

Review Essay: Museums and the Bubble^{*}

***Museums in the Material World.* Simon J. Knell, ed. New York: Routledge, 2007. 374 pp.**

***Museums and their Communities.* Sheila Watson, ed. New York: Routledge, 2007. 568 pp.**

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Both of the books under review are from a new series of “Readers” (targeted at students who plan to work in museums) put out by members of the museum studies department at Leicester University—a department that is among the most influential in the United Kingdom and therefore the world. It also has a very popular distance-learning degree program with a global student body. There are now three such Readers (the first in the series is *Museum Management and Marketing* edited by Richard Sandell and Robert Janes [2007]) and more to come, each of which is closely linked to the editors’ teaching and research interests and marketed as the stuff out of which a course in museum studies might be made.

Readers are common in museum studies. Generally they are compilations of excerpts of chapters of previously edited volumes or monographs, or they are reprints of articles, and they are framed by introductory essays. Like most Readers in museum studies today, the Readers under review blur or collapse the distinction between writings about museums by those who work in them and writings about museums by those who work on them, usually to use museums as convenient locations for cultural critique. Thus you encounter in *Museums and their Communities* readings by, for example, Stephen Weil, James Cuno, and Dawn Casey—all museum directors or senior administrators—not to mention works by curators interspersed with writings by scholars such as Stephen Dubin, Nelson Graburn, Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, Timothy Luke, and Sharon Macdonald, to name a handful. Thus in *Museums in the Material World* you will encounter (again) Weil, and David Carrier and various curators and directors of natural history museums, but also Pierre Bourdieu, Daniel Miller, Annette Weiner, Michael Shanks, and Christopher Tilley, to single out some prominent anthropologists and archeologists. *Museums and their Communities* is comprised of 39 chapters, all previously published within the last ten years. *Museums in the Material World* contains 30, most just as recent, all published in the last 25 years.

In general I like Readers because the editors have done my work for me. They are the scholarly equivalent of a *prix fixe* menu. As long as you trust the editor’s tastes, you are in good hands, and you can explore in one swoop a terrain you might not have come to understand if you tried to get at it one article at a time. Both books gave me more pleasure than not. I found the introductory essays very helpful and the readings on the whole to be well chosen and stimulating. They were successful to me although I must confess at the outset that I was surprised to find that one of the

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books, *Material World* had an essay that I authored with Richard Handler (“After Authenticity at an American Heritage Site”) which has been reprinted in other Readers, and which now, of course, because it was originally published in *American Anthropologist* (Gable and Handler 1996), is easily available online. If you are at a university or college you can download it for “free” (at least to you). But it would probably take quite a bit of work to track down every source. Thus the continued market for Readers.

The editors of both Readers (and by extension the series) share a commitment to what has come to be known as “the new museology.” As such (and this is the theme that ties together the readings in *Museums in the Material World*) they assume that museums should embrace rather than resist the broad critiques of Western epistemologies and aesthetics associated with Bourdieu and Michel Foucault to name a couple of the paragons. They are also committed to the idea that museums have a responsibility (and this is the theme that is most prominent in *Museums and their Communities*) to further the democratizing project of modern societies. In sum these Readers exemplify the degree to which museum studies—the professionalized field that issues certificates or grants degrees, advanced or otherwise, that are increasingly a necessary credential for finding work in a museum—has become an applied branch of cultural studies. So, even as these Readers devote much space to critical analysis they are ultimately optimistic about the power of museums to do social good.

Sheila Watson frames *Museums and their Communities* by taking it for granted that museums are powerful institutions, which, if they are to exercise their power to do good, must do so by engaging with “the communities they serve” (p. 1). Her language is uniformly populist. In her introduction, and in the readings she has culled, “communities” tend to be composed of the kinds of people who were once socially stigmatized or politically disempowered. They are, paradigmatically, Australian Aborigines or Portuguese or Muslim immigrants to Australia; people of color or homosexuals in the United Kingdom; African-Americans in the United States, and more generally people who normally find museums to be unwelcoming places—that is, people without much education, people of the working classes. Museum professionals should (and she stresses that they generally do) fight against what the new Labor party in the United Kingdom defined as “social exclusion” by acting as agents for the inclusion of these communities into the social and representational space of the museum. They should not only endeavor to represent, in positive and useful ways, marginalized or excluded people, but in so invoking them make them aware of themselves and their potential power. Such work, she emphasizes will not be easy. No one should “underestimate the problems museums face...in their attempts to work effectively with communities, supporting diverse identities and satisfying multiple needs and expectations, many of which are economic and political as well as social” (p. 19).

One reason that such work is not easy is that the discourse of community can be deployed by the bad guys as easily as it can be a language that empowers or mobilizes the good guys. Corporate entities can also claim to be part of the community and make demands on museums; retrograde or bigoted groups can also claim to speak for the museum’s community and make demands: to fire directors, to close down or otherwise redact offensive exhibits. Especially illuminating here are Steven Dublin’s reflection on the Smithsonian’s response to criticism of its plan to exhibit the Enola Gay and Dawn Casey’s response to criticisms leveled at her and the Australian

National Museum for taking up so much space to display the lives of Aborigines. Poignantly, Casey lost her job for standing on principle. Celebrating communities has always been easier to do than making communities by way of critique.

Another reason that it is hard to make truly inclusive museums is that the good guys may not yet be communities, and so they might not articulate for themselves their needs and expectations. Several of the readings explore these problems. My favorite was a piece by Andrea Wittcomb on her efforts to get Portuguese speaking immigrants in Australia to imagine themselves as a community worthy of inclusion in a museum. Her interlocutors were often proud of their origins, and personal and familial struggles to become Australian, but it was hardly obvious to them how those personal memories could be combined with the memories of others to tell a more inclusive and abstract story of immigration and minorities in Australia.

If most of the writings in *Museums and their Communities* tend explicitly to endorse the goal of social inclusion and to assume that museums have the power to effect positive change, it is harder to read a similarly ameliorist agenda in *Museums in the Material World* even as Simon Knell, like Watson, avers that museum curators are themselves powerful. In general Knell accepts as valid the now common critique that modern museums objectify, and therefore make natural, a particular vision of the world. Art museums, to take one target, turn all artifacts, no matter what their function, into objects of aesthetic appreciation. Natural history museums, to take another, turn the natural world, with all its blurrings and opacities, into a catalogue or a typology. Indeed, Knell goes farther than this (and this becomes a sort of back-handed defense against the all too common charge that the objectifying agenda of modern museums works relentlessly in the interests of the powers that be), emphasizing that, because of entropy, museums' collections are constantly verging on incoherence. According to Knell the materials of museums are not only threatened with physical decay and disorder, but that they are always losing a connection with the various forms of labeling that made objects into something of significance in the first place. This seeming critique becomes, however, a celebration. Because museums are full of material things, they require the constant work of interpretation to make them make sense. "It is expertise—with all the risks of bias—which breathes life into the corpse-like object, by shaping the labels in drawers, exhibits and heads" (p.26). That is why museums continue to be important: objects might indeed "affect our emotions in ways that is impossible to articulate" but "most of us cannot know the object's antiquity or authenticity without being told" (p. 26). On this score Knell's choices for his last two chapters are particularly evocative. In "On the Rocks" (originally published in 1980) Philip Doughty reviews the slovenly state of the United Kingdom's geological collections, yet reminds us of their potential value if properly cataloged and stored; in "Endangered Species and the Law," Valerius Geist makes a good case for why old taxonomic collections will be significant as states and international bodies develop legal means to protect endangered species. Thus Knell has organized his Reader to coax his readers (neophyte curators) to continue to make the case for their relevance, and with a certain confidence that, despite the critiques of Foucault and Bourdieu, they still can make such a case.

Both Readers were published before the economic bubble burst with such devastating results for museums. This bubble reveals how much a part of the material world museums are and how much they depend on the communities they have created and fostered. This year, so I read in the *New York Times*, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City will probably have to lay-

off 10 percent of its workforce because its endowment that once was 2.9 billion dollars has lost 800 million, while the city is giving it 1.7 million dollars a year less than it normally does, and far fewer than the 1.5 million foreign visitors who tended to pay the 20 dollar “suggested donation” are expected to come this year (Kennedy 2009). I have not heard any parallel news about the American Museum of Natural History but one can be sure that they too will suffer, albeit differently, because of different communities, constituencies, partners, and audiences, in a shared and darker material world. I wonder too about museum studies itself. Will there continue to be a ready market for Readers or will the bursting bubble also deflate explosion in the production of advanced degrees?

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