

Assignment 1.

(5) How important is the concept of authenticity in the presentation of heritage?

Introduction

This essay will explore how important the concept of authenticity is and discuss this importance within the presentation of heritage.

Ford W Bell (2012) said that; 'museums greatest asset is authenticity'. Speaking at an event called 'The Digital Future: A National Forum'. he told the audience that museums need to embrace this and promote its importance as they are the best placed educators, experiential facilitators, and economic engines that bind society together. We need to discuss what is meant by the term 'authentic' within the museum and heritage sectors. Several words spring to mind, genuine, real, proof, believable relative and provenance, value and movability. Also, what becomes apparent is the question who's or what's concept of authenticity are we to address the importance of?

Valerie Casey and the Aura

Valerie Casey (www.valcassey.com/thesis/thesis_technocratic) describes the concept of 'authenticity' as having an 'aura'. This aura is made up of an arrangement of characteristics, which she lists as: material, craftsmanship, aesthetics and pedigree of the producer. If an artefact is displayed within the museum or heritage setting the visitors assume it to be a genuine artefact. How the display is represented infuses it with authenticity furnishing it with cultural authority and therefore cultural identity. 'The Gaze' directed towards the item on display, gives it authenticity by the

position the item takes within that display. The object is looked at and it is looking out at the audience (Casey.2003:1-21).

Craftmanship confers a distinctive aura through the ability of the artisan to create hand-made items in contrast to those that are mass produced through the industrialisation processes. The aura shifts within this value structure, handmade items becoming highly valued over mass produced pieces, within museum and heritage displays.

Aesthetics, that is the object placement within a setting, can reinforce the aura, giving it greater emphasis. Examples of such placement and presentation include the use of glass cases, barriers and extra security screens. Giving the appearance of reverence feeds in to the aura of value, a controlled space and a demonstration of authority (Casey. 2003:1-21). Andre Malraux suggests that the placement of an object within the heritage setting is the most important factor in creating its importance. 'Each exhibit is a representation of something, differing from the thing itself, this specific reason being its *raison d'être*' (Malraux 1974:14).

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and collecting.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) suggests that objects are found and therefore collected and that the process of collecting gives value to the object. 'Authenticity is located not in the artefact's *per se* or in the models on which they are based, but in the *methods* by which they were made-in a way of doing, which is a way of knowing, in a performance' (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998:196).

Peter Ucko and Freud.

Ucko (2001:279) explores Sigmund Freud's vast collections of antiquities suggesting he was mindful of which were considered authentic and which were not. He points out that Freud was well informed on archaeological

practice and data. And, his acceptance of forgeries available on the open market could be reflected in his need to have objects within his personal collections, and, those he intended to purchase, authenticated by experts. However, we are informed of forgeries within his collection. Ucko (2001:280, 293) reminds us that collecting unprovenanced material was not seen as negative in the past, as it is now seen in modern collecting. 'a replica- unlike a forgery- is itself in some sense 'authentic' (Ucko 2001:297).

Appadurai and exclusivity

The question that needs to be asked is: 'who's authenticity? who's reality?' Is it the actual item itself that needs to be authentic? Appadurai (1988:44) states: 'discontinuities in the provenance of commodities (collections, artefacts) can prove problematic in authenticity and question expertise'. He carries on this theme by suggesting that as consumption of these commodities becomes greater and more easily available, authenticity is questioned yet again. As technologies progress and mass production of items ensues, the sense of exclusivity is no longer retained, hence items are available to a wider range of consumers. Such items can be purchased and collected by a wider cross-section of the community, with less control and monopoly by the museums and heritage sector. Appadurai suggests that this is not a new phenomenon:

'There is a particular set of issues concerning authenticity and expertise that plagues the modern West, and this set, which revolves around the issues of good taste, expert knowledge, 'originality', and social distinction, is especially visible in the domain of art an art object's' (Appadurai 1988:45).

Relics of the past, over wide geographical spaces and time periods, through various means, have also encountered similar concerns regarding exclusivity and an expert elite control knowledge about and access to artefacts.

Gell and whose authenticity?

In his essay regarding the authenticity of the Rajasthani silver jewellery traded at the markets of Bastar in India, Gell (1988) comments; 'the silver ornaments for sale in Bastar markets are mostly old; but are cleaned and repaired by Marwan silversmiths so that to all appearances they are brand new. This is a source of perplexity to Western visitors in search of old and authentic-looking tribal jewellery' (Gell 1988:121) In fact this jewellery is not tribal, it is old but, this passes between both the Hindus and Muria tribes within this region. It is not worn by the Hindu's but kept for part of their marriage dowry payments. The Muria's do not use dowries within their traditions and the jewellery they wear is not sold to tourists as they prefer to choose their own. So, this silver to outsiders is seen as local, authentic and tribal, and purchased as such. But who's authenticity is it? the tourist? the Hindus? Or the Muria's? Gell (1988:137) calls this 'a hall of mirrors' with the re-evaluation of authenticity taking place in an endless loop of consumption.

Patrick Geary Construction of Value

Patrick Geary (1988) comments on the construction of an object's value in relation to Medieval relics and the various rituals of authentication required. Relics can be translated, they have a biography which is part of their provenance, which includes the history of their production and how they were acquired whether in the context of gifts or purchases and acquisitions. There are three types of transferral: first, discussion of demand informed by need, taste and fashion; second, the transformation of relics from persons to commodities through a process of transition; third, 'high-prestige' objects such as relics do not necessarily need to be relevant and seen as valuable to everyone in a culture. The disagreements produced regarding the 'identity and value of such objects' can be seen as biographies, which can be examined in terms of examining these objects as both persons and commodities. How the historical and social context

changes the value or biography of an object can become dependent on a process of comparison, value and selection, and demand and control (Geary 1988:169-191).

Brian Spooner Authenticity Historical Accuracy.

Spooner says of authenticity; 'The real thing is not simply an artefact, it is made by individuals, from special handcrafted materials, in particular social, cultural, and environmental conditions, with motifs and designs learned from earlier generations' (Spooner 1988:199).

This work looked at oriental carpet history and production a classic artefact which could be authentic, but a high standard of modern imitation of that classic, may be less likely to be authentic. It is not simply determined by reproduction of the object, but is to do with genuineness, its face value, and desire for the reproduction. However, the expertise visible in a product may provide us with the authenticity we seek, not necessarily the product itself. Personal interpretation is complex, and can include traditions, quality goods, poorly constructed examples, old and new, genuine and imitation, authenticity nearly always involved in the process. One person's idea of classic within authenticity can be questioned through an individual's idea of quality. Where an item known to be an imitation would be acceptable as authentic, purely because it was manufactured to a high quality and therefore deemed acceptable (Spooner 1988:195-235). Authenticity is an intangible and subtle idea, with attributes of exclusivity and cultural and objective criteria 'In seeking authenticity people are able to use commodities to express themselves and fix points of security and order in an amorphous modern society' (Spooner 1988:226).

Trust and Authenticity.

Jennifer Trant (2010:306-314) and Clifford Lynch (2010:314-332) explore the importance of trust regarding authenticity. Knowledge of the layers

constructed within works of art are key to establishing authenticity. Heritage bodies need to be developing cultural information resources, giving users challenging and interesting experiences allowing them to make reflective judgements on the collections they view and visit, developing trust in that cultural information they absorb 'Authenticity has its roots in trust' (Trant 2010:311) 'Trust leading to authority of the establishment in its available information' (Lynch 2010:320). Exploring the digital age of information Lynch describes how the process of authentication becomes problematic for the heritage sector. The need to copy and record all available physical information becomes paramount for each item on the itinerary. And where ever possible the connection with archaeological and historical reports assigned to the digital articles for provenance.

[Hetherington and Foucault.](#)

Since Foucault's (1974, 1989) work the study of the museum and heritage sectors has developed into the new museology. This projects these establishments as not only holders of objects and artefacts, but as educators allowing critical enquiry about these things (Hetherington 2011:460). This role of displaying, cataloguing and collecting items has become a platform in the shaping of cultural imagination within modern society, playing an important role in lives of the past, present and those to come. What is displayed should remain a continual dialogue between establishment and environment 'a space of creative imagination' (Hetherington 2011:472-473). An understanding of the power of the space within and without the establishment, who, becomes a combination of the authority of space, and emphasis of the item, with the viewer or visitor; becoming guided to the continuously changing spaces through questioning and ability.

Findings.

Before the 19th century museums were considered a display case for collections of objects. Over time this changed with the first typology of museum being the legislating museum. These bodies were selecting and displaying items with very little thought of context or provenance and limited information. This presentation appeared to reinforce the museum's authority as being the only place where these displays were available to be viewed. Interpreting museums then developed, they had the same level of engagement as before but now information was added to displays in the form of labels, date time lines, values and guide books. Provenance was now provided with the information appearing to become more important than the objects themselves. Performing museums now came to the fore. These were promoting the way of display and engagement over the object. Objects appeared more out of reach with the venue and activities generated there, becoming more prominent than the individual pieces (Bennett.1995:17-58).

Museums have their own specific ideals of what we as the viewer or visitor are to see by control of the space they exhibit. They decide how we are to give the object value through how it is presented in the premises, out of reach etc and what knowledge we as the viewer are to be educated with, the accompanying display, labels and information boards. The heritage establishments give the objects authenticity by the authority they use that enables them to display those objects (Smith.2006:89). This museology also gained critique as portraying the items within as 'a synthetic and sanitized view of the past designed simply to generate tourist revenue through, at best 'infotainment', and, at worst, 'Disneyfication' (Smith 2006:195) Things do not speak, they are 'dumb' (Crew and Sims.2012:159) when removed from their primary uses, then placed on display they become commodities. So, to the question of how important is the concept of authenticity in the presentation of heritage? The answer appears to be through interpretation.

Conclusion.

This collecting of objects allows each to become mute in their surroundings. They have become detached from their history and have lost their voices. Put on display behind glass or barrier gives an authority over us as the viewer. But we are presuming these objects have authenticity by the authority of the location they are placed in. These objects have a history of authenticity, from their initial production, through sale and purchase; to curatorship and exhibition. The object is always the same, where as the authenticity can be transferred from establishment and collector through the authority given by placement, lighting, information labels and value. In effect, whether the object is authentic becomes less important, as the authority used to highlight information on the object is used to give the intended audience that information which is significant to that establishment. For example; an object may be displayed among a collection of various items intended to emphasise the movement of commodities during a given period. But placed separately in another setting, it is used to inform production methods, or to focus on the manipulation of materials in another. Whether the object is a genuine article, or a reproduction becomes interpretive. If a reproduction is necessary as the original is too fragile for display, then the viewer is still able to appreciate it knowing it has the authenticity of the original. This method of authentication is not designed to mislead the viewer but is there to enhance the experience of the delicate original (Belk.1995., Hooper-Greenhill.1995., Kingery.1996., Carbonall.2012).

An object is unable to tell us the situation in which it was produced, as it has no voice. We can make assumptions as to where it was produced through examination of the context in which it was located. Materials used in production may provide clues as to the methods of construction and, time scale of that production. This information may also be considered as interpretive. The position of discovery may be authenticated through photographic and textual archaeological reports provided. Material composition may be deduced through scientific analysis and age ranges

established through comparison. However real the object seems to be the question of authenticity can remain. Should we assume the object to be of the time? May it have been an air loom passed down before this time? Could it be a product of gift exchange? Which authenticity are the museum or heritage setting to choose to portray? Does it matter? Surely if viewers are told something no one would question the museum, right?

This is where the voices of all those mentioned before, become heard. Authenticity may be the heritage setting and museums greatest asset (Bell.2012) but how they choose to use that asset may need to be revised. The 'aura' (Casey.2003) may dictate the position the object holds, but who decides that rank? Collecting things may give them importance (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett.1998), but what shape does that collection inhabit? Whether a believable copy or not (Ucko.2001) surely some form is preferable than none? The question of who has the monopoly on authenticity (Appadurai and Gell.1988) does this area still need to be debated? Value could be deduced through amounts, small numbers indicating a higher value than those that are easily available (Geary.1988) availability can become a blindfold to authenticity. Historical accuracy (Spooner.1988) is a hotly debated argument with very few scholars in agreement at any one time. Trust (Trant and Lynch.2010) sure this idea merits interpretation within authenticity? Now we come to it, a dialogue of interpretations between viewer and provider (Hetherington.2011).

This is the importance of authenticity within the presentation of heritage. All the voices bring their valid debate, all provide both the setting and the viewer with a choice. This choice is about knowledge, the settings are deciding what knowledge they are willing to educate and inform the viewer with. The viewer now needs to allow themselves to accept this knowledge, without question, or, can choose to digest this knowledge, using it to further their education through research and study, so producing their own notion of the authenticity of the heritage they are presented with. Learning to

question and debate about the dialogue of interpretation authority, that appears to be needed when dealing with the concept of authenticity.

‘Museums are the acquirers and holders of collections, and they control their use. Factors that determine the nature of museums have consequences for their collections, too. Museums exist within the context, different for every country, of social, political, economic and cultural history, and current circumstances. As well as country-specific factors, globalization has a growing influence. Even though museums as an international network contribute to globalization, they are also a means by which countries and regions respond to its influences, to maintain their cultural identity. Then there are factors that are internal to the museum; its specific purpose, its organizational culture, and the attitudes and skills of its professional staff.

These considerations strongly influence and constrain what the collections represent and how they are used. In addition to these external constraints are the attitudes and training of the professionals in the museum, how they see their roles, how they allocate resources of time and money, and how they view their audiences and users’. (Keene. 2005:15)

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