

Chapter 1 Museum materialities: objects, sense and feeling

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The more I looked at them, the more I studied them, the more I appreciated their beauty over and above the information about their context. They were beautiful! The more I described them and handled them, the more emotionally attached to them I became.... My eyes opened.

Dr Ekpo Eyo, quoted in Vogel 1991: 195.

This book is about objects, people and the engagements between them. It deals with the fundamentals of human experience of objects, specifically in the context of public display such as museum and gallery spaces. The volume aims simultaneously to return a material culture focus to studies of museums, and a museum focus to studies of human-object engagements. It heralds the re-emergence of the object as a focus point for understanding museums and what they do, and a concurrent renewal of the museum as a research site of great potential in wider explorations of interactions between people and the rest of the material world.

The book seeks to contribute to both museum studies and material culture studies. Each of these fields of enquiry has a long history of multidisciplinary and interdisciplinarity – in keeping with which, the chapters here explore understandings of objects, sensory experience, embodiment and affect developed through work informed by such diverse disciplines as cultural studies, social anthropology, sociology, philosophy, media

studies, literary theory, psychology and neuroscience. The book's case studies are also rooted in contemporary museum practice, including exhibitions, education, outreach and artistic interventions, with authors variously focusing on displayed museum objects or art installations and interactions with them by museum visitors, curators, artists and researchers. Topics encountered include materiality and other perceptual and ontological qualities of objects themselves; embodied sensory and cognitive engagements with particular objects or object types in a museum or gallery setting; notions of aesthetics, affect and wellbeing in museum contexts; and creative and innovative artistic and museum practices that seek to illuminate or critique museum objects and interpretations. The book's authors include not only academic specialists in an extensive range of disciplines, but practising artists, curators and former curators and education officers too.

The attempt to focus on the material characteristics of objects and the ways in which those characteristics are sensorially experienced in museums, is an important part of the volume's rationale and a key focus of this first chapter. The 'material turn' (Edwards & Hart 2004: 3) in anthropology and related disciplines over the past twenty years has, rightly, led to concentration on the embeddedness of material objects in human social life and the meanings and values objects thereby acquire; yet arguably much of that 'materialist' analysis has simultaneously led us away from the reality, significance and very tangibility of material surfaces, encouraging us instead to leap straight into analysing the role of objects in social and cultural worlds, in the process missing out an examination of the physical actuality of objects and the sensory modalities through which we experience them. Despite, in other words, the renewed emphasis in much

scholarship on the material – and indeed on the ultimately unbreakable, Janus-faced, definitive links that exist between it and the social – a great deal of material culture studies actually pay surprising little attention to the ‘irreducible materiality of things’ *per se* (Pietz 1985, cited in Spyer 2006). Exceptions include work on sensory culture – the ‘sensual revolution’ (Howes 2005) – part of a move away from the structuralist and poststructuralist dominance of language and discourse and the later pre-eminence of vision and ocularity, in both method and critical analysis. Another important area has comprised anthropological studies of art and aesthetics, wherein ‘aesthetics’ is broadly conceived ‘as a field of discourse that operates generally in human cultural systems, since like cognitive processes it can be applied to all aspects of human action’, not only art *per se* (Morphy 1994: 9). These sensory and aesthetic foci inform the rationale for this volume. Chapters here explore some of the ways and contexts in which things and people mutually interact; in the process, the book raises questions about how objects carry meaning and feeling, the distinctions between objects and persons, particular qualities of the museum as a context for person-object engagements, and the active and embodied role of the museum visitor. Each author addresses aspects of engagements with and experiences of objects in museum or gallery spaces. Indeed, the exploration of subjective *experience* – physical, multisensory, aesthetic, emotional, immersive – of publically displayed objects, albeit from different perspectives, is the primary motif for the volume.

This book is not, however, simply an examination of strategies and technologies through which museums can seek to (i) maximize the sensory modalities visitors use to experience exhibitions and (ii) better enable audiences to interact with historical or other

representations in the gallery space. Museums, and museum studies, to an extent are already substantively and constructively engaged with such issues. As will become clearer below, these engagements are generally not, however, of the ‘materialist’ kind called for and represented here, focused primarily or initially at least on physical, material and bodily experience rather than leaping immediately beyond into the important worlds of social context, social effect and the social and economic aspects of production and consumption.

A truly materialist approach necessitates a subtle, but important, re-jigging of emphasis in many areas of study, especially museums, influenced in part by phenomenology. Such a shift is already established in material culture studies – especially those areas influenced by sensory culture studies (e.g. Csordas 1994, Howes 1991 and 2003, Edwards & Hart 2004, Jackson 1996, Stoller 1989) – and indeed the possibilities of such a truly material emphasis were highlighted some time ago (e.g. Miller 1998). Yet this is an approach has not yet significantly influenced contemporary studies of museum collections and practices, with a few exceptions (e.g. the anthropologically focused Ames 1992 and Clifford’s discussion of museums – and objects – as contact zones [1997], the more recent Edwards, Gosden and Phillips 2006a, and the more applied and less cross-cultural Pye 2007 and Chatterjee 2008). It is, as we shall see, a change of focus in which ‘the frame of museum contact’ (between cultures, periods, objects and persons) potentially ‘is recalibrated from museum space to museum object’ (Feldman 2006: 255; see especially Witcomb, and Wehner and Sear, this volume).

The museum object and materiality

There is a current, indeed dominant, view within museum studies and practice that the museum is about information and that the object is just a part – and indeed not always an essential part – of that informational culture. This approach has a long pedigree and has become an implicit part of discussions of the purpose and character of museums, be they characterized in relation to the by now extensive territory of *learning* in museums (c.f. Hooper-Greenhill 2007), social action (e.g. Gurian 2005, Sandell 2002), curation (e.g. Gathercole 1989) or to explorations of museums' historical development (e.g. in the context of exploring museum shifts from being 'object-centred' to 'experience-centred' [Parry 2007: 81]). It is a view in which objects have value and import only because of the cultural meanings which immediately overlie them and as a result of the real or imagined stories which they can be used to construct (e.g. Kavanagh 1989). The material object thus becomes part of an object-information package: indeed, in such a framework the Museum Object properly conceived is not the physical thing alone at all, but comprises the whole package – a composite in which the thing is but one element in 'a molecule of interconnecting [equally important] pieces of information' (Parry 2007: 80). In turn, from this perspective the package only has value as a tool in institutional practices which seek to create meanings with wider educational, social or political significance.

Museums' long-held aura as authoritative temples of enlightenment and culture rests upon the socially widespread belief that they hold in perpetuity, for the benefit of society, historically established data-sets comprised of objects and their documentation. Such repositories are available not only for repeated re-interpretation by scientists and art historians in different historical periods, but also as places of edification available to

the ordinary visitor. If we are lucky, the museum-goer may come away informed, provoked, moved or inspired by the objects they see – but how? Is this simply a result of contextual information or at least object-information packages, and/or of exhibition design and interpretation? Or is it also something to do with physical, real-time, sensory engagements – even those which may be imagined – with material things, and the emotional and other personal responses such interaction can produce (e.g. variously Edwards, Witcomb, Rees Leahy, Ting, Watson and Golding, this volume)? If so, in what ways do those engagements come about, and how (if at all) do they differ in museums from those in the everyday material world which museum visitors and the originating communities of museum objects ordinarily inhabit(ed) (c.f. Taylor, Watson, Golding and Scarborough, this volume)?

Too often the possibilities for physical and emotional interaction with objects in museums are assumed to be non-existent or restricted to an elitist, ‘pure, detached, aesthetic response’ (O’Neill 2006: 104), unless they are enabled or underpinned by (largely textual) information provided by the museum. But might this dichotomous pair of response-types in reality be a little more complex? And while information is vital, might the conventional *emphasis* on it rather than on object, occasionally actually inhibit the varied possibilities of engagement across a socially extensive range of visitors, including those who lack prior knowledge of the objects they are looking at? To ask these questions at all, risks accusations of elitism or essentialism – but my objective is to explore the nature of objects and engagements with them, as a contributory part of contemporary investigations into how museums can effectively and inclusively enable people to reflect creatively, sometimes transformatively, on

themselves and others, and to experience ‘beauty and knowledge as ends in themselves’ (O’Neill 2006: 111).

In the standard emphasis on meaning, important though it is and integral to it as the object may be, the object *per se* often seems lost: ‘Things dissolve into meanings’ (Hein 2006: 2). To say so does not imply support for a traditional, ‘essentialist’ model of the museum in which museums exist only to preserve, document and display *objects*, over a socially inclusive, ‘adaptive’ one in which museums exist primarily to serve *society* (O’Neill 2006: 97, my emphasis). Rather, I am seeking to shift the focus back to physical objects, but with a strong emphasis on their impacts – actual and potential – on real people (c.f. Edwards and Ting, this volume). There are, as we shall see throughout this book, so many possibilities in human-object engagements – yet such possibilities are, I suggest, sometimes severely curtailed by much of what a museum actually does. In particular, the museum’s preoccupation with information and the way it is juxtaposed with objects – the biographies of historical objects and the persons associated with them, the classification and scientific significance of natural history specimens, the demonstration by ethnographic artefacts of aspects of particular ways of life – immediately takes the museum visitor one step beyond the material, physical *thing* they see displayed before them, away from the emotional and other possibilities that may lie in their sensory interaction with it. Of course, up to a point this is only as it should be: precisely because of the manner in which institutions have selected, categorized and preserved not only objects but also information pertaining to them, museums have indeed developed as ‘storehouses of knowledge as well as storehouses of objects’ (Cannon-Brookes 1984: 116, quoted in Parry 2007: 80). These epistemological

functions and their political and moral ramifications are a central part of museums' historical and cultural rationale, and it is clear how important objects are in these processes (Bennett 1995, Knell 2007). But what are the experiential limitations of construing material objects as simply or principally elements in broader data-sets and disciplinary paradigms? What are the implications of this conventional, informational approach for how things in museums are perceived and interacted with by curators and visitors? What opportunities might it foreclose? What might a different, material, even emotional, approach to museum objects contribute to the potential of socially inclusive museums to enable rich, physical and emotional, personal experiences for all their visitors? What would it be like for visitors more often than not to be able not only to read a text panel that explains an historical story associated with an object, but also to experience an embodied engagement with that object and thus form their own ideas and/or a tangible, physical connection with those who made and used it in the past?

There are two separate points wrapped up together here, both of which are key messages. The first, ontological point is that through our sensory experience of them objects have some potential for value and significance in their own right, whether or not we are privy to any information concerning their purpose or past. The second, more practical point is that creative, materialist thinking about embodied and emotional engagements with objects can provide more powerful alternatives or additions to textual interpretation in enabling visitors to understand and empathize with the stories objects may represent. From both perspectives, engagements with material things should be the fundamental building block of the museum visitor's experience – yet so often, so unsatisfyingly, they are not (c.f. Wehner and Sear, this volume). A major reason for

this, is the view that the Museum Object is an object-information composite.

Conceiving and presenting objects as always incomplete, even useless, without the (textual) provision of associated data and interpretations, excludes the possibilities inherent in objects' material, sensorially perceptible characteristics – possibilities which appear *a posteriori* in conventional museum approaches to objects but which are in fact *a priori*, insofar as they are dependent primarily upon objects' pre-existing and inherent, real and physical properties rather than their social and epistemological associations (c.f. Saunderson *et al.*, this volume, for a psychological view). Others too have argued that museum conventions somehow demean the objects they contain. O'Neill, for example, claims that 'the origin of museums as temples to reason means that a key aim has been to tame objects and diminish their power' (O'Neill 2006: 101). However, he still regards the real properties of objects as 'obvious' and 'trivial', considering objects' power as invariably inseparable from their wider associations and meanings. The latter are, of course, crucial to the significance and possibilities of particular objects, but they are not all that may be so. It is not the purpose of this book to argue against the value of exploring, presenting and interpreting information and meanings – clearly, the very resonance and power of material objects in and outside museums is often, if not usually, inextricable from their history and links, as poignant examples such as the physical fragments of domestic life left behind in bombsites (Moshenska 2009), the dilapidated traces of the past evident in the hospitals for new immigrants on Ellis Island (Baker 2008), old articles of clothing deliberately concealed in buildings (Eastop 2006), and a number of the chapters in this book, movingly demonstrate (e.g. Wingfield, Hancock, Witcomb). However, in varying ways the chapters which follow also pay some long overdue attention to objects themselves, *qua* objects (though they may not articulate it

in this way – e.g. Taylor): to aspects of their apparently obvious and trivial material qualities and to the possibilities of people’s direct, embodied, emotional engagements with them.

Reconfiguring the museum object

It is through re-examining engagements with material things in museums, and through connecting museum studies with contemporary directions in material culture studies, that we can begin to reconfigure current notions of the Museum Object. Even if it were possible to disentangle objects from information and from the classificatory processes embedded in the museum enterprise, it could still be argued that museum objects never stand alone. The physical things in museums and galleries continue to comprise one element in a composite, but rather than being part of an object-information package they exist within an object-subject interaction. This is the interaction between inanimate, physical thing and conscious person, and constitutes the moments in which a material thing is perceived and sensorially experienced. It is only through this interaction that the thing becomes properly manifest to the viewer – in effect, it is only through the object-subject engagement that the material artefact or specimen becomes real at all. As Tilley has argued for non-museum contexts, the object’s materiality neither exists nor is perceived in isolation, but lies in the sum of a relationship between both the object’s qualities *and* the embodied way in which we experience them (2004; c.f. Strathern’s demonstration that persons and things alike are defined – indeed actualized – by relationships, or meaningful and active engagements, between them [1988, 1999]). At the same time, of course, the way in which we experience objects is shaped significantly, even if not exclusively, by the physical properties of the objects

themselves. As Gosden puts it, '[a] building, a pot or a metal ornament has certain characteristics of form which channel human action, provide a range of sensory experiences (but exclude others) and place obligations on us in the ways we relate to objects and other people through these objects' (2005: 196). It is in this sense that objects have effects and agency – a notion which, as Gosden also points out, allows us appropriately to attribute 'power or capacity to objects' but which does not equate with allotting them 'will or intention' too (ibid.). Furthermore, we are not just acted upon by the visually apparent material qualities of an individual object upon which we gaze in the museum on a rainy Sunday afternoon; long before that Sunday, we have existed in a world constructed of and around material things – a world which has, through our prolonged, enculturated exposure to it, shaped our perspectives and sensory responses. It is in that context that '[p]eople crystallize out in the interstices between objects, taking up the space allowed them by the object world, with [their] senses and emotions educated by the object world' (ibid.). Aspects of such object-person engagements can then be exploited by artists, curators and others in order to enhance the experience of objects in the museum or gallery (e.g. Pheby and Dorsett, this volume).

In sum, then, the Museum Object can be said to have two forms, both of which are composites rather than solely the physical thing itself. In the first form, as we have seen, the substantive object is simply one element in an informational fusion of data – some of which happen to be material and some ideational. In the second, the Museum Object consists of an enmeshing of the physical thing and human, sensory perceptions of it. The first of these denotations of 'Museum Object' is conventional in much of the extant museum studies literature, and in it the thing's material properties may or may not be of

particular significance; indeed, even if they are significant, they are frequently missed in the rush to identify and explicate the wider social and/or disciplinary meanings that the thing might be said to represent or connote. In my second definition of the Museum Object, however, physical and sensible properties are fundamental to its nature. And surely it is here, not in the object-information package, that we can find the Museum Object's uniqueness: many cultural institutions and practices derive from and incorporate important, intersecting, informational composites, but what is special about museums and related settings is the very *physicality* of their core building blocks. Quite what that physicality may imply, not only for and beyond objects as sets of information and meanings but also for the possibilities of the museum experience, has been surprisingly little explored.

Engaging with objects in museums

Indeed, much of what is interesting in the very materiality of objects is often ignored altogether. Even in non-museum-based writings which appear explicitly to call for a focus on materiality, real *stuff* and its three-dimensionality, weight, texture, surface temperature, smell, taste and spatio-temporal presence, is often, tantalizingly, almost entirely absent (e.g. Straw 1999). Usually missing too are the intimate details of people's physical, sensory – visual, haptic, aural, oral, gustatory, kinaesthetic – engagements with the physical things in question. Sometimes it is visuality rather than materiality which is privileged in existing analyses; at other times, rather than the thing itself its meanings, values and contexts predominate, despite being at least one layer removed from the material nature of the object *per se* (even if they are essential to

overall understanding and interpretation of it). As Glenn Willumson puts it in relation to one kind of object, photographs:

Too often this socio-cultural inscription [of the shifting meanings of the photo-object] suppresses the materiality of photographs as they are squeezed within the rhetorics of canonical histories of photography and their concomitant spaces of collection and exhibition. Historically, even when attention *is* paid to the materiality of photographs, as is the case with the fine art print by the master photographer, it is submerged beneath the discourse of aesthetics

(Willumson 2004: 62).

In short, it is about time we paid more attention to the very materiality of the material, beyond narrow (though still important) discussions of aesthetic and formal qualities of artworks or technical analyses of archaeological artefacts and natural history specimens (c.f. Pheby's chapter on art, this volume). This means not treating the material as 'merely something upon which meaning is inscribed – a world of surfaces on to which we project significance', a world where 'meaning is only ever "read into" things' (Graves-Brown 2000: 4). It means enriching an existing 'interpretive preoccupation with the symbolic, representational and communicative dimension' which has 'left some other more basic and direct links between cognition' – and, I would add, emotion and physical sensation – 'and material culture unexplored' (Malafouris 2008: 401). To make such a shift will inform not only a greater understanding of the ways in which people engage with the material world, but also the aesthetic and technical explorations and wider social and disciplinary meanings from which the physical object cannot

really, of course, ultimately be disentangled. Thus, for example, to pay proper attention to the materialized ‘performance of thumbing through the photographs, selecting and sequencing, and gluing them’ (Willumson 2004: 63) that is constituted by the construction and indeed later usage of a photograph album, is to investigate not only issues of photographic techniques and aesthetics, and matters of personal and social history (as museums may always have explored), but also to explore physical and emotional, intimate and tactile, object-subject engagements in the past and present (e.g., in this volume, the different layers of feeling represented in Nakashima Degarrod’s paintings and audience engagements with them; the material deteriorations and accompanying shifts in Stevenson’s palimpsests; and the changing physical, cognitive and affective interactions with the Sultanganj Buddha, described by Wingfield). Thinking in this way has been remarkably subordinate to wider questions of meaning and value not only in most of the resurgent studies of material culture (outside those influenced by sensory culture studies) that have flourished within anthropology and other disciplines over the past twenty years, but also in studies of and practices in, the museum – supposedly the material institution *par excellence*.

Self-evident materiality?

What, though, precisely is this ‘materiality’? In part at least connotes the form and the materials of which an object consists, together with the techniques by which it may have been made or formed, any additions or presentational conventions (such as a frame) which may have been added to it, and all and any traces of the passage of time and, especially, physical human interaction. Materiality implies too, though, engagement – be it cognitive, emotional or imaginative alone (e.g. Hancock, Nakashima Degarrod,

this volume) or physically, bodily participative as well (e.g. Wingfield, Pheby, Stevenson, Rees Leahy, Wehner and Sear, this volume). I have already suggested refiguring the Museum Object as an object-subject interaction, in which the object's physical characteristics will be among the most important factors, and I said that in a sense it is only as a result of the object-subject engagement that the material thing becomes real at all. To an extent, this echoes Pearce's argument that the

meaning of the object lies not wholly in the piece itself, nor wholly in its realization [by the viewer], but somewhere between the two. The object only takes on life or significance when the viewer carries out his realization, and this is dependent partly upon his disposition and experience, and partly upon the content of the object which works upon him

(1994b: 25).

Where Pearce uses 'meaning', we could substitute 'materiality'; where she describes an object taking 'on life or significance', we could use 'is materialized' instead. In other words, the sensible, physical characteristics of the thing trigger and thus contribute to the viewer's sensory perceptions, which in turn trigger emotional and cognitive associations, which *together* with the physical characteristics could be said to constitute the object's materiality. Materiality, then, is about not solely meaning nor simply physical form, but the dynamic interaction of both with our sensory experience. It is in this, that perhaps we can locate that which Pearce describes as 'the power of "the actual object"' (1994b: 25). Conceptualizing materiality as a summation of physical characteristics, sensory experience and meaning in this way, firmly shifts attention back

towards the object, the thing before us. This is no mere theoretical re-emphasis or slight shift in academic terminology. Rather, it reminds us of the basic truth that the material properties of the thing itself are *essential* to how our bodily senses detect it and thus to how we experience and formulate ideas about it. This is the ‘argument that a deep mutuality exists between our sensory apparatus and material things’ (Edwards, Gosden and Phillips 2006b: 5). Is the self-evidence of this perhaps one reason why so many studies of material culture, and especially of museums, seem to ignore it? Self-evidence, of course, does not equate to simplicity and an absence of a need for explanation. Neither, as several chapters in this volume indicate, does it imply that materiality is straightforward or static (e.g. Pheby, Stevenson, Scarborough).

Museum processes and sensory and emotional experience

This notion of materiality reminds us that before we formulate any ideas at all we can, if permitted to do so, consciously experience more fundamental sensory and emotional responses to objects. These responses can sometimes be powerful, even transformative, as Greenblatt’s notion of wonder implies (1991; see also De Bolla 2001). The physical senses and the emotions are two different kinds of ‘feelings’ which are intrinsically linked – particularly so in the notion of ‘affect’, which some writers have distinguished from ‘emotion’ on the grounds of the intertwined physiological basis and social shaping of affect, thus its inextricability from the materiality of socially constructed body (Tomkins 1962-1992, Gibbs 2002). Emotion, affect and sensation all form a significant part of the experiences of objects discussed in this book. They do not have the prerequisite of information and are responses which are arguably possible for all. Yet museums’ preference for the informational over the material, and for learning over

personal experience more broadly and fundamentally conceived, may risk the production of displays which inhibit and even preclude such affective responses. Inevitably, the object-information package can still have the power to move us, but most often it does so almost entirely through textually-provided meaning, and threatens to foreclose a more basic, but no less potent, bodily and emotional response to the material itself (c.f. Greenblatt's view of what museums have lost in evolving from temples of wonder to temples of resonance, 1991).

Of course, however museums choose to present objects and object-information packages, it is inherent in the very nature of the museal process that the material things museums display are almost always distanced from the viewer in ways that do not replicate human relationships with things in the real world outside (though different forms of interpretation, especially artistic interventions, can problematise this – e.g. Nakashima Degarrod and Dorsett, this volume). The issue of *selection* is also key to what museums do – even a lump of moon rock can be turned ‘into an object and a museum piece’ by the crucial idea ... of selection’ (Pearce 1994a: 10). In addition, museums are ocularcentric, a way of seeing in their own right (c.f. Alpers 1991, Crimp 1993), an extreme version of the broader dominance of the visual in the world – especially the modern Western world (c.f. Levin 1993, Crary 2000). It has not always been so, as a number of scholars have pointed out (see especially Classen 2005, Classen and Howes 2006). Museums as ‘odd and inaccessible places ... that neither partake in life, nor in which life partakes’ (Zimmer & Jeffries 2007: 3) are products of Western modernity that postdate earlier Wunderkammern and cabinets of curiosities that enabled a sense of wonder through a full, active, sensory engagement with objects. Nonetheless,

and initiatives to enable, for example, handling of museum objects notwithstanding (c.f. Pye 2007, Chatterjee 2008), the processes and impacts of today's display practices are overwhelmingly ocularcentric. Museum displays are an element of visual culture, and by default the museum is, for the visiting public, primarily a visual, rather than a material, technology. Indeed, this visual emphasis can be extended into the idea of museums as spectacle, peddling 'illusion and the suspension of disbelief' (Parry 2007: 76).

Museums' privileging of the visual does not allow the viewer to replicate their real-life, synchronous and direct use of several senses in engagements with the physical world of which they are a part (though c.f. Rees Leahy, this volume). Looking at an object in a gallery, one is, for example, usually prevented from also touching, smelling, hearing or tasting it (though of course there may also be social prohibitions against such actions in other spheres of life, too – I would not, for example, lick an oil painting hanging in a friend's house any more than I would one in a gallery). Our ability to form an impression of the item's material characteristics beyond gross form, size, colour, reflectiveness and so on, is significantly compromised in the museum. It would only be by holding the bronze sculpture in my hands, maybe raising it to touch my cheek, and perhaps hearing the sound of my fingernails against the metal, that I could fully appreciate its coldness, heaviness, density, musicality and smoothness of surface. Equally, it would only be by holding a hand-woven textile, turning it around, feeling the extra thickness of the supplementary weft patterning in a different fibre, that I could properly experience not only the tangible remains of the performative act by which a decorative technique was materialized, but also the warmth it would lend to the wearer.¹

Yet I can do none of these things in the exhibition space: I cannot feel the undulations and grooves of hand-adzed wood, or the smoothness of the cowrie shells sewn in regular lines onto a piece of cloth and the way they make the whole object ripple rhythmically as you move it. My contacts with conventionally displayed objects are devoid of the familiarity with which others may have engaged with those things in the past. The dominant visual paradigm, in other words, brings about increased distance and reduced intimacy (Zimmer and Jeffries 2007: 5).²

I can, though, imagine some of these things. That is, I may add other sensory elements to the visual even if they have to be imagined, intuited or remembered. An object's properties, such as its colour and its texture, are internally related, cannot ultimately be separated, and together make the object what it is, just as intersecting stimuli and responses across the sensory range together make my experience what it is (c.f. Deleuze and Guattari 1983; Merleau-Ponty 1992, Tilley 2004, Paterson 2007). Equally related and ultimately inseparable, are the senses that each observer's body utilizes in experiencing the object (for an experimental psychologist's overview of scientific research into the integration of sensory modalities, see Spence 2007; see also Saunderson *et al.*, this volume). In the museum, I might involuntarily add some sensory dimensions further to the visual, automatically suffusing my sight experience of an oil painting with an intuited and probably subconscious sense of the roughness of its visually evident three-dimensional surface, for example.³ I might also use imagination and indeed empathy (c.f. Prown 1994: 136; Edwards, Witcomb, Hancock, Nakshima Degarrod, Wehner and Sear, this volume) deliberately, in order actively and consciously to increase my sensory engagement with both the object and, in the case of a painting or

photograph perhaps, the scene it may depict (I may too imagine ‘ghosts’ of people associated with objects – e.g. Hancock, Nakashima Degarrod and Dorsett, this volume). But, prevented from using those other sensory modalities directly, I might also get things ‘wrong’ – as Celia Fiennes noted in 1702, recording her surprise that a cane in the Ashmolean collections which looked heavy, was actually so much lighter than expected when, as was permitted in those days, she picked it up (1949: 33, quoted in Classen and Howes 2006: 201).

The nature of the museum does not contradict the phenomenologically-informed notion that ‘we work from within the world, not upon it’ (Ingold 2000: 68, see also Heidegger 1962; c.f. Bourdieu’s notion of ‘body hexis’, 1977), although it does restrict us more than does the world outside. We encounter ourselves, our environment, and the other people and things that move within and constitute part of that environment, through our bodies, whether in the museum or not. Our senses, spatial locations and movements determine how we experience and interpret the world of which we are a part, and in turn those spatial aspects and our senses themselves are culturally constituted: rather than simply biologically determined givens, they fluctuate not just within our individual mental realms but also across time, places and cultures (e.g. Howes 2005). This notion of contingent, embodied, sensory experience involves conceiving of human cognition, consciousness and feeling as ‘extended, distributed, enactive and mediated’ within the material world – including that of museums – rather than simply ‘within the skull’ (Malafouris & Renfrew 2008: 382, 384). The role of our senses in experiencing and interpreting the world is an important aspect of the wider role played by our bodies. Too often we forget that we live *in* the world and too often we interpret that world – whether

subconsciously in the course of our individual everyday lives, or whether deliberately as part of interpretive endeavour in museums, heritage sites, journalism, academia or wherever – not as we should, from *within* it, but as if we were outside it, disembodied, looking on.

Really engaging with objects in museums is on one level clearly not a rare occurrence at all: curators engage with the material object at the moment of acquisition, during documentation and beyond; geologists and other natural scientists, for example, intently study the material characteristics of the things before them and seek to comprehend each tiny datum embodied in the objects' very physicality. However, they tend not to do so in an in-depth, critical way that focuses explicitly on the material object and how an embodied subject – such as a museum visitor – might engage sensorially with it.

Furthermore, engagement with the physical, material aspects of the object is most often neither obvious nor widely sensorially accessible in museum displays. In visual display, for example, where touch is impossible, something vital is lost: '[w]hile the visual provides only distant access to textured surfaces, such as woven structures, the haptic defines the affective charge – the felt dimensionality of the spatial content' (Zimmer and Jeffries 2007: 5; see also Diacon 2006). To permit rich engagement with objects in museums in a material and properly embodied way, rather than as a purely visual exercise, would, as Candlin points out, necessitate 'a paradigm shift' via which museum staff would recognize 'that sight is not the sole route to aesthetic experience and knowledge' (2007: 103). It would entail questioning how a predominantly visual paradigm can enable us fully to experience the objects' physical characteristics. How can it enable us really to imagine and empathize with the makers and previous owners

of the objects, ‘the feelings of those who originally held the objects, cherished them, collected them, possessed them?’ (Greenblatt 1991: 45). How far do conventional approaches to the public display of objects optimize our imagination, beyond the visually apparent, of material and sensory qualities? To what extent do such approaches enable our own, performative engagements with real, three-dimensional things and encourage subsequent empathetic responses to other people’s habitual interactions with those objects in the past? How many of the physical traces, indeed scars, of those past interactions are evident to the contemporary viewer (for an exploration of this in relation to trying to display past acts of performance art, see Scarborough, this volume; for an artistic interpretation of the traces of past interactions with visually represented objects [in this case, shrines] rather than the objects themselves, see Nakashima Degarrod)?

Although museums remain essentially visual modes of experience, many institutions have explored wider sensory approaches to their objects, of course. Education departments’ use of handling collections has long demonstrated the value of physically interacting with ‘the real thing’, as have more recent initiatives such as the Victoria and Albert Museum’s *Touch Me* exhibition (2005).⁴ Museums have also used touch in reminiscence and therapeutic work (e.g. Arigho 2008, Jacques 2007, Noble and Chatterjee 2008, O’Sullivan 2008, Phillips 2008). New, digital, touch technologies that permit the user to ‘feel’ a distant or fragile object are being explored too, for example at the Fisher Gallery at the University of Southern California (McLaughlin *et al.* 2002, cited in Zimmer and Jeffries 2007; see also Geary 2007, Onol 2008, Prytherch and

Jefsioutine 2007). All such projects acknowledge the value of sensory modalities beyond the visual alone, particularly that of touch – a physical engagement that

provides the satisfaction of a corporeal encounter. By touching a collected object the hand of a visitor also encounters the traces of the hand of the object's creator and former owners. One seems to feel what others have felt and bodies seem to be lined to bodies through the medium of the materiality of the object they have shared

(Classen and Howes 2006: 202).

Nonetheless, museums remain essentially visual, don't-touch places. Their journey into modernity to become and remain so, necessitated that museum visitors accept several related ideas, including 'that they were less important than the exhibits on display and thus must behave deferentially towards them ... that to touch museum pieces was disrespectful, dirty and damaging ... and that touch had no cognitive or aesthetic uses and thus was of no value in the museum' (Classen 2005: 282). In part, of course, the establishment of such a paradigm is related to, and certainly justified by, the importance of conservation. Touch is particularly damaging, and even for those professionally permitted to handle objects is often not supposed to happen without the material barrier of gloves. Conservators themselves have been described as 'the ultimate border guards ... uniquely possessed of the right to change the material states of objects through touching, cleaning, dismembering, fumigating, freezing, and other activities' (Edwards, Gosden and Phillips 2006b: 20). This contemporary emphasis on preserving the object is, as Classen and Howes observe,

‘the expression of a changing ideological and sensory model according to which preserving artifacts for future view is more important than physically interacting with them in the present’ (2006: 216: c.f. Classen 2005). In contrast, Ouzman argues, could we not foreground the fact that material objects are perpetually ‘in states of transformation, some of which may be called “decay”’, in order to enable greater understandings of those objects and their cultural and temporal specificities (2006: 270)?

None of this, of course, renders the visual unimportant; neither does it substantiate touch as the only other sensory modality of significance. It does, however, emphasize that the visual needs to be thought of in intimate relationship to the other senses, and vice versa (Taussig 1993: 26). In reality, all the senses are intertwined, and all objects are experienced multisensorially (as Edwards demonstrates in this volume). The challenge for museums, as for philosophy and psychology, ‘is not to replace the visual by the tactile, but to explore the complexity of the senses in aesthetic experience’ (Fisher 1997: 11, cited in Paterson 2007: 86), and to reflect upon how the world touches us, not just vice versa (c.f. Berenson 1909, Paterson 2007). This means accepting too that while almost all objects presented without information are mute in terms of their earlier contexts and context-dependent meanings, we the observer can still have a response to their sensible attributes. Indeed, some objects may still ‘say’ much to us even when we are utterly ignorant of their original cultural, historical or other contexts – even when we have no idea what the thing actually *is*; in such a situation, the relationship between us and the object is silent only in respect of one (admittedly very important) set of potential meanings and values of the object, not necessarily all of

them. Our responses are subjective, dependent on all sorts of things ranging from the object's setting when we experience it to our own background, knowledge and culturally and historically constructed ways of seeing and of integrating imagined other sensory qualities with the visual.

Subject-object distinctions

Integrating the visual with other sensory modalities and acknowledging the subjectivity of experience, is potentially still limited as a new approach – at least, it is if it assumes a fundamental duality or distinction between person and object and emphasizes the influence of human subjectivity disproportionately to the effects of object's physical characteristics. From a more phenomenological perspective, the interesting part is the process of perception lying *between* oneself and the object; it bridges object and person, causing them, at the moment of perception and interpretation of the object, to exist only in relation to each other. In this view, it matters not that you experience the same object differently from someone else – both of you are still having an embodied, sensorially engaged experience of the object that, certainly, is partly determined by your own characteristics, but is equally dependent upon the object itself: your response would not be what it was if the object were not what it is. Subjectivity of response, and material qualities, are intertwined with each other, and *both* (together of course with the framework within which you see the object) determine the experience and interpretation of objects. To take the example of historical artefacts, Prown defines them as 'the only class of historical events that occurred in the past but survive into the present', arguing that as materialized events they permit past events to 'be re-experienced' (1993: 2-3). But is/was the artefact really the 'event'? Or is the event now the object-subject

engagement, the moment in which the physical thing and its sensory attributes are experienced by the perceiving person? What matters, in other words, is the way in which things instigate or trigger a particular set of perceptions and response in the human subject – a repeated set of events perpetually open to change, including once something as become a museum object. At the same time, it is not the person's subjective experience and response alone that matters, either. The specific, objective attributes of a particular object also play a part. As a result, neither object nor subject has the last or only word; rather, it is in their mutual intersection that sensory responses and subsequent ideas are generated (c.f. John Dewey's notions of transactional experience, in which the object is as much a part of the experience as the subject [1937]). It is, in other words, in the space in between object and subject, the space in which they meet, that the two impact upon – indeed form – each other, in what Ting (this volume) describes as the object-human manifold.

Undoing Cartesian mental/material distinctions, and re-emphasizing the mutual embeddedness of sensory modalities, sensible material qualities and the personal influences individual perceiving subjects bring to bear, has the potential to inform museum practice in creative ways (e.g. Golding, Dorsett, Wehner and Sear, Watson, this volume). Seeing the things that matter as whole subject-object engagements, rather than thinking of objects as simply materialized human action or natural form rendered meaningless without the ample provision of textual explanation, constitutes not just a theoretical position but a real opportunity. New approaches to museum interpretation may exist in simultaneously rejecting the modernist view that it is only the human imposition of meaning onto objects that renders them meaningful in the first place, and

accepting that while objects are not meaningful in themselves it is through their involvement in the material world and their interactions with each other, that both objects and persons influence and give meaning to each other (Gell 1998, Gosden 2005).

This book is not intended as a manifesto for the fetishistic setting apart of objects: the social reality of objects, their inextricability from human social life, their *engagement* (c.f. Taylor, this volume), is well established across a range of academic and museum disciplines. However, the sociability of material things is still largely discussed without much attention being paid to the details of their physical realities, in museum contexts or elsewhere. To see objects not as background scenery to the drama of human life but as actors within it, bridging the realms of the physical, the social and the mental, has been an important part of the recent turn towards the material (c.f. Miller 1987). Can we now reconsider those realms – even if only for heuristic purposes – as not being separate at all, or argue that the engagements which matter happen not in objects, nor in minds nor social relationships but, physically as well as emotionally and cognitively, in the spaces in between all three?⁵ This is not to contradict arguments that have been advanced over the past twenty years: it would difficult to deny that objects can bring about particular social effects (Gell 1998) or that they have biographies and, in a sense, social lives of their own (Appadurai 1986; Gosden & Marshall 1999). Indeed, many of the chapters in this book incorporate and are informed by such perspectives. But to focus within this on the material and the sensual aspects of objects in social life, and on their emotional and physical, as well as social, effects is simply to attempt to return

some deserved attention to the object and human engagement with it – something which all chapters in this book, in different ways, do.

This book thus seeks to contribute significantly to a turn to the material within the specific context of the museum or gallery. The book is bounded by a foreword (Pearce) and afterword (Morphy) by long-standing scholars in the fields of museum material culture studies and anthropological material culture studies. Its central part is then divided into three parts – *Objects*, *Engagements* and *Interpretations* – with the aim of breaking down their more conventional elision (although in practice, of course, almost all chapters address some elements of two or three of these ultimately intersecting areas). The first part of the book, *Objects*, includes chapters which discuss a particular category of objects and their qualities (Edwards on photographs), specific objects in two different museums (Witcomb and Wingfield), materiality and immateriality in art practice and audience participation (Pheby), and a scientific examination of the visual perception of art objects (Saunderson *et al.*). The book's second part, *Engagements*, is concerned with characteristics and implications of engagements with objects by people in and through museums and galleries. Chapters cover such topics as the artistic and subsequent manipulation of materiality (Stevenson), memory and emotion (Hancock), visitors' aesthetic responses to images of beauty and violence (Nakashima Degarrod), constructing museum exhibitions so as to enable visitors to analogize between displayed and personal objects and experience (Wehner and Sear), encounter and enthrallment in the art museum (Rees Leahy) and affect and authenticity in the perception of art (Taylor). The final part of the book, *Interpretations*, addresses the implications of object qualities and of sensory and emotional engagements with them for various interpretive

strategies in museum and gallery spaces. It covers attempts to enhance the multi-sensory – indeed, sensuous – experience of objects’ formal qualities (Ting), uses of sound, light, film and the exploitation of sensory experience in representing history (Watson), working with senses and emotions in educational programming with disadvantaged school groups (Golding), artistic intervention as interpretation (Dorsett) and issues of authenticity, movement and absence in trying to exhibit performance art – or, at least, its traces (Scarborough). Overall, the questions raised in this volume about the nature of the object itself and our experiences of it in public institutions of display, are basic and fundamental in thinking about objects in museums and galleries – yet together they constitute far from an established or orthodox approach.

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Notes

¹ Interestingly, Marinetti, in his 1921 *Manifesto of Tactilism*, also used the example of woven textiles (cited in Zimmer and Jeffries 2007: 5). Riegl was another thinker in this area who was particularly immersed in textile objects. Current research by Zimmer and Jeffries (2007) also focuses on textiles.

² Distance of a physical and emotional kind, and the detached and critical contemplation it facilitates, is of course a fundamental aspect of the traditional Western mode of viewing art. It is, however, a model which tends to disallow the impact of bodily and emotional engagement – something which van de Vall interestingly reflects back upon in the light of the aesthetic experience of new media art and other contemporary visual artworks (2008).

³ C.f. Durand's development (1995) of Riegl's notion of the 'optical-haptic' (1893), discussed by Edwards & Hart (2004: 9) as an example of how 'when we look at photographs we often move from pure opticality to the optical-tactile as our attention moves from a thing being represented to an awareness of the texture of that thing (for example, the grain of skin or the weave of foliage), until a point is reached where we identify this with the very texture of the photograph itself'.

⁴ http://www.vam.ac.uk/vastatic/microsites/1376_touch_me/ (accessed 2 March 2009).

⁵ Of course one important further area for consideration, in relation to the engagements between people and objects, is the very space, including the architecture of the building, within which they happen. This is an area well set up in Macleod 2005, and considered in relation to architecture more generally by authors such as Pallasmaa (2005).

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