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See table of contents

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it will save us, but I get no closer to Gordon Mentzer by thinking such thoughts than I do by reading Mary Murfree.

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Peter VERGO (ed.), *The New Museology* (London , Reaktion Books, 1988)

In Canada the phrase "new museology" is heard most often from Quebec-based heritage workers and refers to developments in museums and museum-like practice which attempt to restructure the social partnerships between people, objects, heritage and institutions. Pierre Mayrand suggests

> ... the mandate of this museology has also been broadened to include a territorial perspective in which user populations are encouraged to assume the responsibilities traditionally delegated to "professionals".[1]

This is not *The New Museology* reflected in the 1988 collection of essays under that title edited by Peter Vergo whose authors write essentially from a British perspective and predominately from the Fine Art and large gallery institutional tradition.

In these essays there is an urgency to reorder and expand their tradition, and suggestions on how museum institutions might re-focus, but there is no call for the radical disassembling of the structure of museum work as is implied in the "new museology" of France and Quebec and no suggestion the folk should take over from the professional. These essays, after all, were written by Keepers and Assistant Keepers at the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Museum of London, the Royal College of Art and universities at Essex and Canterbury.

This is writing about museums — what they do, their aims and policies, their dual nature of entertainer/educator, and particularly their role as evaluator of the beautiful, significant and worthwhile. While the old museology concentrated on methods, according to Vergo, the new museology discusses purposes.

There are essays by eight men and one woman — not a reflection of the predominately female museum work force — all of whom are struggling in one

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1. Pierre Maranda, "A new concept of museology in Quebec", *MUSE* 2.1 (April 1984), 33.

way or another with the question "What does an object, on display outside of its daily life, imply to the folks who show it and the folks who see it"?

The initial essay, "Museums, Artefacts and Meanings", by Charles Saumarez Smith introduces the problem. He suggests collected objects were seen to have the capacity to demonstrate aspects of cultural differences and change, to be viewed not purely for their own sake "as fragments from a shattered historical universe, but rather as possible indicators, as metonyms, for comparative study". (p. 9)

One of the most insistent problems museums face, then, is precisely the root assumption of the discipline: that artefacts can be, and should be, divorced from their original context of ownership and use, and redisplayed in a different context of meaning, which is regarded as static and superior because it is safer. This is, in part, the rationale used by the Alberta Provincial Museum last year for not returning a Blackfoot pipe bundle and the United States for not signing UN protocols on the return of cultural property.

Using examples from the Victoria and Albert Museum, Saumarez Smith demonstrates museums are not neutral territory, not arbitrary constructions which provide a protected opportunity for an object to speak for itself, but theatrical in design, presenting objects in environments which condition and codify the visitors' expectations.

> Wherever one turns in discussing the display of artefacts in a museum there is a problem of epistemology, of how artefacts are perceived and represented by the museum curator, and of how they are perceived and understood by the museum visitor. It becomes clear that this is a highly fluid and complex activity which is not susceptible to straightforward definition: that visitors bring a multiplicity of different attitudes and expectations and experiences to the reading of an artefact, so that their comprehension of it is individualized; that curators equally have a particular and personal representation of historical and aesthetic significance; that artefacts do not exist in a space of their own, transmitting meaning to the spectator but on the contrary are susceptible to a multiform construction of meaning which is dependent on the design, the context of other objects, the visual and historical representation, the whole environment; that artefacts can change their meaning not just over the years as different historiographical and institutional currents pick them out and transform their significance but from day to day as different people view them and subject them to their own interpretation. (p. 19)

As Saumarez Smith suggests, the idea of the artefact as a complex presence subject to multiple interpretation has important implications for the way museums think about and present themselves. It implies the breakdown of rigid taxonomies and classification systems and a restructuring of activities in conservation, interpretation strategies and museum scholarship. He calls for museums to be active centres of investigation into the nature of the relationship between the individual and the physical environment. There is no suggestion, unfortunately, that this work be contracted out to folklorists.

Essays by editor Vergo, Ludmilla Jordanova and Colin Sorensen continue to investigate these themes in different styles of institutions, galleries, art galleries and theme parks.

Paul Greenhalgh's discussion on the 19th-century international exhibitions, ''Education, Entertainment and Politics: Lessons from the Great International Exhibition'', includes analysis which is applicable to our own new Museum of Civilization. In 1889, at the *Exposition Universelle*, a striking educational feature was the ''history of Human Habitation'', a long street of exact reproduction houses intended to convey, as one walked along, the history of the house in all nations throughout time. Despite the well-meaning intention of exposition designers to instruct the visitor, the public was ''well on its way to appropriating the medium for its enjoyment, not for intellectual betterment'' (p. 82). 100 years later, the Council for Business and the Arts in Canada has concluded ''there is a real movement to museums as entertainment rather than education''.[2]

Phillip Wright's essays on the quality of visitor's experiences in art museums, and Nick Merriman's analysis of museum visiting as a cultural phenomenon investigate the visitor side of the museum/visitor equation. Merriman's sad conclusion is people who don't visit museums have the worst attitude toward them, leaving the museum worker who wants to increase popular public profile with an apparently unsolvable problem.

Or is it unsolvable only if museum work remains within the traditional institutional structure? Wright suggests the solution ''requires museums to change their approach and methods in order to accommodate the speeds and styles of learning of today's visitors, because the clock cannot be turned back to the spirit, and the attitudes, of early nineteenth-century museum visiting'' (p. 138). Wright does not discuss the probability of this spirit and attitude being inherent in the structure of the institution and likely unchangeable.

Stephen Bann's essay ''On Living in a New Country'', discusses Australian experience in a manner familiar folklorists. He uses Roland Barthes as a guide to the restructuring of ''history'' around themes to achieve collective expression, and he weaves his own museum visiting experience into the story. Bann's self-conscious approach to analysis is helpful, as he states:

> I will forego the obvious dialectical argument that it is the very lack of a past that provokes this enterprising cult of 'heritage' and history, or the equally obvious point that such responses as I have evoked are not necessarily the responses of the average visitor. (p. 111)

It is facile to suggest a great deal of museological angst could be relieved with the application of some solid sociology, folklore and communications theory. But there has been a failure of museum workers to cross-reference their concerns with those of other disciplines. Csikszentmihalyi's book on the

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2. Kate Taylor, "Wooing a Fickle Public: Buildings, Shows, draw museum crowd", *The Globe and Mail* (Saturday 9 February 1991) C10.

meaning of things should become required reading for anyone who works with objects[3]; Neil Postman, while sadly announcing the death of typographic culture, at least explains why those institutions, like museums, based on typographic structures just don't work anymore.[4]

The museum is itself an artefact of north European nineteenth-century culture. Its adaptations and modifications are specific to their time and place, and diagnostic to the social systems which gave rise to them. I don't think it is too imperialistic to suggest museums are a folklore form — a genre with its own inherent structure, grammar and rhetoric. Museums have always been vehicles for social purpose and continue to respond to pressures of performer/audience interaction.

The essays of *The New Museology* are struggling with a fundamental self-delusion of the discipline: that museum-work is pure, non-rhetorical and transparent. Any community which wishes to use material as a vehicle to represent itself must ensure its own purposes can be told apart from those of the museum. This is much the same struggle a folklore fieldworker experiences trying to translate the life stories and artistic production of an informant into a thesis, photograph, display or exhibition.

Folklorists who are struggling with this difficulty, inherent in their discipline, should read this collection, then invite the local curator out for a drink and a chat about common concerns. The exchange would benefit both of them.

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3. Mihalyi Czikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, *The Meaning of Things: Symbols in the Development of the Self*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981.
4. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, New York, Penguin Books, 1985.