

## *Μουσείον: Artists' Reflections on Museums*

### **Highlights from the Creative Symposium held at the School of Museum Studies, University of Leicester, on 5 December 2012**

The Museum is [...] part of the royal palaces; it has a public walk, an *Exedra*<sup>1</sup> with seats, and a large house, in which is the common mess-hall of the men of learning who share the Museum. This group of men not only hold property in common, but also have a priest in charge of the Museum [...] appointed by Caesar.

Strabo, description of the Museum of Alexandria, Egypt, *Geography* 17.1.8<sup>2</sup>

It is my wish that [...] they should be applied to finish the rebuilding of the Museum with the statues of the goddesses, and to add any improvements which seem practicable to beautify them.

Diogenes Laertius, description of the *Mouseion* in Aristotle's Lyceum, Athens, by Theophrastus, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 5, 51-3<sup>3</sup>

### ***Ancient Beginnings: The Mouseion***

These tantalizing glimpses into the world of the ancient Greek *Mouseion*, from which our own word for 'museum' derives, reveal a complex social construct for which there is little comparison today. Often translated as a place or temple dedicated to the Muses, ancient *mouseia* might in fact have comprised anything from an open-air shrine at which offerings were laid, to an indoor study facility appended to a building for religious worship. Indeed, the 'Museum' of the ancient world appears to have fulfilled multiple functions as a sacred space and place of learning, art,<sup>4</sup> memory and royal patronage, before it was primarily defined as a repository of objects during the late medieval and early Renaissance eras.

What makes the concept of the *Mouseion* so interesting is its hybridity and multi-faceted nature; one which invites us to interrogate the very concept, praxis and purpose of the

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<sup>1</sup> *Exedras* were described by Vitruvius in *De Architectura* as porticoed spaces with seats 'where philosophers, rhetoricians and all others who delight in studies can engage in disputation'. See Susan Pearce and Alexandra Bounia (eds), *The Collector's Voice: Critical Readings in the Practice of Collecting*, Vol. 1: Ancient Voices, (Aldershot and Burlington: VT, Ashgate, 2000), p. 88

<sup>2</sup> Strabo, trans. Horace Jones, *Strabo, Geography*, in Loeb Classical Library, Vol. 4, (London and Cambridge, MA: Heinemann and Harvard University Press, 1954), cited in Pearce and Bounia, *Ancient Voices*, p. 88

<sup>3</sup> Diogenes Laertius, trans. R. Hicks, *Diogenes Laertius, Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, in Loeb Classical Library, Vol. 1, (London and New York: Heinemann and G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1925), cited in Pearce and Bounia, *Ancient Voices*, p. 85

<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that, like the statues of the goddesses Diogenes refers to, certain artefacts may have been regarded as sacred objects first and works of 'art' second.

contemporary museum, from what museums are for to why we collect. Indeed, the University of Copenhagen's famous Medical Museion purposefully adopts a variant of the ancient name in order to draw attention to its dual function as a combined museum and research centre, which has as much to do with the generation of new knowledge as it does with objects and their storage.

### ***The Creative Symposium and Exhibition***

*Mouseion: Artists' Reflections on Museums* was a one-day artist-led creative symposium organised by the PhD community led by Alex Woodall with the generous support of Dr. Sandra Dudley, Exhibitions and Collections Director, and hosted by the School of Museum Studies, University of Leicester, on 5 December 2012.

Its primary objective was to investigate the purpose, and ultimately the value, of artistic contributions to and involvement with museums for various stakeholders, including visitors. As the term 'creative' suggests, many of our artist-presenters did not adhere to traditional modes of delivery, but instead utilized object- and activity-focussed sessions through which participants, who included six of the seven exhibiting artists, PhD students, and academics, as well as an architect, curator and a secondary school pupil on her museum internship, were able to discuss theory but also to actively engage in creative practices of making, writing, and illustrating.

The event accompanied the current exhibition in the School by seven UK-based artists: Karl and Kimberley Foster, who together form the artistic partnership known as Hedsor, Michael Leigh, Hazel Jones, Dawn Felicia Knox, Lyndall Phelps and Yvette Hawkins. Curated by Alex Woodall and Cy Shih, this multisensory exhibit presented us with a cornucopia of mysterious objects, from artefacts knitted from old newspapers to a metronome whose dial had been supplanted by the silhouette of a tree. Through these objects were posed a series of questions, reflections, and re-envisionings, some serious, others more playful, not only on the contemporary museum, but on objects and materialities of all kinds, as seen through the eyes of the artist.

A selection of the key highlights from our discussion appear below. I have grouped these not by session title, but by artist, and the key themes and ideas I thought they brought to the Symposium.

### ***Exploring Alternative Ways of Seeing Objects and Museums***

We began our day in an unorthodox manner, by scattering a jugful of buttons upon the floor! As these tiny objects collided with others and rolled off on odd trajectories of their own, an analogy was drawn between these and our own thoughts, unfettered from the confines of the quotidian and our habitual reduction of knowledge to a single, uncomplicated meaning. This was to be a space of questioning, and challenging some of the preconceptions upon which our ideas about museums and materiality were based.

Implicit within this process, however, were also the notions of chaos and inaccessibility, and our collective fear of the unknown, and from this emerged our first question. By inviting artists to make the world unfamiliar, and strange, were we as museum professionals contravening our remit to convey it with clarity and coherence?

Artistic interest in and engagement with the contemporary museum is by no means a new phenomenon. This includes the current trend for artistic intervention within the museal space, as demonstrated as early as 1970 by Andy Warhol's *Raid the Icebox* exhibition at the Rhode Island School of Design's Museum of Art, Providence. Such exhibits, which often evince a fascination with the museum storeroom, demonstrate that meaning is not clear-cut, but plural, contested and contradictory. Warhol was scrutinizing the aesthetics of museal display by exhibiting items regardless of their perceived quality or condition, but the museum claimed he was merely 'exhibiting storage'.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Hedsor: Touch as a Means of Fostering Dialogue***

Speaking about their work, Karl and Kimberley Foster articulated the fact that for them, art was a mode of enquiry in itself, one which tended to manifest itself in visual, tactile and symbolic forms or 'puzzles'. Essential to this practice was the establishment of a physical relationship between objects and visitors. Touch has traditionally been interpreted by historians of art as simple, unproblematic, and premodern,<sup>6</sup> but not only is this view increasingly contested by historians of the senses, it is also being challenged in contemporary art practice by Hedsor and other creative practitioners. Touch, Hedsor found, tends to slow down the processes of contemplation, bringing the visitor into a far more intimate knowledge of a given object – not just its textures, weight, smell and temperature – but its complexity, relevance and emotional charge. Using 'Object Dialogue Boxes', boxes filled with an unlikely assortment of objects – often composite in nature, but resembling everyday objects, such as a paint brush whose bristles have been replaced by miniature paint brushes – the artists encourage participants to open them up, play, and experiment with their contents, but make it very clear that it is the participant – not the artist – who ultimately finds the meaning in the work.

Artists can be called upon to question, critique or subvert museum displays, but they can also simply offer an alternative means of engaging with and interpreting material objects, one which hints at another way of looking, even at familiar objects, and that is in itself extremely valuable. As Dawn Felicia Knox observed, the artist is not an intermediary between the monolithic museum and 'the public', but rather invites dialogue between artists, curators and visitors equally, reinforcing the notion that we are all producers of meaning. Indeed, Karl noted that an important part of the artistic process is in the letting go of the dialogue. This act, of course, implies risk. To what extent are curators able to 'let go' of the museal narrative, and allow visitors to choose their own path?

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<sup>5</sup> James Putnam, *Art and Artifact: The Museum as Medium*. Revised Edition. (London: Thames and Hudson, 2009), p.18

<sup>6</sup> See Fiona Candlin, *Art, Museums and Touch*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010)

## ***Dawn Felicia Knox and Yvette Hawkins: 'Reading' the Book as a Complex Object***

A good illustration of what *can* happen when the artist starts this process, but leaves it up to the participant to finish, is also furnished by one of the most enjoyable and memorable parts of the day - the book-making activity facilitated by Yvette and Dawn who both explore different aspects of the physicality of books in their work. Under their guidance, participants each constructed a 'simple' book, a pamphlet book and a Japanese stab-bound book, using A4 paper sheets, needles, cotton thread and some traditional items of the book-binders trade: an awl for making incisions and a bone folder for sharpening the creases; both beautiful and interesting objects in their own right.

However, engaging in this practice was something which created a new relationship between ourselves and the object. Understanding how part of an object is made changes our perceptions of that object, transforming it from compendium of knowledge to material artefact and reminding us that before the advent of the printing press, books were luxury items which could be afforded by very few. It also speaks to the book as a 'performative' object – one which has symbolic and social meaning which may convey the wealth, taste and level of education of the owner,<sup>7</sup> just as much as it is 'performed' in the acts of opening, reading and closing. The artists thus help facilitate such 'conversations with objects', but can also help provide glimpses into a world which, quite literally, in this case, reads between the lines of things.

Dawn showed us an artwork which comprised all the parts of a book which were traditionally made by men – essentially just the shell – a fact obscured by our prior ignorance of the history of bookmaking and by our relationship with completed books. As Yvette rightly noted, 'artist's books' have become an artistic form in their own right during the course of the last twenty years, metamorphosing the traditional museum and library presentation of books as remote and cerebral objects to things of startling visual, olfactory and tactile properties which preserve not only their contents, but actively absorb traces of the material world which surrounds them.

## ***Lyndall Phelps: Spotting What Others Miss***

A very different approach to objects is found in Lyndall Phelps' fascinating photographic project which combined research into natural history and military history. Strange bedfellows perhaps, but Lyndall demonstrated how this kind of 'high-contrast' project can uncover not only a new way of looking at specimens, but one which demonstrates their value beyond the scientific and into the social and personal. When specimens are collected by natural history museums, this does not necessarily mean collecting the whole animal – often it is just the skin, fur, feathers, shell and bone. While these are

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<sup>7</sup> Ryan Perry, 'Objectification, Identity and the Late Medieval Codex', in Tara Hamling and Catherine Richardson, (eds), *Everyday Objects: Medieval and Early Modern Material Culture and its Meanings* (Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), p.317

scientifically interesting, they are difficult objects to display as they are not especially aesthetic.

Lyndall's work on the *Evacuate* exhibition at the Natural History Museum from 2005 - 2008 uncovered the little-known story of the evacuation of specimens during World War 2 and their temporary storage in twenty-five English residential country houses; often, it seems, in the billiard room. While Lyndall was unable to return the specimens to the houses to which they had been sent, she photographed the specimens *in situ* in the museum stores, next to photographs of the interiors of the rooms they had briefly occupied, and *vice versa*. Trays of exotic butterflies and sleeping owls once again seemed to inhabit, and enliven, albeit in ghostly form, their former stately apartments. She also sent a complete inventory of the specimens sent to each property to their owners. Remarkably, one elderly gentleman recalled the collections being in the house as a boy. They were boxed up, and naturally, he had yearned to know what they contained, and especially whether there were any tigers, and was delighted to finally find out!

Moreover, the curators at the Natural History Museum, who enjoyed little input into the display of specimens in public exhibitions, were especially grateful to the artist for making these objects 'visible' once more. It is projects such as these which also reveal objects and their webs of association in all their complexity – here weaving together the narratives of the individual, once-living 'object' with those of the museum and country house, both architectural and social objects in their own right, and those of the human participants in their shared stories, at different times and stages of life, places and circumstances.

### ***Hazel Jones: Enigmas in Metal***

Last, but not least, Hazel Jones reminded us that there are other kinds of knowledge than the factual, and to which the artist can draw attention and critically reevaluate a museum collection. Hazel studied metalwork and jewellery and is fascinated by the quotidian or banal object, by rusty spoons, padlocks and other metal ephemera. She showed us several curious inventions of her own design – a currant steamer and a pea-splitter – which reminded me of Mary Norton's *The Borrowers*, tiny people living under the floorboards of our own houses, who would surely have delighted in these contraptions. Hazel's objects tend to have the appearance of the artefacts from the Victorian era, and of things well-worn and used, but unlike Samuel Rowbottom's Automatic Tea Making Apparatus of 1891, they have little marketable practical use.

Hazel is also an avid collector and cataloguer of objects, and has been particularly influenced by the eccentric collection of one Mary Greg, who accumulated an incredible assortment of domestic objects during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, now held at the Manchester Art Gallery. Most of these objects are slightly broken, and it was this, and their everyday nature, which called their worth and importance as 'museum objects' into question. When Mary's collection of Noah's ark animals was repaired, for example, Hazel felt that they had lost a special part of their identity, idiosyncrasy and

historical record. By revisiting Mary's collection in her research and practice, Hazel's work is helping others to see the worth and relevance of Mary's long-forgotten 'bygones', breathing new life into them and challenging the museal notion of value, and of knowledge, as something far more open, democratic and accessible than it has traditionally been.

It is also the mystery of these objects, however, which is part of their attraction for the artist and, it seems, all who have encountered them. One of Hazel's favourite objects is a working chatelaine, from which is suspended, among other things, a small metal capsule with a roll of paper inside, on which a letter 'e' in black ink is just visible. Discussants considered whether it would 'spoil' the object to know what was inside. While Hazel concedes that it might well 'diminish' the object in some way, she does always endeavour to verify the facts behind the objects she collects. Yet, as Lyndall observed, art often blurs the boundaries separating reality from fiction, and there are also matters of belief and imagination to take into account. Mary's bygone objects, and Hazel's objects which could have been, speak eloquently to our need for museums to facilitate our individual and creative engagement with objects.

## *Coda*

In our final, plenary session we came together once more to consider the key themes which had emerged from the symposium. First of these was the immense value to museums and their stakeholders in artists' opening up, questioning of, and different modes of engagement with objects and collections. Not only can this facilitate a deeper understanding and appreciation of objects for museum audiences, but it can actively lead to new knowledge about objects and collections being created. The second was the artistic fascination with categories and with classification, and the tendency to work within the languages of the museum as a kind of *Gesamtkunstwerk* in its own right. The third theme we identified was that of the power of objects and their agency - their capacity to move, inspire and surprise us. For myself, I would add a fourth: such projects can greatly enhance stakeholders' enjoyment of collections, and of museums. After all, museums aren't just about learning, but about having fun with objects and processes, and from this relationship, new meanings, senses of value, and ownership, often arise.

We started and closed the proceedings with physical processes: by tipping buttons out on to the floor and leaving them there for most of the day, and by contemplating, drawing and making our mark on objects, from documenting our own personal objects in Lyndall's workshop, to hammering out our initials on a collection of mid-twentieth-century 'Bonnie Loaf' tokens in Hazel's. In turn, these objects left their mark on us. Yet one of the most valuable things museums and their audiences can gain from creative practice is that questioning spirit which saw the earliest human collections founded. One of the reasons the concept of the museum has changed so much over millennia is because we keep on questioning, and subjecting cultural practices and performances to revision and re-framing, something which imbues them with currency and relevance and without

which museums must lose something of their critical perspective – on the world and on themselves.

The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known.

Viktor Shklovsky, *Art as Technique*, 1917<sup>8</sup>

**Stephanie Bowry, PhD Student, 21 January 2013**

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<sup>8</sup> Viktor Shklovsky 1917 cited in Eric Santner, *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory and Film in Postwar Germany*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 61