

The Treasure House: Objects of Wonder, Objects of Play

From *Mapping the Musesphere: Cultures of Exhibition and Technologies of Display*

MPhil/PhD, Media and Communications, Goldsmiths College, University of London, 2006, Chapter

3 – Cultures of Exhibition

Objects mobilised in the gallery to represent cultural heritage may function in different ways. On the one hand they may serve to bedazzle the visitor, or alternatively to de-mystify and clarify the narrative. Like a film, with its own internal, temporal logic, the exhibition story is driven by a succession of moments – each one punctuated with an object or artefact – coming together to communicate the story that consequently becomes strangely familiar – or alternatively, strangely exotic.

In describing ‘wonder’ as a model for exhibiting works of art, Stephen Greenblatt (1991: 42) recognises the encounter between object and beholder in the museum context, and describes the ‘power of the displayed object to stop the viewer in his or her tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention’. In describing this process, Greenblatt (ibid.: 43) acknowledges not only the dialectic nature of the object, but also its precariousness, which, he claims, radiates a rich source of resonance, which Walter Benjamin (1992) denoted as the ‘aura’.¹ ‘Nothing conveys as accurate a conception of the genuine aura as van Gogh's late paintings,’ Benjamin asserted, ‘which could be described as all things painted with their accompanying aura’.² The auratic resonance, which Benjamin describes, is determined in part by the almost hallucinogenic setting of the object on the pedestal in the gallery, and in part through the ambiance of the museum design. The architectural space of the museum, with the glass showcases and the spotlight pedestals, together set the stage for the encounter, and visitors who wander around the galleries can not help but be awed by the lavishness and splendour that they sense is around them.

¹ The aura is also described in Benjamin's *Protocols to the Experiments on Hashish, Opium and Mescaline 1927-1934*, referring several times to qualities of the aura and specifically to the art object. See ‘Protocol V: Walter Benjamin: Hashish Beginning of March 1930,’ *Protocols to the Experiments on Hashish, Opium and Mescaline 1927-1934*: Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Ernst Joël, Egon Wissing, Fritz Fränkel. From Walter Benjamin's *On hashish*. Translated from the German by Scott J. Thompson in 1996. The Walter Benjamin Research Syndicate is an on-line research resource for individuals interested in the writings and the ongoing critical theory of Walter Benjamin (1892-1940). <<http://www.wbenjamin.org/protocol1.html>>, (accessed 22.03.05).

² See Protocol V: Walter Benjamin: Hashish Beginning of March 1930.

Greenblatt describes the German draughtsman and printmaker, Albrecht Dürer's sense of wonder that he felt when he came across a famous journal illustrating a series of Mexican objects sent to Charles V by Cortés. Dürer described this wonder, crucially understanding their beauty as 'testimony to the creative genius of their makers'. This kind of looking, he adds, 'the origins of which lie in the cult of the marvellous and hence in the artwork's capacity to generate in the spectator surprise, delight admiration, and intimations of genius [...] this wondering and admiring and knowing', according to Greenblatt, 'are at least partly independent of the structures of politics and the marketplace' (1991: 53). Similarly, social anthropologist, Alfred Gell (1992), describes the technological process whereby artefacts come into being and suggests that these outcomes of the technical process emphasize the technical miracle that must be distinguished from a merely mysterious process. It is miraculous, according to Gell, 'because it is achieved both by human agency but at the same time by an agency which transcends the normal sense of self-possession of the spectator'. This technical miracle evokes a profound sense of awe in the beholder, a potent visceral response that Gell (ibid.: 44) identifies as the 'halo-effect'. The following chapters will return to the 'halo-effect', the aura and the visceral response to objects that stop you in your tracks, to consider whether these qualities are evident in any way in art that has been born-digital.

As if to safeguard their auratic qualities, objects located in the gallery have been staged in ways that prioritise looking over touching.³ Spot lit in the gallery, and protected by a glass barrier, museum artefacts resonate in very different ways from those objects that we know from daily life. But, even if they were once used as ritual objects themselves, in their museum after-life they are now de-sacralised and embalmed in glass, with only a label by their side, or an explanatory video to suggest how they were once used as sacred objects by those empowered to deploy them in the privacy of the home or in places of worship.

Museums conserve and display objects and artworks that are appreciated, not only for their cultural value, but also for their monetary value, as well for their exemplary, exceptional and unique characteristics that tell their own stories. Museum objects resist our desire and are inevitably located both physically and symbolically out of our reach. Objects of wonder are always

³ See Bennett (1998: 209) on the pedagogical scopical regime in the museum.

unattainable, resisting touch and resisting possession, but, unlike the allegorical space of the theatre, or the mediated experience of the cinematic screen, the cultural heritage that is evident in a museum artefact resonates within its own physicality, and, it is because of this visceral materiality that the museum object is assured of its undeniable vitality. In spite of the auratic quality of the object that keeps it out of our reach, the material qualities of an object are strangely reassuring. We probably know what a Saxon iron axe feels like, even if we can't actually hold it. We are familiar with the touch of fabric even if we can't try on the costume displayed in the glass case in front of us. By the time we come to the museum, we have already learned enough about the world to be able to make sense of the objects we encounter in the gallery, and, through the familiarity with other, perhaps less wondrous objects, we have already learnt to come to terms with the world around us.

Cultural experience, according to British psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott, begins with creativity first manifested in play. From the beginning, the baby has intense experiences in the potential space between the subjective object and the object objectively perceived. Winnicott describes these cultural experiences as between 'me-extensions and the not-me' (1971: 100) and describes the development of culture experience through the relationship between mother and child. Building on his early theory of transitional objects and transitional phenomena Winnicott (1951), describes how babies 'create' an object that acts in the intermediate area between internal and external reality, using this liminal space to interact with the world. Drawing on Jacques Lacan's 1949 paper *Le Stade du Miroir*, Winnicott extends the role of the reflection of self in the mirror in each individual's ego development, which, he argues, needs not only the visual perception of the separate mother, but also psychosomatic inter-relating and object-relating of the physical object (ibid.: 112) that comes to represent the baby's separation from mother.⁴ These objects may take the form of a favourite toy, or a worn out scrap of material that both comfort the baby, by projecting the image of his mother onto the object, while at the same time, instilling a sense of containment as the baby sees himself, as small and fragile, and the idea that he too can be comforted and cuddled in the same way as he hugs his toy. The move from object-relating to the more sophisticated object-use (ibid.: 89) demands that the baby destroys the object in (unconscious) *fantasy* [original italics]

⁴ Winnicott is referring here to a baby being held, and handled satisfactorily, and the way the baby will use an object, and to feel as if this object is a subjective object, and created by the baby (ibid.: 112).

(placing the object outside of self), to then discover that the '*object survives*' [original italics] destruction by the subject' (ibid.: 90). In the early stages of emotional growth, the baby is able to use the object, learning to feel as if this object is a subjective object, that has been created by the baby (ibid.:112). This moment is where fantasy begins for the individual and where the baby can use the object (that has survived the fantastical destruction), that is now objectively perceived, has autonomy, and belongs to 'shared' reality (ibid.: 91).

The highly subjective interrelations with transitional objects and transitional phenomena occur in early the development of the individual self. At the same time these processes influence culture, and are decisive in the formulation of a shared culture. Winnicott uses the term cultural experience, as inherited tradition, as an extension of the idea of transitional phenomena, and explains how we learn our culture through play. He argues that play 'expands into creative living and into the whole cultural life of man' through drawing on our inner or personal psychic reality and projecting it onto the actual world which can be objectively perceived (ibid.: 103). Extending from the personal progressions, whereby individuals learn to externalise their internal processes and formulate their own cultural experience, Winnicott also describes culture as 'something that is in the common pool of humanity, into which individuals and groups of people may contribute, and from which we may all draw, *if we have somewhere to put what we find*' [original italics] (ibid.: 99). The rather congenial image that Winnicott conjures up suggests the place, (originally the object), which is located in the potential space between the individual and the environment which is to be thought of:

As part of the ego organization, here is a part of the ego that is not a body-ego, that is not founded on the pattern of body *functioning* but is founded on body *experiences*. These experiences belong to object-relating of a non-orgiastic kind, or to what can be called ego-relatedness, at the place where it can be said that *continuity* is giving place to *contiguity* [original italics] (ibid.: 101).

These play spaces and fantastical representations extend as other objects are brought into the constellation of our private world, each demanding new organisational processing, and each extending our contiguity in the world. Children quickly learn to decode the cultural process that

the objects surrounding them come to represent. In this way, objects represent the way we come to terms with the world, and growing up with specifically culturally-charged artefacts in the home or in school – photographs, videos, objects and books that bind community networks and forge a common memory – serve to set the scene for the enrichment of personal identity and community affiliation.⁵

I argue that objects in the gallery come to represent the potential space between individual and the universal community of man, the national body, or fraternity to the local community. As a result of his or her own (successful) somatic interrelating and object-relating as baby with mother, the evolving individual is able to extend these potential spaces and relate to objects and other people as a culturally cognisant individual in society. These phenomena (both the objects in the home and by association those later encountered in the museum) are located simultaneously outside of the self, yet are inscribed on the universal, national, or community body, representing the potential space that enables us to imagine our cultural self. As the baby internalised his own mother and learned to identify as a separate being, so the gradual accumulation and integration of cultural objects helps us to internalise our collective selves, incrementally absorbing new objects into our psyche, as we evolve as culturally developed individuals.

Different objects stimulate this potential space in different ways. We often consider a museum to be the populated with wondrous objects, however, the sometimes banal object found in a local museum resonates with visitors precisely through their familiarity with the objects, even though they may belong more to the past than they do to the present.⁶ The connections between home and museum serve to forge closer bonds and a closer identification with the exhibition and ‘the’ story effortlessly becomes ‘their’ story as the mimetic object slips easily into collective memory. Some objects, however, are temporally or spatially detached from the visitor’s own life and when encountered on display, demand that the distance between the visitor’s own entrance narrative and the object’s provenance be resolved in order for the encounter to be meaningful.

⁵ See Appadurai, 2003 and a discussion on the social relations that objects represent and the value of objects as they circulate in society.

⁶ See Macdonald for a full discussion how ordinary and mundane objects of the recent past are put on display in museums which, according to Macdonald entails a kind of fetishization of everyday life (2002: 102).

The entrance narrative, according to Doering (1999: 81), is the visitor's own internal storyline. The entrance narrative, Doering argues, is marked with three distinct components: a fundamental way that individuals construe and contemplate the world; their own information about the exhibition; and their own personal experiences, emotions and memories. When objects, for example from a distant historical period, or a culture that is very different from their own are displayed, there may be little bearing on a visitor's own story line. The potential discrepancies between time and space need to be bridged through new indexes to enable the visitor to be able to make his first step into the narrative, and to bridge the gap between the exhibition's narrative and his own. For instance, in Leicester Museum the exhibition, *The Making of Leicester*, bridged the gap between past and present with an eye to the future generations of Leicester, with the display of archaeological evidence of communities from the distant past. Described in their promotion as 'Iron Age, Roman, Saxon and Medieval citizens in exciting detail, including the reconstruction of the Glen Parva Lady, a Saxon woman from the year 500 AD', the past was deftly projected into the present, and the storyline was launched.⁷ Separated by over 2,500 years, this Saxon lady, who had remained anonymous over all these years, had become re-configured as the *Glen Parva Lady* and could now be mobilised to represent a common ancestry. Whether this was the way that visitor's contemplated the world, or conceptualized the past, the narrative aimed to link in with the visitor's own world and to resonate with his or her own emotions and memories. Naming the anonymous lady had made the unfamiliar, familiar, and the objects on display could be internalised in a continuum that had started more than two millennia before, moved in quick succession to the present and aimed to unite past and present, object and visitor in a common heritage and shared future. As Hewison noted, museums, as institutions have stories to tell, but whether they bedazzle, inform or entertain us, they do so through the cultural filter of the institutional ideology, and while the museum endeavours to present narratives that are meaningful for their visitors, not all entrance narratives may comply with those of the museum.

Bibliography

Appadurai, A. (ed.) (2003) *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Peters, J.D. (1997) 'Beauty's veils: the ambivalent iconoclasm of Kierkegaard and Benjamin,' in A.Dudley, (ed.), *The Image in Dispute: Art and Cinema in the Age of Photography*, Austin: University of Texas Press.

Benjamin, w. (1992) *Protocols to the Experiments on Hashish, Opium and Mescaline 1927-1934: Translation and Commentary*

<https://www.scribd.com/document/125558806/Protocols-to-the-Experiments-on-Hashish-Opium-and-Mescaline> <ACCESSED 18.9.16>.

Bennett, T. (1995) *The Birth of the Museum*, London: Routledge.

Doering, Z. D. (1999a) *Strangers, Guests or Clients? Visitor Experiences in Museums*, Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution.

Doering, Z. (1999b) 'Strangers, guests or clients? Visitor Experiences in Museums,' *Curator* 42 (2), 74-87.

Gell, A. (1992) 'The technology of enchantment and the enchantment of technology' in J. Coote and A. Shelton (eds.), *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Greenblatt, S. (1991) 'Resonance and wonder' in I. Karp and S. D. Lavine (eds.), *Exhibiting Cultures, the Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, Washington, DC: Smithsonian.

Hewison, R. (1987) *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline*, London: Methuen.

Lacan, J. (1949) Le stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du Je telle qu'elle nous est révélée dans l'expérience psychanalytique, in *Écrits*, Paris: Édition du Seuil, 1996.

Macdonald S. (2002a) 'On "old things": the fetishization of past everyday life,' in N. Rapport (ed.) *British Subjects. An Anthropology of Britain*, Oxford and New York: Berg.

Winnicott, D. W. (1951) *Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena*, London: Heinemann.

Winnicott, D.W. (1971) *Playing and Reality*, London: Routledge.

⁷ *The Making of Leicester*, Jewry Wall < <https://www.leicester.gov.uk/leisure-and-culture/museums-and-galleries/education-and-learning/active-learning-programme/>, 2016).