

Andrea Witcomb. *Re-Imagining the Museum: Beyond the Mausoleum.* London and New York: Routledge, 2003. 208 pp. \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-22099-6.



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Andrea Witcomb's book makes a fresh and valuable contribution to current museum-studies literature. The book's strength is threefold. It lies in Witcomb's ability firstly to engage with current theoretical debates in the light of her own curatorial experiences, secondly to relate this to her own research within museums, and thirdly to present her findings in an extremely lucid and cogent fashion.

The book is structured into six sections each of which addresses a different aspect of contemporary museums and recent changes in museum practice. At the same time, one of Witcomb's arguments is that these apparently recent changes are often overstated and that, in fact, many current developments have considerable precedent in museum history.

Section one examines theories of power and meaning developed within cultural studies and how they have been applied to museums while also providing a "longer history of relationships between leisure, tourism, urbanity, and museums" (p. 4). Section two looks at maritime museums in the context of post-industrialization and economic regeneration using leisure and tourism. Section three explores how and why museums are experiencing fundamental changes to their curatorial practices and research activities and concludes by providing practical suggestions for future museum management.

Section four attempts to tease out the complexities of relationships between museums and communities and, in the process, problematizes the notion of community itself. It does this through a discussion of two of Witcomb's own professional experiences; the first, as curator of a community access gallery in a museum in Western Australia and the second, as a museum consultant to a local museum staffed by volunteers. Continuing the theme of the changing museum, section five explores how museums and audiences have been affected by new electronic technologies. Chapter six extends this discussion by linking debates about multimedia to earlier museum debates surrounding the introduction of interactives. This last chapter, once again takes issue with received wisdom; in this case, Witcomb disputes the assumption that interactivity will necessarily lead to a "more democratic, open relationship between the museum and its audiences" (p. 7).

In all six chapters, Witcomb situates her argument within the context of current museological theory and uses her case studies to engage with various theoretical positions. Her desire to challenge assumptions and test theoretical models against practical scenarios makes for extremely interesting and thought-provoking reading. Reading her book prompted me to revisit a number of issues at the heart of new museological thinking.

The book works especially well where she includes direct and detailed evidence of her work with museum volunteers and community members (as in chapter four), or in her recounting of internal museum processes and discussions with museum professionals (as in chapter three). This kind of “view from the inside” is fairly rare in museum studies literature because of the obvious difficulties of gaining access, protecting confidentiality, or because of concerns over a museum’s public profile. However, two other accounts spring to mind as useful comparisons: Sharon Macdonald’s investigation of the restructuring and representation of the Science Museum in London and James Clifford’s now seminal account of the power relations present in interactions between indigenous groups and museum curators at the Portland Museum of Art.[1] All three cases clearly demonstrate the complexity of museums as sites of representation and spaces of public memory and, at the same time, as organizations with very practical concerns relating to staffing and management structures. In this respect, Witcomb’s work is a welcome addition to our understanding of the specificity of museums as both cultural phenomena and as objects of cultural analysis.

The book’s engagement with specific theoretical debates within current museum studies literature deserves further mention. As already indicated, Witcomb uses her case studies as a means of testing various theoretical approaches. In particular, she addresses the Foucauldian governmental approach which has been so influential in museum-studies literature since the 1990s.[2] In chapter four, for example, she explicitly tests Tony Bennett’s argument that contemporary museums continue to be enlisted by governments to deliver their cultural policy initiatives, in this case, multiculturalism.[3] She also examines his discussion of the ways in which museums produce a notion of community rather than simply represent it. Witcomb sets this argument against her two experiences of working with community groups and, in particular, as a museum consultant working with the volunteer staff of a local museum to help them update their displays and rethink how they were using their collection. Witcomb’s new museological ideas included the introduction of issues of representation and multiculturalism into the museum. However, she found that the group of volunteer staff was far less docile and amenable to such ideas than anticipated. Instead, the “community” was internally divided and responded in a much more varied and non-compliant manner, to the extent that angry members of the group eventually destroyed the museum displays. Their responses, she concludes, were informed by

group allegiances and divisions within the volunteer cohort which linked to their own individual sense of identity, their social status, their educational backgrounds, their geographical affinities and their own political views on the issue of multiculturalism in contemporary Australia.

In this respect, she argues against what she sees as Bennett’s desire to deconstruct an often romanticized binary opposition of community as opposed to government because she suggests that this has led him to reduce communities to being an effect of government. On the contrary, she argues that those she calls “government technicians”—i.e. cultural policy makers and museum workers—are not adequately recognizing disparities between governments and communities: “[t]he problem here is not the assumption of an opposition between community and government but precisely the opposite—an assumption that they are one and the same” (p. 100). While not at all suggesting that this is a reason to abandon initiatives such as cultural diversity, Witcomb argues that there needs to be more open acknowledgement and discussion of the different values and attitudes of the various “interpretive communities” involved in the cultural sphere. This is crucial, she suggests, if genuine progress is to be made with new museological agendas.

To be fair, Tony Bennett does state in *Culture: a Reformer’s Science* that his use of Foucault and the concept of governmentality is intended to be seen in the context of the production and deployment of museum discourses rather than their consumption by audiences.[4] However, on the basis of her experiences, Witcomb prefers to use James Clifford’s theoretical model of the museum as “contact zone” (a term borrowed from Mary Louise Pratt).[5] She writes:

“The consequence of this approach is that Clifford is able to analyse specific instances of relations between museums and communities as cross-cultural encounters in which the museum, as much as the community, needs to make adjustments. Rather than understanding the museum as a static, monolithic institution at the centre of power, it is read as an unstable institution attempting to come to grips with the effects of the colonial encounter, an attempt which has both positive and negative affects [sic] on those involved” (p. 89).

Witcomb finds particular merit in Clifford’s account, because he recognizes that the museum itself is a community with its own conventions and cultural values (pp. 79-101). Like Witcomb, Clifford’s account also stresses the diversity of museums and how they are changing

continually in response to their own changing contexts—colonial, postcolonial, modern, postmodern, public, commercial, and so on.

Overall, Witcomb is actively seeking to make a contribution to the theoretical conceptualization of museums but she does have another agenda which she reveals in the conclusion. Here she discusses what she perceives to be a gap of understanding between museum practitioners and academics working on museum studies/cultural studies and she presents her book as a sort of conceptual bridge between the two sides. In her words: “[t]his book has attempted to offer a tactical intervention in what I take to be an unhealthy and unproductive situation of mutual antagonism between museum professionals and intellectual critics” (p. 168). Witcomb’s analysis of the relationship between museum critics and museum professionals is important for all those concerned with the current and future state of museum studies. However, I suspect it will take time and, more specifically, the development of a different kind of museological approach from both sides before the situation she describes will change dramatically. Nonetheless, Witcomb’s book represents a positive and timely contribution towards this goal and for this reason it should be of considerable interest to academics, students, and practitioners alike.

Notes

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[1]. Sharon Macdonald, *Behind the Scenes at the Science Museum* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2002); James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1997).

[2]. For a critique of this approach, see, for example, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, “The Museum in the Disciplinary Society,” in *Museum Studies in Material Culture*, ed. Susan Pearce (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1989), pp. 61-72; Clive Barnett, “Culture, Government and Spatiality: Reassessing the ‘Foucault Effect’ in Cultural-Policy Studies,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2 no. 3 (1999): 369-397; Colin Trodd, “The Discipline of Pleasure; or, How Art History Looks at the Art Museum,” *Museum and Society* 1 (2003): 17-29. Also see Tony Bennett, “The Exhibitionary Complex,” *New Formations* 4 (Spring 1988): 73-102; *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995); *Culture: A Reformer’s Science* (London: Sage, 1998).

[3]. Bennett, *Culture*

[4]. *Ibid.*, pp. 61, 12-13.

[5] Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992).