

# Museum Experiments

MARY BOUQUET

University College Utrecht, Netherlands

Public museums are enduring institutions, establishments, or places designed to select, preserve, study, display, and transfer the material and intangible evidence of human culture and its environment across the generations. There are many different ways of identifying, safeguarding, and transmitting what is considered valuable worldwide. The form and function of museums have varied widely over time, their collections have diversified, their missions have been revised, and their operations and management have been transformed. Since the late eighteenth century, national legislation has defined what museums are and do in different nation-states. International cultural organizations, such as UNESCO and the International Council of Museums (ICOM) have, since the mid-twentieth century, created a global framework for professionals employed in the rapidly expanding heritage sector. International definitions also change and sometimes vary according to language: the ICOM's 1974 definition, for example, emphasizes the driving role of research in the French version of the text. In 2007, the ICOM statutes defined the museum as a “non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment” (ICOM 2007).

Some scholars see the twentieth-century expansion of museums as part of an ecumenical inflation of heritage and a commercialized component of the culture industry. Others emphasize the reshaping of the museum as a “traveling institution,” reflected in an increasing number of community and ethnic museums worldwide. While the impetus for research in many academic disciplines, including anthropology, migrated away from museums into universities in the early twentieth century, since about 1989 there has been an upsurge of interest in museums as a site of analysis, from a variety of disciplines, converging in the field of museum studies. More recently, some museums have established research centers. Initially, scholars sought to explain the museum as an instrument of nineteenth-century liberal governance in creating, as Donald Preziosi puts it, “exemplary models for ‘reading’ objects as traces, representations, reflections or surrogates of individuals, groups, nations, and ‘races’ and of their ‘histories’” ([1998] 2009, 489). The new public buildings and spaces, with organized displays of objects, accessible to various social classes, were linked with other public institutions, such as libraries, parks, and department stores, as part of a broader exhibitionary complex that was integral to the development of the democratic state and citizenship (Bennett 1995). This new form of governance was based on the idea of the museum's educational potential, offering the recently enfranchised pathways to self-improvement. The birth of the modern museum can also be understood as “part of a new visual regime in which the

*The International Encyclopedia of Anthropology*. Edited by Hilary Callan.

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DOI: 10.1002/9781118924396.wbiea2244

arrangement and display of objects functioned as a novel way of acquiring and disseminating knowledge” (Noordegraaf 2004, 10). As framing devices, they opened windows on the world while, at the same time, shaping our view of the world through that frame.

## Experimentation

Around 1900, the comparative analytical understanding of nineteenth-century science, technology, and medicine—for which museum collections were of central importance—gave way to more experimental ways of producing knowledge, based in university departments. Similarly, anthropology reoriented its methodological and theoretical foundations away from the museum and its collections of material culture toward empirical fieldwork. The rise of the temporary exhibition has nonetheless been seen as the art-historical equivalent to experimentation in the natural sciences (Noordegraaf 2004, 81). Bringing together artworks in unprecedented combinations allowed art historians to scrutinize an artist’s development in ways unforeseen by artists or patrons, and for the public to share these insights. So successful did temporary exhibitions become with the public that art historian Ernst Gombrich rebuked museums for becoming (thematic) exhibition centers, arguing that “in some respects the old-fashioned museum had an edge here over many more recent experiments” (1977, 465). To enjoy Johannes Vermeer’s *View of Delft*, he advocated developing “a feel for what was common form and what was unique—a feel that can no more be verbalized than any other sensory discrimination, but which makes us sensitive to that fine calibration that underlies our experience of delight” (1977, 465).

It is precisely feeling and affect that some now identify as being essential for understanding how museums may reinforce collective memories and national identities, how particular attachments to the past are produced through the presence of objects and through attention to the nondiscursive work of curators and designers (Message and Witcomb 2015). Attention to the everyday practices and contingencies of the museum has led, in scholarship on museums in the early twenty-first century, to studies of collecting, curatorship, conservation, collection management, research, and mediation, both *from within* and in connection with the public, stakeholders, and new constituencies.

## Knowledge practices

Experimentation is generally understood as bringing together elements under more or less controlled conditions, thereby unleashing transformations that may not have been predicted or predictable, resulting in new understandings and new knowledge. Knowledge counts as scientific if there is a clear account of the methods adopted, the procedures followed, and the outcomes observed or measured, all interpreted and reported in a form that allows others to follow the same procedure or evaluate the findings. While this idea of experimentation refers back to the seventeenth-century

shift from Aristotelian to experiment-based empirical science, experimentation offers a powerful metaphor for the production of new knowledge about all aspects of the museum. The bringing together of unprecedented combinations of objects (as collections or as exhibitions), expertise, and human agents (whether professionals, stakeholders, or publics) gives rise to unpredictable outcomes.

Practitioners and theorists of the New Museology have, since the late 1980s, been writing about various aspects of exhibiting cultures—some experimental in the sense outlined above. These include representational questions such as those concerning art museums, national identity, and minority cultures, and museum practices both inside the museum and those taking place outside its walls, through broader musealization processes or at world fairs and festivals. Curator Susan Vogel (1991) wrote about the “trickery” of museum installation explored through the exhibition *Art/Artifact* at the Center for African Art, New York, in 1988, where the same object (a Zande fishing net) placed in a series of different settings was perceived variously as a natural history specimen or a modern art piece.

Such practice-based writings on representation are linked with paradigmatic shifts in theoretical understandings of the first museum age, notably articulated by cultural theorist Tony Bennett (1995). Bennett examined the historical formation of the museum, the nineteenth-century exhibitionary complex, and the political rationality of the museum; he looked at the policies and politics of the people, the past, and the invisible embedded in the institution; and he explored what he termed technologies of progress. Drawing on both Foucault and Gramsci, he explained these developments by proposing that the museum was central to nineteenth-century governance, which sought to create a new kind of citizenship by using culture visibly and educationally as a public resource. Bringing together ordered, representative sets of objects, displayed in newly designed and scripted public buildings, museums equipped formerly excluded social classes with vantage points that empowered their understanding of the world. These classes benefited not only from the object lessons set out before them but also from exposure to upper-class manners that were equally visible to them in the space of representation—helping to fashion the imagined community of the nation-state.

This conjuncture was experimental insofar as the nineteenth-century exhibitionary complex was intended for all citizens: it was unprecedented and its outcome was therefore unpredictable. Those with the requisite economic capital could demonstrate their civic disposition by converting their wealth into collections, which were later donated to museums often with their own names attached (as a collection, wing, or entire museum). Hence, the new ways of constructing citizenship, subjectivity, and personhood offered by the public museum within its utopian precincts, and through the secular rituals designed to be enacted there, were nonetheless closely connected with broader structures of economic, political, and social inequality inherent in liberal capitalism and imperialism.

The world changed too profoundly over the course of the twentieth century for this entry to do more than point here at the effects of two world (and many regional and local) wars, decolonization and independence processes, civil rights and emancipation movements, financial crises symptomatic of increasingly obscure ways of generating value, environmental crises, and the information technology revolution,

which contributed significantly to globalization. The museum is an intrinsic part of globalization and a sensitive register of its impacts—whether in terms of mission, ethics, or experimental practices of various kinds. Practitioners of the new museology were working in the aftermath of poststructuralist theory, which articulated new understandings of how agency shapes and changes societal structures and institutions. They were also influenced by a broader postcolonial ethic that helped to shift the emphasis away from the product toward the collaborative process with various social actors, notably representatives of source communities. Laying claim to, or being invited to have a stake in the uses and meanings of, historical collections in mainly metropolitan institutions brought museums into the debate about identity politics but also changed museum practice. The centenary of the Cambridge Torres Strait Expedition at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in 1998 was the culmination of a renewed research process whereby museum staff engaged contemporary Torres Strait Island communities and brought community leaders to Cambridge (Herle and Philp 1998).

Film played an important role in those twentieth-century changes. Through film, the new contact zones that opened up in museum storage began to find wider audiences than their immediate witnesses. Films such as Hugh Brody's *The Washing of Tears* (1994) depicted the enduring impact that the removal of the Yuquot Whalers' Shrine from Vancouver Island to the American Museum of Natural History, New York, in 1904, has on contemporary Mowachaht. Filmed encounters between Ephraim Bani and his wife with collections from the Torres Straits and the curators of various European museums in 1995, in Frances Calvert's film *Cracks in the Mask* ([1997] 2008), document variation in their reception and ultimately contributed to change. Gil Cardinal's two films followed how the Haisla people of British Columbia reclaimed and eventually secured the return of the memorial pole raised by Chief G'psgolox at the end of the nineteenth century. The pole was removed from Haisla territory in 1929 by the Swedish consul, who presented it to the Ethnographic Museum in Stockholm, where it was preserved and displayed upright, *inside* the museum (contrary to indigenous practice). When descendants of G'psgolox discovered the whereabouts of the pole in the 1990s, they traveled to Stockholm to reclaim it. Return was effected in 2006 after a long and complex process of negotiation. Both sides made concessions to accommodate the conditions set by the others. The Haisla representatives stipulated, for example, that the replica pole they presented to the Stockholm museum must stand outside. The museum, for its part, insisted on protective facilities for the original G'psgolox pole once it was back in British Columbia. Such films helped to change attitudes and practices among international professionals.

These curatorial shifts coincided with a broader turn toward installation and site specificity that transformed art practice in the 1990s. Vivian Sundaram's *History Project* mounted inside the Victoria Memorial Museum Calcutta, in 1998, to mark the fiftieth anniversary of Indian independence demonstrates this development. Sundaram's work goes beyond the institutional critique of an earlier generation of New York artists (such as Hans Haacke and Fred Wilson) by directly illuminating the museum as a colonial form. Sundaram engaged with the forms, materials, and conditions of the site itself,

thereby exposing how Indian nationalism took on the colonial project and Bengali resistance to that (Mathur 2015).

While reflexive and critical museology together with site-specific art practice led to experimental exhibition practices in the 1980s and 1990s, there were no less profound shifts in routine museum practices. Noteworthy among these was the digitalization of collection records, which led to discoveries about existing collections such as those made during the Pitt Rivers Museum's (PRM) Relational Museum Project (2002–6). Digitalizing and linking such documents as accession books, archives, and the card catalog rendered the museum knowable: it became a place of discovery, experimentation, exploration, and imagination. Nobody had imagined that about half of the PRM's collection consisted of stone tools, nor had anybody conceived of the vast network of relations cohering around museum objects. Digital technologies made it possible to ask questions and obtain answers about the collection that would have been extremely time consuming before the transfer of collection records to databases. This quiet revolution was matched by the move to share (some of) this newly generated knowledge via museum websites on the internet. From early examples, such as the first versions of the website of Teylers Museum (Bouquet 2012), museums embarked on a digital push to renew collection, curation, and interpretation. The constant evolution of technology also encouraged renewal in the way museums understand relationships with stakeholders.

This “second museum age,” as Ruth Phillips (2005, 85) has called it, was characterized by a community-led return to specific ancestral materials that was directly interwoven with the practical work of curators. The Blackfoot Shirts Project at the PRM exemplifies the transformative effects of community engagement with such material heritage on their uses, conservation, and meanings. Senior Blackfoot representatives visited the PRM in 2004 and together with staff devised a project whereby a number of hairlock shirts, which the Blackfoot consider to be ancestors, would make a return visit to North American museums. In the process, Blackfoot shirts “shifted from being ethnographic specimens of Blackfoot culture to catalysts for Blackfoot cultural strengthening, from a museum context to being used in a Blackfoot ceremony” (Brown and Peers 2015, 284–85). This was seen at the time as a rather extreme version of museum experiments with social agency and mediation, in which Blackfoot communities took control of certain aspects of the project. The process also brought various kinds of tensions to the surface. Museums professionals found themselves hindered by their professional habitus: the training, protocols, values, and priorities developed over the long histories of museums. This means that further experiments will depend on whether museums are able to change their own premises.

Collaborative renovation of exhibitions is an area of practical work that, although scarcely experimental by now, has the potential to yield new theoretical insights. This was the case with the reinstallation of the once pioneering visible storage facility at the Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver. Consultation and collaboration with indigenous communities led to a reorganization of the collections according to indigenous classificatory and cosmological categories and informed by local knowledge. The new Multiversity Galleries combined visible storage with exhibition space in ways meant to be most relevant to Northwest Coast peoples. Jennifer Kramer (2015)

conceptualizes the cocreation of a native voice for the Multiversity Galleries through the metaphor of Möbius museology, whereby curator and originating communities are endlessly linked through the process. Such engagement may give rise to rather than assuage community tensions. And Kramer warns that museums need to be aware of their powerful and complex role in bolstering cultural identities through collaborative curation.

## Places for the placeless

Although museum experiments are clearly not synonymous with *exhibition* experiments, the institutional prominence given to exhibitions means that many shifts in curatorial and artistic practice as well as scholarly attention have revolved around questions of appropriate display and/or visibility. Many have remarked on how collaborative projects have become mainstream. Whereas contributors to Paul Basu and Sharon Macdonald's *Exhibition Experiments* (2007) focused on reflexive ways of exhibiting ethnography, art, and science, less than a decade later Annie Coombes and Ruth Phillips (2015) saw a more broadly defined "culture of experimentation" as expanding the old definition of the museum. Instead of being "just a set of bricks and mortar institutions," museums have become a "technology of representation that can be recruited for new constituencies." Seen thus, museum exhibitions become "laboratories for experimentation and the development of new relational practices" (Coombes and Phillips 2015, xxxv). Among the constituencies to find a home in the temporary space of a sometimes improvised "museum" are migrants.

The Hotel Yeoville project in the Johannesburg migrant suburb of Yeoville was designed in several cross-disciplinary steps: initial research in the neighborhood was followed by the creation of a website, which in turn was translated into a physical exhibition location. The aim was to bring forth the memories, fears, and dreams of migrants from all over Africa living in Yeoville to facilitate the *emergence* of community and thereby help to counter widely held prejudice and violence against them (Bristow, Kurgan, and Opper 2015). Concept, design, and architecture allowed people to represent themselves using social media and digital technologies to gather stories and create self-portraits, and then translate these into a physical location in the newly renovated library in central Yeoville. The project places the bricks and mortar of this temporary museum in a new light: this placing of placelessness crucially gave people somewhere to make themselves known. Architect Alexander Opper provides a compelling account of how participants reinvented the white cube, reinscribing it in ways unforeseen by the inwardly oriented, evenly lit, white walls of the post-1945 invisible script (Bristow, Kurgan, and Opper 2015). Whereas the white cube was severely criticized by European and North American artists and art critics starting in the 1960s, in Yeoville it became a postcolonial canvas and carrier for performing and recording the lived experience of participants.

## Current museum experiments

On the one hand, joint acquisitions, such as the Louvre and Rijksmuseum purchase in 2015 of Rembrandt's 1634 wedding portraits of Maerten Soolmans and Oopjen Coppit, will entail the mobility of the artworks, with the couple residing for five years at a time alternately in Paris and Amsterdam. International research projects, such as the Bosch Research and Conservation Project, expanded knowledge about the artist, his work, and his studio practice, leading to worldwide collegial contacts, prior to the 2016 blockbuster *Hieronymus Bosch: Visions of Genius*, which opened first in the artist's hometown of 's-Hertogenbosch and then Madrid. The British Museum and the National Museum of Australia organized a joint research project and major exhibition, *Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilization*, in London, and *Encounters* in Canberra, in 2015, involving extensive consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait individuals and hitherto unmatched loans from each institution. In reconfiguring national collections, by making prior research and conservation an explicit part of a blockbuster, and by involving Aboriginal individuals with their historical belongings on the other side of the world, museums take experimentation to a new level.

On the other hand, the current prominence of refugee or migrant crises reverberates in temporary installations at canonical institutions such as New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Bouchra Khalili's artwork *The Mapping Journey Project* (2008–11), comprising eight videos narrating refugees' journeys to Europe, installed in the MoMA atrium in early 2016, was a reminder of the speed with which this topic has become mainstream. The formal components of the artwork consist of a colored map of Europe onto which a hand plots—with a black marker—the sketchy contours of a grueling journey across frontiers and seas, which is narrated by the voice of an invisible man or woman. *The Mapping Journey Project* is part of the MoMA's *Citizens and Borders* series of discrete projects related to works in the collection, offering a critical perspective on histories of migration, territories, and displacement. When the installation closed in October 2016, it was followed by *Insecurities: Tracing Displacement and Shelter*, which explores how contemporary architecture and design are addressing notions of shelter in the light of global refugee emergencies.

Hotel Yeoville and *The Mapping Journey Project* express, in their different ways, an issue at the heart of the current museum experiments and debates: the museum as a safe place for things that people value, and as a place of encounter with difference; a place for people deprived of their own safe places to dream, remember, imagine, and reassemble themselves; and a place for the rest of us to try to grasp what is happening.

## Art, science, and society

Future research is likely to further elaborate inter-, cross-, multi-, trans-, and/or postdisciplinary approaches to the museum as a site of analysis. The positive value of borrowing and exchanging methods while focusing on the site, collections, exhibitions, and public function of the museum as a civic institution is already evident in recent scholarship. Further research grounded in the museum will be informed

by theories of contingency, chance, and unpredictability, arising from daily practice in this particular place (Thomas 2010). Museums are sites where discoveries can be made not only in storage areas or through experimental exhibitions but also through shared acquisitions and shared responsibilities for collections that can arise from projects of collaborative curatorship. Such projects may go wrong, resulting in protests against international partnerships yet reflecting local power struggles, underlining the need for careful research into the political embedding of the institution (Singh 2015). Carefully calibrated approaches are needed to be able to investigate the feelings that museum materialities activate among the various people who engage with them (Dudley 2010)—for example, through conservation. There is likely to be further elaboration of theories about curiosity, emotion, memory, and affect, and how these shore up or disrupt the civic skills required for dealing with difference. Reappraising the “natural conservatism” of museums—their narratives of continuity and the need for preservation as a response to change—may reveal one of their greatest assets, allowing them to reinvent themselves as a site for critical reflection on sustainability, innovation, and consumerism.

SEE ALSO: Artifacts; Collecting; Colonialism and the Museum; Denmark, Anthropology in; Display, Anthropological Approaches to; Ethnographic Spectacle; Frobenius, Leo (1873–1938); Germany, Anthropology in; Heritage; *Malanggan*; Material Culture; Migration; Museum Conservation; Museums and Source Communities; NAGPRA (Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, 1990); Netherlands, Anthropology in the; Repatriation of Cultural Property and Human Remains; Representation, Politics of; Tourism, Travel, and Pilgrimage; UNESCO, Place of Anthropology in

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