

Recoding the Museum: Digital Heritage and the Technologies of Change.* Ross Parry. London: Routledge, 2007. 166 pp.

Reviewed by Patricia Galloway

This book is about computers and museums, how computers began as part of museum infrastructure and how they have continued to become part of the museum itself or even to substitute for it. Ross Parry sees this history as a tale of two stories, one of initial incompatibility turning into acceptance and “new futures for the museum” (p. xi). He stakes out his turf by placing his analysis in the realm of cultural studies and technology studies—and he is a lecturer in museum studies at the University of Leicester, which has been a significant source of social-science-oriented approaches to museum studies for 30 years.

The work begins with a chapter that outlines this history by working through a series of significant projects beginning in the 1960s: Self Generating Master (SELGEM) at the Smithsonian, the Museum Computer Network’s first projects, and the emergence of the Information Retrieval Group of the Museum Association (IRGMA) in England. Supporting these developments were the technology of timesharing computers, the emergence of humanities computing, and the adoption of machine-readable cataloging for libraries. Pushing museums toward a digital solution were expanding collections under the influence of the new social history, an explosion in archaeological materials recovery due to increased development, and a huge expansion of research in general as Big Science took hold—in the face of which traditional cataloging methods, based on the curator’s artisanal “daybook” and “creative cabinet” practices, made it impossible for museums to keep up. At the same time there were increased demands from the public for access and accountability, as these “crises” had made it abundantly clear that the standards of traditional museum documentation left much to be desired in terms of consistency. The solution that was offered was a new approach to collections management, making explicit and standardizing the tacit knowledge of curators and building granular registers and catalogs, reflecting the positivist approaches inherent in New Archaeology and structuralism.

Parry’s book, however, is not a history *per se* but a thesis, which he argues with the assistance of Lev Manovich’s (1999) five principles of new media. For Parry these characteristics—numerical, modular, automated, variable, and transcoded—become the lens through which he sees the computer’s role in “recoding” the museum, placing his argument in the context of a flock of New Museology books about rethinking, reimagining, reshaping, and reframing. He points especially to the museum as a medium and a container of media. The general message is that the adoption of computer-based management of all things at all levels in the museum started a process by virtue of which the authority of the museum—in its collections, exhibits, and location—was deconstructed by the granular listing and management of museum objects. This created a catalog capable of supporting access from a distance to individual museum objects and the creation of virtual collections, leading to the possibility of crowdsourcing curatorial activities and thereby exposing curatorial input to the museum’s authority (for good as well as ill—emphasizing its value-added). Parry asserts that digital technology has been “catalytic,

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significant and lasting... at the heart of the change... constructively disruptive” (p. 140). The chapters present this argument by discussing (chapter 3) how automating the catalog in effect disaggregated collections and separated individual objects from their contexts; (chapter 4) how virtual exhibits granted authenticity to simulacra; (chapter 5) how the “visit event” was irretrievably decentered by the creation of virtual exhibits that “rescripted” the visit and translated spatiality; (chapter 6) how the public’s newfound online access has begun to permit remix and mashup that in effect rewrites the exhibit narrative offered by the museum; and (chapter 7) how museum production was skewed and morphed by affordable hardware, initial skills deficits, and the move to push systems into a better fit that was supported by emergent communities of practice around “museum informatics” and heritage commoditization.

In sum, the book provides an interesting look at the impact of technology and “new” media on museums, and, to a degree, it includes how the intractability of traditional requirements of dealing adequately with actual physical things has dialoged with that impact; but it is not without its problems. It is a partial story inevitably: it omits the political economy of objects in museums, the emergence of social history through the motive force of the decolonization in the 1960s of the British Empire and internal decolonization in the United States, the emergence of the notion of shared authority as oral history became more reflective, and, not least, the waning of educational programs that produced scholar-curators. So much context has been omitted that the author’s “intentionally astigmatic story” (p. 138) is closer to partially blind.

Part of this problem seems to stem from the author’s decision not to present technology in such a way as to plumb its epistemic force, to understand how its embodied agency takes a role and *has* agency in museum applications. With the performances supported by the machine as the focus, the machine itself and its culture become the ghost. I suggest that one could write another equally persuasive book that makes computer technology the beneficiary of what museums, driven by other social developments, have demanded to support new responses; I hazard the suggestion that there is no one example where all these elements—physical objects, traditional practice, technological emergence, and critical thinking about museum interpretations in a postcolonial context—converge under the leadership of computer technology. In 2004 the distinguished Princeton historian of computers and computer science, Michael Mahoney, pointed out the need to “decenter the machine” from the history of computing, because of its very indeterminate nature; instead he pointed to the fact that different communities of practice taking up the general symbolic processing capabilities of the computer “created different computers or (if we may make the singular plural) computings” (Mahoney 2004). This may be especially pertinent since Lev Manovich has himself now turned from the effects to the cause in order to help formulate a field of “critical software studies” that will closely examine the coevolution of computer code and social epistemes (Manovich 2008).

That said, Parry’s book is a valuable addition to the literature for its case-rich general review of the entry of computers into museums and the institutional politics that accompanied and followed. It is also an interesting take on computer-infiltrated museums as “recoded” into new media, to which I anticipate that the present readership can offer constructive responses.

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