Reading the Museum: On Sean Silver’s *The Mind Is a Collection*

**JOANNA STALNAKER**

When Sean Silver welcomes us to *The Mind Is a Collection*, we find ourselves ushered both into his mind, with its particular twists and turns, and into a museum filled with the strangest of objects. The book presents itself as a virtual museum, a collection of twenty-eight exhibits that give material form to Silver’s claim that in seventeenth and eighteenth-century Britain, dualist theories of mind were elaborated “through embodied engagement with crafted environments” (viii). Chapters are called cases—meaning both a container for objects (from a cabinet to a skull) and an instance of a particular situation (as in “case studies”). Individual numbered readings within those cases are called exhibits, each one attached to a particular object (from Locke’s commonplace book, to William Hay’s bladder stone, to a blank page in *Tristram Shandy*).

The first thing I would like to say in praise of Silver’s book is that this structure is not a gimmick. And I say that as someone who was initially susceptible to thinking it might be. Silver has crafted a book that can actually be experienced as a museum in ways that are deeply meaningful and even transformative. Since the experience of reading is—like the workings of the mind—difficult to convey, let me begin with an analogy. I experienced Silver’s book much like the recent “Manus X Machina” exhibit at the Met, in which articles of *haute couture* and *prêt à porter* are displayed so as to highlight the complex interplay between hand and machine in modern high fashion. At first, I found the exhibit profoundly disorienting. I was confronted with a collection of very strange objects: a white, feathery dress with bird skulls poking out from the sleeves; a set of colorful pleated dresses arranged like rocket ships at various stages of takeoff. It was not until I came across some volumes of Diderot and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie* in the central exhibit chamber that I began to understand how the exhibit was conceived: the objects were grouped according to the artisanal *métiers* depicted in the *Encyclopédie’s* plates, from the *plumassier* (feather-worker) to the pleat-maker. As I continued to walk around the exhibit, the objects from these different “cases” began to resonate with each other in surprising ways: pleats made with a three-D printer on one dress came to resemble hand-sewn ridges of coral on another; finely detailed, machine-made *maroquinerie* or leather-working was barely distinguishable from hand-made *dentellière* or lacework. Everywhere the curator’s discreet hand was present, allowing me to perceive both the categories separating these objects into their various cases and the resonance between objects and across categories. When I eventually left the exhibit to visit, at random, a few galleries of the Met’s permanent collection, I found myself seeing familiar objects with new eyes: the nearly transparent stone pleats of an Egyptian statue looked like fans opening onto a girl’s body; the rich brocade of a nineteenth-century portrait seemed poised for flight.

I have digressed at some length to describe this experience because it mirrored my experience of reading *The Mind Is a Collection*. I will not be alone, I think, in finding Silver’s vocabulary of book as museum, chapters as cases, and readings as exhibits disorienting at first. But nor will I be alone, I expect, in finding that this book subtly transforms the objects on which it lavishes such careful curatorial attention and, in doing so, gradually transforms our entire view of the eighteenth-century world, whether it be
the world of ideas or the world of things or, if we accept Silver’s compelling claim for a materially-embedded history of ideas, the interface between them. The experience of reading *The Mind Is a Collection* is not a linear one: this is not to say that the book doesn’t have an argument, but that the exhibits take on meaning through gradual accretion, just as bladder stones grow within the body. In this book, meaning accretes through the sympathetic resonance of objects within and across categories, a resonance that can often be experienced only retrospectively. Like Robert Hooke’s sensory impressions in the brain, Silver’s exhibits “retain’ and continually ‘radiate a Motion of [their] own,” long after you have finished reading about them (118).

Let me try to be more concrete: at the end of his third case on “Digression,” Silver interprets a series of descriptions of walks by Joseph Addison as efforts to grasp the ramble of the mind. At the same time, Silver’s discussion of actual walks habitually taken by Addison shows how “Gardens, like poems, are to be read” (147). By the end of this case, the distinction between inside (Addison’s mind) and outside (the poetry-laden landscape through which he walks) has been broken down. Our own minds have been subtly and even somewhat sneakily prepared for Silver’s next case, “Inwardness,” in which William Hay, author of an essay on deformity, and the diarist Samuel Pepys enclose kidney stones in textual cases to conceive the peculiar and elusive bodily experience of inwardness. Yet by the time this case draws to a close, we have moved from the pain of lithotomy and the oily surface of a kidney stone to a blue-bound volume of a tragedy enclosed within a hidden cabinet at Strawberry Hill: Horace Walpole’s public staging of inwardness with the perpetually withheld publication of his play, *The Mysterious Mother*. Strange objects and strange bedfellows, but they make the case that the eighteenth-century experience of inwardness moves us toward the period’s “great epistemological vanishing point”: conception, as it occurs both in the mind and in the female body (202).

In such a short time, I cannot attend to numerous other examples of the surprises and transformations that make Silver’s collection whirl like a very lively brain. But I would like to raise the question of what occurs in Silver’s final case, “Dispossession.” Up until this point, all of Silver’s exhibits are marked by the regime of possessive individualism, in which “the ownership of material things enables a kind of metaphorical transference to the ownership of other things, like ideas, rights, or faculties of mind” (246). In his last case, however, Silver moves from the possessors—all of whom happen to be men—to the dispossessed, a category that includes “the poor, the transient, and those cast out by the law,” along with almost all women (227-28). The question of gender had been percolating in my mind as I read, from the moment early in the book when Silver observes in defining *cognitive ecologies* that “ecology is a study of home” (17). But Silver’s cognitive ecologies—by which he means libraries, workshops, notebooks, and collections—are by and large homes crafted by men, seemingly in isolation from any shared domestic life with women or servants. It is only in the fifth case, “Conception,” that gender comes to the fore, when Silver argues that the “epistemological vanishing point” of eighteenth-century theories of mind, i.e., the conception of ideas, can only be grasped through women’s bodies. In William Hunter’s *Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus*, this means that the violently literal peeling back of pregnant female cadavers is juxtaposed with the effort to imagine what the initial moment of conception might look like.
Thus Silver brilliantly makes the case, in his first five chapters, that it is impossible to conceive of eighteenth-century theories of mind without putting women front and center. But he does so, up to this point, without including a single female-authored exhibit in his collection. This absence is all the more striking when we learn, at the beginning of the sixth and final case, that according to Karen O’Brien “no female writer … accepted uncritically [Locke’s] epistemology” (196). But who were these female writers? What did they have to say about Locke’s epistemology? And how might they have figured the mind differently? Just as the mental conception of the Widow Wadman must be relegated to a blank page in Tristram Shandy, Silver’s readers must conjure from blankness a picture of what female theories of mind might have looked like. That is, until the twenty-fourth exhibit of Laetitia Pilkington’s book of accounts. This is one of the six exhibits that make up the “Dispossession” case, exhibits which, as Silver admits with refreshing candor, are “the least adequate to the case they are made to bear” (x). Pilkington is a Grub Street hack whose memoirs Silver reads as an instance in which “the author emerges less as a source of autogenetic production than as what might be called a function of the marketplace” (240). In other words, Pilkington, the sole female author in this case and in the museum, appears not so much as an author in possession of her ideas, words, and creations, as an object moving through the endlessly reconfigured collection of the emerging literary market.

So it is that Silver’s collection has its own vanishing point: how it might be possible in the eighteenth century to conceive of a woman’s mind. One of the most remarkable aspects of the book, to my mind, is the subtlety and intelligence with which Silver makes room for this dark space at the heart of his museum. He has given us to understand that eighteenth-century theories of mind have everything to do with women. He has also helped his readers, with his last six exhibits, to “unthink everything the past twenty-two [exhibits] have thought” (226). Now that we have unthought, we are left wishing that we could think with him anew, to fill in the blank page of eighteenth-century female conceptions of mind.