

Thinking About Audience and Agency in the Museum: Models from Historical Research

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This paper examines a current trend within museum studies to conceptualise the contemporary museum as democratic, open, and working in partnership with its community, which is seen as a fundamental change from museums at some point in the past, when they were didactic and produced or encouraged a passive audience. This trend, it maintains, is not just produced by museums needing to fit into various agendas for social inclusivity, but also by some of the most important texts in museum history, which look at the ways in which various forms of agency worked to deny agency to the public. It argues that such a view radically understates the forms of agency available to ‘outsiders’ to museums in the past; and that as a corollary, analyses of the contemporary museum need to be wary of seeing shared agency as already achieved. By exploring the forces which work to distribute agency widely inside and beyond the museum, alongside those which worked to centralise agency in the institution of the museum and its curators, we can gain a much fuller understanding of museums past and present.

INTRODUCTION

In the past, exhibitions were prepared by curators and when they were finished, they were “opened to the public”. The process of production was closed, and the completed display allowed no point of entry for the consumer, the visitor. The consuming subjects, the visitors, were constituted firstly as separate from the professional processes of the museum, and secondly as a general, undifferentiated mass. ... The age of the passive visitor has passed, to be superseded by the age of the active and discriminating “consumer” or “client” (Hooper-Greenhill 1992, 210-11).

In recent years museums have apparently undergone a profound change in their relationship with their audience – this relationship is now characterised as a partnership, with the museum part of the apparatus of a democratic state which makes a space and a voice available to all its citizens. This is seen as a reversal of the earlier museum which was ‘exclusive and socially divisive’ (Ross 2004; see also Lang, Reeve and Woollard 2006). This somewhat Whiggish characterisation of the development of the museum threatens, I argue, to overlook examples of why and how a wider public could exercise agency in the museum, in favour of constructing a self-congratulatory model of change. Certainly for curators in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the ideal model of the museum was one in which curators produced knowledge, and audiences consumed it; a one-way process based on the expert credentials of the curator. However, an investigation of the way in which museums have historically interacted with a range of constituencies suggests that this model was never fully achieved in practice, and indeed, that museums have always been partnerships between curators and a variety of other groups.

Contemporary discussions of museums’ involvement with their audience is dominated by the idea of community (see for example Karp, Kreamer and Lavine 1992). In some cases this concept is very uncritically used, with a museum’s community or communities understood to be self-evident constituencies which can speak with a coherent voice. In other cases the ‘community’ is deconstructed, but this tends to be a sociological exercise, acknowledging the effect of structures including ethnicity, gender and race on the groupings among the audience. It may, however, be more useful to think about how the museum as an institution, its collections and objects, and wider discursive formations, create varying voices for subjects within the museum. The strength of this approach can be particularly seen if we take a historical approach which highlights the constructed nature of museum audiences and publics.

FORMS OF AGENCY

In order to understand how audiences and publics have shaped the museum, we need to understand what forms of agency and what subject positions are made available in museums. Historical studies of museums have enormously expanded our understanding of what museums do and have done, and have enabled us to identify the roles of various agents in the process of museum work. However, many of these studies have also fed the sense of rift between the historical and the modern museum, by emphasising the ways in which audience passivity was produced by the multifarious agents of the museum:

Space and architecture

Influential studies by Bennett (1995), Forgan (1998) and Yanni (1999) have emphasised the role space and architecture play in creating meanings and interactions at the museum. Buildings shaped both bodily engagements at the museum, and the narrative meaning of the displays. Indeed, the key argument of Bennett is that the two are intertwined and therefore inscribe meaning in a bodily way. Moreover space shapes people by dividing the public from

the curator and constraining the behaviour of the visitor. But might it also be true that people shape space? In other words, the nature of the space is as much a product of the bodily interactions which happen within it, as it produces those interactions. Suzanne MacLeod talks about ‘the human bodily experiences that have made and remade the architecture of the museum throughout its “life”’, a description which emphasises the point that the relationship between built space and the identities of people within that space cannot be seen as a purely one-way process, but rather an interaction (MacLeod 2012; see also MacLeod 2005). And a key methodological issue to raise here is the tendency of commentators to engage with idealised versions of museum space, particularly photographs and prints which show an empty or almost empty museum. The assumption is that the people are added after the museum spaces have been finalised, and thus fit in with the pre-determined spatial discourse. Of course, it is important to investigate ideals, especially the ideals of those who were in charge of museums; but there is plenty of evidence to suggest that while the empty spaces look as if they could exert a disciplinary effect and could produce a certain narrative meaning, in the overcrowded state they were not infrequently in during the nineteenth century neither of these processes could function, as detailed below.

Curatorial

As curating developed as a profession, curators developed techniques and practices to enhance their own authority, giving themselves and no one else a position from which to speak in the museum. Expertise in classification, cataloguing, connoisseurship, conservation and exhibition/display have all been identified as markers of curatorial authority (Alberti 2009, Teather 1990). Work on more recent curatorial identities has also affirmed a view (among curators at least) that experienced curators have a quality of judgement that no one else has (Sandino 2012). Yet in fact curators do not have a monopoly on any of these skills, and especially in the late nineteenth century many people within and outside museums were able to classify, catalogue, and prepare for exhibition at least as well as many curators; while connoisseurship, still closely linked to notions of aristocratic (and inherent) taste, has continued to be thought of as something more likely to be found in the disinterested amateur than in the jobbing curator. Curators did develop ideas which enshrined and enhanced their own agency within the museum and aimed to minimise those of others – for example accession policies, the downgrading of the role of honorary curators and local government committees – but there are ground for doubting the efficacy of such measures.

Objects and collections; displays

Both the accreditation of certain objects and certain types of collection as appropriate or inappropriate to the museum, and the creation of displays using those objects, acts to create meaning within the museum. Commentators vary in how far they think this meaning creation is under the control of the curator. Pearce, for example, sees the world of objects acting out structural formations which cannot be traced to one individual but are part of deep cultural patterns (Pearce 1990). Similarly, Hooper-Greenhill links typical forms of display to deep, and relatively persistent, epistemological frameworks; which is effectively what Bennett does in linking displays to the dominant trope of ‘knowledge’ in the late nineteenth century (Hooper-Greenhill 1992, Bennett 1995). Certainly there can be no denying that the way in which objects were understood to yield knowledge was always historically produced; but equally, recent studies have pointed to the ability of objects to retain a ‘multivocal’ quality. Their materiality encompasses the potential for other stories and meanings to be created from them; which is why curators are never able fully to control them, or to shut down the possibility of understanding them in different ways. As Larson says, ‘objects are full of ambiguities and entangled histories. They tend to undermine the categories we provide for them, and lead us down unpredictable pathways as we learn from them’ (Larson 2009: 243-4).

While such approaches to the agency of the museum illuminate many of the processes by which a museum became a museum, we should not just look to the past to see how audiences and the public were disempowered. These studies posit a duality in power, and a somewhat undifferentiated ‘audience’, but further digging in the history of museums complicates this picture substantially.

AUDIENCE AND MUSEUMS c1900: VISITING; VOLUNTEERING; DONATING

If we look at the museum around 1900 we can see a number of ways in which a public or audience constituency acted to shape the museum; and moreover, it becomes clear that a separation between curator and audience is hard to sustain.

1 - Volunteers are a group which make this lack of separation clear. Recent studies of volunteers focus on the economic contribution which they make, and develop ideas about good practice in volunteer management, but do not reflect on the extent to which volunteers may be ‘authoring’ the museum. It has been suggested that volunteers promote ‘user involvement’ in museums, and the extent to which volunteers are involved in research has also been noted (IVR n.d.). I argue that volunteers, those working within museums but unpaid, are and have always been a powerful voice. They differ from curators in lacking professional training, which might be argued to privilege the curator; but have historically often had equal amounts of subject expertise, and the benefits of being seen as selfless and disinterested. In the cash-strapped museums of the nineteenth century, volunteers undertook substantial and significant jobs – in Liverpool, Brighton, Bristol and Manchester they arranged entire subject areas, and the Rev. H. H. Higgins in Liverpool had a substantial input into the overall arrangement of the museum, the type of object displayed, and the interpretation strategy. He also single-handedly created an educational programme for the museum (Hill 2005). Nina Layard, an honorary curator at Ipswich Museum gave her collections to the museum but insisted they be kept in locked cases to which only she had the key. She objected to the curator even entering the room in which they were kept. Today, as commentators suggest that museum staff have too many management commitments to get to know their collections in depth, it is significant that volunteers are most often working on research – in other words they may be the ones who know the collections best, which offers them a position from which to act.

2 - Donors, arguably, have always had a relatively important position within the museum, but it is sometimes assumed that they have little agency, except in deciding whether to donate or not. Their role is assumed to be limited to the offering of objects, which the curator then takes charge of either accepting or not. Again, though, the museum which has been able fully to dictate its own acquisitions from donors is relatively rare. There is a lot of material advising museum staff how best to cultivate donors; but it is equally possible that donors cultivate museum staff. New regimes of meaning for objects/collections were actually very often driven by audience/public – in Manchester the Egyptology collection emerged more or less despite the museum staff; while evidence is growing that the birth of social history as a museum focus was driven by ‘outsiders’ to museums of one sort or another (Alberti 2009, Hill 2011). Gosden and Larson conceptualise the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford as a radically distributed entity, examining the complicated agendas of those who donated objects, and mediated or solicited those donations, right round the world: ‘people and objects that might otherwise be deemed to have existed “outside” the Museum have actually played a formative role in its history.’ I think this is as true for those museums whose donor network is not so geographically diverse as the Pitt Rivers as well (Gosden and Larson 2007, 11).

3 - Visitors— Far from passive, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that visitors to museums in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries actively engaged with a number of aspects of the museum as disciplinary institution and as creator of meaning. Visiting the museum was a performance which was undertaken in a number of ways. In the Mappin Art Gallery in Sheffield in the late nineteenth century the audience (of young working-class) used the gallery for ‘promenades’ and were felt (by other members of the public) not to be showing sufficient (or sufficiently respectful) attention to the paintings; sheer numbers also overwhelmed attempts to discipline audience through space, policing, use of barriers. At the same time, visitors to the Harris Museum in Preston, especially female, working-class visitors, spent so much time laughing and joking about the full-size reproduction of Michelangelo’s David, then at the entrance to the museum, that it was moved to the farthest room in the museum (Hill 2005). This is reminiscent of contemporary reports of visitors’ spitting on exhibits in Glasgow because they disagreed with those who were being held up as representative of the city. Alberti’s work on anatomical museums and the Manchester Museum also shows how visitors bring specific forms of agency to the interpretation of displays (Alberti 2007, 2009). Moreover we can understand these interpretations best by linking them to particular understandings of the type of leisure activity offered by the museum and gallery, and of the types of performances these necessitated. For the relatively new bourgeoisie of the late nineteenth century, such a visit was an opportunity to affirm cultural capital and an appropriate sensibility; while for sections of the working class, a distinct understanding of ‘a good day out’ shaped their interpretations of the exhibits. Interpretation is thus simultaneously performance of identity.

It is also clear that visitors can bring forms of knowledge to the museum which can be as legitimate as curators’ knowledge. Museum rhetoric has always tended to place curators as custodians of the people’s/town’s/nation’s past and possessions; discussion then moves to who can legitimately claim to be or represent or know the group. Urban elites in the late nineteenth century saw curators as essentially their employees – power followed social/cultural capital; but working-class discourse also emphasised the agency of rate-payers, with some working-class visitors asserting of art collections, ‘They’re ours’ (Hill 2005). Later, those who could lay claim to an ‘authentic’ link to the past claimed a special place in the development of the museum especially with the growth of oral history – while it becomes widely recognised as legitimate for visitors to dispute curatorial authority on the basis of their own memories (Carnegie 2006).

CONCLUSION

It thus becomes clear that a key issue is how to conceptualise the agency available to the wider public in various ways – we should think about the positions which the museum, the objects, and wider discourses make available for a variety of people within the museum. The tendency to think of a dichotomy between curator and visitor obscures as much as it illuminates. It’s not just that I reject the optimistic chronology implied in many studies of museum development, especially in the UK; but I am wary also of their self-congratulatory nature. Graham Black has suggested that museums’ celebration of their ‘new’ democratic and responsive nature is in part a consequence of historical amnesia (Black 2007). Agency within the museum has always been an extremely complex issue, and you need to dig down to discover the array of subject positions and modes of agency available: who was able to act, and who was not able to act. The corollary of a more complex view of audience/public agency historically, is that we also need a more complex view of those who cannot/do not act within museums at the present time.

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