or sensory evocation of place and the latter an investigative response to its specific history. Case studies illustrate how artists respond to the demands of a brief, the conservation and practical requirements of working in a heritage environment, and the research and thought-processes entailed in creating something not simply 'about' but 'of' place. Many echo Claire Robins' espousal of emotional engagement as an essential part of the learning experience that can be facilitated by artists' interventions in museums (Robins 2013).

As previously stated, the publication focuses on the collaborative exchange between art practice and other disciplines, particularly in academic research. Presented in co-authored chapters, these partnerships demonstrate how the affective qualities of art elicit emotional and empathetic insights in viewers that can enhance other forms of enquiry, unlocking unexpected insights.

Contemporary Art in Heritage Spaces presents a range of perspectives on 'art-heritage' – the different forms it takes and the range of roles it fulfils in both the making and doing of heritage – that offer nuanced and critical readings of this complex relationship. It addresses ongoing debates about the instrumentalization of art as a smoke-screen for institutional failings, as well as whether contemporary art can be an effective communication tool for those not in possession of the 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1985) to negotiate its aesthetic language. It also advances new approaches to measuring the impacts of these projects and how they might be harnessed for individual and, potentially, societal gain. However, while acknowledging the recent research programmes that have informed much of the content of this publication, the work required to more fully understand the aims, impacts and learning taking place through these projects, much of which can only be fully appreciated with the passing of time, has only just begun. This book should act as a stimulus to others, whether heritage professionals, artists or academics, to continue to investigate this fascinating phenomenon.

References

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