

New Museum Theory and Practice: An Introduction.* Janet Marstine, ed. Oxford: Blackwell, 2006. 332 pp.

Reviewed by Laura Peers

This is an ambitious book, setting out as it does to explore the gamut of ‘new’ museum theory and practice. Essay topics range from museum architecture and its significance through feminist curatorial strategies, art and ethnographic curation, historic sites and museums as research sites, virtual museums, conservation, Aboriginal Australian approaches to museology, and the revision of older museums to meet new emphases and needs. The book also gives study questions for teaching at the end of each essay.

Covering this breadth is a huge challenge, but on the whole the book meets it. The introductory essay is sweeping in its overview of recent challenges and shifts within the museum profession broadly, balancing theoretical observations with acknowledgement of the pragmatics and politics of museums. The scope of this essay, and its balance of theory and reality, make it a major contribution to the volume, far more so than most introductions to edited collections.

The essays in this book are diverse, but together they suggest virtually all of the recent major intellectual and political shifts within the museum world. I found the papers by Eric Gable (on racial politics and ‘truth’ at Monticello), Moira G. Simpson (on Aboriginal Australian approaches to museums and curation), and Julie L. McGee (on South African museums, especially the national art museum) really valuable for raising many issues connected to the culture and truth-values of traditional museums, and the cross-cultural, cross-racial, and postcolonial politics of interpretation and identity in which museums find themselves entangled. Gable’s conclusion that Monticello suggests two different landscapes of knowledge, “a visible landscape of shared knowledge without controversy or conflict, and an invisible landscape of suspicion, mistrust, and paranoia,” could be brought to bear on analyses of many museums caught between old and new ways of working, curating, and communicating (p. 126). Likewise, Simpson’s discussion of the Aboriginal exhibition deliberately presented without information or interpretation in accordance with Aboriginal cultural protocol—and undoubtedly to the confusion of non-Aboriginal viewers—suggests many of the difficulties of multi-perspectival exhibitions. Other papers also raise issues connected to the construction of truth, knowledge, and identity in various ways. Rachel Barker and Patricia Smithen’s essay on conservation strategies, with its vivid images of insects hatching in some works of art and intentional bullet holes in others, and McTavish’s essay on virtual museums, also evoke questions about what is real, what is desired, what is edited, what is said (or not), what is kept and presented, and why.

Not everyone will find the study questions desirable, but most are phrased so as to guide students down certain lines of analysis in useful ways. Some of the questions, however, are rather

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ambitious: one following McGee's paper, 'What is social memory?', is a relevant topic but phrased in dauntingly broad terms, presupposing rather a lot of related reading.

This volume brings earlier, benchmark volumes such as Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer, and Steven D. Lavine's *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992) up to date, while maintaining theoretical issues that scholars have long been concerned with. It is an important book, one that will be useful to think with and to teach with.

Focusing on relations between North American tribal communities and UK museums, Laura Peers is a curator at the Pitt Rivers Museum and a lecturer in the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology at Oxford University. She is the author of Playing Ourselves: Interpreting Native Histories at Historic Reconstructions (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2007) and (with Alison Brown and members of the Kainai Nation) Pictures Bring Us Messages: Sinaakssiiksi Aohtsimaahpihkookiyaawa: Photographs and Histories from the Kainai Nation (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007). She is the editor (with Alison Brown) of Museums and Source Communities: A Routledge Reader (New York: Routledge, 2003).