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Book Review

Museums in the material world edited by Simon J. Knell, London and New York, Routledge, 2007, xvii_374 pp., CDN\$50.95 (hardback), ISBN 10: 0-415-41699-1

Museums in the Material World is an anthology of 30 previously published papers written over a 26-year period. It is edited by Simon J. Knell, Head of Department of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester, UK. As with Knell's previous publications, *Museums in the Material World* reflects his teaching and research interest in the disciplinary, material, social or political production of museums, objects and collections. It is one of a series of readers that is reflective of the changes in the museum studies' core curriculum as it is taught at Leicester.

It is aimed at museum studies students and museum practitioners. It is similar in structure to other readers produced by the Department of Museum Studies, in that Knell has gathered a compilation of writings by specialists in core areas of museum thought and practice. *Museums in the Material World*, to use Knell's words, 'situates the museum in the material world by examining and inter-relating four quite distinct aspects of its engagement'. He identifies these as *The Objective World*, *The Subjective World*, *The Consumed World* and *The Transient World*. These worlds are examined not by 'corralling the Great and the Good' but rather by gathering papers that capture the essence of change as viewed and dealt with at ground level or, to use a currently popular analogy, at the coal face.

Knell recommends that the book be read from end to end – rather like a novel. The articles are intended to be situated in key moments, or related to important issues and to demonstrate changes from object to subject, and fixed to fluid. It is not intended to be a book to be dipped into, and probably would not be if used as a course reader, yet for those of us working in the museum profession who seek, rightly or wrongly, only the discourse related to our areas of interest, the temptation to hunt and peck through the papers might prove to be irresistible.

In his introductory essay Knell talks about the changes in museum practice; the move from vocational training and professional practices, confined as they are to ideas about collecting and exhibiting objects, to a more intellectual and eclectic stance that promotes the inclusion of debates about representation, copyright, censorship and social practice. This move from the comfort zone of the constructed mega-narrative to a more uncomfortable and challengingly fragmented zone is embraced by many museum professionals but not, Knell argues, well articulated to the visitor.

After the introductory essay Knell introduces each of the four sections in detail. He provides critiques of the papers, suggests connections between ideas, and supplies the reader with an interpretation that situates the papers within his larger construct of objective, subjective, consumptive and transient worlds.

The first section, *The Objective World*, contains a group of papers that are, on average, about 20 years old and that span natural history, social history, art history and archaeology. They present the museum in its traditional roles as collector and keeper of objects, engaged empirically with the material world. They defend the value of disciplinary expertise, systematic collecting over time and collection documentation. Read from today's perspective they also point to some of the sources of the changes in the relationships between disciplines, how collections are formed and what is said about them. It might have been interesting to have asked the authors to reflect upon these earlier papers, but perhaps that is intended to be the reader's task.

The papers included in *The Subjective World* span changing and contested ideas about western art and art history. These authors explode the canons of taste associated with western concepts of art, question the process of validation and examine the impact of post-colonial attitudes on museum practice. These papers call for the democratizing of interpretation in the museum and the recognition that there are many narratives and meanings. Unlike the authors included in the first section of this book, these authors revisit the historical thinking associated with their particular focus.

The Consumed World situates the museum in a social world of ubiquitous consumption and examines both how the perceived value of objects is related to their movement and who controls that movement. The authors examine how the museum is self-perpetuated by its middle-class values and tastes, and how artists, dealers, critics and curators contribute to this by guiding the public's perception of what is good taste and of value. The ethics of dealers are questioned, concepts of aesthetic value are examined and the sometimes tricky relationships between the various stakeholders involved in the movement of objects are exposed.

There are nine papers in *The Transient World*, the fourth and final section of this book. Many topics are covered, but all contain a thread that examines ideas of ownership and the relationship between the illusionary and real acts of keeping. The repatriation of native American human remains, the 'authentic reproductions' that tell the sanctioned story of American history, the exhibiting of objects that have witnessed 9/11, and the use of objects to invest a new nationality: all demonstrate the profoundly moving power of the object to convey the many different ways of knowing and seeing the ever-changing world in which we live. The final papers in this section take the reader back to those on the front line – the coal face – and a discussion of the challenges facing museums today. These include owning authorities who do not comprehend the value of collections, funding that is directed at programming rather than research, short-term projects versus long-term commitment, training that is insufficient, and so on. We are left with the caution that if museums remain engrossed in their distinguished past and tradition then they will devolve into museums of themselves.

This is a sobering end to a thought-provoking book that not only recognizes the value of some earlier practices but also looks beyond and outside disciplinary boundaries. One is left to wonder whether Knell did this knowingly, so that the reader is tempted to return to the beginning and read again with a more discerning eye.

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