Affect, Interpretation and Technology

The interpretation of objects is a fundamental function of practically all museums; the actual display methods through which objects are interpreted, however, vary gr eatly from o ne museum to another and over time. I n recent years, the strategies of disp lay adopted by museums have significantly shifted, particularly in relation to the emergence of two areas: the employment of multimedia information technology in delivering interpretive information and the use of a ffective modes of communication in the interpretation of artefacts. At museums such as The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, the Hong Kong Museum of History and the National Museum of Australia, advances in information technology significantly influenc e museum displays. At the same time, these same museums aim to generate emphatically immersive and moving experiences for visitors, engaging them at a sensory level, particularly by emphasising visitors' embodied relationships with spaces and objects. Th e rise of bo th affect and technology in museum s are coincidental trends of equal force that have developed fairly independently of one another. Most often, information technology complements affective modes of communication by providing contextual information through cognitive, linguistically -based, didactic modes. Very rarely, h owever, do museums combine affect and technology. Indeed, they seem quite incongruous – while affective experiences are closely linked to visitors' physical relationships with ob jects, multimedi a information technologies are fundamentally intangible.

What place, then, can this technology have within this rise in affective experiences in museums? In this paper, I will address this question by first considering current museum display strategies that aim to employ affective interpretive modes, focusing on the

importance of the physicality of space and the materiality of artefacts. Indeed, the emergence

of this mode is seen in con text of the broader general trend towards 'experien tial' display

practices within museums in general. In the latter part of the paper, I consider this trend in

relation to the rise of multimedia technologies in museum displays.

Since the emergence of the New Museology in the 1980s, it is an axiom of mu seum

interpretation that an artefact's meaning and significance is contingent upon its social

contexts. Theorists like Susan M. Pearce, for example, significantly influenced the way in

which museum theorists and p rofessionals understood the interpretation of artefacts. It was,

however, a very particular approach to interpreting objects. Pearce extrapolated the

analytical frameworks of Saussurean structural linguistics and applied them to the 'reading'

of objects. So, similar to semiotic analyses of word s, Pearce's object analyses attempt to

retrace the momentary mental process of signification. The object, as the *material*

manifestation of social systems, becomes the *parole* and its meanings are decoded in relation

to its social and historical contexts, t he *langue* (Pearce 1992: 24 -30). Objects are thus seen as

forms of text, to be interpreted through a lin guistic unpacking of the ir meaning. It is an

interesting adaptation of the approach of structural linguistics, and Pearce certainly makes

effective use of it; she uses this method throughout her own work and it strongly underpins

her own proposed methodological model of artefact study (Pearce 1994: 125 -32). Her

adaptation of the semiotic approach, however, is very much 'of its time', as part of a wave

that swept across a range of cultural theory disciplines in the 1980s. Consequently, Pearce's

structural linguistic approach to interpretation gives primacy to the linguistic (written and

speakable) elements of the artefact (Pearce 1992: 7 -14), but largely ignores the significant

non-linguistic affective dimensions of objects. In recent years, the Pearce approach is proving to be limited because it ignores the meaningfulness of our physical phenomenal engagements with objects, which goes beyond the straigh tforward symbolic. As Eilean Hooper-Greenhill notes recently, while social contexts are vital to interpreting material culture, the importance of our experience of the object should not be ignored:

> The exchange between object and viewer is more than a co gnitive one. The encounter between an active agent and an object has two sides to it: the interpretive framework brought to bear by the individual subject, which is both personal and social, and the physical character of the artefact. (Hooper -Greenhill 20 00: 112)

Whereas the semiotic approach allowed for a cool -headed unpacking of meaning, it ignored the messy but vital significance of the highly -subjective aspects of our physical encounters with objects – the role of our senses, memory and emotions.

When we experience objects, we do more than simply *read* them. We engage them within a spatial relationship with our body. As Hooper -Greenhill says, "the material properties and the physical presence of the artefact de mand embodied responses, which may be intuitive and immediate… the initial reaction to an object may be at a tacit and sensory rather than an articulated verbal level." (Hooper -Greenhill 2000: 112) Jill Bennett, an art theorist, describes these kinds of encounters as being, "in a very palpab le sense, 'felt' rather than merely observed." (Bennett 1997: 131) It is a kind of "'language of the bod y' — an untranslatable idiolect" (Bennett 1997: 132). It is a 'language of the body' in the sense that our embodied engagements with objects are richl y meaningful.

The Hong Kong Story, the centrepiece permanent exhibition at the Hong Kong Museum of History, provides a clear example of how this affective 'language of the body' performs an interpretive function in museums. The exhibition was opened in 2 001 and traces Hong Kong's history from prehistoric times to the Handover of the former British co lony back to Chinese sovereignty in 1997. Part of the exhibition re -creates the e xperience of walking down a Hong Kon g street in the early twentieth century, during the British period. Within the indoor space of the Museum, a row of shops is portrayed in l ife-sized detail. Visitors wander by a representation of the waterfront of Victoria Harbour and up into the 'city', past Chinese food stores, tea shops and medicine shops. They can walk into shops, throughout buildings and climb aboard a tram. The exhibition goes far beyond a simple dioramic display. Rather, it attempts to interpret the past through authentic material culture that is presented within spac es that are occupiable and seemingly liveable.

Importantly, this kind of display strategy potentially opens visitors to a kind of subjective empathic identificati on. What d o I mean by this fairly complex phrase? I will illustrate with an example of a pawn shop, included in *The Hong Kong Story's* street. As visitors enter the pawn shop, they are met by a sparse interior with only a very high service counter facing them. The counter stands at about six -foot-high and can barely be reached by an adult. At first, visitors might well be puzzled at the sight of this absurdly oversized counter. What confounds visitors at an in tellectual level, however, suddenly becomes clear when they engage *physically* with the counter. Standing in front of the counter and reaching up to its top, it becomes evident that its height is a strategy for 'saving face': from the proprietor's point -of-view behind the counter, only the top of the client's head can be seen,

guaranteeing the client's anonymity. This experience grants us an understanding of the counter that goes beyond any intellectual engagement: our understanding is *perceived* more than it is *conceived*; it is *felt* more than *comprehended*. Furthermore, and importantly, through the affective encounter with this object and its space, we are able to identify empathically with those who once felt the humiliation of standing in front of similar counters. Likewise, at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC, affective display strategies are employed with great affective potency. Visitors experience the inside of a Polish cattle car that was used to transport prisoners to their deaths and walk beneath a cast copy of the infamous 'ARBEIT MACHT FREI' sign from the entrance to Auschwitz. The Museum places visitors in physical relationships with these objects that echo those of Holocaust victims. Visitors learn about the Holocaust at intellectual and cognitive levels, within historical narratives of dates, places, people and events. But these objects and spaces create immersive experiences that operate at an extra-cognitive and extra-linguistic level.

As an interpretive strategy, this 'affective mode of apprehension', as Julies Prown terms it, (1980: 208) can be profoundly meaningful and emotionally powerful. During a recent visit to the Imperial War Museum's Holocaust Exhibition in London, I encountered a pile of shoes, which were confiscated by the Nazis from prisoners at Majdanek and the Aktion Reinhard camps during the Holocaust. Standing next to these shoes, sharing their space, I found myself singling-out one shoe amongst the innumerable browning mass. Looking at that shoe, in its raw stark materiality, I could easily imagine slipping it onto my own foot. We can never assume that our subjective reactions are necessarily the same as

those of anyone else, but my own experience of this was very affecting. These shoes,

however, are certainly apt to evoke affective responses from different visitors because shoes

appeal to our banal bodily habits. The everyday habit of putting on shoes is so much a part

of our living embodiment that we barely think about it. This single shoe offered itself to my

everyday habits, inviting me into the intimately tactile relationship of wear ing it. Even

though museum conv entions prohibit me from actually *touching* this object, this degree of

physical connectivity persists in this encounter. At that moment, I shared with its anonymous

murdered owner, from 60 or so years earlier, a common and very everyday habitual

relationship to that shoe. And it is through these kinds of shared relationships wit h objects

that we can enter into po werful emp athic relationships that seem to transcend place and time.

When we walk beneath the 'ARBEIT MACHT FREI' sign or reach up to the Hong K ong

pawn shop counter, we do not just *see* these objects and *read* meaning from them, unp acking

and decoding them into linguistically -expressible information, we also engage with the

objects at an embodied level, through our senses and within spatial relatio nships.

It is important to understand these kinds of displays in relation to broader changes in

the functions of museums within society, and to sketch out the shifting value systems that

underlie the move towards the use of affective modes in museums (Ch akrabarty 2002: 5 -6).

Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that there is a slow but steady movement in museums over the

last century towards adopting more experiential and embodied modes of interpretation and

communication. He argues that this movement comes in res ponse to fundamental shifts in

the nature of western mass democracies since the nineteenth century, which have gone from

what he calls a 'pedagogical' model to a 'performative' model (Chakrabarty adapts these

terms from Homi Bhabha's (1994) use of them).   The 'pedagogical' model was dominant in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; in this model, subjects are not born as political beings but instead earn that status. Citizenship is therefore something earned and entered - into, primarily through linguistically-based, cognitive modes of education. According to Chakrabarty, learning through abstract reasoning was central in pedagogical democracies in the nineteenth century, with the written word as its highest form and universities and museums as corresponding and reinforcing institutions. Later in the twentieth century, however, the 'performative' model of democracy begins to dominate. In the performative model, legitimate citizenship is not something earned but rather a natural and given human right. As Chakrabarty says, "[i]n this conception that has increasingly dominated debates in and about public life since the 1960s, to be human is to be already political" (Chakrabarty 2002: 6). It is an inclusive notion of citizenship, not predicated on the prerequisite of literacy and abstract reasoning.

Museums, then, have changed their interpretive practices in ways that directly correspond with the role of museums in relation to their changing societies. One important consequence has been the easing of the bias towards cognitive forms of interpretation over affective forms. In the nineteenth century, museum objects functioned to articulate linguistically-expressed metanarratives of knowledge, such as taxonomic structures. This regime actively discouraged experiential and embodied engagements of visitors with their objects. Glass cabinets extracted objects from lived experience and placed them into stasis; they privileged sight above other senses and often restricted the visitors view to a fixed point, making objects two-dimensional so that they could be interchangeable with their labelling.

Museum visitors' embodied experiences with objects were suppressed and directed more towards non-bodily physically-removed cognitive contemplation. Since the eme rgence of the performative model of democracy, in the latter half of the twentieth century, there has been a significant shift in museum attitudes towards knowledge and the role that their objects play in its p roduction (Schlereth 1985: 1-75). Particularly since the 1960s, museums are recognised as being ideological institutions that reify power through the interpretations and narratives with which they frame objects. Their narratives are now recognised as being contestable; knowledge is no longer singula r and sanctioned by the institution, but is multifarious and negotiable. This loosening of the museum's authority is now regarded as a positive basis of new developments in contemporary museum practice. As Andrea Witcomb argues, these days "visitors them selves have an active role in the p rocess, becoming co-authors in the production of meanings" (Witcomb 2003: 143). This breaks down the traditional one-way flow on knowledge by allowing meanings and narratives to be negotiated between institution and audi ence, and it brings audiences into a more intimate spatial relationship with museum objects in which the information gained is more experiential than cognitive. As Chakrabarty says, "if the pedagogic model of democracy privileges the capacity for abstract reason and imagination in the citizen, the performative one brings into view the domain of the embodied and the sensual… it is as if the ped agogic model privileges the brain over the senses." (2002: 7) In contrast to the restrictive functions of glass ca binets, many museums now attempt to reconcile the object with visitor experience and draw visitors to the conceptual and analytical via the sensory and experienced. As Chakrabarty says:

> the politics of experience orients us to the realms of the senses and the embodied. This is never achieved by the capacity for abstract reasoning. It takes us away from our senses, it trains us to be sceptical of the evidence they produce about the

world… The museum today, however, increasingly opens itself up to the embo died and the lived. (Chakrabarty 2002: 9)

Importantly, unlike museums in the nineteenth century, visitors to museums like the Hong Kong Museum of History and the United States Ho locaust Memorial Museum are actively encouraged to engage the museum on a ph ysical and multi -sensory level. Their embodied experiences contribute to the interpretive framework of the museum.

With all this emphasis upon spatial relationships, the materiality of the object and the embodied physicality of the visitors, can 'immat erial' multimedia technologies in museums effectively contribute to this affective interpretive mode? Can multimedia technologies go beyond the more straightforward cognitive modes of interpretation? Many multimedia exhibits we encounter in museums tend to be of the mouse -and-monitor variety; we either sit or stand before a screen and in teract with the technology, usually through some kind of manual interface, such as a keyboard, mouse, pushbuttons or touch screen. A very good example of this kind of mul timedia interactive is *The Lady Darley Album* exhibit, produced by Kate Richards, which recently was included in *The Lost City* exhibition at the Museum of Sydney. In *The Lost City*, this multimedia feature was included at the end o f an exhibition of images and objects, which most notably featured a detailed miniature model representing King Street, Sydney, in the 1890s. To use this interactive, the visitor sits at a desk with a mouse and computer monitor. On the screen, they can access one o f many historic al panoramic photographs of Sydney by navigating and selecting with the mouse. Each image is hyperlinked to texts of historical information. This is an interesting and enjoyable multimedia feature, and I found myself spending more time using it than look ing at the objects in the exhibition. The clickable interactivity of its images allowed my interaction

with the technology to be informative without being didactic and closed -off. This kind o f

dissemination of cognitive information is certainly vital to   the functions of museums. The

experience, however, has a limited affective dimension. If an embodied encounter with

objects evokes certain kinds of sensory memory, then sitting down with a monitor and mouse

resonates more strongly with sitting at the com puter in my office than anything else. Indeed,

the approach of *The Lady Darley Album* is typical of many multimedia exhibits. Another

multimedia exhibit at the Museum of Sydney was a three -story vertical video wall in the

Museum's vestibule. In its 1994 version, this video wall went beyond the mouse -and-

monitor use of multimedia features such as *The Lady Darley Album* . As Andrea Witcomb

notes, the video wall moved multimedia technology away from strategies for the

straightforward dissemination of cognitiv e information and more into affective territory.

Witcomb points out that although the video wall is technology -based, the broader idea of

interactivity it enacts is "not premised on technological definition, "but instead is about"

spatial experiences." It produces a kind of" dialogic interactivity" that is emphatically

directed at the body and the senses (Witcomb 2003: 156).   In this case, multimedia

technology is employed to create an experience of a space *in order to interpret that space* ,

rather than as an extension of existing text -based interpretation, as a kind of animated

didactic panel. The video wall demonstrates that a greater confluence is possible between the

increasing use of multimedia technology and the broader mo vement within museums toward s

affective and experiential modes of interpretation.

At the National Museum of Australia in Canberra, an exhibit called the *Welcome*

Space goes one step further than the video wall. The National Museum of Australia uses

many multimedia interactive tech nologies, such as the Big Map, a large Australia -shaped video screen that can be controlled by visitors through a touch screen interface. Visitors can access a wide range of historical, environmental and geographical information from the touch screens, which are powerfully brought to life on the large screen. The *Welcome Space*, however, combines this traditional 'manual interface' interactivity with the 'dialogic interactivity' of the Museum of Sydney's video wall. The *Welcome Space* comprises a wide darkened corridor with a bank of video projections on either side, which leads into the Museum's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander gallery. On each side of the corridor, a row of indigenous Australian dancers is projected onto the screens, accompanied by sounds and music. The projection loops through a series of different dances. At first, these projections seem like the video wall at the Museum o f Sydney; the scale of the projections creates a 'spatial experience'. As we move through the corridor betwe en these projections, however, the movement of our bodies has a direct impact on the images. Movement on the floor causes ripples and movement on the screen as well as sampled sounds. The movement and sounds respond in direct proportion to the movement of the visitor. If visitors stamp heavily and dance enthusiastically around the space – as many children tend to do – it positively bursts to life.

As David Bearman and Jennifer Trant suggest, multimedia exhibits such as the *Welcome Space*, add a wholly different dimension to interaction and p articipation, "by removing the keyboard interface and putting a visual interface at the social centre, by making interaction visceral or verbal rather than symbolic and te xtual." (Bearman and Trant 1999: 21) So, a multimedia exhibit such as the *Welcome Space* is not concerned with the

dissemination of knowledge that is cognitive, ordered, linear and narrativised, but knowledge that is gained through embodied experience. With the *Welcome Space*, technology is vital in activating the physical space of the museum. Once visitors realise that the *Welcome Space* is responding to the impact of their feet on the floor, the space encourages further stamping of feet. As with the pawn shop counter in *The Hong Kong Story*, we enter into an empathetic physical relationship with the indigenous dancers on the screens and the living cultures represented in the gallery. These kinds of exhibits are sometimes construed as being part of a 'Disneyesque' museum-as-theme-park trend. Keith Windshuttle, in his criticisms of the National Museum of Australia, likens the *Welcome Space* to MTV. Similar criticism was levelled at Te Papa in Wellington by Rodney Wilson, director of the Auckland Museum, who said that "[p]eople who flock to the British Museum in London don't do so because they really want to go to Disneyland." (Robinson 1998) Such views tend to overestimate the importance of structured narratives and underestimate the importance to visitors of tacit information.

Multimedia technologies, then, do have a place within the rise of affective experiences in museums, but the extent of this is largely dependent upon how museums understand and utilise those technologies. The mouse-and-monitors approach will remain as important as the need to provide visitors with factual and cognitive information. But we should not underestimate the possibilities that multimedia technologies may hold beyond this effective but very straightforward role. The use of technology in an exhibit like the *Welcome Space* demonstrates a different, imaginative and more open understanding of what constitutes *interpretation* – in which contextualisation is provided by experiences rather than facts.

Fundamentally, this entails a rethinking of what constitutes 'in formation' in museums. As Chakrabarty says, "information is now also what addresses other senses – of seeing, hearing, smelling and touching." (Chakrabarty 2002: 11) Ultimately, museums stand to benefit from this more expansive understanding of information. As Charl es Saumarez Smith notes:

> The museums which have the greatest grip on the popular imagination are not those which are most modern and systema tic, but often those which are most disorderly and individual… the experience of these places is not o f history, ordered and systematic, but of memory, provocative and strange. (Saumarez Smith in Kwint,1999: 7)

Regardless of the technologies that museums use, whether high -tech interactives or low-tech dioramas, a broader unde rstanding of information and interpretation opens up visitors for more intense encounters within museums.