

Review Article

The Empty gallery? Issues of subjects, objects and spaces.

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Stephen Conn, *Do Museums Still Need Objects?*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010, hardback, £26.00, pp. 296

Charlotte Klonk, *Spaces of Experience: Art Gallery Interiors from 1800 to 2000*, New haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009, hardback, £45.00, pp. x +305.

Christopher Whitehead, *Museums and the Construction of Disciplines: Art and Archaeology in Nineteenth Century Britain*, London: Duckworth, 2009, paperback, £12.99 pp. 160

A central argument in Brian O'Doherty's influential *Inside the White Cube*, first published in 1971 (1986), is that in the twentieth century the spatial context of the white-walled art gallery becomes important to shaping our understanding of modern art because it is implicated in changes in the relationship established between the viewing subject and the viewed object. The white-cube gallery ideal, he suggests, establishes a space constituted outside of time in which we, as visiting subjects, can relate to art objects on display as pure forms outside of their everyday context. The outcome, he argues, however, is not the confirming of some transcendental subject with a coherent experience of Art in keeping with this supposed blank space but precisely its opposite: the alienation of the subject and the fracturing of experience into something multiple and incoherent when confronted with art objects that cannot be viewed contemplatively simply as pictures on a wall. Such a gallery type has this effect, O'Doherty believes, because the relationship between art (object) and viewer (subject) is one in which the eye of the viewer becomes detached from the embodied experience, leaving behind an empty form of spectatorship and spectatorial experience. Collage, O'Doherty suggests, introduces this changed relationship between object and spectator because it calls into question the perspectival establishment of the viewing point as the point of the subject/eye around which viewing art has been premised in the modern past (see Panofsky 1991).

The Eye-subject was formerly constituted in the galleries of the past, and by all modern art up to and including Cubism, as a critically judging and discerning (albeit art obsessed) subject. Such a subject was capable, O'Doherty notes, of experiencing art in a disinterested and detached way. The spectator, on the other hand is, for O'Doherty, unable to distinguish the difference between real space and art space in the white cube gallery because they have become blurred into one another by this unsettling of the relationship between coherent object and viewer, and indeed the walls of the gallery itself. Such a subject is prone, he believes, to sensation and impression and as such experiences not only art but their own sense of self as something fractured (1986).

While O'Doherty's approach can be seen as rather generalizing in its argument, and runs the risk of overdetermining the spectator as a manipulated subject, it stands in a long philosophical tradition concerned with the nature of experience within modernity (see Frisby 1985). The ideal subject, O'Doherty's Eye, firmly established within Kant's third critique – of aesthetics – is an independent, discerning, critically judging subject with a coherent experience of the world (*Erfahrung*). The Subject of modernity, however, first discerned by Baudelaire in his championing of the representation of the everyday in art, found also in Simmel's understanding of distracting, metropolitan life and in Benjamin's analysis of fetishistic consumer culture and

captured in modernism's disintegration of the picture plane and its dissolution into the surroundings, is a fractured subject with a fragmented form of experience (*Erlebings*) (Frisby, 1985, Hetherington 2007a). Many have bemoaned this transition and castigated spectatorship and spectacle as the subsequent fetishized, manipulated form of cultural expression that is suited to such experience in capitalist society (Debord 1977, Clark 1984).

Such issues can be seen as part of the context for Charlotte Klonk's *Spaces of Experience* which is directly concerned with charting historically the changing character of experience within the art gallery and its relationship to changing art and techniques of display over the past two centuries. More tangentially this relationship between subjects, objects and gallery space is relevant to both Stephen Conn's *Do Museums Still Need Objects?* and Christopher Whitehead's *Museums and the Construction of Disciplines*. The former makes an opening essay on the relationship between objects and gallery practices and politics a key theme for his book, while for Whitehead it is the separation of archaeology and art around boundary objects and their relationship to the establishment of disciplinary fields of investigation within the museum that is the major concern. There is more to these works than simply this issue and neither engage directly with O'Doherty (though Klonk does). However, the questions they raise and the answers they give cannot be understood without some consideration of the relationship between these terms - object, subject and space - and the social space that they come to make.

The overall aim of Klonk's historically rich account of the developments in gallery display over the past 200 years is to argue that we can situate our understanding of the changes in experience by relating it to the changing display of art in galleries (2009: 8). The history of bourgeois perception is not a new topic (see Ivins 1953, Berger 1972, Lowe 1982, Bryson 1988, Panofsky 1991, Cray 1990; 1999) and changes in experience didn't just take place in art galleries but few have investigated in this level of empirical detail that relationship as it is established in the space of the art gallery. Through a focus on galleries in the metropolitan centres of London, Berlin and New York, her historical account moves us in chronological fashion and charts the changing practices and ideas associated with the display of pictures and their relationship to subjective experience. This history is a history of the metropolitan bourgeois subject of Europe and North America in general. In the first half of the nineteenth century the National Gallery in London is used to illustrate how a cultural preoccupation with questions about individual perception, subjective experience and interiority came to dominate thinking about the display of art and how that helped influence the display regime of the gallery and the debates surrounding it.

As the century unfolds we move into an era that both Warren Susman (2003) and Richard Sennett (1986) have identified as being preoccupied with a gradual shift away from issues of rank and character and their display to others and towards those of interiority and privacy in the making of the modern subject and their individualized experience. Klonk gives us a helpful account of how this process was manifest in the establishment of the displays in the Nationalgalerie in Berlin later in the century though its use of period rooms, attempts to establish a display that was easy and pleasing to the eye and a reflection of collective, bourgeois taste that it presented as personal taste. The gallery in this period assumes much of the character of the bourgeois interior – the parlour - with its emphasis on intimacy, a growing sense of individual expression and emotional impact. For Klonk, as well as stylized period rooms and use of the trappings of bourgeois taste, this aim of reflecting social concerns around interiority and the inner life are also expressed through the use of low hanging pictures and attempts to use wall colours that do not fatigue the eye in order that the experience of the gallery aids visitors in their personal appreciation of art and their self-understanding as subjects.

The book charts a now well known trajectory of the modern subject from citizen to consumer over the period under investigation. It subdivides that into three eras: i) a nineteenth century concern with the individual in relation to the display regime of the bourgeois interior; ii) an early twentieth century socialist divergence in which issues of exteriority and collective experience are articulated but later transformed into iii) an individualised contemporary consumer experience in a spectatorial arrangement. The author highlights challenges to the dominant bourgeois gallery experience first from socialist experiments with collective experience and a concern with exteriority in experience that challenged the ideology of interiority and

bourgeois individualism in the emergence of the white cube gallery of the inter-war years in Weimar Germany (chapter 3). She goes on to look at the post-war capitalist triumph and appropriation of that mode of display and the establishment and extension of the modern individual's experience - that of (manipulated) consumer (chapters 4 and 5). This takes us into the gallery spaces of New York and Berlin as flexible containers in which consumer taste is cultivated (2009: 149) and a society of the spectacle seemingly established.

Richly illustrated with examples, and detailed with commentary on key directors and their gallery policies and practices, Klonk's book gives us a full account of the development in museums across these cities as illustrations of the social trend towards individualised experience that is collectively articulated through consumer society. While the book offers us a very light touch approach to social theory, it is clear that some of the arguments of the early Frankfurt School are guiding her argument (notably Siegfried Krakauer and Walter Benjamin). The overall direction of change and suggestion of false consciousness is established and shown how it influenced (and was influenced by) gallery display practices. However, for a book that purports to be about subjects and subjective experience, Klonk's gallery spaces, while richly filled with objects and the discourses that placed and arranged them there, seem somewhat lacking in embodied subjects. Partly this is a quite understandable methodological outcome of not being able to speak to people who were there in the distant past. More of note, perhaps, is that it is the objects (and the discourses surrounding them) that are called on to tell the subject's story. It would have been good to hear a bit more about their surrogate subject status.

While one might agree with the general direction of Klonk's argument there are a number of issues that remain somewhat underdeveloped. First, the concepts of experience and subjectivity, while illustrated with many convincing examples, are assumed more than they are explained. For example, the changing use of colour on gallery walls and assumptions in the debates of the time about subjective experience becomes a surrogate for subjective experience and interiority. Similarly, there is no real discussion of what a consumer actually is; the somewhat negative, manipulated connotations associated with this term (a hang-over from mid-century theories of mass culture) are also assumed rather than discussed in detail. One might also add that the subjective experience here is very much a visual subjectivity. One gets little sense from the argument that viewers bring their bodies with them when they visit galleries and that this might influence their overall experience of what they find there.

If Klonk's book on subjective experience is a little light on experiencing subjects, then can we say the same about the object in Conn's *Do Museums Still Need Objects?* Conn's book, really a series of essays about the contemporary American museum scene and the problems it has to face, offers us a range of historically informed takes on a set of contemporary museum issues and in passing explores the changing relationship between museums and objects over time in order that we might better understand why museums are currently doing what they are doing. The themes he highlights mostly focus on those of identity politics and museums and includes debates around the repatriation of artefacts, the display of oriental objects in American museums, how and why science museums have catered for children as audiences, an example of a museum that failed, and questions of the changing relationship between the museum and civic identity within a contemporary consumer society.

The themes for each chapter set the scene for exploring the relationship between museums and objects, and there is much worthwhile and thought provoking scholarship on display here. What is more open to debate, however, is whether Conn actually answers the question in his title. Conn is quite clear in arguing that the role of objects in museums has diminished as the twentieth century unfolded. We could question whether diminished or changed is the right answer as it is artefacts rather than the broader philosophical issue of objectivity that is under investigation here. However, rather than exploring these issues in any real detail Conn moves on instead to other matters and away from this central topic that really concern him. What he really seeks to do in the opening chapter is not just tell us what has happened to the object in the museum but tell us how we should approach the study of museums in general. His position is a clear, resolute defence of Enlightenment principles and a pragmatic political position that celebrates cosmopolitanism and citizenship against the politics of cultural difference and self-identity. What he takes issue against is not just neo-liberal thinking and its

impact on the museum sector but also arguments with a more progressive (postmodern) leaning. He is particularly critical of museum studies that is overly theoretical in its approach (especially if Foucault is in any way an inspiration) and seeks to challenge much of the identity politics that has been associated with such post-structuralist work. In particular, he is especially critical of those who seek to shift museums from the cultural to the political field and make critical demands of them that he thinks are unsuited to their purpose. He also seeks to challenge the move of museum studies away from a thoroughgoing (historical) analysis of museum practice and into an exercise in using the museum to explore theoretically derived questions of identity in sociology and cultural studies. Few authors are singled out for direct criticism but his main point appears to be that these commentators either lose sight of the museum in their critical analysis, or want to turn it into a political institution and demand from it things it cannot deliver. We have, of course, been here before in a general sense of philosophical debate (see Habermas, 1987). Conn is not the first person to challenge positions taken up by those who seek to offer a critique of contemporary society (or of the contemporary museum).

Putting aside that scene-setting first chapter (which is more about subjects than objects), what Conn actually offers is a series of thoughtful historical essays on the changing role of objects within American museums. There is much to commend in what he tells us about the complexities with which Oriental artefacts were encountered as a problem which unsettled western classificatory schemes (boundary objects in Whitehead's sense as we shall see). Similarly we get much of note on the particular development of science museums in America and why they have become key sites for children's museum experiences around interactivity. And the essay on the demise of the Philadelphia Commercial Museum is a notable success in demonstrating how not all museums succeed and what happens to their buildings and collections after they have shut. The broad issue of disposal is a rising one, I would argue, within museum studies and this is a very useful case study of that (see Hetherington 2004; 2007b).

In the end Conn concludes by showing that museums at the beginning of the twentieth century were more preoccupied with objects and less with their audiences than they are now. This is situated in a final essay on the decline of the liberal, urban public sphere, the transformation of the citizen into the consumer and the gradual loss of confidence in many museums as cultural actors as an increasingly diverse set of political demands are made of them. Much of this is familiar ground. However, Conn's polemical tone and especially his aversion to using social theory in investigating museum issues means that his argument gets a little side-tracked in his critique of identity politics and he does not really give us a complete answer to the question in the title- we are still left looking for the object somewhat.

While Klonk sets up her analysis around the subject and Conn around the object, Whitehead's approach is to consider instead the issue of discourses within museums. Whitehead takes us back to the nineteenth century and the museum as a site of scientific investigation. His aim is to show how in the London museum scene of that time discourses operating within the museum helped to establish distinct scientific forms of enquiry (the objects of enquiry, the methods for approaching them, the contested nature of scientific knowledge, and the mapping out of fields of enquiry notably around uncertain boundary objects) and separated out the disciplines of art and archaeology that we know today.

In a resolutely theoretical book of the kind that appears to trouble Conn (which makes strong use of a Foucauldian approach to discourse and supplements it with arguments drawn from Bourdieu's analysis of the struggle for legitimate knowledge within particular social fields – in this case science), Whitehead puts forward an argument that will be familiar to those who know debates within the sociology of scientific knowledge (SSK) and applies them to the museum sector out of which much of that science emerged and relocated to the University at a later date. The first 74 pages of this short book are taken up with establishing this argument. Of particular importance are the role of boundary objects – the Parthenon Frieze is one example used (chapter 3 - is it art or is it archaeology?) – which operate and are mobilized in different ways within debates and around which different fields, communities of practice and their scientific approaches and methodologies coalesce. Where to place things and in which galleries, Whitehead shows, was also central in shaping the different identities and collections across the different museums in London. The intervention of the South Kensington museum and the debates surrounding the National Gallery are used to illustrate how different museum

fields (and the scientific disciplines associated with them) came to be articulated, established and naturalized in practice. At the centre of this series of competing claims stands the Royal Commission of 1857 set up around the National Gallery through which Whitehead explores many of these issues.

What is somehow missing in all three of these books, I would argue, is a systematic analysis of the space of the gallery itself. What all three authors have in common is an historical question about which objects went into which galleries, to what end, and how they were arranged and the practices and debates that surrounded them as those arrangements changed over time. Yet as most cultural geographers would now argue, social spaces are not containers in which subjects and objects are simply placed and in which the action then happens, rather they are made as spaces through the changing relations between subjects and objects (see Massey, 1999). The gallery is never empty and waiting to be filled with subjects, objects, discourses (or signs), rather its condition of possibility as a gallery is brought into play through the tensions established around subjects, objects, discourses and signs. That was something O'Doherty realised all that time ago and while he might have simplified the position established within the art gallery around early modernist art, what we can take away from that is the messiness involved of the making of the gallery as a space for experience, object display, policy, practice and politics and scientific discourse. The boundaries are never finally drawn, including the boundaries between culture and politics (and theory and empirical investigation we might add) – in the world of the museum and gallery; they are always in play.

The problematic issue of boundaries associated with subjects and objects is what I will take away most from reading these works, not least the apparent boundaries within museum studies that are on show here. What Whitehead reveals in his account is that the cultural practices associated with museums and their collections, the objects on display and the character of the visiting subjects, are clearly about games of power, about political interventions and about claims of legitimacy over knowledge and practice fought over within science. In some respects that can be seen as a counter argument to Conn's position of wanting to keep museums out of political field and see their legitimacy established with the field of culture. Whitehead's analysis suggests, however, that culture (and science) and politics always go together. In fact, one can apply much of Whitehead's analysis of knowledge and museums in the nineteenth century to contemporary museum studies itself. While we might not have always seen it clearly there has been for the past two decades now a struggle over legitimate knowledge, communities of practices, methodologies, uses of theory and so on in the new museology and the museum itself is very much a boundary object around which those seeking to assert the rightness of their approach make their moves and counter-moves. We have, I'm sure, all been to museum conferences where we see speakers politely talking past each other – practitioners and art-historians armed with their slides on the one side, serious theoreticians with their well-thumbed copies of Deleuze on the other. But maybe we have now reached a critical juncture at which mutual bemusement might have to take on a more serious tone. Taken together these books show us where some of the fault lines will develop; uses of theory, I suggest, will be a key one.

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