

## Book reviews

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**Laurajane Smith, *The Uses of Heritage*, London and New York: Routledge, 2006, paper, £17.99, pp. vii+351**

'There is, really, no such thing as heritage' (p. 11), Laurajane Smith declares in the opening sentence of her book. With this she outlines her main thesis: that heritage is not a *thing* with defined meanings and values, but an 'inherently political and discordant' practice that performs the cultural 'work' of the present. It can be utilized by different interest-groups and individuals for different purposes and with varying degrees of hegemony and legitimacy. It tells us more about the present, in other words, than the past.

In a wide-ranging first chapter that traces the historical development of an 'authorised heritage discourse' (hereafter AHD), Smith observes that the uses of heritage are consequently often bound up with power relations, and specifically the power to legitimize and de-legitimize cultures. This is because powerful groups have been actively successful, over time, in defining what does and does not qualify as the nation's heritage. Such hegemonic definitions promote the idea that heritage is about a common national inheritance, lineage and set of innate values; that it concerns a singular past that must not be tampered with (predicated on the Ruskinian ethos of 'conserve as found'), that it is evidenced through monuments and tangible assets as opposed to other forms of expression, that visitors need to be led to it and instructed in it passively, and that it derives from a universal aesthetics of taste and value largely determined by expert rather than lay judgement.

In seeing these assumptions as constituting a discourse, Smith is able to show how they establish powerful conceptual frameworks outside of which dissenting voices struggle to advance alternative conceptions. For example, the dominance of this discourse has resulted in the widely-held idea that conservation is about the preservation of selected and credentialized buildings and tends to exclude understandings of heritage that are not focused on material assets but on people's attachments, identities or sense of belonging. The dominance of such a view is illustrated by the heritage critics, who vociferously attacked heritage in the 1980s, and who in the process mistook the AHD for heritage itself, defining their target in this narrow sense and hence tarring all heritage with one brush. Smith also points out that many of the gestures towards multiculturalism and minority history in museums today still leave unaltered the terms upon which heritage is defined, allotting subaltern groups a place in the authorized discourse, but not allowing alternative conceptions of what constitutes heritage to take hold. This echoes Coombes's (1992) analysis of museum displays that celebrate cultural diversity under the 'banner of multiculturalism' but fail to explore the unequal relations of power that underpin it. As a result, subaltern cultures may only be exhibited as 'scopic feast' or 'contented global village' (*ibid.*).

In Chapter 2, Smith outlines a conceptualization of heritage that seeks to move away from its persistent equation with sites, buildings, material objects and patrimony, and to understand it instead as a cultural process – an approach that concords with my own view of heritage as a form of communicative practice. It should be seen as a dynamic process, in which the past furnishes the resources for conflicts and disagreements about what should be valued and how. In recounting the lessons she learned participating in a heritage project with Waanyi women in northern Queensland, Australia, Smith advances the argument that the heritage dimension of the project was actually something living - located in the experiences and performances that the women made of the historical site; not the site itself. This means that heritage emerges as a relational idea: it is about how individuals and groups actively take up

positions in relation to sites, buildings, events, histories. It becomes 'a way of knowing and seeing' (p. 52). In engaging with heritage, people are constructing a sense of their own identities, one that may be in opposition to, in concordance with, or simply remain outside the terms of the AHD. These positions are not, Smith argues, reducible to the simple question of divergent opinions and values; it is rather about how people are caught up in a range of activities that involve remembering, forgetting, communicating, asserting identity, and so forth, as well as cultural values.

It is one of the book's considerable strengths that the author presents her analysis of first-hand visitor research undertaken (e.g. at country houses, the Waanyi archaeological landscape site in Australia, selected UK industrial social history museums, as well as a study of community heritage and identity in Castleford), to demonstrate her arguments rather than relying on generalising theory (as many discussions of heritage tend to do). In her research at the manorial sites, she shows how middle-class visitors unproblematically draw upon the AHD in making sense of their own pleasure in visiting these historical houses, rooted in their attainment of a sense of cultural security and reassurance about their own class and national identities. In the case of the Riversleigh landscape, by contrast, there is far more of a sense of contestation around the established AHD, and that the AHD itself is used flexibly by different groups to bolster their claims to authenticity and authority. Hence, Smith's analysis demonstrates that this authorized discourse is not fixed, but can mutate and take on different forms in different contexts; crucially, too, the users of heritage are active in their appropriations, accommodations or negotiations with it. Nevertheless, it remains a powerful agent in constituting the field of what can and cannot be defined as heritage, legitimizing in the process dominant ideas of nation, class, culture and ethnicity.

This book makes a significant contribution to our understanding of heritage as a social and cultural process. It advances in a new and confident direction an emergent analytic framework that treats heritage as social practice, not object. It therefore helps to formulate heritage as a topic of study that is no longer caught in the old debates over what is and what is not heritage. I would certainly recommend it as essential reading for anyone interested in the complex determinants of people's multiple relationships to the past: through remembering, understanding, coming to terms with and arguing about, one's own sense of identity.

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Coomes, A. E. (1992) 'Inventing the "Postcolonial": Hybridity and Constituency in Contemporary Curating', *New Formations*, 18, Winter, 39-52.

**Jonathan Conlin, *The Nation's Mantelpiece: A History of the National Gallery*, London: Pallas Athene, 2006, hardback £24.99, pp. xx+554**

According to the dust jacket, Jonathan Conlin's *The Nation's Mantelpiece* is the first history of London's National Gallery. The truth of this claim rests in its being the first book which is exclusively dedicated to the history of the National Gallery and which records its past in (near) completeness: aspects of the history of the National Gallery have previously treated in numerous texts, from Carol Duncan's *Civilizing Rituals* (1995) to Christopher Whitehead's *The Public Art Museum in Nineteenth Century Britain: The Development of the National Gallery* (2005), and others besides.<sup>1</sup> Conlin's more comprehensive study builds to some extent on work by these and other authors, although it would be impossible to gauge the extent of the existing literature from Conlin's text or its scholarly apparatus. For while this is a work of serious scholarship, it is one which has deliberately detached itself from the academic practice of museum studies, and which disdains some of its methodologies - though not its concerns.

Conlin's book is written in the old fashioned but respectable idiom of the committed empirical historian, whose narrative presents the facts - and just the facts. The book is divided into two parts, the first of which is an historical narrative of the Gallery, from its 'origins' in

<sup>1</sup> Others that spring immediately to mind are C. Trodd, 'The Paths to the National Gallery', in P. Barlow and C. Trodd., eds., *Governing Cultures: Art Institutions in Victorian London* (Ashgate, 2000) and B. Taylor, *Art for the Nation* (Manchester University Press, 1999). I have not attempted an exhaustive list.

eighteenth-century political discourse to the admission charge debates of the 1970s - the 1980s and 1990s are dealt with as an epilogue to the book as a whole. It is a detailed account of the Gallery's administrative history in the context of Parliamentary politics, and a highly informative one at that: Conlin's knowledge and consideration of the European context, and also of the domestic political scene, is unusually strong, and he has had the energy and the resources to visit an unprecedented number of archival collections to research his account. The degree of detail and texture in his narrative is impressive, particularly since it covers such a long period of time.

The second part of the book, equally scrupulously researched and anchored in its archival sources, extends its account around major 'themes' in the Gallery's history: the author chooses to explore the Gallery as a site of public instruction; the history of its 'tastes' as a collector (I found this chapter particularly informative); and the development of its physical structure. Again, these are presented as chronological narratives and deal with their topic from the 1820s to the 1970s. These three themes will be familiar concerns for readers of this journal, and would suggest common ground between Conlin's approach and the practices of museum studies. But in fact this is where a difference in approach is most visible. While writers in museum studies tend to address issues of architecture, taste and the educative function of museums as part of their work in forming 'publics' or 'nations' or mediating other social and political relationships, Conlin regards these concerns as being imposed by others on the Gallery, rather than as a structuring feature of the institution itself. As he puts it: 'European galleries enjoyed the protection of the court... (whereas) The National Gallery...was...regularly dragged into broader debates on art, education and social policy' (p. 50). It is only because The National Gallery was 'dragged into' these debates that they appear in his book at all.

Conlin sees these issues as objects of study rather than the purpose of study: in one passage he writes that 'Foucauldian "museology" is part of the Gallery's history, and that is how it is considered here' (p. 212). This is about as overt a discussion of methodology as appears in the book: there is very little dialogue with other scholarly work in the text, or in the footnotes, so it is hard to pin down the substance of Conlin's critique. His approach is determinedly empirical, which is at once the book's strength and also its limitation. Conlin's text is so literal that it quashes any metaphorical reading of his sources, or sense of their native purposiveness: for example, he defends Charles Holmes (an early twentieth-century Director of the National Gallery) against the Bloomsbury accusation of aesthetic backwardness by referring the reader to Holmes's autobiographical account of being hemmed in by the demands of the Trustees (p. 340), where a more imaginative reading might question Holmes's self-justification. A 1970 documentary which explored various iterations of visual discourses of the female body is described as 'startlingly incoherent' (p. 266). The discussion of the importance of Gallery architecture is reduced to that of 'how the institution positions the viewer relative to the art on display' (p. 371), and does not open the question as to how the position in the Gallery might be related to positions in other political and social landscapes. In Conlin's universe, there are no discourses, only statements. The conclusions that he draws from them may be correct, but they extend only to their most literal sense.

Part of the reason for the book's lack of open discussion of methodology or contextual issues may arise from its desire to appeal to a general or lay reader. The book is published by Pallas Athene, which specializes in travel books and has a short list of art titles dominated by artist biographies. *The Nation's Mantelpiece* has been designed to be as attractive as possible, and is bursting with single and double page reproductions of work from the National Gallery's collection, as well as illustrations of every kind, one on nearly every page. In a book which runs to 450 pages of text plus appendices, this is lavish indeed: the illustrations alone will for many readers justify the purchase price. Conlin's style is lively and readable, he has an eye for a good anecdote (I particularly enjoyed his account of Bonnell Thornton's spoof 'Exhibition of the Society of Sign Painters' on page 16) and a barbed wit: I have no doubt that the book will attract an enviably wide readership from browsers in the Gallery shop.

**Louise J. Ravelli, *Museum Texts: Communication Frameworks*, London: Routledge, 2006, £18.99 paper, pp. xiii + 182**

This book is a welcome addition to the considerable literature on museum communication. It provides museum professionals with a framework, as the title indicates, with which to understand, study and operate the complexity of written language in museum practice.

Ravelli draws on Halliday's linguistic theory and its presentation of communication as a 'socially contextualized, semiotic resource ... which actively constructs meanings, rather than passively transmitting them'. Her main chapters examine museum communication through the organisational, interactional, and representational aspects of language. In an additional focus chapter, Ravelli also addresses the problem of making texts accessible and adjusting the level of complexity for different audiences. Ravelli makes these general linguistic and communication theories relevant to the museum context through examples of exhibition wall and object labels taken primarily from Australian museums but including museums in London, Washington D. C., Paris and Bilbao. In later chapters, the concept of text is extended to include exhibitions and museums themselves and Ravelli suggests how the integrated framework can provide a platform for further research.

Halliday's systemic-functional linguistics theory provides access to the function of language in communication and describe three ways in which language communicates. Ravelli renames his categories to make them 'more transparent in the museum context'. Halliday's term *ideational* becomes Ravelli's term *representational* which shows how language is used to portray, interpret and construct meaning. Halliday's *interpersonal* becomes *interactional*: this function shows language being used to relate, engage and evaluate; and *textual* becomes Ravelli's *organisational* which explores how language is used to organize, shape and connect. This renaming of established terms for a particular context could cause confusion, but with excellent examples, Ravelli does make the explanation of the terms more transparent and applicable to the museum.

In examining the organizational aspects of museum labels, Ravelli explains that this is both a resource with 'creative potential' to convey meaning and a requirement which must be used effectively. Aligning with Halliday's use of the term *textual* for this aspect of language, Ravelli analyzes the text itself, looking at the genre in some depth and how this affects communication. Genres such as reports, explanations, expositions and directives are examined and, supporting these conceptual aspects, there are excellent annotated examples of actual museum labels which also list text features, such as whose 'voice' is being heard. A resonant example of procedural/instructional text on responsible cat ownership from Australian Museum shows that, although this genre usually employ the imperative voice, commands can be disguised as statements. So 'Don't let your cats roam' becomes 'Keeping cats at home improves relations with the neighbours', which is, in effect, more persuasive and less authoritative. At the mid and micro levels of the text, Ravelli examines the pointers and signals such as the use of headings and the flow of information. This chapter concludes with a brief review of the contribution of typographic style to the feel and communication of the text.

In considering the interpersonal or interactive aspects of language, Ravelli enters the arena where '[M]useums, through their communicative practices, take up a 'speaking role', and enable roles to be taken up by others' Here, she examines the way in which language shapes these roles; for example, how grammatical forms such as declarative or interrogative affects the reader's response to the text. Particularly useful is her examination of agency in text ('The Thames Valley was scavenged for food by early humans.') compared to text without agency ('The Thames Valley was scavenged for food.'). Awareness of these aspects of language is particularly important for curators and exhibition designers writing on controversial historical and ethnographic subjects. A contemporary presentation of slavery, for example, can be either with or without agency and the audiences' response and understanding will be affected by either approach.

Ravelli finally considers how language is used representationally to build an understanding of the world. This is perhaps the most common use of language in museums since it is concerned with how events and information are portrayed. This aspect is considered from two viewpoints: the accuracy of the information and the choices made from among the many ways

in which it can be presented. The relationship between accuracy and choice of language is admirably shown using examples commonly seen in popular science books, such as 'Insects evolved a system of branching tubes known as tracheae.' This suggests that insects were involved in making decisions on their development. Greater accuracy is achieved by exchanging object and subject in the sentence; 'A system of branching tubes known as tracheae evolved in insects.' Using communication of technical and of taxonomical information, Ravelli shows that representation is an active process where the agency of the writer is possibly at its strongest.

While this comprehensive treatment of museum communication through language provides the framework it claims, there is one surprising omission. There is no consideration of the burgeoning use of print and digital media, such as catalogues and audio interpretation to support exhibitions, and interactive websites, podcasts and blogs to reach a broader audience. These relevant and influential forms of museum texts are not mentioned, nor included in any of the well-constructed examples. However, the complexity of these texts may require analytical approaches, such as content analysis, which go beyond a purely linguistic framework. It was not Ravelli's intention to offer a comprehensive review of all aspects of museum text, but her excellent analysis of wall and case labels encourages the hope that she will turn her attention to print and digital museum communication.

Ravelli shows that communication is about making meaning using all the texts available, including the museum location itself which she examines in a final chapter. Here, she explains the notion of an expanded 'text'; one that includes the exhibition, and the museum as itself as constructed by museum staff. This 'text' communicates and is 'read' either knowingly or unknowingly by visitors.

Ravelli understands that 'There is enormous potential, through language, for constructing, negotiating and adjusting ... dimensions of meaning.' In examining contemporary museum communication through this framework, she provides museum professionals with a means to examine and critique their writing. Museum practitioners can use the framework to identify their agency as producers and provide a better understanding of the process of communication through written language.

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**Chris Healy and Andrea Witcomb (eds), *South Pacific Museums: Experiments in Culture*, Monash: Monash University ePress\* & Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2006, hardback A\$39.95, pp232.**

*South Pacific Museums*, an edited book of papers, many of which were first presented at the symposium 'The Re-Birth of the Museum' at Melbourne University in 2004, provides an introduction to a number of innovative new and redeveloped institutions in the South Pacific, including the two largest New Zealand institutions, the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington, and the Auckland War Memorial Museum Tamaki Paenga Hira; four Australian institutions including the National Museum of Australia, the Melbourne Museum, the Australian Centre for the Moving Image and the Sydney Museum; and the Centre Culturel Tjibaou, New Caledonia. Two smaller recently developed institutions, the Gab Titui Cultural Centre in Torres Strait and the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, are also discussed. The book captures something of the spirit of the original symposium which was both stimulating and at times provocative.

This book is divided into three sections: New Museums, New Knowledges and New Experiences. The first section, New Museums, considers the role of the national museums of Australia, New Zealand, New Caledonia 'at particular historical moments under specific political pressures' (back cover). The authors of these substantial papers explore how the intersection of new museology and the cultural politics in each of these nation states is manifested in the architecture and the development of policy and practice in each of these national museums. In part two, New Knowledges, the authors discuss the development of museum practice within these newly created institutions. The range of institutions is broadened to include the Gab Titui

Cultural Centre, Thursday Island, Torres Strait, the Vanuatu Kaljoral Senta (Vanuatu Cultural Centre) and the Bunjilaka Aboriginal cultural centre and Keeping Place at the Melbourne Museum. The authors of these papers focus on the evolving practices surrounding the interpretation of indigenous cultures in the museum context. In part three, *New Experiences*, the authors 'explore the ways in which museums in the South Pacific are producing that ineffable cultural phenomenon – experience' (back cover).

The publication of this book is significant for its breadth of scholarship and its regional focus. When I began teaching Museum Studies in 1989 there were very few books or academic papers about museums in Australia, New Zealand or the South Pacific more generally. Creating sets of readings for Museum Studies students meant utilizing the rapidly growing number of museum publications through the 1990s which were being published in the Britain and North America. In the last ten years the increasing number of books and journal articles published by academics and museum based scholars in Australia and New Zealand and the rest of the South Pacific has meant that museum practitioners and students in a range of disciplines have had access to publications that address the evolving nature of museum practice in this region. *South Pacific Museums: Experiments in Culture* makes a significant contribution to this growing tradition of South Pacific museological publications.

As a consequence of the growing cross disciplinary academic interest in museums as sites of research in the postcolonial context there has been an increasing number of museum-related books written in Australia and New Zealand in the last decade, while at least ten doctoral theses on museums, on subjects as diverse as performance indicators, the nature of taonga Māori (Māori cultural treasures) and the establishment of a new national museum, have been written by New Zealand scholars over this time. *South Pacific Museums* should be read in association with other publications that have emerged from this region in recent years (including Paul Tapsell (2000, 2006), Ian Wedde (2005), Kylie Message (2006), Henare (2006), McCarthy (In Press), Chris Healy (1997), Andrea Witcomb (2003), Lissant Bolton, (2003)). The challenge for those of us in universities and major metropolitan museums throughout the South Pacific is to facilitate publication by museum practitioners and community-based cultural heritage workers (professional and voluntary) whose local conditions constrain their ability to contribute to this body of museological and heritage maintenance literature and also to ensure that such publication reflects the diversity of cultures, stakeholders and institutional and collection types present in our region. While this book focuses primarily on very well funded metropolitan institutions there are also some chapters devoted to institutions and heritage maintenance programmes that are at the margins of the museological mainstream. Their inclusion goes some way towards recognizing the diverse nature of museological innovation in our region.

It is particularly encouraging for museum practitioners in the South Pacific to see our institutions and museum practices positioned within local, regional and international contexts as the authors in this book have done. Perhaps, as a result of this new wave of publication we can anticipate the inclusion of South Pacific case studies in European and American anthologies that purport to provide international coverage of the museum literature?

This book includes five papers about New Zealand museums: three about Te Papa, one about Auckland Museum and one about museums as cultural guardians. This reflects the dominance of Te Papa in the New Zealand museum sector and in recent publication about New Zealand museums. The papers by Williams and Wedde are substantial additions to the rapidly growing literature on Te Papa. While Williams looks in from outside, providing crisp description and analysis, Wedde provides the insider perspective with an incisively critical eye. These papers provide an interesting contrast with the more corporate tone of Huhana Smith's short overview.

Rankin's paper on Auckland Museum provides a useful status report on that institution. It would have been useful to have included a contribution that considered the similarities and differences between Te Papa and Auckland Museum, since there has been overt competition between these two institutions following the opening of Te Papa. Do the two institutions have significantly different perspectives on the role of museums in New Zealand society? Do they have fundamentally different approaches to the interpretation of collections? Or is this competition merely about market share and share of government funding?

Brown's paper provides a useful introduction to issues surrounding museums as cultural guardians, the repatriation of cultural property and the impact of digital technologies in the reproduction of cultural treasures. In particular she draws our attention to the need to recognise that a range of perspectives exist about the resolution of these issues.

The parallels that have been identified by the editors in the social, academic and political responses to the development of new national museums in the South Pacific remind us of the common elements of our histories and our contemporary political realities. It is essential that we recognise and value the balance required between generic museum practices, recognizable throughout the world, and the importance of knowing how to engage effectively with communities in the local context.

In each of the new and redeveloped museums described and analysed in this book the authors have recognized the willingness of the planners to extend the parameters of museum practice and absorb and respond to the reactions of diverse publics. Whereas in the past many museums sought the comfort of a steady state, there is now much greater willingness to challenge orthodoxies and engage with the unpredictable oscillations of change and experimentation. One responsibility of scholars who observe the museum is to document and analyse these oscillations. It is therefore essential that the balance is maintained between the author as institutional celebrant and the author as critic and conscience of society.

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