

A useful past for the present

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The successes and failures of history

Museums have been active in shaping knowledge over (at least) the last 600 years. During the period of the Renaissance *episteme*, the classical age, and the modern age, a variety of both structures of knowledge and rules for the production of truth can be observed to have been in operation. Accumulation of material things, both natural and artificial, have always been one of the ways in which it has been possible to know the world, but cabinets, *studioli*, *Theatrum sapientiae*, repositories, and ‘museums’ have been constituted according to the prevailing epistemological context, and have, therefore, enabled different possibilities of knowing according to the rules and structures in place at the time.

There is no essential museum. The museum is not a pre-constituted entity that is produced in the same way at all times. No ‘direct ancestors’ (Taylor, 1987:202), or ‘fundamental role’ (Cannon-Brooks, 1984:116) can be identified. Identities, targets, functions, and subject positions are variable and discontinuous. Not only is there no essential identity for museums, as the case-studies demonstrate, but such identities as *are* constituted are subject to constant change as the play of dominations shifts and new relations of advantage and disadvantage emerge. ‘Truth is of the world: it is produced by virtue of multiple constraints’ (Foucault, 1977b:13).

The successes of history belong to those who are capable of seizing these rules, to replace those who had used them, to disguise themselves so as to pervert them, invert their meaning, and redirect them against those who had initially imposed them; controlling this complex mechanism, they will make it function so as to overcome the rulers through their own rules.

(Foucault, 1977c:151)

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An 'effective' history of museums has discovered a long story of collection, confinement, and classification of material things, but there have been radical shifts in what things have been seen as desirable, how classifications and meanings have been made, why collections have been put together, and how these collections, once constituted, have been used. The production of 'truth' or 'knowledge' is a process that can be found to be operating at all times, and the selection, confinement and organisation of material things has been only one of the modalities of this production. However, the forms of truth and knowledge that *have* been constituted have not followed a continuous identity.

Truth in the Medici Palace was simply the truth that positioned the prince (Cosimo/Piero/Lorenzo de Medici) at the apex of a fixed hierarchical structure, closer to the Creator-God than others, and legitimately so placed because the visible splendour of his material existence marked a relation of exteriority. The production of this knowledge was abruptly ended when Florence was invaded by the French and the first generation of Medici were thrown out of the city. The collections that were still remaining were abruptly removed, physically altered, reorganised, and re-presented: rearticulated to constitute a new regime of truth to legitimise a new form of relations of advantage/disadvantage.

Knowledge in the 'cabinet of the world' was the revelation of the hierarchical unification of an occultised, magical, centripetal, fixed world both revealed and concealed through the interpretation of the signatures of the world, and at the same time the positioning of the subject (prince/scholar/consumer) at the centre of this partly objectified world. The shaping of this truth could no longer be sustained on the collapse of the Renaissance structures of knowing. Those collections which remained intact could no longer maintain the rational structures of the interpretation of hidden knowledges. Once the relationships revealed by the links between material things were lost, the unity of the collections could no longer be perceived and they became 'irrational', 'confused', and 'miscellaneous'.

'Knowing' in the Repository of the Royal Society was the pure tabulated relationship of words and things constituted through differentiation and separation, where the original ordering of nature was demonstrated through simple, visible, physical juxtapositions. The production of this truth could not be achieved because of a lack of instrumental technologies. With a change in the target of language from the ordering and naming of the material world to the representation of mental processes, the production of this knowledge became irrelevant, the project declined, and the collection was neglected until the British Museum was established with its own regime of practices, and producing its own truths.

Knowledge in the 'disciplinary museum' was the truth of liberation from tyranny, the egalitarian and democratic opportunity to gaze on a history of man liberated from oppressors and free to constitute history in his own image. At the same time, an old form of knowing was reactivated in a new context; the knowledge of the position of the prince. This complex structure of knowledge had both specific short-term political dimensions, which were abruptly ended in 1814, but long-term cultural and political dimensions. The establishment of such a system of museum practices acted as a programme and a stimulus to further museum establishment across Europe during the nineteenth century where new relations of advantage/disadvantage, new princes, and new histories were produced.

Each society has its 'general politics' of 'truth' (Foucault, 1977b:13). This knowledge is produced through regimes of practices, of which the museum is one. The knowledge so produced is radically discontinuous and subject to abrupt reversals.

The histories of the museum successes and failures demonstrate that the use of knowledge is contingent upon other power practices. When the Medici were reinstalled in Florence in the sixteenth century, the idea of the golden age in Florence as a reactivation of their own specific past, presented in a specific way, was used to legitimise their rule. History was rewritten and re-presented. The suppression of the truth of the cabinet of the world, and the redesignation of its rational knowledge as irrational and disordered, came about because this older way of knowing the world conflicted with a new scientific truth that positioned the subject in control of the world and his own destiny. Occult and magical explanations could not be accommodated within such explanations.

'Effective' history places the museum in its constitutive context. Previously this has not been the case. All writers of 'normal', all-encompassing museum histories (Wittlin, 1949; Bazin, 1967; Van Holst, 1967) write about museums by tracing a line that moves from museum to museum, across time and space, drawing out the features of an essential museum.

This attempt at effective history has worked with specific case-studies with the aim of drawing out the particular and detailed features of each one. The case-studies were chosen because of their differences rather than their similarities. At the same time, effective history recognises that the social is open, only partially fixed, and that therefore, any case-study, any site of the production of knowledge, is equally only partially fixed and thus that external/internal relations are subject to movement and change. The social includes material things, subject positions, spaces, and values. Through the analysis of the elements of several 'museums', it has

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become clear that none of these things has an essential identity. A radically contingent, differential fluid identity was revealed in each case.

The identity and meaning of material things is seen to be constituted in each case according to the articulations of the epistemological framework, the field of use, the gaze, technologies, and power practices. If the same object had been held as part of the collection of each of the 'museums' that have been discussed, the meaning of the object would have radically changed as it moved from one institution to the next. The way in which the object would have been both understood and enjoyed would have shifted. Neither what counted as knowing, nor what counted as pleasurable, remained the same.

Thus a painting of a 'Madonna and Child' would be understood in the Medici Palace as both a magical and a religious thing, something that could give protection against evil forces, and something that should be held in awe. The value of the painting would have some relation to both the quality and quantity of precious material (gold leaf or lapis lazuli) expended in its production and to the skill of the artist who had painted it. This painting might well have been an integral part of the decorative scheme of a room, or executed upon an item of furniture. It would probably have been produced specifically for consumption within the Medici Palace.

The modality of knowing the painting in the Medici Palace would have been constructed through the reading, evaluative, and calculating gaze which operated within a pre-existing, fixed, theological-political order. Pleasure would have been produced through the exercise of both the evaluative gaze and the gaze sensitive to the spiritual qualities of colour and light.

In the second case-study, 'the cabinet of the world', a painting of a 'Madonna and Child' would be understood as part of the representation of the hierarchical structure of the world. It would be one thing among other things both old and new that were placed together in the cosmological picture, and it might possibly be linked to other things of very disparate nature through resemblance and signatures. It would probably have been painted in allegorical form. The painting would possibly have been acquired by agents on behalf of the collector and might therefore have belonged to more than one owner. Its value would have increased had this owner been a person with a certain social position. It would be detached from a specific site of production and consumption. The modality of knowing this painting would be constructed through the occultised interpretive gaze which placed it in an objectified cosmological framework. Pleasure would be produced

through reading the hierarchies and correspondences (which might be extremely personalised) in attempting to bring together and represent a world picture, which might be highly secretive and occultised.

In the third case-study, the Repository of the Royal Society, a painting of a 'Madonna and Child' would be seen as something that did not fit with a complete picture of nature. Nonetheless it would be valued as a gift from a specific donor. If it had been painted by a specific artist or if it had previously belonged, or been seen by, specific people, its value would increase. It might well have been purchased in a 'curiosity' shop, and if it had hung in another collection, could have been formatised to fit. The modality of knowing was constructed through the classificatory gaze that separated and divided but that also evaluated the painting according to social structures, and possibly even magical notions. Pleasure would more likely reside in contemplating the status of the donor (or of being the donor) than in fitting the painting into the classificatory framework.

In the fourth case-study, the 'disciplinary museum', the painting would be part of a constellation of objects that represented liberation from tyrants and oppressors. In being seen, it took its place among the technologies designed to create docile bodies, and to reform the population as a resource for government. The painting might be part of a hang that had specific educational functions. It might be grouped with other paintings by the same artist, or from the same geographical location, to demonstrate a personal history, or a geographical 'school'. The painting might equally be in store, part of a reserve collection, or it could have been subjected to restoration.

The painting would have been perceived and known through the causal philosophical gaze that was beginning to understand man as both subject and object of analysis. The gazer might have used the painting as a starting point for the consideration of the psychology of man. Pleasure would have varied radically in relation to subject position: subjects internal to the museum practices might have taken pleasure from the production of knowledge and truth (exhibitions, catalogues, research) from the painting, while subjects external to these productive processes might have taken pleasure from the consumption of this knowledge and truth. Or, of course, they might not. In this case-study, the breadth of consumers and the function of truth at the level of population, introduces to museum practices for the first time the question of the acceptance or rejection of specific forms of truth. Museum practices become enmeshed in the constitution of the politics of pleasure. As such, the identities of collected material things, previously constituted within a small social group, become of political relevance on a large scale.

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The use of effective history is that it reveals that material things have no essential identity, that meaning is not constant, and that the processes of 'keeping and sorting' (Impey and MacGregor, 1985:1) have not remained the same. The search for rupture shows no unbroken continuity, but on the contrary constant discontinuity, breaks, ruptures, and reorganisations of material things and their meanings. Effective history also reveals the intimate articulations of the constitutions of identities through relations of advantage and disadvantage.

A constant flux of meaningful objects is revealed: manuscripts are broken up and rebound, reassembled, retranslated, becoming new forms of inscription; sculpture is repositioned in different spaces, and pieces are added or removed; images carved on to one thing are reproduced in another medium, on another scale, to make new historical and political points; jewels are melted down, remade, sold, given as gifts, according to current needs; things are discarded, thrown away for lack of relevance, broken up on new ownership, brought across vast spaces by agents of all sorts (missionaries, sailors, travellers, colonisers, cultural agents); things are cherished, nourished, or neglected according to the play of the factors that constitute them as objects. The identity of meaningful objects remains open, and is constantly shifting as other aspects of the social shift around them, as elements are transformed. Effective history reveals the 'unstable assemblage of faults, fissures, and heterogeneous layers that threatens the fragile inheritor from within or from underneath' (Foucault, 1977c:146).

The constitutive elements of the various case-studies were found to be in a constant state of flux due on the one hand to violent reversals such as invasions, imperial wars, revolutions, and civil wars, and on the other to smaller discontinuities such as management techniques, problems of changing monies, or the need to cultivate social support. All of these changes operate on their own time-scale which leads to non-correspondences and discrepancies within small areas of the social. Specific manifestations and their constituent factors also change at varying rates. In spite of the collapse of the Renaissance *episteme*, for example, some 'cabinets of the world' (Dresden) remained intact until the Napoleonic wars; some (Francesco I in Florence) were rearticulated almost immediately after their initial establishment.

Discontinuity can be identified in the separations and classifications made of meaningful objects. Changes in the valorisation of the old, the real, and the complete can be seen. Up until the end of the eighteenth century, old and new objects were placed together; in museums at the present time radical separations are made on the basis on periodisation. For a long time there was no distinction between the real and the replica; where it was the series that mattered, this distinction was not important.

Now the integrity of the 'real thing' is crucial. The need for a series meant that things were made complete; the ethics of restoration was not an issue as it is at the present time. Many museums up until fairly recently were focused exclusively on the representation of the past. Indeed, even today, many people assume that this is the major function of museums. This was not the function of the collections of the Medici Palace, the cabinets of the world, or the Repository of the Royal Society. The values and priorities that are taken for granted in museums today are not the same as the values and priorities that were important in the past.

Museums in the modern age

The modern *episteme* is constituted by the emergence of the human sciences. A human science exists 'wherever there is an analysis—within the dimension proper to the unconscious—of norms, rules, and signifying totalities which unveil to consciousness the conditions of its forms and contents' (Foucault, 1970:364). A human science is understood as a form of knowledge which takes knowledge itself, and knowing, as problematic. A human science questions that which forms its target of study. Thus sociology problematises society, and asks 'how is the social possible?'. The answers may come from a variety of perspectives, and the relationships between these answers also form part of the content of sociology.

The human sciences 'address themselves to that mode of being of man which philosophy is attempting to conceive at the level of radical finitude, whereas their aim is to traverse all its empirical manifestations' (Foucault, 1970:347). Where philosophy searches for analytical purity, abstract concepts and refined systems of mental activity, sociology, for example, is far more concerned with studying how people relate together in specific locations (school, industry); how practices and relations are constituted through systems of power (in the family or the professions); how many people act in specific ways at specific times (go to museums or football matches, shop at Harrods). The analytical and descriptive mapping of experience is the basis for the formulation of ideas, problems, and concepts in the human sciences. Sociology, psychology, anthropology, archaeology, history, art history, biology, and geology tell the stories of the history of the earth, of life, of man, and of civilisation. The interrelationships of these forms of knowing constitute a totalising order of things and of knowledge, which is historicised through and through (Bennett, 1990:43).

'The domain of the Modern episteme should be represented as a volume of space open in three dimensions' (Foucault, 1970:347). Deductive sciences such as maths and physical sciences are situated in the first dimension, the

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sciences of language, life, and economics are placed in the second dimension; while the third dimension is the site for the space of philosophical questioning. The human sciences do not exist in any of these dimensions, and are in fact, very difficult to locate. They have their existence in the three-dimensional space that is formed by this epistemological trihedron, and they borrow methods from each of the sciences at their boundaries. The existence of the human sciences is tenuous and perilous, positioned as they are between, and borrowing from, the deductive sciences, the empirical sciences, and philosophical reflection. Nonetheless, the human sciences have succeeded in establishing themselves as the most characteristic mode of knowing in the modern age.

In the modern age, it was to be no longer enough for material things to present themselves on a table of knowledge: the way in which things would be understood was in their relationship to man; 'it is no longer their identity that beings manifest in representation, but the external relation they establish with the human being' (Foucault, 1970:313). The stories of man, life, and civilisation were to become more important than the physical identities of material things.

The basic structures of knowledge of the modern *episteme* are totality (a story, a theme, a history, organic relationships) and experience (relationships of things to people, knowledge evolved through the study of and activity in empirical events). Knowing and knowledge have become three-dimensional, all-involving, and all-encompassing. The main themes of knowledge are people, their histories, their lives, and their relationships.

These themes and structures underpin the shifts and changes in museums and galleries that can be observed today. New technologies, and new articulations of space, individual subjects, and objects, have emerged to enable the new themes and structures of knowledge to do their work. The functions and targets of this work have perhaps changed less. Museums and galleries are still able to subdue and to control bodies, and to establish social and cultural divisions. Today, however, these actions are not unfrequently documented and contested and museums have become sites for active and visible ideological struggles. Many of the new technologies and micro-processes of power demanded by the new structures of knowledge hold within them new possibilities for intervention in power processes and for the fragmentation of monolithic messages. This potential for intervention and for new perspectives has called forth its own response in terms of totalising and all-encompassing 'experience'.

Although the modern age began to emerge at the beginning of the

nineteenth century, developments did not occur at the same time and in the same way across all the various knowledges that can be grouped under the term 'human sciences'. Shifts and changes in the constitutive elements of museums could no doubt be charted as they responded to the developments of the individual sciences, although the responses might not always be found to be in step with the modalities of knowing. Thus the relationship between space and knowledge in the Natural History Museum as conceived by its first director, Richard Owen, was more in tune with the out-of-date theories of Georges Cuvier, than the modern ideas of Lamarck, Darwin, and Wallace. Owen had visited Cuvier in the Natural History Museum in Paris as a young man, and had worked with Cuvier shortly before his death in 1832. Cuvier's concepts of the relationships of groups in the animal kingdom as variations on an archetype were to be given material expression in the spaces of the 'Index Museum' which was proposed by Owen in 1859. In the event, the 'Index Museum' was incorporated into the central, cathedral-like hall of the museum, and is described by Owen in a report of 1880 (Stearn, 1981). The bays of the 'Index Museum' would be labelled 1–12, and would 'convey an outline ... of the divisions of Natural History, which would be fully and systematically illustrated in the several Galleries of the Museum'. The central core of the museum, therefore, opened to the public at the end of the nineteenth century (1881), expressed through its spaces knowledge that looked back to the end of the eighteenth century, and which had not yet fully made the shift into the modern age. The two-dimensional classification of the classical age offered principles of three-dimensional layout (Peponis and Hedin, 1982). The exhibition on human biology that opened at the end of the 1970s rearticulated the space of the museum, incorporating ideas informed by several divisions of the human sciences, including human biology (exhibition content), educational technology (exhibition design), and sociology (visitor studies). A very different spatial environment emerged, where convex spaces, curved lines, smooth transitions, and several choices of route shaped both the physical and intellectual experience of the museum visitor.

The technologies and micro-processes of museums can be discussed in relation to space, material things, and individual subjects. The identities and interrelationships of each of these elements will have changed many times during the period designated by Foucault as constituted through the modern *episteme*, and the current discussion will, therefore, focus on museums at the present time. How do spaces, material things, and individual subjects, at the end of the modern age, articulate with the primary themes and structures of knowledge?

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Technologies in the modern museum

At the birth of the public museum, a division was drawn between the private space where the curator, as expert, produced knowledge (exhibitions, catalogues, lectures) and the public space where the visitor consumed those appropriately presented products. A deep cleft was formed that separated out the practices of the museum workers from those of the visitor. The experience of the museum, its collections, and its specialist processes, was different on either side of this divide. The lack of knowledge of the work of the curator constituted the visitor as ignorant and the curator as expert in respect of the collections. Conversely, the lack of knowledge of the visitor's reactions and responses constituted the curator as ignorant in respect of the audience for whom the museum's intellectual products were intended. Now, the closed and private space of the early public museums has begun to open, and the division between private and public has begun to close.

This opening of the space of the museum can be observed at a number of different levels. Conceptually, some curators are inclined to see themselves as facilitators for learning rather than as sole dispensers of knowledge. Shifts in the understanding of the learning process in schools, and the consequent recasting of the role of the teacher as facilitator, can be observed in museums. Exhibitions, and even collections, are now sometimes the product of joint efforts between audience and museum worker. An adult education project on history in a local community in Southampton resulted in an exhibition at the local art gallery of photographs brought by local people (Jones and Major, 1986). Getting together an art exhibition in a small village in Sweden involved the art adult education group in decisions about inclusion and exclusion, presentation, levels of text, and so on. This was followed by a visit to the art gallery in the nearby town, where the adult students experienced a new interest in the art gallery because they had themselves been through the processes of making an exhibition (Riksstallningar, 1976).

The private spaces and processes are sometimes opened quite literally through inviting visitors on 'open days' to see 'behind the scenes'. Storage areas, conservation and photographic laboratories, and archives are demonstrated and explained. Sometimes the activities that, in the past, would always have been carried out behind closed doors, are pursued in the public spaces. Thus the preparation of exhibitions, previously a hidden process, is sometimes now open to view. At Leicester Museum an exhibition of large historic paintings which had not often been displayed before, was prepared in the large open spaces of the art gallery; partly because the objects themselves were so large that this was the only space where they could be displayed, but partly also as an educational

opportunity for the public. Discussions on the condition of the paintings and the conservation work required were held equally between the curator and the conservator and the curator and the visitor.

The idea of open storage has emerged in the last few years (Ames, 1985). Conceived with a democratic end, several museums in western Canada found ways to redisplay their collections so that not only were the objects always accessible, but so also was the information held by the curator. At the University Museum of British Columbia, for example, the collections previously held in stores closed to the public were rearticulated in newly open spaces redesignated 'Research Collections'. The data held on the collections was made accessible through the use of computer documentation and print-outs collated in books positioned near the relevant objects. This attempt to 'deschool' the museum meant that new display cases had to be designed, so that, for example, those objects which were small and therefore liable to loss or damage were placed in cabinets with glass-topped drawers. At the Children's Museum of Boston, the curators work in glass-fronted offices next to the public galleries. The private work of the museum is visually accessible.

The architecture of museum buildings is now being adapted to enable information of all sorts to flow through more smoothly. Where the Natural History Museum in London, for example, was constructed to enable objects to be laid out in a typology, new museums in Japan are being built to allow channels of information to be installed. These cables and optical fibres carry information on all aspects of the work of the museum, including documentation on the collections, demographic and other information on the visitors, and data concerning the security and the internal environment of the museum. The 'intelligent' museum (Mizushima, 1989) requires adequate information-transmission capability; thus the quality of the electrical supply and the electrical wiring method is all-important.

The 'intelligent' museum controls its own environment through air-conditioning, and factors such as the thermal quality of the structure, the heat emission from equipment, changes in the number of visitors, and the characteristics of both exhibition and conservation environments must all be understood as part of the same general framework. The 'intelligent' museum monitors its own security through a strong system of information provision concerning the protection against fire, floods, or earthquakes; against penetration of boundary security; and against theft and burglary. Devices can be installed which inspect temperature, humidity, carbon-monoxide and carbon-dioxide intensity, dust quantity, wind speed, luminescence, and light.

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Information on the collections can now be moved around the museum space itself, and also can be made available in other collections across the world or down the road. The space of the museum and the space of the object are no longer as they were.

The visitor, too, is connected to the museum space and its information-carrying function. Computer terminals distributed about the museum building offer guidance to the space itself, and information on various collection-related topics. Visual exhibits and simulation games are on the menu. The computers can be linked together and to central information banks. As the visitor works with the computer, it is possible to interrogate the nature of the interaction. Demographic information is recorded, such as the age and sex of the operator, the length of the interaction, how often an individual will use a terminal, what path of enquiry is followed, and how accurate are the responses of the visitor when tested (Mizushima, 1989). As the subject and the information terminal interact, so the one generates the other: the subject generates information at the same time as consuming it; the terminal both gives and takes at once.

The entrances to museums often now look more like hotel lobbies than the prisons they perhaps resembled in the past. Large green plants, thickpile red carpets, bubbling, sparkling waterfalls, and cheerful smiling faces are to be found in the spaces that were formerly austere, bare, colourless, and peopled by warders in military-style uniforms.

Museum spaces have been rearticulated in other ways too. Shops, restaurants, rest and orientation areas occupy space that in the past would have contained objects and displays. The percentage of space within the building allowed for the display of objects is reduced in favour of spaces to display people. Thus, in La Villette in Paris, lounges with a group of sofas, a television monitor, and a nearby counter from which to buy food and drink are to be found at regular intervals. People can be found sleeping among the displays, and are, in many ways, much more entertaining. In some museums, specialist facilities are available for adults with babies, and the recent large-scale exhibition in Glasgow, namely 'Glasgow's Glasgow', contained a play area for children.

As shops take over gallery spaces, museum exhibits are returned to storage, and items for sale take their place. Objects for looking at are replaced by objects for purchase. Museum visitors as lookers and learners are repositioned as consumers. The merchandise in the shop is selected to relate as closely as possible to the collections of the museum, and may include replicas of three-dimensional objects, or prints of paintings. Patterns and designs from the material things in the collections are reproduced to 'museumise' ordinary items such as tablemats, diaries,

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pens, pencil cases, wrapping paper, small boxes, and calendars. Images are detached from their original sites of inscription and reassembled in new ways. Thus a book in the British Museum on the subject of 'cats' consists of images of cats from Ancient Egypt, the Classical World, the Middle Ages, and any other attractive cat that can be seen on a 'real' object from the collections. Cats from a Walter Crane ink drawing appear on the page next to cats from a seventeenth-century woodcut of three witches, the broadsheet reporting on their trial. A cat is abstracted from *The Historic of Foure-footed Beasts* by Edward Topsell, written in 1607, and reused as one of many cats in ancient times.

The contents of shops relate to the nature of the collections, but shops are sometimes even more specialised. At the British Museum, for example, a general shop with three-dimensional objects such as replicas of the Harris chessmen and Egyptian sculptures, T-shirts, posters, and silk scarves, is to be found in the main entrance; a general bookshop in a side gallery; a more specialised bookshop in the galleries of the British Library; and a small stall, with cheap items for children, in the Egyptian galleries.

Many museums and galleries have allocated space for their visitors to eat and drink. These spaces vary from elitist and expensive restaurants to sandwich bars. Some museums contain both, so that business people and families can both be suited. Meals, and other events too, are sometimes carefully selected also to relate to the collections; thus at an open day as part of an exhibition on the Caribbean at Leicester Museum and Art Gallery, Caribbean food was served, and, if visitors wanted, it was even possible to obtain a Caribbean hair-do during the evening.

With a reorientation in the funding of museums and galleries (Hooper-Greenhill, 1990:65–6), the appeal to business sponsorship includes the use of space for corporate entertaining, either in the galleries or in special hospitality suites. The Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester which occupies a building that was recently converted from a station to a museum, includes a conference and entertainment suite sited next to the spaces used by the education department.

Many museums have begun to define their image more carefully, and this can be seen in the way in which their spaces are articulated. Along with new attentions to segmentation of the customers, the products have themselves become more segmented and specialised. Individual identities are heightened to compete in the marketplace. Thus the Science Museum in London has become more like a giant playground with the installation of Launchpad, a space entirely filled with large-scale exhibits that invite participation. Historic houses become more historic and more 'real' by employing actors to 'live' for a period on the premises. Oakwell Hall, in

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Batley, Yorkshire ‘came to life’ when a team of actors in seventeenth-century costume ate, drank, cooked, talked, walked about, surveyed the land, fired guns, and cut down a tree, all in period style (and ignored the vast crowds that threatened to test the strength of the balcony over their heads as they ate in the hall). The National Gallery of Scotland was recently redesigned with dark, rich, and heavy wall-coverings, apparently intended to recall Victorian decor, although for any visitor who is not a specialist in Victorian style or the history of design, the atmosphere is more likely to evoke impressions of an extremely wealthy present-day house, or a large stately home.

Museums have now become part of a ‘total destination’; part of a holiday package that might include two nights in a hotel, a trip through the local countryside, and a visit to the museum. Museums sell themselves in the same brochure along with other local tourist attractions. Ironbridge Gorge Museum, long a successful tourist destination with its river, town, shops, and variety of sites, many with costumed ‘interpreters’, is now considering acquiring a hotel to complete its universal appeal.

Today’s ‘universal’ museum is one where all the various needs of visitors can be satisfied: a museum with well-displayed and enlivened collections, with a shop in which desirable and well-packaged objects can be purchased, with several places to eat according to one’s taste and pocket, with a rest area, and with space for the children to be cared for and to play. Open, intelligent spaces offer increased access to subject and object.

‘Objects’ in the modern age are no longer presented on the table of classification, where their morphology defined both their identity and their interrelationships. During the classical age, a thing became an object through its visible features. Now material things present themselves in their relation to human beings (Foucault, 1970:313). Material things are now constituted as objects through organic, historic links, through stories, and through people. In the museum, the three-dimensional display case was evolved to show the artefact or specimen in its physical dimension. Display cases seem to us now as, on the one hand, a metaphor for our understanding of what counts as a museum, but on the other hand, as curiously outdated. How can organic relationships, histories, and links to people be shown in display cases? What strategies are museums and galleries inventing to incorporate anthropology, sociology, and psychology as part of the knowledge of museums?

New technology is being used in displays to fragment the meaning of the artefact and to introduce many perspectives, many points of view. In the past, the object on display was accompanied with a label that fixed it in a monolinear frame of reference. A chair was ‘Oak, Seventeenth

Century'; a gun was identified by its firing capacity; a feather head-dress from the Solomon Islands was presented as an exotic item from the colonies. The human, social, and cultural contexts of these artefacts were rendered invisible by these strategies. Now the many frames of reference that can contextualise material things are displayed along with the things themselves.

In Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery for example, a new exhibition, known as the 'Gallery 33 Project' focuses on cultural assumptions. The exhibition's name indicates its new approach: 'Gallery 33. A meeting ground of cultures. An exhibition about the way people live: beliefs, values, customs and art from around the world.' The exhibition draws on the museum's extensive holdings of art and artefacts from the Americas, Africa, Asia, and the Pacific, some of which have been in store for twenty years. Artefacts in everyday use in Birmingham, and in other parts of the world, are displayed alongside historical objects, with the past and the present both represented. There are opportunities for active involvement through handling and through the use of interactive video. A performance space is included as part of the gallery space, where musicians, dancers, storytellers' and craftspeople can work, thus enabling what the curator calls 'a true meeting ground of cultures'.

The interactive video is used as an opportunity to fracture and augment the meanings of four key artefacts, through the presentation of different perspectives and experiences. Four individuals who collected artefacts from the Solomon Islands are profiled: Ida Wench, a missionary, and Arthur Wilkins, a collector, both active in the 1920s; then from the contemporary scene, a fictional American tourist, N.S. Jones, and Lawrence Fontana, the director of the Solomon Islands National Museum. These four people offer a variety of views that contrast in terms of time, gender, race, and professional interest. The visitor is offered a number of routes through the various perspectives, according to choice. The interactive video itself can be experienced at a variety of levels, depending on knowledge and interest. The video is incorporated into the gallery spaces in such a way that those who are working with the touch screen can be observed, and their choice of study route through the material can be shared with other visitors. In the display of the artefacts many different opportunities are made for relationships with people to emerge.

In the past, museum classification systems offered very limited frames of reference for the sorting of objects. Even where more than one reference was possible for each object, many curators insisted on using only one (Porter, 1990:81). Thus a domestic item (a kitchen chair, say) would be classified under the heading 'furnishing', and would not also be crossreferenced in relation to design, production, or material. Systems

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which enable the positioning of the item in more than one structure are now required, but even these systems (design, production, material), which consider the chair in terms of its intrinsic features, will very soon be felt to be insufficient. Where it is necessary, as it is today, to present objects in relation to people, the chair may well be related to its use in a human context. For example, it might be considered as one of the first pieces of furniture of a couple setting up home for the first time. At the Geffrye Museum in London in 1990, an exhibition 'Putting on the Style: Setting up Home in the 1950s' consisted of a number of room sets, all of which related to specific typical local groups, including immigrants from the West Indies (sitting-room); young single people (bedsitter); a young wife (kitchen); and so on. The memories and experiences of local people were researched as part of the exhibition planning, and local objects were acquired, often through donation. During the exhibition a questionnaire asked visitors which room they found the most meaningful in order for the curators to decide which of the room sets potential visitors might most like to see as a permanent room display. This approach to collection and documentation demands a sensitive and sophisticated system that goes beyond mere classification.

Until recently, research on the collections was carried out after the object had entered the collection (Porter, 1990:79). Acquisition and research were seen as two separate processes. Now these are seen as part of the same process. Ideas are now more important than objects. Now the idea is to tell a specific story, and objects are gathered as they relate to the story. The person-related context is gathered at the same time, sometimes through the processes of oral history. The words that are collected along with the objects are often displayed together with the objects, inscribed either on a panel, through writing, or in the air, through an audio system. In 'The People's Story', for example, in Edinburgh, a fishwife is reconstructed life-size as part of a display. She is, however, not just any fishwife, but based on a specific individual whose actual words appear in the accompanying panel and are broadcast, along with sea-gulls, through an audio system, from time to time. The research for displays such as these is meticulously carried out; representative types of people are chosen, and then from within the type, a particular individual example is documented. The criteria for inclusion are historical and scholarly, rather than entertainment related. However, once the choice of content is made, the method of communication is as active and interactive as possible. Human experience forms both the basis for the research, and the basis for the mode of communication.

Other forces are at work here, too. 'The People's Story' deliberately takes an oppositional stance in terms of which history is told, and the experience of the telling. In contrast to the National Gallery of Scotland, for example,



30 A choice screen from the interactive video *The Collectors* made by New Media for Gallery 33 at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

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which is nearby, this story is not of the elite, but of the everyday, and the experience of the museum is noisy, active, and friendly. 'The People's Story' is housed in a small building with a narrow entrance off the pavement, like many small houses. In contrast, the National Gallery of Scotland is in a large building, overlooking a public park. A flight of steps leads through an entrance portico into the large, heavy, quiet, closely guarded rooms. People walk through this museum slowly, maintaining an upright stance, talking quietly, looking quietly, keeping their own personal space inviolate. At 'The People's Story', the small spaces soon lead to the development of a crowd who jostle together to peer in through the narrow window of a cell containing a reconstructed scene; different noises can be heard all the time, including the sea-gulls, the real broad speech of the reconstructed individuals who form the bulk of the displays, and the exclamations of the visitors as links and connections are made to their own lives and experiences.

This museum in Edinburgh comes close to the 'total museum', where ideas not objects are most important (Sola, 1987:47; Weil, 1989). This focus on themes, ideas, and relationships can be identified as one of the guiding forces of the modern museum. The Musée de la Civilisation in Quebec, for example, states:

While many museums focus on the artefact, the *Musée de la Civilisation* focuses on the human being. Artefacts, however important they may be, are only so because of their meaning and use. They are seen above all as evidence of human activity.
(Trudel, 1989:68)

New technologies and practices are evolving in museums to display ideas. In the past, the curator, as object-expert, played the most important role in the production of exhibitions. The exhibition process itself tended to be disjointed, consisting of several different activities which happened sequentially, but generally without much discussion of exhibition objectives or targets. Thus the curator worked on the topic and the content of the exhibition; the designer received the brief and found a way of presenting the ideas in a visual form (generally rewriting the labels, and thinning out the number of objects in the process); and once the process had come to an end, the education officer taught in the exhibition spaces (generally using the objects, but finding a new order for their presentation, and completely disregarding the texts). Now, exhibition teams have emerged, and project-leaders are appointed from within the team to manage the exhibition process. The project-leader need not be the curator, the 'power-brokers' in the earlier model (Miles, 1985).

In the past, the knowledge of the object was the most important



31 Peggy Livingstone worked as a fishwife and bought and sold her fish in Edinburgh. She is shown in 'The People's Story' at Edinburgh City Museum as a working woman aged 39. Currently 77, Peggy worked closely with the museum in its research for this display.

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knowledge required to make an exhibition; now, knowledge about the audience is equally important. Information gathered through the disciplines of sociology and psychology is incorporated into the exhibition process: sociology offers knowledge about demographics (who comes to the museum), and about who might be interested in the subject matter of the exhibition; psychology offers information about learning styles and approaches, with particular reference to learning in museums. As museums develop new ways of finding out about audiences and their attitudes, beliefs, values, and habits in so far as these affect museum-going habits, so new practices are developing to incorporate the findings into museum work.

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 'general public' was offered carefully designed exhibitions which had been researched with scholarly precision, and which presented themes and topics of complete absorption to the curator. Those people who did not share this fascination (often fostered through long years of specialist education and work with collections) were regarded as somehow deficient. No help was offered in the deciphering of the concepts or the ideas for those that did not possess the specialist knowledge. In some museums these processes still remain, but in many, radically new approaches can be observed.

At the present time, in many museums, the curator has been decentred, and instead of one point of view, many voices are encouraged to speak. Thus in an exhibition on Caribbean history in Leicester Museum in the mid-1980s, a Caribbean historian was asked to write the texts of the exhibition. In Sheffield, a travelling caravan took a touring exhibition to areas of the city not immediately accessible to museums and art galleries. The exhibition was a taster for, and introduction to, an exhibition to be held in the Mappin Art Gallery 'Reflections to the Future: Black Lifestyles in Sheffield 1955-88'. The form and content of the final exhibition was not decided until reactions to the exhibition had been assessed, alterations had been made, and some new objects had been temporarily collected (Robinson and Toobey, 1989).

The potential audience for the exhibition is encouraged to contribute to the display techniques and the subject matter. At the same time, a curatorial consciousness has emerged which highlights those audiences that have been omitted in the past. Exhibitions in the past tended to attract an audience with a very similar demographic profile to that of many curators:

white, middle- or upper-class, able-bodied, and male. Now, the perspectives of women, different ethnic groups, and people with disabilities are actively incorporated. The contributions of these groups are often small, but very significant. For example, a group of blind sculptors visited an exhibition of sculpture, intended specifically for the blind and partially sighted, before its opening, and it was discovered that many of the objects that had been placed on the floor by the young, able-bodied curator were difficult for the group to appreciate. Many of them suffered not only from impaired vision, but also from old age. The pre-visit was able to reveal major defects that could be improved without difficulty, and which made the exhibition much more accessible for its intended audience.

It is generally expected that audiences wish to be much more active and physically involved in museums today. The age of the passive visitor has passed, to be superseded by the age of the active and discriminating 'consumer' or 'client' (Henley Centre, 1989). The terminology is significant. 'Visitors' are present in a space by permission; they enter an alien space, akin to someone else's home. The museum or art gallery has in the past been very much the territory of the professional staff, with the 'public' allowed in on sufferance, if their behaviour was appropriate. Now the 'client' demands active rights and expects good service. A 'client' has a contract for the delivery of goods or services, and is in a negotiated situation where he or she has an equal position of power.

The subject as 'client' or 'consumer' is offered numerous opportunities for involvement—to the extent of complete immersion—in museums and galleries today. Where in the past, the experience of visiting a museum was two-dimensional, an experience of a slow, controlled, surveyed walk past completed displays designed without the needs or interests of the visitor in mind, now experiences are three-dimensional. A museum visit can include theatre or 'living history' in social history collections; science centre exhibits that are only complete when the visitor/client operates or uses them; or discussions with artists that are in residence in art galleries. Many of these experiences depend on the visitor's participation to be effective: the actors offer food to the visitors; the artists are expected to talk as they work in their public studios; science demonstrators ask questions as they carry out experiments in the open gallery spaces.

The concept of 'target audiences' has emerged, partly to facilitate this process, but partly in response to the introduction of marketing techniques to museums. During the last five years, new subject positions have emerged in museums. Marketing managers, development officers, and fund-raisers are all now to be found working in museums. In the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, education officers and designers were employed in addition to curators. These professionals improved the experience of the museum for



32 'The People's Show' at Walsall Museum in 1990 offered local people the opportunity...



...to display their own collections.

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those who happened to visit. In the 1990s, however, audiences are actively recruited through the techniques of the salesman and the advertising executive. The technologies of mass marketing and mass communication have begun to be adapted for the museum environment and as the technologies become incorporated, significant changes can be observed.

The marketing of a 'product' (the museum) that is not for financial gain but for educational and entertainment value, means an adaptation of the 'sell' from hard to soft, with an emphasis on less immediate and more intangible gains. The British Museum, for example, has evolved a cookbook based on the collections: 'Feast with the Pharaohs!'; 'Dine with a Renaissance Prince!' it suggests.

To return home after a visit to the British Museum and to relive the experience by reading your guidebook or admiring your postcards is wonderful, but how much better if you could also 'taste' your visit by recreating the dishes that the ancient civilisations, whose art works and artefacts are now displayed in glass cases, actually ate and enjoyed?

(Johnson, 1987)

In the modern age, knowledge is no longer shaped by the secret, enclosed, circulating structures of the Renaissance *episteme*, nor by the flat, classificatory table of difference of the classical *episteme*; now knowledge is structured through a three-dimensional, holistic experience which is defined through its relationship to people. The act of knowing is shaped through a mix of experience, activity, and pleasure, in an environment where both the 'learning' subject and the 'teaching' subject have equal powers. Subject positions are more closely related than in the past; former divisions are now bridged in a number of different ways. Where both the object and the curator are decentred, the visitor/client/customer has new opportunities.

New articulations of space, object, and subject create the conditions for the emergence of new technologies. However, although targeted at 'enjoyment' and 'pleasure', the uses of this pleasure cannot be accepted uncritically. In the museum environment where equal rights offer (and indeed require) multiple perspectives, and thereby the articulation of many potentially conflictual points of view, newly pleasurable technologies of discipline and control have evolved to soften the contradictions and to disguise the inequalities. The total experience (in living history or interactive exhibits), the total immersion (in gallery workshops and events), can have the function, in the apparently democratised environment of the museum marketplace, of soothing, of silencing, of quieting questions, of closing minds.

A useful past for the present

What is the use of museums in the age of the 'experience', the unified total approach to knowledge? Where museums seek to emulate theatres, cinemas, pageants, and funfairs, what is left of unique and specific value?

An 'effective' history has shown us how the meanings that are construed from objects are many, variable, and fragile. Meanings are not constant, and the construction of meaning can always be undertaken again, in new contexts and with new functions. The radical potential of museums lies in precisely this. As long as museums and galleries remain the repositories of artefacts and specimens, new relationships can always be built, new meanings can always be discovered, new interpretations with new relevances can be found, new codes and new rules can be written.

The successes of history belong to those who are capable of seizing these rules, to replace those who had used them, to disguise themselves so as to pervert them, invert their meaning, and redirect them against those who had initially imposed them; controlling this complex mechanism, they will make it function so as to overcome the rulers through their own rules.

(Foucault, 1977c:151)

The radical potential of material culture, of concrete objects, of real things, of primary sources, is the endless possibility of rereading. In contemporary culture, where contextualised and mediated messages surround us, and where reality and hyper-reality (Eco, 1986b) can barely be distinguished, the potential of a return to the concrete material evidence is of overriding importance. Effective history teaches us that, because meanings and interpretations are endlessly rewritten, we too can seize the opportunity to make our own meaning, and find our own relevance and significance.

Does this individual and intensely personal interpretation of artefacts stand in opposition to the experiential and contextualising efforts that many museums are making, as part of their new destiny as totalising institutions? Is it the case that the more the museum contextualises artefacts, places them in narrative displays, and demonstrates the links that these objects make with other objects and with people, the more difficult it becomes even to perceive the possibility of a personal interpretation? Foucault suggested that the modern age, which began at the end of the eighteenth century, would not continue much beyond the present time. Can the end of the modern age be glimpsed in the contradictions revealed by contemporary museums? And if so, what is the future of museums?