

Philosophy and the museum: An introduction to the special issue

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Abstract

This paper introduces the special issue by explaining the context of the conference at which the papers were originally presented, suggesting some ways of thinking about the intersection of philosophy and museums, and briefly introducing each paper in the collection. In the main body of the paper I look at a recent trend in museum interpretation and argue that it can be understood in terms of a definition of the museum as a space of representation and space of difference. I go on to suggest that this definition allows us to think of the museum as liberating us from certain ways of thinking. The paper as a whole suggests that philosophy can help us to think about museums, and that museums can contribute to philosophical thinking. © 2006 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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How can philosophy help us to think about museums, and how can museums contribute to philosophical thinking? In the wealth of theoretical material published on museums, few philosophers have addressed the museum and few museum studies researchers have thought about the museum philosophically. While the museum's Enlightenment origins have been extensively analyzed and critiqued, and while it is standard practice to refer to the 'Enlightenment philosophy' of the universal museum, little has been written on how the development of the museum reflected and influenced the metaphysical and epistemological concerns of the eighteenth century. Similarly, while new museums are called 'postmodernist' based on their promotion of cultural pluralism and engagement in critical self-reflection, such labelling lacks an analysis of whether and how philosophical postmodernism operates in the museum. And while questions of deaccessioning and repatriation of objects are cast as 'ethical' problems, such studies have not generally been founded on a coherent programme of

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philosophical ethics or a demonstration that such a programme is appropriate to museums. Most fundamentally, as Mark O'Neill emphasizes in this issue, the nature and purpose of the museum have never been adequately or coherently defined. The lack of philosophical engagement where that engagement would be useful leads to problems for theoreticians and practitioners alike. Alongside the history of the museum lies a history of philosophies of space and time, interpretation and value, nature and art, and subject and object that have affected and been affected by the museum's development, and that can help us to think about the nature, purpose, and potential of the museum.

It was the purpose of a one-day conference held at the University of Dundee in May 2005 to bring together researchers and practitioners to discuss the relations between philosophy and museums. Entitled *Thinking about Museums: Objects of Desire and the Concept of Collecting*, and organized by the Departments of Philosophy and Museum Services at the University of Dundee, the conference drew an audience of around 75 people working in universities, museums, and the culture and heritage sectors, and featured a balance of speakers from philosophy and museum backgrounds. The papers, carefully selected from a wide range of submissions, focused on a number of common themes, including the definition and purpose of the museum, the Enlightenment origins of the 'universal' museum, representation and inclusiveness, the museum as a site of interaction, and the question of time. This issue presents a selection of papers based on those given at the conference. Rather than attempting to present a comprehensive look at topics in 'philosophy and museums', the issue offers a number of perspectives on a 'slice' of interrelated themes.

In the remainder of this introduction, I introduce some of the themes taken up by the contributors to the issue: the definition of the museum, the museum as an Enlightenment space, and the museum as a space of difference. I look briefly at a recent trend in museum interpretation and argue that it can be understood in terms of a definition of the museum as an Enlightenment space of representation, and show how philosophy helps us to arrive at this definition. I then suggest that as a space of representation, the museum is also a 'postmodern' space of difference that can potentially liberate us from certain ways of thinking. It is not only the case that philosophy can help us to think about museums, but also that museums can contribute to philosophical thinking.

There is a recent trend in museums towards minimal interpretation of objects or, in some cases, the total absence of interpretation. No doubt this happens for different reasons in different contexts. But there are two reasons that seem particularly prevalent: there is a renewed desire on the part of museums to inspire a sense of wonder in the visitor, and it is increasingly seen as important to encourage visitors' plural and diverse responses to objects. These two reasons are linked: wonder, even if it is shared by a group of people, is a personal response to objects, so encouraging wonder, in general, will theoretically allow for the diversity of individual response. Minimal interpretation suits both these aims and seems to serve the purposes of the 'learning' agenda by emphasizing personal routes to thinking about museum objects over authoritative curatorial accounts of the objects. In taking away the text and the curatorial voice, museums leave visitors alone with the objects, allowing them to have a supposedly unmediated encounter that can inspire feelings of awe, personal reflection and multiple interpretations.

The problem with this approach is that it can have the opposite effect to the one intended: the lack of interpretation can leave visitors frustrated at the lack of authoritative information about the objects, or bewildered about what they are supposed to learn from the display. Three examples of the trend for minimal interpretation suggest the complexity of this issue.

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