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Beyond the Rational Museum: Toward a Discourse of Inclusion
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Abstract: Museum discourse is not inclusive in that it neglects or negates the affective potential of museums. Affect is pre-cognitive sensation, it is unexpected, and leaves a more lasting impression than re-cognition. The museum's role in the shaping of histories, and its origins in class and gender exploitation are important areas of discourse, however, the focus on these issues also limits discourse. Ideologically driven critique seems unable to explain the experiential affect of exhibits of art and material culture. Arguably, an alternative museum with a contradictory set of meanings has always existed alongside the rational museum of critical discourse. Some critics do acknowledge that their disciplines seem unable to grapple with this 'alternative museum', however, there is not a critical vocabulary of affect with which to give it appropriate expression. Gilles Deleuze's philosophical ideas give relevance to affect, and are useful in shaping or 'shocking' a way toward a more inclusive critical discourse, which might lead toward more inclusive museum practices.

Keywords: Affect, Museum Discourse, Deleuze

The following discussion expands what is generally inferred by the term 'the inclusive museum' and argues for a more 'inclusive' form of museum discourse. The premise of the argument is that the application of much critical theory to the analysis of museums is limiting when it comes to an appreciation of the affective, physical experience of visiting museums. A limitation that is an outcome of thirty years of critique investigating practices that originated in the nineteenth-century public museum. A critique that allows no theoretical space for meanings that do not conform to a model of the museum as an inherently authoritarian and elitist institution. Yet it is apparent that 'alternative' meanings may contradict the 'rational' museum's schemas of knowledge and relations of power. It is in the omission of these meanings that this paper deems the general tenor of museum discourse based upon critical theory to be exclusionary.

For example, consider Donna Haraway’s influential case study (1989) of the activities of the early years (1908-1936) of the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH). She argues that the ‘natural sciences’ were used by the Museum as an antidote against what the great American capitalists perceived as a looming class war. The Museum’s ‘public health role’ was achieved through racial doctrines contained as knowledge, and realized in its activities of exhibition, eugenics and conservation (Haraway 2004:248). ‘Knowledge’ was presented to the public as moral and educative, with trustees pleased to observe that through visiting the museum, children had ‘become more reverent, more truthful, and more interested in the simple and natural laws of their being’ (2004:243).

However, Donald Preziosi’s childhood experience of visiting the AMNH, though admittedly later than the period described by Haraway, is experientially very different—he would lie beneath the tyrannosaur skeleton pretending to be wounded, dying prey. He recalls being seduced by the exhibits and writes of ‘the visceral feeling of being pulled everywhere by the museum, and of not wanting to leave’ (Preziosi 2003:5). It is tempting to consider whether other children, during the early years that Haraway writes about, were similarly affected not by the ‘civilizing’ and moral meanings of the museum, but by suspending belief in themselves as human. Such experience is not necessarily restricted to children. From his investigations into learning in museums, David Carr has concluded that, ‘We go to a museum in order to see what unfolds within us when we are there: we are folded up, and we unfold before the object, becoming capable of saying something new about ourselves’ (2006:16).

The idea of an unfolding of the self is compelling as an expression of an affecting museum visit or encounter. These encounters often seem to relate to a shift in temporal understanding of the world through an artefact’s embodiment of a different space and time. Giving value to the affect of this experience does not align with the analysis of Haraway and others for whom any potential knowledge gained from the museum experience must comply with the museum’s intended objectives. In this dichotomy lies the limitation of the focus of analysis upon the rational museum, that it locates museums and meaning within an experience that is intentionally ‘written’ into the display of objects.

Nevertheless Haraway’s critique is an important expose of the early years of the AMNH and it is not
the intention of this paper to query her findings, nor to suggest a return to the Grand Narratives of the rational museum. The point is rather that visitors to museums are not necessarily influenced by the narratives of progress and civilization that are being presented but are affected by 'the exotic, the strange—museums as houses of mystery' (Witcombe 2003:24). Please Sir, where's the withered hand? asks a child in the poem 'The Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford'. James Clifford suggests that to be this child, is 'to ignore the serious admonitions about human evolution and cultural diversity posted in the entrance hall. It is to be interested instead by the claw of a condor, the jawbone of a dolphin, and the hair of a witch' (1985:236).

In proposing a shift in our thinking to assign critical value to affecting experiences in museums, it is not the intention to discredit the current direction of museum studies, or art history. The point is to acknowledge that these disciplines can be limiting when it comes to understanding specific encounters with artefacts and art in the spaces of museums and art galleries. Admittedly this is not a fashionable notion given that across cultural schools 'there is an underlying assumption that giving credence to expression represents an uncritical subjectivity' (Massumi 2002:xiii). A way through this impasse is suggested via Michel de Certeau's thinking about practices of the everyday; an approach enabling acknowledgement of the importance of critical theory applied to the rational museum whilst also giving value to alternative 'non-rational' expression. With this dual approach established as a conceptual possibility, there is room for speculative engagement with the museum through, for example, Gilles Deleuze's notion of transformative experience as a shock or rupture that shifts thinking outside linear notions of space and time. While an investigation of the specific nature of the 'Deluzian museum' is outside the scope of this paper, the trajectory of thinking that is opened through more inclusive discourse gives credence to such possibilities.

The 'Rational' Museum in Discourse

Since the 1970s the social value and usefulness of knowledge has rigorously informed critical thinking, influenced by Marxist theory, feminist critiques of patriarchy, psychoanalytic accounts of constructing identities, and semiotic and structuralist methods of analysing signs and meaning (Harris 2001). Widely applied to what may be considered a 'new art history', cultural commentators began to apply these theoretical perspectives to the museum in response to a, 'widespread dissatisfaction with 'old museology' which it was believed resembled a 'living fossil'4 (Vergo 2000:n:4).

The perspectives of critical theory and new museology have provided structures with which to understand and frame the museum through its emergence in colonial and capitalist ambitions. In this model the museum's formulation of taxonomies and classifications are exposed as rejecting all previous schemas of display and exhibition as irrational. Pivotal, in the professionalized public museum the 'visitor' is positioned as an ideologically formed subject, determined by the power relations of the institution and its networks. There is little room from which to theorize the museum as a space of meaningful change. This is apparent when we appraise Tony Bennett's critique of museums.

Bennett does not disagree with Haraway's scathing evaluation of the AMNH's activities but rather he heightens its potency by taking issue with her view of the Museum as a vehicle solely for promulgating a ruling class ethos established as a private institution owned and controlled by New York's major capitalist families. He contends that this interpretation is too narrow and that rather than a 'private' Museum, the AMNH was, in a Foucauldian sense, actually the very model of a governmental institution (Bennett 2004:117). Within the logic of Bennett's critique there is no possibility of a visitor's affective experience contradicting the meanings imposed by the exhibitionary complex.

Bennett had earlier (1988) taken up a suggestion by the art historian Douglas Crimp that the art museum was ripe for analysis in Foucault's terms (Crimp 1985:45). In his essay 'On the Museum's Ruins' (1985) Crimp argues that postmodernity may represent the foreclosure of modernism and the commencement of a new episteme. The Foucauldian implication is that the museum is a modern institution of social power, alongside the asylum, the clinic, and the prison. Bennett, however, viewed museums not as places of confinement like prisons and asylums, but as sites of exhibition forming part of a larger 'exhibitionary complex' of discipline and power (2004a).

Bennett has a particular interest in the way that museums are linked to political and social theory. He reveals that cultural governance at the AMNH

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2 The application of critical theory remains important. For example, in relation to Marxist theory, Jonathan Harris points out, 'What is underestimated at our peril...is the significance of capitalist economic forces in social development throughout the world and for this reason Marxism, in its analytic and diagnostic modes, remains of unsurpassed importance within critical intellectual thought' (2001:267).
3 The assembly of a Deluzian museum is the topic of the author's doctoral research.
4 Peter Vergo perceptively compares old museology with the Coolacouth, whose brain shrinks in the course of its development so that 'in the end it occupies only a fraction of the space available to it' (Vergo 2000a:3).
was part of a larger social and political apparatus than Haraway’s institution dominated by a coterie of powerful men. This apparatus has to do with the museum underscoring the requirements of American neo-liberalism by using objects in typological displays to produce evolutionary narratives. The focus on ‘Civilization’ reflected the values of American neo-liberalism, values that differed from the previous moral agenda and reforming zeal of museums which underscored mid-nineteenth-century liberalism. There is no disputing the acumen of Bennett’s analysis. However, there is little in his critical writing about the physical affect of a ‘civilizing’ sequence upon a visitor. Yet an artefact, even while positioned within a didactic narrative sequence, remains an individual object with the capacity to affect and stimulate meaning that is not only outside the intent of the display, but that may contradict it.

The same point may be made about a semiotic analysis (1978) of the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MOMA) by Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach. They read the layout of art across the museum as a gendered narrative in which American abstract art is transcendent over other art, notably paintings and sculptures of European female nudes. The core of their critique is that museums are ideological instruments that aim to utilize affect in a didactic manner. They describe a ‘ritual walk’ that commences for visitors at the museum entrance where, ‘Separated from the movement of the street, you are released into the space of the interior like a molecule into a gas’ (Duncan & Wallach 2002:486). In this state you ‘walk through an irrational world in which everyday experience looms as monstrous and unreal, compared with the higher realm of dematerialized spirit’ (2002:295). The ‘irrational world’ experienced by the visitor is a part of an intended ritual to maintain the museum’s dominance as a patriarchal and capitalist entity. Like Haraway and Bennett’s critique of the AMNH, there is no space to consider a visitor to MOMA encountering the ‘irrational world’ of the museum in alternative ways.

During the 1990s, Alan Wallach continued to examine the role of North American art institutions as producers and conveyors of ideologies. He critiques ‘The West in America’ (1991), an exhibition that reinterpreted paintings of ‘wild west’ subjects as instruments of domination. The exhibition was described by the art historian Simon Schama as, ‘A religious sermon, phemonenally condescending to both the painters and the painted’ (cited in Wallach 1994:93). In considering the disdain the exhibition generated, which seems to have been largely due to tactless wall text and labelling, Wallach determines that museums are incapable of providing a critique of ideology as this would strike at the very heart of the museum’s traditional function, as ‘already inscribed in any given museum space is a set of meanings that work against any sort of critical narrative’ (1994:98). Wallach’s view frames the museum as an institution in perpetual stasis. Yet, surely, this is overly pessimistic and alongside the ‘set of meanings’ that he claims work against change, there always exists the possibility of another set of meanings.

A More ‘Affecting’ Discourse

This paper suggests that Andrea Witcomb is accurate in proposing that there may be benefit in moving away from Foucaudian approaches to museums and governmental, and semiotic approaches to reading museum displays (2003:3). Withered hands and dinosaur bones embody meaning that may affect daydream and play, irrelevant to any didactic intent. As Michelle Henning observes, while it is obvious that museums will attempt to organise visitors and to direct their attention, ‘we cannot assume that the...sensory and emotive effect of a display will be complicit with the overt messages or content of the museum’ (2006:3). There are numerous examples of contrary meaning in response to exhibits, artefacts or art. Gaynor Kavanagh cites the experience of a fundamentalist Christian school group visiting the Holocaust Museum in Washington who concluded after walking around the museum that it “provided the evidence that the Jews had received punishment for their failure to accept Jesus Christ as their saviour” (2000:158). The meaning generated by visitors in this instance is alarmingly different from that intended by the museum. Another forceful instance of the generation of contradictory meaning is the 1937-38 ‘Degenerate Art’ exhibition in Nazi Germany. Intended to discredit modern art, many visitors were instead amazed at the emotive power and quality of the expressionist art on display (Verger 2000b).

Overwhelmingly when critics engage with the affect of exhibits in museums they focus on the intentional use of didactic strategies employed by the institution. The operation of unintended affective response receives scant attention. That there is a ‘dual nature of affect in itself supports the view that the process of generating meaning in museums is more complicated than the rational museum model allows.

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3 The museum’s layout is a labyrinth, the effect of which is traditionally about overcoming the experience of being ensnared by the Goddess. The labyrinthine ordeal, is a ‘male spiritual’ venture in which consciousness finds its identity by transcending the material, biological world and its Mother Goddess’ (Duncan & Wallach 2002:93).

4 Henning observes this particularly in contemporary zoos where the pleasure of technically complex simulations may be quite antithetical to the project of getting visitors to “care about the reality” to which such representations refer’ (2006:58).
It appears that the generation of meaning in museums has two affective elements—didactic affect (anticipated by museums), and delirious affect (accidental, and chaotic). Separating the two dimensions of affect assists in developing a discursive framework, however, it is the case that both affective dimensions—didactic and delirious—operate simultaneously and are perhaps experientially inseparable.

The duality of affect agrees with Michel de Certeau's practice of the everyday, a 'logic' which differentiates between strategic systems of representation and the tactical meanings that individuals produce from these representations. According to de Certeau, tactical meaning is produced within every dominant social, political, and cultural entity through paths that trace 'interests and desires that are neither determined nor captured by the systems in which they develop' (1984:xiii). What this suggests is that ‘consumers’ makes their own logic out of systems of representation, whether this is television, newspapers, a city, or museum. The presence and circulation of a system of representation ‘tells us nothing about what it is for its users’ (1984:xiii). Thus, visitor behaviours in museums are complemented by what they actually ‘make’ or ‘do’ with the experience.

Affecting experience is important to understanding the transformative potential of museums. An affect is a physical response that is prior to an emotion or decision. The distinction is important. Affect is an automatic and pre-cognitive ‘feeling’, while decision-making involves cognitive response. Emotions are different again. They occur after an affect, and are an externally and culturally determined response to an event. Yet in critical discourse, affects are usually not distinguished from emotions and as such affective experience is deemed to be culturally and politically determined. However, affect actually has a weak ideological link. This notion gains credence once the automatic operation of our body’s internal proprioceptive movements and the random nature of involuntary memory are understood. The point that matters for this discussion is that if there is no affect, the museum encounter is one of re-cognition. Facts may be imparted and information about a subject or object accumulated but without leaving a strong impression. In re-cognition people receive what they largely expect to receive; they remain contained within their usual thoughts, the subject/object remains in place, and they are physically unmarked by the encounter.

**Duality and Contradiction**

There are some critics who believe that contradiction is an integral and valuable part of the museum but **who do not extend this idea to engage with expressive or affective experience**. Jean-Paul Martinon views the art museum as a 'dialectical institution' that presents itself through a double bind of truths and uncertainties, "it does not know what art is, but it keeps the promise that the museum is the place where the answer is" (2006:65). He offers a reading of the museum through its potential to revise its association with linear space and time. In this regard he claims the museum is not conservative, but argumentative in the sense that it always seeks to challenge that which enters the plastic process. He defines this operation as a kind of 'messianicity without messianism' and contends that contrary to common understanding, the museum is not an archival institution in the sense of a repository of past events. Rather, it is sited at the junction of endings and openings and is in a permanent state of disjunction, dispute and contestation (2006:65). Martinon argues that because of this it carries the potential of unravelling traditional temporal ideology, and 'setting difference into motion'.

Ultimately, it appears that Martinon is arguing for non-binary meaning to be associated with museums. When he states that it is 'never possible to pin-down or determine what museums are', he suggests this is because they are 'at the center of their own redefinition presenting themselves only in their estranged momentariness' (2006:64). This statement appears to be moving toward an appreciation that the affective and transformative experience of museums has always been based in temporal disjunction.

Two critics who focus their attention on the 'normative' meaning of museums are Gavyn Kavanagh and Calum Storrie who separately propose that the experiential appeal of museums is to be found outside the dominant discourse. Kavanagh qualifies that she does not wish to minimize the ways in which cultural frameworks and political systems condition and influence people, however, she recognizes that there is a need to place emphasis upon 'the personal and private as it comes into contact with the formal and official' (2000:171). In her study of history museums and memory, she argues that understanding the nature of visitors' engagements is limited if the focus is entirely on politics of class and culture; 'People bring with them to the museum not just characteristics drawn from their class status, cultural upbringing

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1. The word 'delirium' derives from the Latin 'deliri', a derivative of 'lim', a furrow. In this etymological context delirium means to move out of the furrow, and away from the path of reason.

2. Neuroscience now suggests that a memory exists as a shift in the strength of the synapses through a protein molecule known as a prion. Jonah Lehrer writes that prions are uniquely liberated, 'They are able to ignore everything from the instructions of our DNA to the life cycles of our cells. Though they exist inside us, they are ultimately apart from us, obeying rules of their own making. As Proust said, "the past is hidden...in some material object of which we have no inkling"' (2007:95).
and political environment but also individuality of self, which has the capacity to rupture at least some of the features of cultural patterns and political assumptions' (2000:158). For Kavanagh the museum is a 'dream space', overlapping with a cognitive, and pragmatic (social) space, 'the visitor travels in, through and out of these spaces, organizing and threading them together in ways that make meaning and associations in their lives' (2000:2).

In his book 'The Delirious Museum', Calum Storrie finds the association of the museum with order and classification restrictive, as it limits, 'either by accident or design, the possible interpretations of the museum' (2006:2). The delirious museum that he identifies does not replace the museums that we know; like Witcomb and Kavanagh he suggests that it exists parallel to the traditional museum as it has evolved. The delirious museum for Storrie is the museum reinterpreted in terms of the city. Its consistent feature, in antithesis of the rational museum, is the breakdown of control and classification. The delirious museum and the street have a conceptual contiguity as both are 'overlay with levels of history, a multiplicity of situations, events and objects open to countless interpretations' (2006:2).

James Clifford also suggests that there is value in escaping from the rational museum, that it is not immutable. For example, he argues that non-Western objects in ethnographic museums can be encountered in ways that unravel self-evident, dominant taxonomies:

Rather than grasping objects only as cultural signs and artistic icons, we can return to them... their lost status as fetishes. This tactic, necessarily personal, would accord to things in collections the power to fixate, rather than simply the capacity to edify or inform. African and Oceanian artefacts could once again be... sources of fascination with the power to disconcert. Seen in this nomadic resistance to classification they could remind us of our lack of self-possession, of the artifacts we employ to gather a world sensibly around us (Clifford 1985:244).

The challenge for more 'affecting' engagements with material culture is echoed in the ideas of philosopher John Armstrong and art historian James Elkins. They separately call for 'deeper' types of engagement in relation to art museums and art history. Armstrong argues that objects need to be understood to embody, rather than articulate meaning. In a culture of cliché, individuals do not engage with the silent, embodied meanings of things (2004). They are too busy grasping for asserted meaning and hype in an attempt to achieve superficial excitement. Perhaps what Armstrong observes is that instead of understanding the affect of objects, what both public and critical discourse is engaged with is a form of affectation; a simulacrum of affect, with no meaningful impact upon the way that the human and non-human world is understood.

In the western philosophical tradition, affective types of expression are mostly subsumed within aesthetic notions of the beautiful and the sublime, and with Romanticism. As noted above, within the critical realm such traditional forms of expression are usually categorized as revealing an uncritical subjectivity. However, in his study of why people cry in front of paintings, James Elkins (2004:73) provocatively suggests that for 'tearless' art historians and related academics, himself included, strong emotions are actually distorted because they involve change, and change is a form of manipulation that carries the ability to alter the way people think. In seeking to understand why some people cry in front of paintings, Elkins finds himself drawing upon theories considered to be 'false' and unfashionable. For example, he resolves that the mostly Romantic idea of the pathetic fallacy, 'is still a good model of the sheer unpredictable complexity of our response to major painting.' Likewise, he argues that 'trance theory', the idea that a painting can be a bridge to another world, is still far better able to explain strong affect than 'a well-behaved, legitimate-sounding theory' (2004:73).

Like Elkins, this paper seeks to understand affective experience, as it applies to museum exhibits. Susan Best describes viewing three contemporary art installations as an experience of intense, affective movement stimulated by the sensation of excitement-interest. Her body engaged physically with each installation 'in order to crouch, walk around, touch, listen, look' (2001:209). She considers the 'role' of affect is to 'amplify, intensify and motivate aesthetic experience' and suggests that affective excitement is a pleasurable entwining of intellectual, motor and perceptual activity (2001:222). Jill Bennett interprets the 'role' of affect differently. She argues that 'we need to understand viewing not as a process of interpretation or cognition, but as an essentially transformative process in which the viewer is directly affected through a sensory encounter with the art object' (2001:6). Bennett champions Gilles Deleuze's notion that art is direct sensation, 'in arguing that paintings actively generate sensation, Deleuze has effectively broken the modern theoretical nexus which links affectivity with the concept of expression and thus tends to treat affect as (a priori) a property of an individual rather than of an image'. She concludes that in doing so 'he opens up the way for the

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kind of reconsideration of pre-modern forms of representation' (2001:14).

The 'Shock' of the Museum

It is suggested that the ideas of Gilles Deleuze can be drawn on to expand museum discourse in terms of the possibilities of Clifford’s ‘nomadic resistance to classification’, Storr’s ‘delirious museum, Kavanagh’s dream-space, and Preziosi ‘becoming-prey’ in the natural history museum as a child. It seems apparent that the meanings that are inherent in each of these experiences do not conform to the didactic meanings that are expected from the rational museum. De Certeau’s tactical form of meaning-making comes into play, contradicting expected schemas of knowledge and power relations. Rather than a subject formed by established knowledge, the museum visitor is in a constant state of becoming, breaking strategy apart, and assembling alternative meanings.

Deleuze always seeks to de-narrativize, aiming to provoke thought outside the clichés, conventions and dogmas of Western thinking. He rejects reliance on reason and commonsense, and sets out to expose the illusions that normalise the rational order of things such as the assumption that outside the established ‘identities, divisions and determinations, logical and syntactical as well as pragmatic…there is only chaos, anarchy, undifferentiation, or “absurdity”’ (Rajchman 2000:8). Instead, outside the rational order there lies a more sustainable way of understanding human and non-human life and the activities and impact of these entities on the world. Accordingly Deleuze seeks always to de-narrativize. A Deleuzian approach to meaning-making in relation to the museum ruptures the concept of the ideologically formed visitor in linear space and time.

The process of de-narrativizing also avoids the critically accepted way that museum objects are read, to make room for alternative readings that operate through sensation and affect. In this regard Deleuze has a particular interest in cinema because it provides images of thought that do not belong to a subject existing in linear space and time. The effect is to crack open the commonsense narratives that conventionally define the self, and allow knowledge of the world not based upon known systems of representation. Like the cinema, an alternative ‘Deleuzian museum’ operates affectively not as a text with meaning, but rather as an assemblage of non-linear time. The implication of this is to move away from the ideological strictures of thinking that are required by critical theory which, as Preziosi argues, have not been effectively applied in museums and therefore have had limited contribution to real social and political change. He notes that ‘professional museum literature in the past few decades’ focuses almost exclusively on ‘technically more refined versions of public education and infotainment’, or ‘more ‘responsive’ and ‘representative’ versions of whatever forms of social and cultural diversity seems to be required in increasingly more diverse communities, cities, and countries’ (2006:70). Preziosi claims that these practices are a ‘façade of change and progress’, and that museum professionals have not taken on board the issues of critical theory except in a cursory way, ‘the disjunction between the critical, historical and theoretical literature on museums and professional practices and methodologies remains vast’ (2006:72). A more inclusive form of speculation that acknowledges the affective, ‘cinematic’ attributes of the museum experience may assist in resolving the superficial application of theory in museums.

Summary

Critical theory and new museology continue to be imperative while tending to perpetuate an exclusionary discourse that limits appreciation of encounters that lie outside those prescribed by the rational museum. Within the ‘rational’ museum, visitors are understood as ideologically formed subjects with little attention given to meanings that may contradict or rupture this subject formation. Aligned to the difficulty of engaging discursively with affective experience in museums is the stigma of such meaning being deemed subjective and uncritical. However, affective experience has a dual nature, and meaning may be generated alongside the intentional knowledge schemes of the museum. Parallel to the ‘rational’ museum and its production of hierarchical forms of knowledge, are other inventions and assemblages. Once this notion is appreciated the production of meaning outside conventional forms of knowledge can be considered. The museum is open for such speculation using Deleuzian ideas to advance a more inclusive discourse that broadens our approach to understanding the human and non-human world.

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