

Book reviews

Calum Storrie, *The Delirious Museum: A Journey from the Louvre to Las Vegas*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006, £75 hardback, pp. 246, illus 28

With its title implying wild excitement or a raving madness, *The Delirious Museum: A Journey from the Louvre to Las Vegas* prepares us for a re-appraisal of the museum. And indeed, the issues familiar to museological discourse are less relevant to Calum Storrie than the museum's 'messy vitality' and 'richness of meaning' (p. 3).

Storrie argues that the 'delirious' museum runs parallel to its traditional, or rational counterpart. In giving definition to the delirious museum, he aims to subvert the association of the museum with order and classification. The need for subversion arises because 'neutral taxonomic systems...used as a means of "clarification" and education' often 'has meant limiting, either by accident or design, the possible interpretations of the museum' (p. 2). This is a valid proposition. The model of the traditional museum has evolved from discourse which locates museums within the parameters of the 'rational' based on their nineteenth-century legacy in the construction of history, and deterministic and patriarchal assumptions about cultural identity. The twenty-first century museum is thus understood through its past emergence in colonial ambitions, based on taxonomies and classifications that disavowed previous schemas as irrational.

Storrie presents his argument through reference to a range of exhibitions, events, and architectural spaces that he classifies as 'delirious'. In keeping with its subject matter the book has a fairly labyrinthine, though not unwieldy structure that he describes as, 'neither pure architectural analysis, nor urbanism, nor history nor literature alone; instead it weaves these forms together.' He goes on: 'Perhaps the book itself is a Delirious Museum mimicking what it describes, for it is, among other things, a repository of anecdotes and arcane facts. It is my collection' (p. 4).

In reviewing Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago's large anthology *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum* (2004), Andrea Witcomb is critical of their narrow editorial focus which is structured to show, 'how the museum as both idea and institution has always been implicated in relations of power and will continue to be so' (Witcomb 2005). Witcomb contends that the anthology's selection of works and editorial framing 'is in danger of ossifying both museums themselves and the intellectual apparatus we use to study them' (Witcomb 2005: 27). In this regard Storrie's book is propitious as it breaks away from the received ideas that Witcomb suggests limit the scope of museological discourse. Instead of de-coding the museum's relations of power, his methodology is to excavate the museum's shared relationship with the city.

It is Storrie's contention that many museum-like traits bear the hallmark of the delirious museum: Walter Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk* is a museum without labels and explanations; Eugène Atget's photographs are an archive of street ephemera; the Surrealist's fascination with objects in shops and arcades is seen in a curatorial light; while the Situationist's 'understood the city in a way that has parallels with the delirious museum' (p. 37). The idea of the museum thus expands to collecting, curatorial, and mapping activities that connect people with the city through quotidian impulses rather than strategic intention. This approach is interesting because, recalling Michel de Certeau's logic of the everyday it presents a 'turning inside-out' of the museum, and acknowledges the museum's 'non-didactic' role in meaning-making.

Many of the 'delirious' projects that Storrie examines are stimulated by the impulses and yearnings of individuals, rather than the didactic requirements of the museum. Personal drama

frames the 1911 theft of the Mona Lisa, and explains the character of 'Charlie Brown's', a long-gone London pub/museum whose walls were nostalgically covered with sailors' memorabilia. Yearning for mortality underlies Sir John Soane's various collecting activities. Soane's preoccupation with death is examined in a walking tour from St Pancras Station—near Soane's family tomb—to his house museum in Lincoln's Inn Fields. Street graffiti, artwork, and collections along the route act to highlight Soane's obsession. These include the room where Jeremy Bentham's auto-icon is 'displayed', and The Hunterian Museum with its 'dried arteries, veins and nerves of various bodies pinned onto wooden panels by the Paduan physician Fabricius Bartoletus in 1645' (p. 101).

Storrie's delirious museum is given purchase in the avant-garde's efforts to create the new. In this context, Storrie locates Yves Klein's exhibition 'Le Vide' (The Void); El Lissitzky's use of active space; Kurt Schwitters' re-invention of the world through his cumulative Merz sculpture/installations; and Frederick Kiesler's exhibition designs influenced by mood and human perception. In a chapter titled *The Spiral in Ruins*, Storrie critiques the projects of modernist architects in their attempt to reinvent the museum. He describes Le Corbusier's design for a Museum of Unlimited Growth, Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum in New York, and the projects of Mies van der Rohe, James Stirling and Frank Gehry. Their efforts are summed up in Storrie's engaging narrative style:

Le Corbusier proposed an impossible, ever-expanding spiral for the museum while Mies not only ignored the spiral, but ignored the museum too. James Stirling took the spiral apart and in the process began dismantling the museum, mixing it into the city. Frank Gehry has re-assembled the museum in the form of a luxurious object, as untouchable as an icon...the Guggenheim in Bilbao...remains that of the impermeable institution holding the delirium of the city at bay. (p.167)

Storrie gauges the success or otherwise of projects by their quality of delirium. This frames his critique of Daniel Libeskind's convincing use of absence in the design of Berlin's Jewish Museum compared with the later projects of Studio Libeskind: '...somewhere along the route the Delirious Museum is lost and the buildings of Studio Libeskind seem to shift into signature works, trophies exhibited as prizes of urban regeneration' (p.168). Storrie examines in some detail the work of Carlo Scarpa in particular his lengthy relationship (1958-1973) with Verona's Castelvechio Museum. Scarpa's work is of interest to Storrie because of his unconventional juxtaposition of objects and disruption of narrative by spatial means, 'His work appears at first fixed in its meaning, but beyond the obsession of detailing and control there is the delirium of fluidity' (p. 146).

Storrie argues that museums are inherently of the street, and museums that do not enable this connection lack a certain quality of authenticity. For example, he contends that delirium is absent at the Getty Centre because it detaches people from the city, unlike the Los Angeles Jurassic Museum of Technology, which is a 'delirious theatre of the city and the world' (p. 197). This 'delirium' operates through its presentation of the real and the imaginary without judging either within traditional taxonomies. This overlaying of meaning occurs, for example, in exhibits of memory which include a 'Proustian' model that 'contains a cup of tea and a petrified madeleine biscuit, the taste of which allowed Marcel Proust to travel back in his mind to his childhood. A tiny valve in the display releases the aroma of the biscuit' (p. 194).

In presenting the delirious museum as a space characterized by disorder, Storrie is articulating the presence of the museum in the everyday. This is a genre that gives credence to the making of meaning outside the strictures of the 'rational' museum. While Storrie largely restricts his discussion to Europe and North America, the genre will find application elsewhere. Importantly, Calum Storrie's delirious museum allows for the museum to be a critical force for change. *The Delirious Museum* is thus a valuable contribution to museological and architectural studies. It will also be of value to those interested in the history of exhibition design. Befitting Storrie's passion for his subject, the twelve chapters of the book with the occasional illustration, are well-researched, intriguing, and frequently entertaining.

References

de Certeau, Michel (1984) *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Los Angeles and London University of California Press: Berkeley

Preziosi, D. and Farago, C. (eds) (2004) *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, Aldershot: Ashgate

Witcomb, A. (ed.) (2005) *Museums Australia Magazine*, vol 13/5, August, 26-28

Bruce Altshuler, ed. *Collecting the New: Museums and Contemporary Art*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005, hardback £22.95, pp. 195.

This book is a sensitively-edited collection of twelve essays (including a historical introduction by the editor), which addresses the complexity of the problems and issues that Western museums confront in dealing with contemporary art today. With its selection of diverse and intriguing case studies and specific focus on the contemporary art scene, it is an important and welcome addition to one of the primary fields of museum studies concerning the significance of collecting and collections for museums. Among recent works in this field, many readers may be reminded of *Museums and the Future of Collecting*, edited by Simon J. Knell, which was based on a conference organized by the Department of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester in 1998 (Knell, 1999). In comparison to this publication, Altshuler's book may seem less sophisticated, especially for social scientists and cultural historians, in its theoretical and conceptual scope; but it still gives new insights into the circumstances of museum practices involving the collection of contemporary art and raises important issues that call for further examination.

In the introduction, the editor divides the following eleven essays into four groups. The first group (Fox, Storr, Weiss) addresses general issues concerning museum collecting of contemporary art today; the second (Cherix, Iles and Huldish, Dietz) concerns various problems specifically associated with contemporary art in particular media; the third explores issues concerning museums and contemporary art associated with specific regions and ethnicities (Desai, McClusky, Pérez-Barreiro, Sims); the fourth (which includes the final essay by Wharton) examines conservation problems caused by contemporary art. However, it is more interesting and appealing to me that several contentious issues are shared across different essays and groups, which allows us to envisage a broader picture of the relations between museums and contemporary art. Most significantly, the book highlights the ongoing tensions between the museum as a legacy of the modernist era and contemporary art produced and evaluated in the context of postmodernity.

Gertrude Stein allegedly observed that the museum and modernity are incompatible. According to her, something could be either a museum or modern, but it could not be both (Altshuler: p.1; Weiss: p. 46). However, this remark was made in the first half of the twentieth century – during which the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA) was established (1929) to focus on the exhibition and collection of the post-late-nineteenth-century and 'present' art. It has been a long time since, and being 'modern' no longer indicates being 'present' or 'contemporary'. 'Modern' classics – modern works that have withstood the test of time – have been accumulated and exhibited by institutions such as MoMA, and it is now a common and important practice for the museums of modern art to designate what Philip Fisher called 'the future's past' (Fisher 1991; also quoted in Altshuler: p. 2). As Weiss (p. 42) writes, the definition of and the distinction between 'modern' and 'contemporary' are 'historical categories', which are 'contingent on setting' and 'elusive'. However, provided that 'modern' refers to 'modernism', it could be specified as a period roughly between 1880 and 1960. 'Contemporary' or 'postmodern' art – which essentially comes after 'modern' art – does not only mean works by living or recently deceased artists but also has connotations of 'more adventurous' and 'more cutting edge' than 'traditional' art – even that produced contemporaneously with it (Altshuler: pp. 3 – 4). Moreover,

these terms also represent different ways of 'seeing' (Cherix: p. 60). He shows contradictory positions taken by modern and postmodern by quoting Hal Foster, who states that a strategy of postmodernism is 'to deconstruct modernism not in order to seal it in its own image but in order to open it, to rewrite it; to open its closed systems (like the museum) to the "heterogeneity of texts" (Douglas Crimp), to rewrite its universal techniques in terms of "synthetic contradictions" (Kenneth Frampton) – in short, to challenge its master narratives with the "discourse of others" (Craig Owens)'. The problematic relations between museums and contemporary art today are concerned not so much with the nineteenth-century tradition of art museums as preservers and exhibitors of artefacts as much as with the curatorial practices that have developed in relation to works and museums of modern art in the last three quarters of a century.

In the book, the ongoing tension between 'modern' museums and 'contemporary' (or 'postmodern') art is discussed with various case studies across different chapters. The use of new forms of materials and methods often problematises the curatorial practices of 'modern' art museums. As the Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles states, quoted by Dietz (p. 85), new-media art 'questions everything, the most fundamental assumptions: What is a work? How do you collect? What is preservation? What is ownership? All of those things that museums are based upon and structured upon are pretty much thrown open to question'. For example, Dietz notes 'the fundamental tension between the wide-ranging and open structures of the Internet and the traditional role of the museum as gatekeeper' (p. 88). Some 'contemporary' artists and their works conceptually challenge the tradition of 'modern' art museums. For example, Wharton states that these 'conceptual' artists and objects challenge 'preservation ethic' of the museum curator and the belief in 'true nature' of the object (p. 164). He writes, 'Committed to prolonging the physical life of objects in the face of inevitable change, conservators are particularly vexed by conceptual and other art that questions notions of performance and deliberately employs ephemeral media' (p. 163).

In addition, contemporary art objects created by artists of non-Western or minority-ethnic origin, most of which have been neglected in the 'mainstream' art scene in the West, have also been fuelling this tension since they started to attract increasing attentions of critics, historians, curators, and dealers in recent years. The four essays in section 3 focus on this theme: each of them addresses the modernist practices and concepts associated with museums and the burgeoning awareness of the importance of those works in the global world of art. Various important issues are explored: two conflicting directions in the Latin American art field in the United States – the importance of Latin American identity and the globalization of contemporary art world (Pérez-Barreiro); and the problems in identifying 'African-American art' or 'African-American aesthetic' on recognition of the diversity of the African-American community (Sims).

The weakness of the book is that the discussions of such important issues are mainly restricted to the level of practice and offer few conceptual insights. This is partly because most of the essays fail to contextualize their arguments in the broader context of the ongoing academic debates in the interdisciplinary field of museum studies. Altshuler's Introduction attempts to compensate for this lack of theoretical depth, but what he can do in nine pages is limited. For example, despite the book's subject matter, no reference is made to any of the growing number of historical, anthropological, and sociological studies of collecting and collection in museums, including Elsner and Cardinal (1994), Pearce (1992), and Shelton (2001). The modernism/postmodernism debates may also have been enriched by referring to Crimp (1997), Danto (1997), and Preziosi (1989). As regards the issues of national and ethnic identities, Kaplan (1994) and Karp (1991) would be important sources for further elaborating the discussion.

In conclusion, this volume insightfully describes the problematic relations between museums and contemporary art and identifies important issues. Despite its weakness, Altshuler and other authors are overall sensitive to the diversity and complexity of the issues the museums are facing today. The book will be a useful source of information and inspiration for curators and others interested in the place of contemporary art within museum collections.

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