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Essentialism, adaptation and justice: Towards a new epistemology of museums

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Abstract

This article treats the prevalent confused mixture of utilitarian, art-and-knowledge-for-their-own-sake and ideological interpretations of the purpose of museums as a problem of epistemology, arguing that that key dimensions of museum knowledge (of objects, visitors, museums themselves, and of society) need to be integrated to achieve coherence. A new object-based, visitor-centred, storytelling epistemology is proposed. This would take an interdisciplinary approach and aim to unleash, rather than mute the real power of objects. It would address human destructiveness, as well as celebrating human creativity and the wonders of nature. It would respect the meaning-making practices of real, as opposed to idealized, imaginary visitors, and promote staff self-awareness in managing bureaucratic drift into introversion and avoidance of difficult issues. Incorporating a theory of justice, it would erode boundaries created by presentation traditions which, though marginal to object experiences, discriminate in favour of specific social groups—often groups with whom staff identify. Providing a museum service on a visibly fair basis is essential for museums to achieve intellectual coherence as well as societal support.

Keywords: Museums; Art; Galleries; Epistemology; Aesthetics; Justice; Audiences

'What's it for, the museum? That's what Neville Dupayne has just asked. What's it for?'

P.D. James, The Murder Room (James, 2003)

The novels of PD James show her to be one of the most astute observers of the values, aspirations and fears of the British middle classes. Many of her plots are driven by speculation that the murder has been committed because some institution which has generated a great

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attachment, dependence or ambition—a theological seminary, one of the Inns of Court, a private home for the disabled—is under threat. Her antennae did not fail her when, in her 2003 book, *The Murder Room*, the possible closure of the private Dupayne Museum seems to be the most likely cause of the murder of Neville Dupayne, and the trustee asks 'What is it for?'.

Official definitions of museums do not provide much help in understanding what museums are for, much less reconciling the many contradictions present in the heart of the philosophy of the greatest museums. The UNESCO and British Museums Association definitions[2] do not say much more than that museums are institutions which carry out museum functions for the benefit of people who like museums. It seems that there is no societal or professional consensus about what museums are for. Rather, the diverging views on this issue have tended to be divided into two schools of thought: the essentialist or internalist view, which argues that museums are for the 'internal' functions of preservation and research, and the adaptive or 'externalist' view which argues that museums are for people 'external' to the institution.

1. Essentialist, adaptive, and ideological views of the museum

On the essentialist view, the tautological definition is correct. Despite occasionally being argued with great sophistication, as in Hein's book, *Museums in Transition*, the case does not go much beyond saying that museums have no purpose other than to carry out the functions of preservation, research and display (Hein, 2002), with display sometimes only grudgingly included: 'museums are first of all archives of material culture documents and only secondarily places of display and public education' (Feest, 1995). This school of thought sees museums as having a permanent essential nature which is not subject to change and development. It traces its origin to the ideals of the Enlightenment, but became entrenched in the late 19th century, when many museums founded by earlier reformers came to see their previous socially improving ideals as naïve and excessively utilitarian. The result was a major epistemological shift within museums. They became committed to an ideal of knowledge and beauty for their own sake. From contributing to major discoveries such as the age of the earth and uncovering evidence questioning the literal truth of the Bible, museums increasingly became preoccupied with confirming the provenance of objects and groups of objects so that they could feature in big stories about progress in science, history and art. Elements which had been introduced for didactic reasons (such as hanging paintings chronologically, by national school) were aestheticised and, at the same time, took on the aura of earlier ideals of objective knowledge, so that the results of connoisseurship were presented with the same confidence as scientific research (see Sylvester, 2000). Within this school, museums are a general good for society because they provide non-instrumental experiences 'for their own sake', i.e. precisely because they have no social purpose. These experiences are distributed fairly because the same experience is provided on an identical basis to everyone.

Many working in this kind of museum see themselves as part of a beleaguered minority, defending cultural heritage and the arts against a new breed of philistines (Appleton, 2001; de Montebello, 2001; Tusa, 2000). They see local and central government policies to widen access

[2] The UK Museums Association defines museums as institutions which 'enable people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment. They are institutions that collect, safeguard and make accessible artifacts and specimens, which they hold in trust for society'. The International Council of Museums (ICOM) definition (ICOM Statutes of 2001, Article 2) states that 'A museum is a non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment'.

not just as ineffectual and competing with core functions for funds, but as inimical to the nature of museums. Appleton (2001), for instance, provides a strong attack on the notion of museums and galleries as agents of social inclusion, and challenges the view that museums should be driven by social and political objectives. For Appleton, the focus on tackling exclusion takes the museum away from other centrally important activities and responsibilities: 'Once a museum puts the perceived needs of the people at the heart of its work, the collection will quite naturally lose its importance and value. A collection is no longer seen as valuable in itself…. Instead, its value is embodied in something external to itself: the immediate relationship it is able to establish to the public, how it will help the museum and its officials connect with the public, or how it will lead to observable changes in the lives of visitors. In the people-centred museum…social ends tend to take over' (Appleton, 2001:18). Dr Peter Falconer claims these views are supported by senior staff in national museums and galleries in London and Edinburgh. No one with whom he conducted these 'elite interviews' at these institutions disagreed with the view that social inclusion objectives set by government are irrelevant to the core function of museums. They are no part of what museums are for, but something they are forced to address by interfering politicians (Falconer, 2003).

The adaptive model, by contrast, argues that it is only by providing a service to people that museums justify their existence (Hudson, 1975; Sandell, 2002). For this type of museum, the basic functions of conservation and preservation are fundamental, but derive their meaning primarily from the services the institution provides to society as a whole, in the present and in the future. This philosophy has been the driving force of a great deal of innovation in museum theory and practice in the past 30 years. Those who embrace this vision are passionate about sharing the pleasures and inspirations museums have to offer with the widest possible audience. They often see themselves as working in a tradition that goes back to the liberal, utilitarian social reformers who founded many of the great national and civic museums of Europe, and of the countries shaped by the European diaspora (e.g. Waterfield, 1994). Proponents of this vision see themselves as part of a changing history which they seek to respond to, not least by trying to attract audiences from amongst excluded groups. They also tend to see themselves as reformers working against an entrenched, elitist establishment which resists greater inclusion—whether within their own institutions or within the sector as a whole (Dodd, 2002a,b; Fleming, 2002; Gurian, 2005; Sandell, 2002).

With the advent of New Labour in 1997, the view of museums as capable of helping to create a more inclusive society has been the policy of the UK government.[3] Educational relevance was also the basis for the first ever major strategic investment by the UK central government in English regional museums in 2002. For a considerably longer period in the USA, most public funders of museums (trusts and foundations, as well as local and central government) have upheld this view of the role of museums (e.g. American Association of Museums, 1992), and education and outreach programmes continue to receive support despite the dramatic decline in government support for cultural institutions.

Undercutting both the essentialist and adaptive views is an argument, found in much of the theoretical literature, which suggests that both rationales are naïve covers for the ideological role of museums in supporting power structures. A great deal of this has seen museums to be instruments of bourgeois, ideological hegemony, which appear as parts of the everyday world, but whose covert function is to make the current power structure in society appear natural

[3] This objective also pervades the Heritage Lottery Fund, which, between its foundation in 1994 and 2005, invested more than £3 billion in the sector.

(Bennett, 1995; Bourdieu & Darbel, 1994; Duncan, 1995). The epistemological shift that has accompanied the postmodern turn has led many disciplines in the humanities to engage in re-examining the basis of their own knowledge and questioning the theories and values of the Enlightenment, utilitarian social improvement and art and knowledge-for-their-own-sake idealism (e.g. Foucault, 1989; Geertz, 1983; Horgan, 1996; Jenkins, 1991). For many, these traditions are as much anti-democratic, elitist, patriarchal and colonizing instruments of class and imperial oppression and control, as drivers of progress and improvement. They relate to more recent views of knowledge as being shaped by the social context of its creation, and are aware of how easily reason can be hijacked by non-rational or unconscious motives in the service of individual or group interests. Duncan, for example argues that: 'to control a museum means precisely to control the representation of a community and its highest values and truths. It is also the power to define the relative standing of individuals within that community. Those who are best prepared to perform its ritual—those who are most able to respond to its various cues—are also those whose identities (social, sexual, racial, etc.) the museum ritual most fully confirms' (Duncan, 1995:8–9). In terms of the position on what they are for, reinforcing the status quo within society is not a secondary, but a core function of museums in this view.

Essentialists deny any connection between high culture and power—Falconer's interviewees are adamant that their concerns are purely aesthetic and intellectual. Adaptive museums view ideological analysis as providing an intellectual rationale for seeing museums as contingent and historical, rather than absolute institutions which, alongside strong elements of continuity, are and have been constantly changing. Museums which are trying to reformulate their ideals to help them adapt to a rapidly changing world, to come up with better answers to the question of what they are for, often draw on this new thinking.

These three perspectives—essentialist, adaptive, and ideological—are held not just by different museums, but to varying degrees by staff and board members within individual museums. It seems that museums, both in their own terms and in terms of their place in society, are fragmented and not wholly coherent institutions.

Lack of coherence is a problem of knowledge, and one way of thinking about the purpose of museums is to approach it as an epistemological issue. Epistemology is, at its most basic, the theory of knowledge, but here it will refer to the ways in which museums themselves 'know' their objects and visitors, their societies and themselves. Museums acquire, hold, and deploy knowledge in a variety of ways that go beyond the research and teaching of their disciplines. As well as gathering and distributing knowledge based on their collections, museums 'know' as part of their very structure and function. Do museums have a special way of knowing that is different from other institutions, and that is more than the sum of the specific disciplines which they contain? If they do, what is the structure of the museum framework of knowledge? How does the sense-perception of objects relate to other kinds of knowledge created and deployed within the museum? How does the way museums know about objects relate to the way they know about visitors? What is the nature of the obligation of museums to the community in which they exist? How do museums' ways of knowing relate to these obligations? Museum epistemology is thus a method for asking what and how the museum knows, identifying ways of knowing that are problematic and seeking solutions in new frameworks of knowledge. The aim of this paper is not to set out a comprehensive theory of knowledge, but rather to suggest answers to these questions by focusing on some of the major areas of conflict between the three perspectives, and to suggest an alternative intellectual framework for museums which would integrate epistemology with a theory of justice.

At present, museum knowledge consists of an uneasy coalition of specialisms, chiefly relating to curatorial and conservation disciplines. Given the methodological and epistemological variety

which supports the mixture of the hard, applied and social sciences and humanities, ranging from archaeology to connoisseurship, it is not surprising that coherence is an issue. This is made worse by the fact that other kinds of expertise which are essential to running museums—people and project management, finance, marketing, visitor service staff, security, catering—rarely figure in the intellectual account of museums; they do not really count as knowledge at all. The status of education expertise is, revealingly, ambiguous. Many national museums and galleries have large education departments. These serve schools and existing adult audiences as an additional, subordinate and usually almost entirely separate function to the core tasks of collection, preservation research and display—what might be called a weak education programme. In contrast, museums committed to being socially inclusive and actively seeking out new audiences have a strong education programme, where staff with education expertise influence strategy and the whole institution is dedicated to bringing in new audiences (O'Neill, 2002; Fleming, 2002).

However, different the status of these museum, managerial, technical and educational specialisms, they are at least formalized, unlike a whole range of unspoken assumptions, motivations, commitments, skills, intuitions and traditions which also inform and shape our decisions. Most museums retain a jumble of often contradictory Enlightenment, utilitarian and idealistic philosophies in their implicit theory of knowledge. Those struggling to develop a new epistemology add another layer, not least in trying to develop a self-aware, reflexive practice (Silverman & O'Neill, 2004; Worts, 1991). If we are going to develop and present to the world a coherent and clear view of what we are for, we can no longer rely on the knowledge frameworks and tribal affiliations of the different, segregated professions, disciplines and traditions which work within museums. We need the intellectual self-confidence to develop a specific epistemology which integrates all the forms of knowledge which museums acquire, produce, deploy and disseminate.

Far from being a matter of purely theoretical interest, the absence of a general museum epistemology has fundamental implications for all aspects of museum functioning. It makes it difficult to engage with external pressures and the agendas of others, and to sustain support from stakeholders—especially funders. Museums have great difficulty in finding a language to explain their role, indeed to justify their very existence to society at large, even to a society that is sympathetic to their existence. The incoherence of museum theory also has an impact on staff structures, the relative authority of various specialisms, the focus of research, collecting, conservation and display, the role given to temporary exhibitions and education activities, the significance attached to objects, collections and collecting, and the relative priority of serving established and new audiences.

2. Issues of knowledge and justice

It is clear from even this brief summary that the differences in the answers to the question—*What are museums for?*—reflect fundamental philosophical differences about the nature of human culture and society, as well as about hierarchies of value and knowledge. It is reasonable in a democracy to expect that institutions like museums would function with differing or even conflicting philosophical bases. This does not mean however that all philosophical positions on which museums are founded are equally valid, or equally good in terms of the values of that society.

Much of the debate arises out of a single fact—that throughout the developed world the majority of museum visitors are drawn from the better-off and better—educated sections of

society (e.g. for Australia see AMARC, 2002; for France see Bourdieu & Darbel, 1994; for UK see MORI, 2002; for Canada see Hill Strategies Research, Inc., 2003; for Spain see Albion et al., 1997). The higher the status of the museum, the better-educated and better-off its visitors tend to be. The crux is whether or not this constitutes a problem. Adaptive museums see the unequal distribution of the good as a basic issue of justice and, therefore, something that should be addressed as a core function of museums. According to Open University philosopher Janet Radcliffe Richards, 'if some social arrangement gives benefits to one group of people, the onus of proof is on anyone who wants to argue that the arrangements also produce some general good' (Richards, 1985). While essentialist museums might argue that the content of museums is naturally more attractive to the better-educated, and the shortcomings of public education systems and the social engineering objectives of governments should not be visited upon museums, this implies that there is at least a prima facie case to answer. Virtually all museums receive public subsidy (through direct funding or the tax/charity regime) and so are paid for by all, although they are used only by a minority. How do museums which consistently benefit an already advantaged group contribute to the well-being of society as a whole?

The demography of museum visitation is, however, only one half of the equation. The epistemological issue is about the relationship between the nature of museums and the experiences of non-visitors. Champions of inclusion argue that museums need to remove barriers to access and to change their practices so that they become meaningful for non-visitors (for example SMC, 2000). But if these barriers or practices are, in fact, part of the essence of what museums are, then exclusion of non-visitors may exist, but not be discriminatory (an analogy might be services provided for children which are not provided for adults; who are excluded but not thereby discriminated against).

The key questions in contemporary museum epistemology are:

- Is the attribution to museums of social purposes compatible with or inimical to the function of museum knowledge?
- Are essentialist museum practices simply a reflection of the nature of museum knowledge or are they ancillary and therefore discriminatory?

In what follows I build upon two axioms. The first is that museums' unique role is to create, articulate and distribute knowledge based on physical objects which for a wide variety of reasons have been deemed significant enough to be worth preserving in perpetuity. The second is that museums are a public good serving society as a whole and which function on a not-for-profit basis. It is worth noting that both the essentialist and adaptive views accept these propositions, but dispute the nature of the knowledge in question, the provenance of that knowledge, the authority on which its distribution is based, and the nature of the link between knowledge and society.

As a working framework for a museum epistemology, what museums know has been divided into four interrelated dimensions:[4]

[4] Much of the thinking behind this paper was developed in order to solve the problems posed, and to take the opportunities offered, by the redisplay of Glasgow's largest museum and art gallery—Kelvingrove, the most visited UK museum outside London. In order to provide an intellectual framework for flexible displays in 22 new galleries which could draw on the entire range of the City's 1.4 million objects (including French Impressionists, Dutch and Italian Old Masters, arms and armour, natural history, Scottish and world archaeology and ethnography) the essentialist Victorian taxonomy had to be completely revised. See Economou (1999) and Fitzgerald (2005).

- Knowledge of Objects
- Knowledge of Visitors
- Museums' Knowledge of Ourselves
- Knowledge of Society.

2.1. Museums' knowledge of objects

> [Housekeeper] 'I suppose a museum is a celebration of death. Dead people's lives, the objects they made, the things they thought important, their clothes, their houses, their daily comforts, their art'.
>
> PD James, The Murder Room (James, 2003)

One of the things you would expect museums to know about and build upon is the power of objects. In fact, the origin of museums as temples to reason means that a key aim has been to tame objects and to diminish their power. The clearest evidence of this is that museums are often reluctant to pay attention to the straightforward, first order, meaning of objects. This is not a result of neglecting the obvious, but trivial qualities, of objects, but of avoiding the obvious and vital because these are too disturbing to contemplate. Museum objects have been removed from churches, temples, shrines and graves and forced to represent the triumph of reason over religion and superstition, of moderate pleasures over carnival and excess, of order over violence and chaos, of detachment over enthusiasm, and of transcendent beauty over historical and cultural change (Sherman, 1994). Objects deemed to be art from whatever period or culture are displayed in museums without reference to the context in which they were produced and used. This ensures that they are stripped of all non-rational associations. Fine art, decorative art, history, archaeological and ethnographic museums alike tend to mute rather than celebrate the religious, spiritual or erotic meaning of objects in collections. These qualities are reduced in labels to elements of allusion, like the answers to clues in crossword puzzles.

The embrace of the Enlightenment ideal of rationality did not eliminate the irrational and evil in human experience. Instead all that is bad and irrational was split off from the idealized self and projected onto convenient others. The others can be people in poor neighbourhoods, in the colonies, or, ultimately in the concentration camps (Flahault, 1998). The good self, the self, which for example, appreciates art in a disinterested way, which seeks knowledge for its own sake and savours rational recreations, is reflected in good objects. Perhaps the Enlightenment view of objects may be thought of as a secularised version of Reformation iconoclasm, not destroying them, but draining them of their lifeblood. Bloodlessness is, for example, characteristic of most museums' views of their collections of weapons: for the Metropolitan Museum in New York and the Wallace Collection in London, they are categorized as decorative arts. It is not that weapons do not have this dimension—human ingenuity and sense of beauty have been lavished on them—but that these meanings are not separate from their use for killing, wounding and torturing people.

The level of denial prevalent in museums is more understandable if one sees minimizing awareness of mortality as a core function of the museum project—the task of conservation is resistance to the inevitability of decay, entropy and death. The rise of modernism involved a decline in the comforts of religion, and museums offer a secular form of immortality for human intentions, embodied in the things we make (especially art), for the animals we kill in the name of science, for the past which recedes ever more quickly from us (Bauman, 1992). And, of

course, museums offer immortality for great collectors, benefactors and the cities and nations which promote museums. The American anthropologist and psychologist Ernest Becker, based on the theories of Otto Rank, describes the innumerable ways we find to deny the inevitability of death and to avoid thinking about it as 'terror management' (Becker, 1997).[5] Cultural forms can help us manage the terror in positive, as well as evasive ways. Literature and art reach their highest and most intense levels precisely when they engage with the tragic inevitability of suffering and decay. Museums, in contrast, rarely engage with the tragic, even though there may be works of art, or historical or natural objects, which communicate tragic stories. The distancing, visual aesthetic and rational categorization of museums diminishes their emotional power, so that they engage in death denial rather than death reflection (Sheets-Johnstone, 2003). Thus, it is remarkable that the National Gallery's Millennium exhibition on the life of Christ, *Seeing Salvation*, was considered exceptional because it struck a religious chord with many of the large number of people who visited it. This was enabled because it was not constructed as an art history narrative, but as the story of the life of Christ in art.

Of course, denial is not a passive state; it takes up a lot of energy. This may be one of the origins of museum fatigue. Terror cannot be muted in isolation; all emotional responses need to be damped down. Just compare the range and intensity of the feelings which people experience in the cinema or the theatre to those authorized by the design, atmosphere and presentation of museums. Perhaps it is because aestheticised museums offer a form of secular transcendence of mortality that threats to their current form are experienced as matters of life and death.

Other issues that arise due to the particular version of rationality applied to museum objects are the dualistic splitting of the rational and the non-rational, and the pretence that the unconscious does not exist. There are a number of ways in which museum displays fail to meet even basic academic standards in the use of evidence in accounts of human history. While there may be rigorous history in curators' heads, or even in labels, the groupings of objects according to essentialist taxonomies make it virtually impossible to say anything intelligent about the past. Amongst the errors identified by David Hackett Fischer in his book *Historian's Fallacies*, the two most common perpetrated by museums are the Fallacy of Tunnel History and the Fallacy of Identity. The former is the assumption that a meaningful representation of the past can be created by using only one type of evidence, despite it usually having been preserved by a 'ridiculously adventitious set of circumstances'. The rows of vehicles of the same type in museums of transport are perfect examples of this; you can't say very much that is meaningful about the history of locomotives by showing only locomotives. The Fallacy of Identity is a closely related error. It assumes that 'a cause must somehow resemble its effect' (Fischer, 1970:177–178). Adrian Forty, in his book *Objects of Desire,* identifies the same confusion in design history—in both academia and in museums: 'the design of manufactured goods is determined not by some internal genetic structure but by the people and the industries that make them and the relationships of these people and industries to the society in which the products are to be sold' (Forty, 2000:6). The Fallacy of Identity might be better named the Genetic Fallacy.

The retention of traditional taxonomies is particularly damaging in relation to objects from non-European cultures. As creatures of the Enlightenment, museums were also part of an imperial project, an extractive industry based on importing raw materials from primary producing countries and transforming them through European superior knowledge and

[5] For the preoccupation of the founding philosophies of modern secular culture—Freud and Darwin—with mortality, see Phillips (1999).

technology into products. Thus, hundreds of millions of non-European artifacts and natural objects were collected and transmuted into art and scientific specimens by emerging European academic disciplines (Hallam & Street, 2000). Today, the knowledge deployed by many museums still views 'ethnographic' objects from this point of view. Concessions may be made to a more respectful vocabulary, so that the ethnography gallery is now devoted to world cultures, and work by contemporary First Nations artists is shown. However, they all too often retain a single Eurocentric view of the cultures of non-white peoples, without representing the voices and perspectives of insiders from those cultures. For some reason, the peoples of Europe and the European diaspora do not seem to figure in the list of 'world cultures' (Peers, 2000).

Many of the great museums in the world have multi-disciplinary collections, but few mount interdisciplinary displays. The only real way of avoiding the Fallacy of Tunnel History and the Genetic Fallacy is to devise interdisciplinary displays to answer interesting questions about the past. Given the great diversity of collections in museums in the West, there are unlimited opportunities to explore this approach. These often emerge in temporary exhibitions, but rarely in long-term displays and, if so, only in a half-hearted sense. Thus, the British Museum's exhibitions on the beauty of the human body and on memory were genuinely interdisciplinary, but the 'permanent' Life and Death gallery draws only upon collections within the remit of the Anthropology Department—no Western fine or decorative art objects are included. Whatever the disciplinary, territorial or personality reasons for this omission, it makes no sense intellectually and lets the public down. A fundamental feature of a new epistemology for museums is to provide an intellectual basis for working across, rather than within, collection boundaries.

Another example of the flawed structure of museum epistemology is the universal distinction museums make between permanent displays and temporary exhibitions. Temporary exhibitions usually have a beginning, a middle and an end, telling a story which explicitly reflects current research. Their ideal of knowledge is of something which is dynamic, exploratory, perspectival and constantly evolving. Permanent displays, on the other hand, reflect an ideal of defining knowledge which is enduring, complete and 'permanent'. This contradiction is not acknowledged as a problem, or even as an opportunity for a creative dialogue between different perspectives on knowledge, but as a reflection on the lamentable inadequacies of the visiting public, who require the novelty and shallowness of temporary exhibitions. Large-scale temporary exhibitions, or blockbusters, were invented by the Metropolitan Museum in New York in the 1970s, but the current director blames the public and their shallow taste and lack of education for forcing these on institutions whose purpose really is the enduring truths of the permanent exhibition (de Montebello, 2001).

One of the greatest intellectual and practical challenges faced by museums is to devise ways of displaying their collections which can evolve over time with emerging research and changing public interests. The current practice of major changes every two or three generations when huge amounts of capital can be secured means that most museum displays are out of date for 80% of their lifespan. While those who plan these displays would personally be acutely aware of how quickly knowledge grows and changes, in their professional mode they seem to practice a Victorian epistemology, seeking a definitive statement of knowledge which is indefinitely true. Inevitably, the closer this degree of durable truth is approached, the more generic and the less analytical becomes its content.

The creation of displays flexible enough to be changed relatively easily over time is often seen as a technical problem, but the design issues can only be resolved after an intellectual basis is created which sees knowledge as a fluid process of discovery. Whatever the internal politics which led to the architects' vision overwhelming the meaning of the objects in the National Museum of

Scotland which opened in 1999, for example, the case for the objects had been undermined from the start by the curatorial aim of creating permanent displays with a projected life of 25 years. Only by abandoning the idea of the permanent display and building flexibility into the epistemology on which the brief is built, will museums be able to solve the technical problems of evolving displays and free themselves from the monumentalist tendencies of architects.

2.1.1. What do art museums know about objects?

Of all the genres of museum, art museums are the most essentialist and the least engaged—at least in their displays—with any of the intellectual developments of the past 100 years (Haxthausen, 2002). One possible explanation of why art museums resist providing any meaningful interpretation (Deuchar, 2002) may be because there is only one really important piece of knowledge that art museums have and wish to communicate about objects on display. They are saying: 'This is art'. The definition of art in this assertion is something that is objectively known, timeless and universal, with an implication that there is only one worthwhile approach to it—the pure, detached aesthetic response, despite the fact that 'these moments of aesthetic experience …occur far less frequently than might be supposed' (De Bolla, 2001:12, Czikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990: 151). It is thus impossible, for example, to explore the way objects become art or (in the event that there are aesthetic universals) are discovered to be art, even if that would help visitors in developing their judgment and appreciation. It also means that the original context of creation or use is not just irrelevant, but may in fact be inimical to appreciating the aesthetic qualities of the object, which in turn may not even be appreciated by the creators themselves.[6] All of this is maintained despite the evidence within art history itself that which objects are defined as art has been subject to constant redefinition (e.g. Elkins, 2001; Haskell, 1980; Zolberg, 1994), and that art which poses the question 'Is it art?' is the preoccupation of the current *avante garde* establishment. It is also the starting point of philosophical texts on modern art, such as that by Cynthia Freedland (2001).

As long as the celebration of life and the greatest human achievements resulting from the idealized quest for beauty and knowledge are thought to require the avoidance of the negative and non-rational in human existence, the celebration will always be to some extent bland, lacking depth and shadow. Museums suffer more than any other element of Western high culture from the dualistic separation of form and content, of the emotional and the cerebral, and from the assumption that human destructiveness is a marginal rather than a central part of the puzzle of human experience. The result is that not only the objects themselves, but the role of museums in society, are diminished. A new epistemology is needed to enable museums to separate what is functional in enabling visitors to experience objects, from the traditions of presentation which mark museums as the territories of specific groups in society.

2.2. Museums' knowledge of visitors

> [Commander] Dalgleish said, "But a casual uninformed visitor could enjoy the experience, get a taste for it, discover the fascination of what in deplorable contemporary jargon

[6] For an alternative perspective to appreciating visual images, see Freedberg (1989). An extreme example of distain for producers can be found in Eric Newton's account of African art—"African sculpture is not, in any conscious sense of the word, 'art'…. Evidently a race of sculptors who could design human or animal symbols with equal confidence can hardly have been conscious that between the two there is a difference in kind" (Newton, 1963:283–4).

museums are encouraged to call 'the museum experience'. To that extent a museum is educational. Wouldn't the Dupayne welcome that?"

'In theory, I suppose'. [said the Trustee]

PD James, The Murder Room (James, 2003)

Despite museums having existed for more than 200 years, there is no consensus or clarity about what people get out of visiting them, or even about the terms in which the experience could be discussed. Until recently there was not much interest in finding out whether visitors had experiences which fitted these descriptions, and visitor studies is still resisted even in museums where it is practised (Fisher, 2001; Gammon, 2001). Museums are, by and large, provided not for visitors as revealed through some form of empirical study, but as imagined by the institution's founders, governors and staff. As well as the imagined and the researched visitor, there is also a third category, the theorized visitor, who lives a rarefied life in the work of cultural theorists such as Carol Duncan, Meike Bal and Pierre Bourdieu.

Essentialist museums which see themselves as providing beauty or knowledge for their own sake tend to be reluctant to define visitor experiences, other than in very vague and general terms. The visitors they target are highly idealized figures drawn from Victorian armchair psychology and formalist aesthetics, committed to appreciating pure form and to doing the homework required for object experiences. They also tend to imagine these usually solitary visitors as having pure sensory experiences, as if engagement with the world without interpretation were possible. Though they claim to be for everyone, the visitors they imagine are very much like the staff and board members in terms of ethnicity, culture, education, class and gender. The result of this is that many find real visitors disappointing. This is exemplified to an extraordinary degree in *The Art of Seeing* by Mihalyi Czikszentmihalyi and a group of fellow cognitive psychologists (Czikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990), commissioned by the Getty Foundation to improve the experience of audiences in art museums. The authors interviewed 50 or 60 directors and curators (and one educator) to see how ordinary people could learn from the experience of experts. Though the book makes some very modest practical suggestions about improving the visitor experience (largely ignored when the new Getty Museum was built in Los Angeles some years later), it is full of the most explicit snobbery.

The interviewees are virtually unanimous that modern people simply do not have the concentration or attention span to appreciate art—and that addressing this is not really part of what they are paid for. It is worth making explicit that the people whom the staff find so disappointing are not the general mass of the non-visiting population that the government and trusts are forcing them to consider, but the educated well-off people who actually do visit museums. The unself-consciousness with which these views are expounded is exactly what the ideological school would predict in an institution whose covert purpose (the maintenance of the current hierarchy) is at variance with its proclaimed egalitarianism. It is not just an accident that anyone who feels excluded from the world of power and status believes that 'museums are not for the likes of us'. "You don't belong here" is not a secondary, but a primary, message of essentialist museums to people who are not familiar with museum rituals.

Despite the secret *hauteur* with which museum visitors are sometimes regarded, they often collude with essentialist staff in resisting efforts to attract new audiences by providing welcome and support for novice visitors—often described as 'dumbing down'. While even well-educated visitors will find many objects about which they know nothing, especially in large multi-disciplinary institutions like the Metropolitan Museum of Art or the British Museum, what they do know is how museums work and what the acceptable behaviours and rituals are. To provide

introductory information would be to imply that they do not know much, or worse still, that the museum is no longer a privileged realm. The reasons given for not providing pathways to appreciating art through non-aesthetic knowledge or emotional connection are usually aesthetic (they would clutter the galleries), but these are merely problems of presentation which can be solved if the will is there. This perspective is part of the art-for-art's-sake tradition and, in effect, applies aesthetic criteria to visitors as well as to objects—and finds them wanting. It ignores a 100 years of developments in ethnography, communications and both the Freudian and cognitive revolutions.

Thus, a key problem in museum knowledge is that many staff are mounting exhibitions for an imaginary public which does not exist. Adaptive museums tend to be much more realistic and accepting about how visitors actually are, focusing their idealism not on an abstract perfect visitor, but on the capacity for every human being to grow and to realize their potential (O'Neill, 2001). They are also acutely aware of the diversity of visitors and potential visitors, and their tendency to visit museums as a social rather than a solitary activity. For adaptive museums, visitor research is a vital form of knowledge which must be as rigorous as collections research, and carry the same weight in shaping the museum strategy.

For adaptive museums, the ideals of educating visitors by transmitting information or providing pure aesthetic experiences are subsumed into a broader goal of enabling visitors to have a meaningful experience. The idea of the museum as a site of meaning-making is based on the seminal work of Lois Silverman, who maintains that it represents a paradigm shift in understanding the visitor experience (Silverman, 1995). Critics, like Kathy McLean of the San Francisco Exploratorium, claim that it is just another name for what good museums are doing now anyway (McLean, 2000). What McLean misses is that the good examples she refers to are mostly sophisticated versions of the Victorian transmission model of museums, where the staff use modern psychological and communications expertise to get their messages across to visitors who are still conceived of as passive. Silverman's vision differs in that it recognizes visitors as partners in the process of creating knowledge, which results when they engage with museum objects in light of their prior life experience, not simply when they memorize museum facts or share the museum's concept of the aesthetic. Indeed, the process may not involve taking in any formal information at all—it may be a moment of reminiscence or an insight shared with a companion. The meaning-making paradigm involves working with how people really make sense of the world and validating a far wider range of visitor experiences than museums have done hitherto. Perhaps the most successful museum in developing such an approach to visitors is Te Papa, the national museum and national gallery of New Zealand.

The single insight which would most transform museums is the realization that other people are different—from each other and, above all, from the staff (see e.g. Briggs and Myers, 1995; Tannen, 1995 for ways of conceptualising differences). Most people assume unconsciously that other people's minds work in ways identical to their own. Those who work differently can be regarded as being stupid or deliberately obstructive. Most often they are simply invisible and it is easy to find reasons not to take them into account. Whether one conceives of differences between people in terms of demographic categories (such as age, gender, cultural or ethnic background, sexual orientation, ability or disability, and level of education), or in terms of learning styles or personality types, the fact is that people differ profoundly in how they see and understand the world. The complexity of this range of difference is one of the most challenging realities involved in the task of creating an overarching museum epistemology. The opposite extreme—that people differ so much that it is not possible to vary provision to take difference into account—is equally fallacious and is also an excuse for inaction.

Museums which seek to face up to the complexity of both visitors and content are shifting from a communication strategy based on detached aesthetics and information transfer, to one based on storytelling. The human mind makes sense of the world by telling stories. Everyone is engaged in a constant process of telling and retelling their own story, as they try to assimilate new experiences to previous versions of who they are and how the world works. At a cultural level, this capacity for meaning-making through narrative is what underlies the great myths and fairy tales, and the great majority of art forms (Bettelheim, 1978; Bloom, 1994). Philosopher Martha Nussbaum argues that the form of engagement which narrative promotes is part a crucial element in civilization, exploring human experience in particular contexts, and in a way which enriches rather than shuts down possibilities (Nussbaum, 1995). Good stories can function at different levels for different people. They engage the imagination, intellect, memories and emotions of visitors and can have rich resonances without requiring more detail than is possible in a museum. Stories inspire visitors to bring far more of their own meaning-making capacity to the museum objects and this makes the museum's task easier. In fact, it is only this capacity of visitors that makes museums' task possible at all; museums need to work with it rather than at cross-purposes to it. Good stories are strong enough to hold together the range of objects in interdisciplinary displays; they can provide the context for the meanings of objects, without undermining their aesthetic power. Storytelling enables the museum to ask and answer questions about objects in an open-ended rather than a closed way, and to make statements of significance without preempting the visitor's own judgment or overwhelming her experience.

The vitality of this approach is reflected in museums all over the world, from Te Papa in Wellington to the new National Museum of Australia in Canberra, to the Museum of World Cultures in Gothenburg. Perhaps the most striking example is the Museum of Ethnography in Leiden, where the redisplay was conceptualised on a model provided by Georges Perec's novel *Life: a user's Manual.* From its setting in a single apartment block, the novel offers a model of an intense container with sections whose residents are separate, but capable of interacting, that served as a metaphor which holds the very disparate collection together.

The emerging museum epistemology aims to enlist people's complex capacity to generate knowledge in order to 'make meaning' of the world. It recognizes the centrality of the specialist contributions of both object and visitor experts in realizing the potential of museums as places of significant experiences for a wide range of people. Knowledge about visitor behaviour, needs and interests, design for communication, ergonomics, and the impact of architectural spaces all need to be formally integrated into what counts as knowledge in the strategic management of the museum. An explicit theory of visiting is necessary to enable the museum to organize itself, so that the institution as a whole (rather than a specialist unit) relates to and serves visitors. Such a theory is also essential if the institution is to be capable of learning. Without a hypothesis about visiting which informs new displays or exhibitions, each is unique in its successes and failures and few if any lessons can be learned.

2.3. Museums' knowledge of ourselves

> For the old man the museum was a private indulgence, as of course they tend to be for some of their curators. He didn't exactly resent visitors—some were actually welcomed—but he thought one genuine enquirer was worth fifty casual visitors and acted accordingly. If you didn't know what the Dupayne [Museum] was and the opening hours then you didn't need to know. More information might attract casual passers-by wanting to come in

> out of the rain, hoping they might find something to keep the children quiet for half an hour.
>
> PD James, The Murder Room (James, 2003)

Since the 1970s, reforming governments of both left and right have been wary of cultural institutions. At best, they view museums as an add-on to the core elements in society; perhaps not a luxury, but not really essential, either. At worst, they will assume that, like most bureaucracies, museums are devoted not to any social or cultural purpose, but primarily to their own survival. The history of museums can easily be read in these terms. They were established to share aristocratic or royal collections with newly enfranchised citizens, or to discover and display useful knowledge and inspiring beauty to civilize the nation or the urban masses. By the end of the nineteenth century, as their knowledge-producing function was usurped by universities and their public education function by the expanded schooling system, museum staff were faced with the challenge of finding a new way of carrying out their role (O'Neill, 2001:27–8). Instead, they withdrew from engagement with society and accepted philosophies of knowledge and beauty for their own sake. This provided a rationale for a shift from a focus on the audience to a focus on the staff, the governing body and those of similar culture and background. Essentialist museums may claim to be object-centred: in fact, they are usually staff-centred.

The question—'What are museums for?'—translates for staff into 'What are you for?', which can be experienced as threatening, or at least contributing to a sense of being unappreciated and undervalued. To answer the first question, the second must also be explicitly addressed, not just in terms of professional expertise, but also in terms of how subjective individual motivations are managed, as well as the intuitive, informal knowledge of what it is like to be a person which everyone deploys in their work, as well as in their private lives.

One of the major sources of epistemological tension within museums is the fact that many staff instinctively use their own experience as a touchstone when planning for the public, generalizing from themselves to all actual and potential visitors. An example can be found in the recent book *Pictures and Tears* by James Elkins, who offers suggestions to help his readers respond more emotionally to paintings: they should visit alone and be prepared to make a considerable effort to open themselves to one work, while at the same time being spontaneous. Despite the fact that his advice clearly reflects his own preferred mode of experiencing paintings, he himself has never been moved to tears by a painting (Elkins, 2001:209). Almost by definition, experts are unlikely to understand people who are not already interested in the specialism to which they have devoted their lives. Socially and professionally they will gravitate towards people who share their temperament, interests and values. If, from behind these socialized boundaries, art experts have in mind an idealized experience (whether aesthetic ecstasy or tearful empathy) which is, in fact, very rare even for them (De Bolla, 2001:12), then the real requirements of the lay public rarely register. Academic success requires a detailed knowledge of a specific territory, but not an understanding of how that area fits into the broad field of knowledge and human wisdom, so that it becomes easy to lose any sense of its significance to human life in general (Midgley, 1991). If there is an analogy between museum visitors and the rational consumers of the perfect self-regulating market, curatorship in these terms can be seen as a kind of insider dealing.

The corollary of experts' projections of themselves onto everyone else is that the expertise of those who do really know about visitors is not treated as proper knowledge. There are still many museums which do not involve learning and outreach staff in devising exhibition strategies,

selecting exhibitions and shaping their content. Exhibitions are presented as a finished product for which additional programmes have to be devised to make them accessible to anyone outside the cultural territory of the expert staff. This is the kind of weak education programme which adds weight to Duncan's argument that educational museums are as much about reinforcing the status quo as essentialist museums.

Teamwork is a relatively new practice in museums, still regarded by some as a management fad which will go away if we wait long enough. Teamwork is not, however, merely an instrument for management, as it represents a radically different epistemology from that of essentialist museums. It is the only way interdisciplinary working can be carried out, and the only way in-depth expertise of museum content can be integrated with expertise about museum visitors. Working across specialisms and subjects threatens the individualistic assumption that knowledge is the reified possession of individuals. To work in teams, museum experts need to develop a capacity to view their own specialist knowledge with enough detachment to enable it to be drawn on selectively by colleagues to produce new knowledge.

In addition to their justification of minimal interpretation on the grounds that everyone is like them really, essentialist museums also argue that everyone is so different it would be an imposition even to suggest a way of approaching an object. One interviewee in *The Art of Seeing* stated that 'museums all have aesthetic experiences, but each one is different', and so was not keen on museum education, whose output he compared to McDonald's: "I think they try to standardize something which is a unique experience for each person" (Czikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990:137). This confuses the *subjective* (in the sense of deeply experienced within a person) with the *individual* (in the sense of unique to one person). In fact, one of the capacities of art is to articulate these deep internal experiences to other individuals. While every person's response to works of art will be unique to that individual, this does not mean that their experiences have nothing at all in common with others, or that one person cannot share another's experience if it is communicated in a meaningful way. It implies a degree of personal autonomy which would seem to rule out not just shared intuitions or judgments of art, but also human development, learning, growth or cultural transmission, not to mention art history—as if not just some, but all, of the curator's knowledge and understanding are beyond language and sharing (De Bolla, 2001:10).

This extreme subjectivist view provides a rationale for excluding people who do not have the prior knowledge to appreciate art. The denial of the element of historical cultural development in both the creation of art and its appreciation by modern audiences reinforces the museum message that art is an objective and universal category. This is used by essentialist museums to justify their refusal to adapt, despite the contradictions inherent in simultaneously maintaining that objects speak equally to all visitors, no matter what their cultural background, that visitors should be prepared to study prior to visiting, and that each visitor has unique, incommunicable responses to objects. Not only is this evidence of the hieratic obfuscation common to many groups who see themselves as elites, but it also suggests an area where these museums are failing to fulfil one of their greatest potential roles in society. In a world where negotiating the difficulties posed by profound individual and cultural differences are critical to civil society, museums can function as places where people can explore their own identities in relation to others, to reflect on how people are different and how they are the same.

Only by becoming aware of our assumptions and thought styles will museum staff be really be able to overcome our excessively individualistic view of knowledge-production and see the process as a collaborative one between colleagues of different types of expertise and museum audiences. Far from diminishing, this clarifies the role of museum expertise and leadership, and

raises the issue of what knowledge to present and with whom to collaborate. This depends on museums' understanding of how society works, and this is the final category of museum knowledge reviewed in this article.

2.4. Museums' knowledge of society

> '…I told him what he already knew. The Dupayne, like any reputable museum, provides for the safe custody, preservation, recording and display of items of interest from the past for the benefit of scholars and others interested enough to visit. Dupayne seemed to think it should have some kind of social or missionary function. Extraordinary!'
>
> PD James, The Murder Room (James, 2003)

If the second axiom—that museums are a form of public good which are universally deemed to merit public subsidy—is accepted, then museums relate to society in at least two important ways. The first is the terms on which they receive a public subsidy and the second is the nature of the services they provide to the members of the particular society which subsidizes them. Even museums which are institutionally autonomous have to make choices about these relationships. A key kind of knowledge which is crucial to any museum epistemology is therefore its analysis of society. This involves a wide range of issues, but this article concentrates on one element which is missing from most accounts of museum epistemology—an explicit set of principles on which museum experiences can be distributed in a way that is appropriate for a public good, i.e. fairly.

To maintain that essentialist museums provide access on a fair basis would not only require demonstrating that benefiting one group to a far greater extent than others benefits society as a whole. It would also require showing that practices which are disadvantageous to excluded audiences are essential to the experience of objects.

A major stumbling block at this point is the fundamental disagreement about the nature of the object experiences—aesthetic, cognitive, emotional—provided by the essentialist and adaptive museums. These are so fundamental and so strongly reflect people's personal intuitions and modes of perception that consensus is unlikely to be achievable. Social and institutional changes which seem to threaten these beliefs are precisely those which are experienced as matters of life and death by those involved. Does this mean that agreement about a theory of justice for museums is also unattainable? Rawls encountered this problem when many people criticized his book, *A Theory of Justice,* for not setting out a fundamental ontological position (Rawls, 1971). Rawls' response was not, as expected, a presentation of his philosophy of the nature of being on which he had built his theory of justice. Instead, he argued that because of the great differences between individuals' experiences and what he called 'the burden of judgment' imposed by life on everyone, there would always be disagreement about the fundamental beliefs in the nature of existence—especially in terms of religion. It is not, he argued, the place of a civic system of justice to resolve these issues, but to provide a framework based on fairness which will enable as many people as possible to exercise their rights without infringing on those of others. If we use Rawls' distinction, we can say that museums do not have to achieve final agreement on the nature of the experience of objects. However, the provision of that experience must be subject to the terms of justice—and justice as understood now, not in the Victorian period. If the public good that is the experience of museum objects can be distributed more widely without being damaged, then not to do so is discriminatory.

For adaptive museums, fairness does not mean treating everyone the same, or providing the same experience to everyone, as essentialist museums tend to argue. Instead, they aim to give

everyone the same consideration in enabling their visit, taking into account the effect individual and communal differences will have on their ability to enjoy the experience. They not only seek to remove physical, cultural and psychological barriers to visiting, but also actively seek to stimulate visiting amongst non-attending groups, on the basis that not everyone's home life or schooling will have given them an opportunity to appreciate museums, and that they have the potential to do so later in life. In this analysis, the visitor is embedded in society and his/her capacity to choose whether or not to visit museums is limited by the structures of society and the opportunities accessible from his/her location within it. These potential visitors are not seen as culturally inadequate, but as having a wealth of life experience that they can bring to bear on the objects to create knowledge, and from which the museum can learn in its task of creating meaningful object experiences. The museum does not abnegate leadership on the basis of its expertise, but shares authority in creating meaning with its audiences. It works to increase the amount of freedom people have to choose to take up opportunities society affords. Displays which reveal the power of objects show that the world can be seen in many ways, creating a sense of possibility which is liberating—without constraining how individuals might wish to use that freedom. For objects to be able to realize some of their potential power, they need to be enabled to tell their stories and to give expression to their role in the culture which gave them significant form. If the museum assumes that visitors bring this background knowledge with them, they limit the best-served audience to those who share the culture of the staff, and withhold the knowledge which might be of value to people from other cultures. People are, of course, extremely sensitive to whether or not they are welcome in a place and the sense of a private shared culture, of help withheld, of superiority to those outside the in-group, are perfectly communicated. In Rawls' terms, the essential element of museums—the experience of the power of objects—has been confused with the means of presenting it, which have grown up over the years and which are part of the cultural capital of a limited group of people. They are thus discriminatory.

The argument against social inclusion programmes in museums as being instrumental is revealed to be largely about preserving exclusive access. There is considerable evidence that intensive engagement with creative activity does build up the self-confidence of individuals who, whether due to poverty, poor education, or family background, are, or are in danger of becoming, socially excluded (e.g. Dodd, 2002a,b; Hooper-Greenhill et al., 2000; Matarasso, 1997). Basing such creative activities on the inspirational impact of the museum is precisely about providing experiences of beauty and knowledge as ends in themselves to people as ends in themselves—unless one regards all education as purely instrumental. Social inclusion strategies are entirely consistent with the avowed humanist values which both adaptive and essentialist museums espouse. Many staff in essentialist museums are dismayed and hurt to be accused of being elitist, sometimes arguing from their own experience that they were inspired by aestheticised displays to develop an interest which enabled them to transcend the limitations of their background. It is undoubtedly true that even the most severely essentialist museums can work for some excluded people, despite their lack of the relevant cultural capital. The issue is why this opportunity would not be provided in a less random way to a wider range of people. The relationship of museums to the rest of society requires the incorporation of a theory of justice into museum epistemology, to ensure that the public good provided is not based on impossibly idealized visitors, on unconscious cultural boundaries created by staff assumptions, or on traditions of presentation which are marginal to the experience of objects, but which provide advantages to specific social groups. Museums can only be as good as their analysis of society and their awareness of the reality of people's lives. Even if, beyond specific intensive

programmes for particular groups, museums could make no contribution to diminishing inequalities in the wider society, they have an obligation to reduce inequalities in the cultural sector.

2.4.1. Towards a new epistemology for museums

> [Curator] 'No. A museum is about life. It's about the individual life, how it was lived. It's about the corporate life of the times, men and women organizing their societies. It's about the continuing life of the species Homo sapiens. No one with any human curiosity can dislike a museum'.
>
> PD James, The Murder Room (James, 2003)

This paper has sought to unravel some key inconsistencies in the knowledge structure in museums, and to identify some directions which may support future development and discussion. The focus has been on integration–integration of all aspects of museum knowledge within, and of museum knowledge as a whole with knowledge of the wider society—so that museum knowledge could begin to meet a key criterion of a functional epistemology—internal coherence (BonJour, 1998:210–231, Morton, 2003:2–3, 77–8). A new epistemology of museums would create a framework which would promote interdisciplinary working to reveal the stories which link objects across the taxonomies which separate and limit them. It would integrate expert knowledge of visitors and knowledge of objects, and it would promote staff self-awareness in managing personal motivations and the way we draw on our personal knowledge as a means of understanding other human beings. It would remain constantly alert to the tendency to bureaucratic introversion, and the impulse to avoid difficult or controversial issues inherent in some objects. It would support museums in representing the non-rational and embracing storytelling as means of combining structure and intuition, analysis and emotion, in order to unleash more of the real power of objects. It would help museums to find the courage to address human destructiveness, as well as celebrating human creativity and the wonders of nature.

A new epistemology would lead museums to take more responsibility for the quality of visitor experiences, not in order to transmit the museum's message more effectively, but to increase their choices and promote growth in terms of realizing their potential. It would view knowledge as containing many perspectives and involving continuous discovery and revisions on the basis of rigorous exploration of evidence, rather than as a reified, universal definitive body of fact. It would seek to share authority amongst curators, educators, designers, audiences and communities. It would take into account the distribution of power in society, locally and globally, and aim to share its privileged position as the producer of authoritative knowledge and meanings. Ultimately, it would try to break away from an excessively individualistic and dualistic epistemology in order to develop a more participatory and collaborative approach across all dimensions of museum knowledge—to create visitor-centred and object-based experiences which are made available in a demonstrably fair way to all.

2.4.2. What would such a museum look like?

The redisplay of Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow, has been approached as an attempt at a comprehensive experiment in implementing this philosophy—creating an object-based, visitor-centred, flexible storytelling museum. The City's collection of 1.4 million objects includes specimens from all the main museum genres and disciplines, so interdisciplinary working was possible. Rather than simply summarizing traditional disciplinary structures (Western Art from 1300–1900, Scottish Archaeology 8000BCE to 1500CE, Evolution, etc.),

the displays were built up from the actual strengths of the collection, by identifying the most interesting stories about the most interesting objects. This avoided the necessity of having to fill in the 'gaps' in the collection with graphics or audio–visuals. From a list of over 200 suggested by staff experts, a process of selection, involving extensive public consultation reduced this to 100. These were grouped into 18 broad themes, one for each gallery. These themes are defined simply enough to provide clear orientation as to content (French Paintings, Scotland's Lost Wildlife, Life in Ancient Egypt, Glasgow and its World), but are sufficiently broad to allow each of the 4–8 stories within each gallery to be changed without having to redisplay the entire gallery. More than 65% of the display furniture is modular, but it is the story approach which provides the basis for future change, not the equipment. Flexibility is often understood as a design problem, but it is in fact an epistemological one–unless the knowledge structure enables incremental change, altering a section of a large gallery will always create visual and intellectual dissonance. The museum can thus evolve over time to reflect new research, changes in public interest and simple rotation of objects.

The interdisciplinarity was not forced, but reflected an effort to answer important historical questions. For example, what had been the centerpiece of the former Arms and Armour Gallery—a suit of armour made in Milan in 1450—has been moved to Italian Art, enabling the great violence, as well as the great creativity of the Renaissance period, to be shown. The Arms and Armour gallery itself has been replaced by one on Conflict and Consequences, which engages with the purpose, as well as the beauty, of many of the weapons. It goes beyond the weapons and armour collection to include stories about Holocaust Survivors in Scotland, objects in the collection which are Souvenirs of War, and the lives of ordinary Scottish Soldiers. The Art Discovery Centre, which explores form, texture, line, colour and other formal elements, includes both Western and non-Western art. The introductory gallery, Looking at Art, caters to novice visitors by introducing them to basic genres—portraits, landscapes, still lifes—but is meaningful to more knowledgeable audiences because the examples are masterpieces. The landscapes are by Constable and Turner, and one of the portraits is by Whistler.

Very extensive research on visitors and non-visitors means that the displays are based on a good understanding of what visitors are interested in, on how they want to experience objects and their stories (Economou, 1999). This does not mean, as essentialists maintain, abdicating expert responsibility, but exercising it with an awareness of what visitors and potential visitors are really like, rather than as idealized simplifications. Crucially, it means that when relatively or completely unfamiliar subjects (Chinese art, turtle rituals of the Torres Straits Islands, pearl fishing in Scotland) are introduced, this can be done in ways which provide visitors with a way in (Fitzgerald, 2005).

An alternative approach to creating a museum which combines storytelling and engagement with visitors, a commitment to rigorous object-based research, and an epistemology which supports displays capable of evolving over time, is exemplified by the Museum of World Cultures in Gothenburg. Drawing on the collections of the Swedish national museums of antiquities and anthropology, the museum explicitly eschewed what the director, Jette Sandahl, calls the positivist approach of permanent displays. Instead, each of the museum's four floors is devoted to a different theme, selected to provide a variety of subject matter, mode of communication and perspective. The opening exhibitions are: an exploration of Africa and the African diaspora, with a strong focus on music, spirituality and resistance; a global overview of AIDS; an in-depth evocation of the life of the Orinoco people of the Amazon, and an installation about the museum and its values by the American artist Fred Wilson. The museum intends to change one exhibition each year, so that it can, if staff wish, be completely changed within

5 years of opening. The production values and scale of the exhibitions are those of long-term, rather than temporary exhibitions, while the timescale enables both repeat visits to favourite exhibits and the sense of a time-limited event which is part of what attracts visitors to temporary exhibitions. By abolishing the concept of the permanent exhibition, the MWC has also resolved the epistemological confusion that accompanies it.

This article has attempted to show that museums need to embrace a far broader conception of epistemology than has traditionally been the case, linking formal, informal, academic, experiential and intuitive knowledge of objects, ourselves, visitors and society into a coherent framework. I have argued that the keystone of this epistemology is a theory of justice which shapes the museum's relationship with wider society. The case for a theory of museum knowledge which values coherence across such a wide range of issues does not imply an oppressive uniformity—one of the key things museums need to know, in as deep and varied a way as possible, is that there are great differences between how people understand and experience the world. It is thus to be expected that museum staff, like people in the world outside, will have profoundly different expectations of the objects which are at the heart of museums. However, individual museum staff cannot rely on their own experience to provide adequate guidance in developing a relationship with society based on fairness. Provision based on generalizing from one individual's mode of experience will inevitably exclude people who experience things differently. Failure to distinguish between modes of experience and the means by which access is provided to them generates displays which are not only discriminatory, but which also tend to be academically weak, bland and lifeless. On the other hand, a broad epistemology, with an integral theory of justice, which supports object-based, visitor-centred, flexible and storytelling displays, has the potential to enable museums to contribute even more than they have hitherto to the creation of a culturally rich, humane, just and tolerant society.

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