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The Uses of Objects: Reflexive Learning in the Epistemic Museum

Museum based learning and cultural (un)consciousness

What do we keep stuff for? In particular what lies behind the cultural inclination to select, collect, conserve and display objects and keep them expensively in museums for public benefit?[1] The regional Harris Museum local to the university where I work in Preston in the North West of England is home to a permanent collection and runs temporary exhibition programmes housed in a late 19th century building, resplendent with neo-classical portico and pediment of self-conscious grandeur, raised above the main city square on what appears from the front aspect to be a massive plinth. In fact the portico is for the birds. A side entrance allows access to human visitors via a gloomy, atrium tucked away underneath. Once inside, the museum offers a monumental setting, with rotunda and grand staircase from of four stories rising 120 feet to the lantern that surmounts the roof; the walls are embellished with stucco friezes. It is as if the visitor must be chastened and over-awed, the better to abase her before the high culture she is about to receive.

Following Adorno (2002) we might consider that the import of the cultural institution lies less in its overt function than in what it reveals of societal contradictions by virtue of its own dynamic relation to the social and political context, and the public it ostensibly serves. This changes over time and in its current form The Harris has become a site of struggle between modernisers who want to put culture at the heart of local regeneration, so transforming the museum into a civic hub, and conservationists who hope to preserve an emblem of Victorian civic pride intact for the edification of future citizens. In the febrile political climate of Brexit, the museum is also enmeshed in tensions between cosmopolitanism and provincial retranchement, and between sentimental nostalgia and the manic optimism of populism.

There is much in museum curation and education, as well, as in the contents of institutions such as The Harris that enables us to reflect on what we unconsciously value as a society, what we repudiate, and how these change through processes which at the time are themselves socially unconscious. I became interested in how cultural institutions relate to their publics, when it occurred to me that part of what they do is offer a space for the contemplation of what we might tacitly know, but have not yet conceived – or what we might call the 'unthought knowns' of cultural life (Bollas 1987). The function of the museum is as much to hold the line against a collective forgetting through memorialization (Mack 2003) as it is a repository for the evolving symbolic life of city, region or nation. Museum collections may literally 'hold' tacit or disavowed cultural knowledge until there is an interpretive community ready and willing to receive it. Such is arguably the case with historical records of slavery or the subjugation of aboriginal peoples. Over time, and in the particular quality of setting the museum can provide, we encounter objects that stimulate

[1] Myna Trustram (2013) asks a version of this question prompted by the Mary Gregg collection in Manchester Museum in which many of the items are everyday, mundane and utilitarian, yet appear to resonate powerfully with many visitors.

associations, thoughts and feelings whereby the unthought known can find symbolic form in material culture and be recognized. In this respect the educational function of the museum is not so much to inform us of culture as to hold up a mirror to it so that, as Winnicott (1971) would have put it, each generation discovers for themselves what is there to be found. As individuals when we visit a museum we encounter an array of objects into which we can project self states and aspects of our habitual relations to people and things. They may become objects of identification and identity formation (Newman and Maclean 2006). They may also offer an aesthetic third (Froggett and Trustram 2014) around which we can elaborate new symbolisations.

In this article, rather than approach the knowing and learning that takes place in museums from the field of museology, I take a psycho-societal perspective drawing on a psychoanalytically informed tradition of thinking on culture from British and Continental traditions that converges on the problem of our relation to the sensible world. The question of interest here is how what is socially unconscious, or in the hinterland of consciousness, can be apprehended through the collections that a museum houses. Museology in general has been more concerned with what we can 'see' than with what is 'hidden', although the accent on visual display has begun to change as the 'post-museum' seeks out new opportunities for encounter and communication with its audiences (Barrett 2011). This opens the door to a psycho-societal perspective that asks what emerges in the space of interaction between museum going publics, the museum contents (including its personnel), and the society on whose behalf this work is done. I shall give an example of the interpretive potentials of material objects followed by a brief overview of the educational function of the museum in its instructional and interactive modes. This will help to clarify the museum's epistemic role (Born & Barry 2010, Muller et al 2006, Miettinen and Virkkunen 2005) in enabling an interaction with its objects that produces reflexive cultural knowledge.

Interpreting objects

In 2010 a series of radio programmes fronted by the Director of the British Museum, Ian McGregor, captivated mass audiences by presenting a 'History of the World in 100 objects' selected from the museum's vast collections[2]. With an object per fifteen minute episode, and a web-site that recorded the text and enabled viewing of the selected artefacts on-line, it was a tour de force of museum pedagogy that enabled the public to encounter each object in terms of the cultural attributes that have made it meaningful over time. For example a Victorian stoneware tea set, dating from the 1840's and partially overlaid with silver work, is understood not only through its materiality and its aesthetic, but through the layers of signification that expose the intricate mesh of social relations, military forces, geo-political administrative and legal powers, along with a household gender order and rituals of decorum, conviviality and probity enacted in the 19th century bourgeois parlour; not forgetting the promotion of tea in the service of temperance to divert the labouring classes from their habitual alcoholic beverages, thereby enhancing the discipline of industrial capitalism's burgeoning workforce.

The success of the series lay in the artfulness with which it enabled the ordinary museum goer, without any specialist knowledge, to acquire the curiosity and method to 'read' each exhibit as a text, understanding it as embedded in social practices and historically produced. The tea set might once have been celebrated simply as an instance of expanding market production, which combined with the craftsmanship of its silver overlay indicated a

[2] http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/a_history_of_the_world.aspx

conjunction of utilitarian need and refined taste in an affluent and aspirant middle class. Nowadays it would just as likely be associated with the imperialism that required agriculture, trade and industry to submit to a British 19th century quest for global domination. In providing expert knowledge of the history and social relations that underlie tea drinking, McGregor offered 'instruction' in the importance of tea production, trade and consumption, which we can further elaborate, and also illustrated the scope of the curator's trans-discipinary repertoire. Audiences could for example consider a tea set as a domestic object that stood at an intersection of global geo-politics, so that within its symbolic presence in the household was an implicate class-based, gendered and racialized social and political order. By thinking in this way about a material object, resonant because it is a special instance of a commonplace piece of household equipment, we could, if we wished, make imaginative comparisons between 'then' and 'now' - bringing to attention the temporal compression of contemporary working lives and how it invades the home, so that the tea set as a focal point of interaction disappears, to be replaced by a box of mass produced bags and an electric kettle. The 'Fordist' erasure of ceremonial tea-making processes comes to light through this juxtaposition, and with it the distinctive performative idiom of the domestic tea time – or what in British workplaces once constituted the tea-break – a social interlude and point of contestation in labour relations.

We understand through these comparisons a politics of the workplace and the home which is entangled with a changing aesthetic of living in the sensible world, that finds expression in objects of mundane, as well as artistic creation. These are particles of the 'distribution of the sensible' that Ranciére (2004) describes as "a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience" (2004:13). However, Ranciére's discussion remains at a metatheoretical level and describes broader epochal shifts between aesthetic 'regimes'. The contents of museums offer the opportunity to discern more localized and differentiated shifts in sensibility. This requires a view of how people have consciously interacted with the objects that they collect, conserve and present and how we apprehend their unconscious uses as distillates of unacknowledged past and potential experience

Besides the tea set's status as a manufactured item (the stoneware) we regard it as a crafted aesthetic object (the silver overlay) - in either case embodying the sensuous symbolic interaction forms that are materialized in process of moulding and making it, and in its ritualistic social uses (Lorenzer 1972, 50).[3] In a domestic setting the set is evocative of intimacy and the relations, harmonious or fraught, that can typify patterns of habitual family interaction. In my own family there is a teapot surmounted with a little silver bird that was gifted to my daughter as a child by her grandmother. The pot was in use in the grandparental home, and for the small child was invested with a fantasy of continuity and stability in a household that was becoming increasingly disordered through dementia and frailty. It served as a transitional object (Winnicott 1971) insofar as she chose it as a receptacle for her illusion of reliability, supported by the potential space[4] of the family teatime - an interlude of shared 'play' in afternoons that were otherwise fractious with inter-generational discontents. At the same time the teapot maintained a real existence of

[3] Although much of Lorenzer's oeuvre is concerned the symbolization of social interaction in language – Leithaeuser (2013:58) draws attention to his account of way in which these forms, deriving from originary moulding actions of maternal care, themselves culturally inscribed by social practices, are transformed and elaborated in moulding actions of work processes whereby raw materials are converted into commodities.

[4] Potential space supports creative illusion insofar as it allows a suspension of distinctions between fantasy and reality, and hence transitional phenomena. We do not enquire therefore "did you conceive of this or was it presented to you from without? …no decision on this point is expected. The question is not to be formulated" (Winnicott 1971, p. 12).

its own, durable but dented with the imprint of clumsy handling from more boisterous and carefree times.

" Without hallucinating the child puts out a sample of dream potential and lives with this sample in a chosen setting of fragments from external reality (Winnicott, 1971, p. 51).

Lorenzer and Orban - perceiving the close correspondence between transitional phenomena and the theory of interaction forms remark "… the transitional object is part of the scene, the realisation of one moment of the interaction form which is able to become independent and concrete in the light of which the emergence of self and object can be elaborated and demonstrated". (Lorenzer and Orban 1978, p. 478)

At stake here is a transformation of the object from its status as 'container' of sensual symbolic interaction forms that derive from its material nature to the biographically specific interaction forms that arise from personal uses of a cultural artfact - thereby composing a familial 'scene' in which a relationship to the cultural field is enacted. Similarly, the potential spaces of the museum gallery offer an array of 'evocative objects' (Bollas 2009) in which this transformation can occur so that the possibilities of symbolization are multiplied – or rather, the galleries can create the conditions – spaces of containment[5] - under which objects become evocative for the people who attend to them, so that they can be creatively used and transformed (Froggett and Trustram 2014)

There are a number of ways of conceiving the educational function of the museum space. It can be an authoritative, didactic space imparting a cross-disciplinary knowledge of cultural forms through the cognitive processes of museum interpretation; or, if we acknowledge the museum's socially unconscious functions, it can be a site of scenic experience (Lorenzer 1986) for the visitor who becomes reflexively enmeshed in a matrix of interaction forms with objects that are available for symbolization[6]; or it can be a potential space where material objects become the containers of unconscious phantasy (object relating), and the museum itself functions as an institutional container that allows unconscious cultural material to find symbolic form. In this mode it can offer resilient and evocative objects (Bollas 2009) that we endow with vitality, selecting, using and 'releasing' them so that they act back on us by virtue of their intrinsic properties (Winnicott 1971). I shall return to these questions later in this article.

The Systematic and Instructional Museum

The radio series, probably one of the most successful the BBC has ever produced, was not only instructive it was also interactive insofar as it was accompanied by on-line pedagogic resources for schools and adult education, and in a move guaranteed to intensify public engagement, individuals and local and regional institutions were invited to upload objects of their choice. All of this potentially offered rich data to anyone with an interest in material culture, whilst the selection and display of objects revealed preferences and prejudices in curatorial practice, and by extension those of the society on whose behalf the museum exhibits.

[5] The generic containment function intrinsic to museum experience is discussed in Froggett and Trustram 2014, while Bartlett and Muller (2017) address the anxieties provoked by a digital exhibition in terms of Wilfred Bion's conception of the container-contained relationship.

[6] For an English language discussion of this concept central to Alfred Lorenzer's work see Salling Olesen (2013), Salling Olesen and Weber (2013), also in the same volume, examples of the depth hermeneutic method through which scenic experience can be interpreted and Hollway and Froggett (2013) which bring the Lorenzerian and object relations traditions into dialogue through an empirical case study.

Museums have long been regarded as places of public education both formal and informal. The learning that takes place within them has been progressively reconceptualised in line with their changing social role throughout the last hundred years or so. The public museum, as opposed to the private collection, dates from the mid 18th century, aligned with the progressive emergence of a public realm. The British Museum and the Musée du Louvre in Paris were prestigious early examples. The public museum gathers strength with the modernist project, the growth of trade and the rise of the merchant classes, coming into its own with the consolidation of nation states and the colonisation processes of the 19th century. Both the anthropological and the art museum played a part in the cataloguing and documentation of cultures, and the self-assertion of an imperial world order. The museum's educational mission was to purvey a view of national progress as much for the 'civilisation' of the working classes as the self-congratulation of a newly powerful and wealthy bourgeoisie. To this end museums pursued their educative mission as a form of public address (Barrett 2011). Bordieu (1984 [1979]) argues that despite the avowed aim of edification, they remained inaccessible to those who lacked the cultural capital to fully benefit from their store of knowledge and artistic achievement (Bordieu and Darbel 1969 [1990]).

Well into the second half of the 20th century museum pedagogy developed in symmetry with the role of the professional curator, becoming implicated in the co-option of an authoritative view of culture into a wider project of governing (Bennett 1995). The function of the museum educator was to maintain a flow of information and curatorial interpretation from museum to a public with whose conditions of life it saw little reason to engage. While these institutions were "intended *for* the people, they were certainly not *of* the people in the sense of taking any interest in [their] lives habits and customs " (Bennett 1988 p.64). Following Foucault (1977) Bennett (1995) and Hooper-Greenhill (1992) see museums as engaged in disciplinary practices, implicated in the formation of subjectivity and mediating the relation between the individual and the state. The dominant exhibition aesthetic in such institutions is effected through quiet spaces of contemplation - the cavernous gallery, reverential atmosphere and oak-framed display case - ensuring that the viewer - always a viewer in an ocularcentric institution - was kept at a respectful distance. In the instructional museum - education, an activity where there is direct transaction with the public - has been largely subordinate to collection and conservation. In the UK it is staffed by a poorly paid and overwhelmingly female labour force, who until relatively recently mediated the knowledge flows in a one way direction, positioning the public as recipients and spectators. The interaction between viewer and collection as a site of inquiry, was and is at best a secondary consideration. In the didactic educational model the idea that one might be able to read the unconscious lives of cultures through museum objects is incoherent, insofar as this can only be achieved through an active and self-reflexive interpreting consciousness.

The de-centred and Interactive museum

The 1990's played a crucial role in helping to in dislocate a largely positivist and unified view of the nature of the knowledge dispensed by museums. Foucault (1986) saw the post-disciplinary museum as a 'heterotopia` - a place of "mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live" (1986: 24). A 'new museology' (Hooper-Greenhill 1992, 1994) was influenced by post-modernist and post-colonial critique in which the role of the museum is re-conceptualised as a 'contact zone' (Clifford 1999) - a cultural meeting point of different spatial trajectories and practices where the museum object can only be rendered intelligible

in conjunction with the communities who have a stake in its origins, ownership and uses. Technological developments played an important part - making literally possible Malraux's idea (1967) of a 'musee imaginaire' which, as Barrett (2011) points out, loses meaning in the common English translation of 'Museum without walls'. "…Malraux sought to establish a conceptual space for human faculties: imagination, cognition, judgement within the museum – to make the museum more 'humanist'. (Barrett 2011 p. 107). Hooper Greenhill (1992) lays emphasis on the museum's re-birth as a 'post-museum' where the visual culture of display gives way to one of communication, and where notions of a homogenized 'public' are increasingly replaced by stakeholder 'communities', 'audiences', or 'visitors', sometimes conceived as consumers. This is not the place to review the extensive debate about the democratic status of 'community' versus 'public' (see Barrett, 2011, for an overview of how it relates to museums). A change in terminology does not in and of itself reposition the people who use museums in relation to the institution and its educational activities. 'community' carries positive associations of an embodied and affective relationship between people and place – and stands as a counter-point to the individualization implicit in the visitor/consumer, but this can be a romanticisation. What defines the relationship between people and museums is the nature of their interaction which may range from a participant opportunity whose parameters are largely defined by the institution to an epistemic role whereby knowledge and learning is in some degree co-produced.

The de-centering of the museum as locus of authoritative cultural knowledge was accompanied by the rise of constructivist education theory (Hooper-Greenhill 1992, 1994). In the context of museum education constructivist pedagogy departs from an idealist epistemology (Hein 1995) and the principle that knowledge and meaning arise in the knower. Hence, rather than conveying systematic knowledge, the role of the museum and its educators is to create the settings and opportunities for interaction with the museum collections that correspond to the specific needs of the learners in question. In interactive museum education visitor interpretation is encouraged, along with the use of technology for uploading photographs and video – a form of user-led curating. The justification is anti-elitist, in the sense of blurring the distinctions between high and popular culture - so that the instructional model is abandoned in favour of 'discovery', and even entertainment. Alternatively, where neo-liberal conceptions of utility, value for money and impact are required to justify any public investment in culture, museums take on an ever widening array of additional functions. Hence we have seen a variety of in-house and outreach activities increasingly working with marginalised and vulnerable groups and requiring a skill set that naturally falls within the province of social work or health work, and can even border on the therapeutic. (Froggett et al 2011).

Commented [LF1]: I've double checked this and have added Hein 1995 – a key 'definitional reference from the Journal of Education in Museums – this is the way constructivism is used to practical effect. Happy to add a footnote clarifying other uses that you allude to but I would need some help here.

Instruction and interaction do not exhaust the educational functions of the museum and is objects. The third possibility is of an epistemic role in which the museum setting enables the self-reflexive experiencing of objects in such a way that they are related to, understood and used to bring into awareness the unthought knowns of the sensible world by linking personal and cultural life.

Reflexive learning and the epistemic museum

Different museum practices do of course co-exist in the contemporary museum. We could posit a continuum with the authoritative, systematic, instructional museum of display at one end and the placeless, heterotopic contact zone at the other - universalistic conceptions of the public are abandoned in favour of a differentiated view of who is accessing the

collections or building, and for what purposes. The authoritative role of the curator declines in the interactive museum as knowledge is dispersed into various modalities of exchange between the museum and its interested communities. In theory the museum does not so much address these communities as provide the settings and circumstances of access which may be virtual or real, and which provide opportunity for a learning experience.

In the History of the World in 100 objects we see a number of these modes available simultaneously. The accounts of the objects were elegant achievements of curatorial expertise, yet in the delivery of the programme at least we experience a museum 'without walls', dependent on broadcasting and multi-media, where interactive possibilities ranged from simply listening in, to following up the online documentation, to engaging in blogs and debates, and finally to a form of audience co-curation whereby selection and decision-making about significant and evocative objects were made by members of the audience themselves. There was little doubt in this particular endeavour that the weight of authority remained with the host institution, but the democratizing direction was clear, and the choices made by the public will no doubt occupy historians and social scientists for years to come. In principle the reflexivity could have been pursued further. The teapot could have become a stimulus for a community led investigation of contemporary tea-drinking rituals within the social settings where they naturally occur, giving rise to a co-produced analysis of what they reveal of everyday sociability as it is lived (or neglected) today. Such a project (not directly connected with the radio programmes) was in fact undertaken in Blackpool in 2016. Wabi Char, took inspiration from a 16th century tea making ritual and was commissioned from artist Caroline Jupp as part of the LeftCoast Creative People and Places Programme, funded by Arts Council England to bring art to areas of cultural under-investment. It drew together a cultural exchange around everyday tea-drinking practices among different communities in the town, including people with dementia (Roy et al 2016).

The political context

Drivers of change are often external to the museum sector itself and developments and debates within museology. As a public institution the museum always stands at an intersection of a number of cultural and policy cross-currents. By way of illustrating the recent fate of museums in the UK, I return to The Harris which, since its founding, has been largely dedicated to the curation of its collections, but is now considering its future civic role as an anchor institution for the city. This widening social remit, typical of regional museums, has gathered impetus over the last two decades and is hailed by some museum professionals as a long overdue democratisation. It is both impelled and constrained by the economic austerity that has been imposed on the sector since the financial crisis of 2008. One of the most noticeable impacts of austerity (fully intended by successive neo-liberal governments) has been the phenomenal contraction of the local state and the decline of municipal authorities, whose funding has been cut by up to 40% in comparison with pre-2008 levels, with further reductions foreseen at the time of writing. In this situation cultural institutions have begun to step in to fill at least part of the gap – the civic deficit that results from the withdrawal of public amenities and the degradation of sites of public encounter. Regional museums have embraced this widening social remit to increase their chances of survival. Supported and part-funded as they generally are by Local Authorities, they have been particularly vulnerable since cultural facilities tend to be regarded as dispensable in harsh economic times, unless like the big national institutions, they contribute significantly to a tourist economy. Many regional museums have closed in recent years; re-inventing

themselves as service providers in priority areas like health offers some hope of continued investment.

Object Relating and object use in the museum

The expectation that museums sustain educational and civic functions, whilst justifying their funding in terms of mass appeal, new audiences and social impact has had paradoxical effects. On the one hand it has introduced principles of consumer demand and satisfaction; on the other it has led to new strategies of engagement with disadvantaged visitors or communities who lack cultural capital. Some of this work has been very challenging and it has not been universally welcomed among museum professionals - why would one train in conservation and curating in order to work with mental health problems or addictions? In a study of such initiatives in England, Froggett et al (2011) found that the strains entailed were stretching some staff well beyond their comfort zones, but the effect has been to re-position curating and education as relational and reflexive practices, enmeshed in the tensions produced by the institution's changing social role. This stretches the curatorial mind-set. In a Visual Matrix session with post-graduate student curators on at the University of New South Wales, in 20167 it became clear that one of the attributes most valued and exhibited was empathy. An interesting outcome of this shift of focus towards human relations has been to cast into relief object relational potential of museum collections and exhibitions, though this has so far been little investigated (see Froggett and Trustram 2014, for an exception)

The following example is taken from research into a programme that operated across six of the UK's North West regional museums, and specifically from work undertaken in The Harris. [8]. Although individual projects supported by this programme were largely led by museum educators the overall objective was to develop health and well-being initiatives targeted at specific communities who would not normally access museum services. In most cases there were no clearly prescribed health outcomes, the aim was to see how museum practice could be extended to become more inclusive, and how learning to make use of the collections could benefit participants who had chronic and enduring ill-health, and sometimes severe disabilities. Work was group based and ranged from people with mental health, alcohol and substance misuse problems, to dementia and disabling or life-threatening physical illness. Some of the projects were delivered on museum premises, others in the institutional health or care settings where people were living. Group numbers were small (normally between six and twelve) and invariably included intensive work which involved an element of creative activity in a carefully designed containing space. In this sense most groups enjoyed something of the intimacy and security of a therapeutic setting in which they could develop skills in art or craft, or simply appreciate what the museum could offer. Without exception projects aimed to help participants gain in self-confidence and social skills and enrichment. The staff leading the groups all intuitively tried to create a space which was both of the museum and apart from it – a 'third space' (Muller et al 2015) which is neither a space of everyday social interaction nor a didactic space, but in a potential space in the Winnicottian sense in which participants could access cultural objects which came 'alive' for them, and through their conscious or unconscious use of these objects could forge a personal relationship to a shared culture

[7] The Visual Matrix Session was conducted with students from the Master of Curating and Cultural Leadership Course, Scool of Art and Design, University of New South Wales, Australia. Visual Matrix is a group based, associative methodology which accesses unspoken dimensions of experience through shared imagery and affect (Froggett et al 2015)

[8] Who Cares? Museums, Health and Well-being was a two year investigation of innovations in museum based learning among six North West regional museums directed understanding the conditions under which vulnerable groups could be engaged and with what effects. It was funded by the then Museums and Libraries Association, now subsumed under Arts Council England

In The Harris the physical setting for this space apart took the form of a small room, normally used for educational purposes, which offered respite from the overwhelming architecture of the building and its cornucopia. The group in this case had been recruited with the help of a hostel for men with multiple problems related to homelessness, including unemployment, alcoholism and mental health problems. The aim was to take them to see a temporary digital installation by Simon Faithfull, entitled 'Recent Findings', that was showing in the gallery at the time. The artwork was then used as a stimulus for a group exercise in creative writing, led by performance artist, Chanje Kunde. It became clear from the outset that the promise of sandwiches and tea (this time as gift, or bribe) before the visit was actually the principal attraction, and after these had been consumed two of the recruits disappeared. At this point the omens were not auspicious – with one or two of the participants presenting as dishevelled, distracted and possibly drunk. However, they did agree to be accompanied through the galleries to view the work, which was in three sections on large digital screens.

The first part, in black and white, consisted of line drawings of urban crows created by Faithfull on his palm pilot, as he travelled the world observing how the birds take on the characteristics of the human populations among whom they live. In cities crows are scavangers, unloved, uninvited, often aggressive, and regarded as avian vermin that foul the spaces that they invade. The group were distinctly unimpressed, declaring the work itself to be "crap" and as researchers we could not escape the thought that crows carried unfortunate associations for people who have lived unwanted among them on the city streets. At any rate, the group moved on quickly, unwilling to give the work further consideration. In the creative writing session that followed the crows were not mentioned – it was as if 'crap' had emphatically evacuated the experience.

However, the next screen had quite a different effect. It showing a grainy black and white film of about 20 minutes, devoid of obvious aesthetic appeal, and yet the group was intrigued and watched it through from beginning to end in rapt concentration. Its subject was the artist himself, again armed with his palm pilot, attempting to follow the meridian line, regardless of obstacles, in a trajectory that – ridiculously - took him across ditches, along river-beds, over high wire fences and through someone's kitchen window. Later in a jointly composed poem, the group wrote

The World didn't seem to care
Just like Tony Blair
Things Might slow you down, keep going
Every paragraph is worth knowing
Doubts disappearing through a window
Life's journey keeps on flowing through…

The poem emerged via a method whereby Chanje asked for impressions and comments in associative manner, and no particular order. The words were captured on flip chart paper and crafted into poetic form with the active participation and agreement of the whole group. The lines showed how they related the artwork to their own lives identifying with Faithfull's improbable quest and futile persistence. Sticking to a chosen path (the Meridian Line) which has no real counterpart in the material world, whilst navigating the obstacles of nature and the orderly lives of others, made existential sense to a group familiar with homelessness. They appreciated the rueful humour and pointlessness of the artist's effort, and the dogged attempt to keep going that spoke to them not only of their situation, but of

the state of mind required to retain a sense of agency in 'life's journey' which keeps on 'flowing through' regardless of the world's indifference. The psychosocial reality that the participants shared as a group found expression in the cultural text they produced. It was articulated in relation an aesthetic object which they appropriated for their own use, projecting into it their life experience. In this way it acquired a particular a resonance for them.

It is worth pausing to consider what was happening here in terms of Winnicott's depiction of transitional phenomena which he defines as

> *…an intermediate area of experience, unchallenged in respect of its belonging to inner or external (shared) reality, [that] constitutes the greater part of the infant's experience and throughout life is retained in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and religion and to imaginative living, and to creative scientific work. (Winnicott, 1971 p. 14)*

This formulation reflects Winnicott's concern to identify the location of cultural experience and the conditions under which it takes place in what he calls the third (intermediate) area of experiencing, characteristic of play. Affirming that the *experience* of play "… is in fact neither a matter of inner reality nor a matter of external reality" he asks "if play [as the origin of cultural experience] is neither inside nor outside, where is it?" (p. 4) and answers that it happens in the potential space between the individual and the environment, "between the subjective object and the object objectively perceived, between me-extensions and not-me" (p. 80).

If we consider the group experience depicted above we see a certain instability in their interaction with the film which is initially strange to them (experienced as not-me), then it intrigues them, and then acquires a very personal resonance for them as they 'incorporate' it, so that it takes on the character of a 'me-extension'. So close do they feel to the artist's experience that they continue to relate to it as if it were their own, overlaying it with the association of an uncaring world, though there is no suggestion of this in the film itself. The potential space that would allow the work its otherness has collapsed in the process of identification. The experience becomes one of fusion with the object which means that although they enjoy it, it ceases to have an independent existence with attributes that do not equate with their own. Since cultural exclusion is one of their definitive life experiences, the process in some measure re-affirms their marginalisation. I say 'in some measure' because this moment exists in a continuum, as we shall see, but it illustrates the difficulty with strategies of learning which depart from what is perceived as primarily relevant to the subject.

Alternatively the object 'objectively perceived', would have carried layers of signification for the group that reached beyond their situation. The film could have been understood as an exploration and critical commentary on the relation between the virtual and the real, and the seductions and perils of literalism in translating digital bearings into the material world, of confusing reality with simulation. Beside the virtues of persistence it spoke of the absurdity of obstinacy, and how defiance or disregard of objective constraint can be an act of revolt, or consignment to an autistic mode of existence. Of course these aspects of the film could also have been related to the lives of the group but they gave no sign that such interpretations were meaningful to them. Instead their subjective appropriation was selective. They projected into the object and identified with it, and in so doing they formed a relation to it (and to the institution that delivered it to them) but they were not challenged

by it and in the lines they wrote, they positioned themselves as victims in an uncaring world. As a highly stigmatised group there was some truth in this, but it was not a route to a broader *cultural* engagement.

The third screen was produced by the artist after a trip to the Arctic Circle in the hope of seeing the auroraborealis, which, in the event, never appeared. Instead, he filmed the reflections he saw in his own eye which, hugely enlarged on the screen, produced an image that the group - to judge by their exclamations of surprise and pleasure - found ravishing. A telescope satellite dish, seen from a distance, floated in the pupil, enclosed in the subtle irridescent ring of colour that is the beauty of a human iris. It was a visual meditation on the nature of perception and the mind's eye as a filter for reality; on the different modes of looking and seeing that are available to us; and on how carrying on in the face of disappointment, rather than dogged persistence, may entail first the acceptance, then the transformation of failure. The group responded to it affectively and aesthetically and when it emerged in the poem that they produced together it was distilled into the words

Northern lights in my eyes,
A light for every time I've tried

This thought is self-reflexive rather than merely self-referential. It's emotional weighting is very different to that of overcoming obstacles in the face of an uncaring world. It acknowledges both the world beyond the self and the symbolic distillation of the Northern Lights into commemorations of personal trials and disappointments – failure is neither projected onto others, nor disavowed, instead of victimhood there is the effort to take responsibility and self-forgiveness. In Kleinian terms (Klein 1940) this would be regarded as depressive anxiety in which one fears for one's own destructiveness, but out of love of the world, rather than its repudiation. The potential space between the individual and the environment is held open and with it the possibility of transformation. The image is neither a subjective object nor an object objectively perceived, but a transitional object (Winnicott 1971) from an intermediate area of experience, not merely related to, but 'used' and then 'released' as a cultural object to live a life of its own.

Winnicott's distinction between object relating and object use is an important one, because it identifies the transformational potential in transitional objects, which are the first objects and proto-symbols that, as infants, we co-opt and manipulate for our own purposes, thereby unknowingly gaining access to a cultural order. In object relating the observer projects into the object or the setting, appropriating elements of it for the expression of parts of the self, so that it becomes meaningfully cathected. In object use the object is placed beyond omnipotent projection, 'surviving' as a resilient object with its intrinsic qualities intact that can then contribute back to the subject. This is why the group were able to be nourished by an aesthetic experience from the third screen and were thereby connected to a shared culture and able to partake in the sensible world of which the artwork is a part.
Cultural experience arises through the finding of transitional objects throughout our lives and museums offer bountiful collections of objects for this purpose. Our group completed its process with the aesthetic transformation of a visual artwork, used as a transitional object, into linguistic form through poetry. This is a form of language is replete with sensual symbolic interaction forms that arise in sensory experience of the material world. The interaction forms are irreducibly social, even though their social character may only become fully evident in language. Lorenzer and Orban (1978) take Winnicott to task for referring to 'subject' and 'object', 'inner' and 'outer' as if separable - but the 'as if' is critical and in 'The Location of Cultural Experience' (Winnicott 1971) subject/object is a heuristic device that

describes *perception* of the object and its relation to the subject rather than its ontological status. Winnicott's focus is on the nature and quality of experiencing, Lorenzer's on how that experience is formed. What they agree on is the transitional or intermediate nature of culture that delivers a sensible world to us in its spatial and temporal modalities through our interactions with it.

There is an unconscious cultural content in these interactions in the sense that they are infused by a habitual or disavowed unthought known until adequate symbolic resources are found to give it verbal expression. 'Adequacy' occurs in Lorenzer's view if the *sensuous* symbolic interaction forms embedded in language maintain its vital felt connection to the sensible world – as is most likely in literature or poetry. The authoritative museum interpretation that addresses its audience is less likely to achieve this than the reflexive co-option of visitors in an experiential and interpretive process. This requires the communicative conditions of the epistemic museum that honours the intermediate nature of culture through the potential spaces it creates. In these spaces socially produced unconscious material that *appears* personal becomes bound to the shared symbolic repertoires of material culture where both physical artefacts and the language with which we speak them establish a *felt* connection to the social world.

The learning process in the epistemic museum is *generative* – it is a cultural production with personal emotional resonance, and it is the socially unconscious aspects of the museum experience that account for this generative nature: over time and as conditions ripen, we uncover the symbolic potentials of objects, as they disclose to us the contradictions embedded in the social relations of their production and use. Thus 'provoked' we re-interpret them to find layers of signification that were not previously available to us. This is an embodied and aesthetic process, as much as a cognitive one, in that it invokes a full range of sensory and affective capacities. At a personal level these objects activate the transitional phenomena that allow us to creatively discover for ourselves what is there to be found, allowing us to dwell among the paradoxes of the hidden and the visible world and of 'inner' nature, so that the knowledge thus produced is in a continual process of dynamic emergence. The museum then becomes an institution to whose care we consign the objects that matter to us, to reflect our sensibilities back to us, so that we can locate ourselves sensuously in a time and a place. This is a basis for enjoying and critically apprehending our relation to other cultures, past and present, and the potentials and limitations of our own.

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