Affect, Interpretation and Technology

The interpretation of objects is a fundamental function of practically all museums; the actual display methods through which objects are interpreted, however, vary greatly from one museum to another and over time. In recent years, the strategies of display adopted by museums have significantly shifted, particularly in relation to the emergence of two areas: the employment of multimedia information technology in delivering interpretive information and the use of affective modes of communication in the interpretation of artefacts. At museums such as The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, the Hong Kong Museum of History and the National Museum of Australia, advances in information technology significantly influence museum displays. At the same time, these same museums aim to generate emphatically immersive and moving experiences for visitors, engaging them at a sensory level, particularly by emphasising visitors’ embodied relationships with spaces and objects. The rise of both affect and technology in museums are coincidental trends of equal force that have developed fairly independently of one another. Most often, information technology complements affective modes of communication by providing contextual information through cognitive, linguistically-based, didactic modes. Very rarely, however, do museums combine affect and technology. Indeed, they seem quite incongruous – while affective experiences are closely linked to visitors’ physical relationships with objects, multimedia information technologies are fundamentally intangible.

What place, then, can this technology have within this rise in affective experiences in museums? In this paper, I will address this question by first considering current museum display strategies that aim to employ affective interpretive modes, focusing on the
importance of the physicality of space and the materiality of artefacts. Indeed, the emergence of this mode is seen in context of the broader general trend towards ‘experiential’ display practices within museums in general. In the latter part of the paper, I consider this trend in relation to the rise of multimedia technologies in museum displays.

Since the emergence of the New Museology in the 1980s, it is an axiom of museum interpretation that an artefact’s meaning and significance is contingent upon its social contexts. Theorists like Susan M. Pearce, for example, significantly influenced the way in which museum theorists and professionals understood the interpretation of artefacts. It was, however, a very particular approach to interpreting objects. Pearce extrapolated the analytical frameworks of Saussurean structural linguistics and applied them to the ‘reading’ of objects. So, similar to semiotic analyses of words, Pearce’s object analyses attempt to retrace the momentary mental process of signification. The object, as the material manifestation of social systems, becomes the parole and its meanings are decoded in relation to its social and historical contexts, the langue (Pearce 1992: 24-30). Objects are thus seen as forms of text, to be interpreted through a linguistic unpacking of their meaning. It is an interesting adaptation of the approach of structural linguistics, and Pearce certainly makes effective use of it; she uses this method throughout her own work and it strongly underpins her own proposed methodological model of artefact study (Pearce 1994: 125-32). Her adaptation of the semiotic approach, however, is very much ‘of its time’, as part of a wave that swept across a range of cultural theory disciplines in the 1980s. Consequently, Pearce’s structural linguistic approach to interpretation gives primacy to the linguistic (written and speakable) elements of the artefact (Pearce 1992: 7-14), but largely ignores the significant
non-linguistic affective dimensions of objects. In recent years, the Pearce approach is proving to be limited because it ignores the meaningfulness of our physical phenomenal engagements with objects, which goes beyond the straightforward symbolic. As Eilean Hooper-Greenhill notes recently, while social contexts are vital to interpreting material culture, the importance of our experience of the object should not be ignored:

The exchange between object and viewer is more than a cognitive one. The encounter between an active agent and an object has two sides to it: the interpretive framework brought to bear by the individual subject, which is both personal and social, and the physical character of the artefact. (Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 112)

Whereas the semiotic approach allowed for a cool-headed unpacking of meaning, it ignored the messy but vital significance of the highly-subjective aspects of our physical encounters with objects – the role of our senses, memory and emotions.

When we experience objects, we do more than simply read them. We engage them within a spatial relationship with our body. As Hooper-Greenhill says, “the material properties and the physical presence of the artefact demand embodied responses, which may be intuitive and immediate… the initial reaction to an object may be at a tacit and sensory rather than an articulated verbal level.” (Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 112) Jill Bennett, an art theorist, describes these kinds of encounters as being, “in a very palpable sense, ‘felt’ rather than merely observed.” (Bennett 1997: 131) It is a kind of ‘language of the body’ — an untranslatable idiolect” (Bennett 1997: 132). It is a ‘language of the body’ in the sense that our embodied engagements with objects are richly meaningful.
The Hong Kong Story, the centrepiece permanent exhibition at the Hong Kong Museum of History, provides a clear example of how this affective ‘language of the body’ performs an interpretive function in museums. The exhibition was opened in 2001 and traces Hong Kong’s history from prehistoric times to the Handover of the former British colony back to Chinese sovereignty in 1997. Part of the exhibition recreates the experience of walking down a Hong Kong street in the early twentieth century, during the British period.

Within the indoor space of the Museum, a row of shops is portrayed in life-sized detail. Visitors wander by a representation of the waterfront of Victoria Harbour and up into the ‘city’, past Chinese food stores, tea shops and medicine shops. They can walk into shops, throughout buildings and climb aboard a tram. The exhibition goes far beyond a simple dioramic display. Rather, it attempts to interpret the past through authentic material culture that is presented within spaces that are occupiable and seemingly liveable.

Importantly, this kind of display strategy potentially opens visitors to a kind of subjective empathic identification. What do I mean by this fairly complex phrase? I will illustrate with an example of a pawn shop, included in The Hong Kong Story’s street. As visitors enter the pawn shop, they are met by a sparse interior with only a very high service counter facing them. The counter stands at about six-foot-high and can barely be reached by an adult. At first, visitors might well be puzzled at the sight of this absurdly oversized counter. What confounds visitors at an intellectual level, however, suddenly becomes clear when they engage physically with the counter. Standing in front of the counter and reaching up to its top, it becomes evident that its height is a strategy for ‘saving face’: from the proprietor’s point-of-view behind the counter, only the top of the client’s head can be seen,
guaranteeing the client’s anonymity. This experience grants us an understanding of the counter that goes beyond any intellectual engagement: our understanding is perceived more than it is conceived; it is felt more than comprehended. Furthermore, and importantly, through the affective encounter with this object and its space, we are able to identify empathically with those who once felt the humiliation of standing in front of similar counters. Likewise, at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC, affective display strategies are employed with great affective potency. Visitors experience the inside of a Polish cattle car that was used to transport prisoners to their deaths and walk beneath a cast copy of the infamous ‘ARBEIT MACHT FREI’ sign from the entrance to Auschwitz. The Museum places visitors in physical relationships with these objects that echo those of Holocaust victims. Visitors learn about the Holocaust at intellectual and cognitive levels, within historical narratives of dates, places, people and events. But these objects and spaces create immersive experiences that operate at an extra-cognitive and extra-linguistic level.

As an interpretive strategy, this ‘affective mode of apprehension’, as Julies Prown terms it, (1980: 208) can be profoundly meaningful and emotionally powerful. During a recent visit to the Imperial War Museum’s Holocaust Exhibition in London, I encountered a pile of shoes, which were confiscated by the Nazis from prisoners at Majdanek and the Aktion Reinhard camps during the Holocaust. Standing next to these shoes, sharing their space, I found myself singling-out one shoe amongst the innumerable browning mass. Looking at that shoe, in its raw stark materiality, I could easily imagine slipping it onto my own foot. We can never assume that our subjective reactions are necessarily the same as
those of anyone else, but my own experience of this was very affecting. These shoes, however, are certainly apt to evoke affective responses from different visitors because shoes appeal to our banal bodily habits. The everyday habit of putting on shoes is so much a part of our living embodiment that we barely think about it. This single shoe offered itself to my everyday habits, inviting me into the intimately tactile relationship of wearing it. Even though museum conventions prohibit me from actually touching this object, this degree of physical connectivity persists in this encounter. At that moment, I shared with its anonymous murdered owner, from 60 or so years earlier, a common and very everyday habitual relationship to that shoe. And it is through these kinds of shared relationships with objects that we can enter into powerful empathic relationships that seem to transcend place and time. When we walk beneath the ‘ARBEIT MACHT FREI’ sign or reach up to the Hong Kong pawn shop counter, we do not just see these objects and read meaning from them, unpacking and decoding them into linguistically-expressible information, we also engage with the objects at an embodied level, through our senses and within spatial relationships.

It is important to understand these kinds of displays in relation to broader changes in the functions of museums within society, and to sketch out the shifting value systems that underlie the move towards the use of affective modes in museums (Chakrabarty 2002: 5-6). Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that there is a slow but steady movement in museums over the last century towards adopting more experiential and embodied modes of interpretation and communication. He argues that this movement comes in response to fundamental shifts in the nature of western mass democracies since the nineteenth century, which have gone from what he calls a ‘pedagogical’ model to a ‘performative’ model (Chakrabarty adapts these
terms from Homi Bhabha’s (1994) use of them). The ‘pedagogical’ model was dominant in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; in this model, subjects are not born as political beings but instead earn that status. Citizenship is therefore something earned and entered - into, primarily through linguistically-based, cognitive modes of education. According to Chakrabarty, learning through abstract reasoning was central in pedagogical democracies in the nineteenth century, with the written word as its highest form and universities and museums as corresponding and reinforcing institutions. Later in the twentieth century, however, the ‘performativ e’ model of democracy begins to dominate. In the performativ e model, legitimate citizenship is not something earned but rather a natural and given human right. As Chakrabarty says, “[i]n this conception that has increasingly dominated debates in and about public life since the 1960s, to be human is to be already political” (Chakrabarty 2002: 6). It is an inclusive notion of citizenship, not predicated on the prerequisite of literacy and abstract reasoning.

Museums, then, have changed their interpretive practices in ways that directly correspond with the role of museums in relation to their changing societies. One important consequence has been the easing of the bias towards cognitive forms of interpretation over affective forms. In the nineteenth century, museum objects functioned to articulate linguistically-expressed metanarratives of knowledge, such as taxonomic structures. This regime actively discouraged experiential and embodied engagements of visitors with their objects. Glass cabinets extracted objects from lived experience and placed them into stasis; they privileged sight above other senses and often restricted the visitors view to a fixed point, making objects two-dimensional so that they could be interchangeable with their labelling.
Museum visitors’ embodied experiences with objects were suppressed and directed more towards non-bodily physically-removed cognitive contemplation. Since the emergence of the performative model of democracy, in the latter half of the twentieth century, there has been a significant shift in museum attitudes towards knowledge and the role that their objects play in its production (Schlereth 1985: 1-75). Particularly since the 1960s, museums are recognised as being ideological institutions that reify power through the interpretations and narratives with which they frame objects. Their narratives are now recognised as being contestable; knowledge is no longer singular and sanctioned by the institution, but is multifarious and negotiable. This loosening of the museum’s authority is now regarded as a positive basis of new developments in contemporary museum practice. As Andrea Witcomb argues, these days “visitors themselves have an active role in the process, becoming co-authors in the production of meanings” (Witcomb 2003: 143). This breaks down the traditional one-way flow on knowledge by allowing meanings and narratives to be negotiated between institution and audience, and it brings audiences into a more intimate spatial relationship with museum objects in which the information gained is more experiential than cognitive. As Chakrabarty says, “if the pedagogic model of democracy privileges the capacity for abstract reason and imagination in the citizen, the performative one brings into view the domain of the embodied and the sensual… it is as if the pedagogic model privileges the brain over the senses.” (2002: 7) In contrast to the restrictive functions of glass cabinets, many museums now attempt to reconcile the object with visitor experience and draw visitors to the conceptual and analytical via the sensory and experienced. As Chakrabarty says: the politics of experience orients us to the realms of the senses and the embodied. This is never achieved by the capacity for abstract reasoning. It takes us away from our senses, it trains us to be sceptical of the evidence they produce about the
world… The museum today, however, increasingly opens itself up to the embodied and the lived. (Chakrabarty 2002: 9)

Importantly, unlike museums in the nineteenth century, visitors to museums like the Hong Kong Museum of History and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum are actively encouraged to engage the museum on a physical and multi-sensory level. Their embodied experiences contribute to the interpretive framework of the museum.

With all this emphasis upon spatial relationships, the materiality of the object and the embodied physicality of the visitors, can ‘immaterial’ multimedia technologies in museums effectively contribute to this affective interpretive mode? Can multimedia technologies go beyond the more straightforward cognitive modes of interpretation? Many multimedia exhibits we encounter in museums tend to be of the mouse-and-monitor variety; we either sit or stand before a screen and interact with the technology, usually through some kind of manual interface, such as a keyboard, mouse, pushbuttons or touch screen. A very good example of this kind of multimedia interactive is *The Lady Darley Album* exhibit, produced by Kate Richards, which recently was included in *The Lost City* exhibition at the Museum of Sydney. In *The Lost City*, this multimedia feature was included at the end of an exhibition of images and objects, which most notably featured a detailed miniature model representing King Street, Sydney, in the 1890s. To use this interactive, the visitor sits at a desk with a mouse and computer monitor. On the screen, they can access one of many historical panoramic photographs of Sydney by navigating and selecting with the mouse. Each image is hyperlinked to texts of historical information. This is an interesting and enjoyable multimedia feature, and I found myself spending more time using it than looking at the objects in the exhibition. The clickable interactivity of its images allowed my interaction
with the technology to be informative without being didactic and closed-off. This kind of dissemination of cognitive information is certainly vital to the functions of museums. The experience, however, has a limited affective dimension. If an embodied encounter with objects evokes certain kinds of sensory memory, then sitting down with a monitor and mouse resonates more strongly with sitting at the computer in my office than anything else. Indeed, the approach of *The Lady Darley Album* is typical of many multimedia exhibits. Another multimedia exhibit at the Museum of Sydney was a three-story vertical video wall in the Museum’s vestibule. In its 1994 version, this video wall went beyond the mouse-and-monitor use of multimedia features such as *The Lady Darley Album*. As Andrea Witcomb notes, the video wall moved multimedia technology away from strategies for the straightforward dissemination of cognitive information and more into affective territory. Witcomb points out that although the video wall is technology-based, the broader idea of interactivity it enacts is “not premised on technological definition, ”but instead is about spatial experiences.” It produces a kind of “dialogic interactivity” that is emphatically directed at the body and the senses (Witcomb 2003: 156). In this case, multimedia technology is employed to create an experience of a space *in order to interpret that space*, rather than as an extension of existing text-based interpretation, as a kind of animated didactic panel. The video wall demonstrates that a greater confluence is possible between the increasing use of multimedia technology and the broader movement within museums toward affective and experiential modes of interpretation.

At the National Museum of Australia in Canberra, an exhibit called the *Welcome Space* goes one step further than the video wall. The National Museum of Australia uses
many multimedia interactive technologies, such as the Big Map, a large Australia-shaped video screen that can be controlled by visitors through a touch screen interface. Visitors can access a wide range of historical, environmental and geographical information from the touch screens, which are powerfully brought to life on the large screen. The *Welcome Space*, however, combines this traditional ‘manual interface’ interactivity with the ‘dialogic interactivity’ of the Museum of Sydney’s video wall. The *Welcome Space* comprises a wide darkened corridor with a bank of video projections on either side, which leads into the Museum’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander gallery. On each side of the corridor, a row of indigenous Australian dancers is projected onto the screens, accompanied by sounds and music. The projection loops through a series of different dances. At first, these projections seem like the video wall at the Museum of Sydney; the scale of the projections creates a ‘spatial experience’. As we move through the corridor between these projections, however, the movement of our bodies has a direct impact on the images. Movement on the floor causes ripples and movement on the screen as well as sampled sounds. The movement and sounds respond in direct proportion to the movement of the visitor. If visitors stamp heavily and dance enthusiastically around the space – as many children tend to do – it positively bursts to life.

As David Bearman and Jennifer Trant suggest, multimedia exhibits such as the *Welcome Space*, add a wholly different dimension to interaction and participation, “by removing the keyboard interface and putting a visual interface at the social centre, by making interaction visceral or verbal rather than symbolic and textual.” (Bearman and Trant 1999: 21) So, a multimedia exhibit such as the *Welcome Space* is not concerned with the
dissemination of knowledge that is cognitive, ordered, linear and narrativised, but knowledge that is gained through embodied experience. With the *Welcome Space*, technology is vital in activating the physical space of the museum. Once visitors realise that the *Welcome Space* is responding to the impact of their feet on the floor, the space encourages further stamping of feet. As with the pawn shop counter in *The Hong Kong Story*, we enter into an empathetic physical relationship with the indigenous dancers on the screens and the living cultures represented in the gallery. These kinds of exhibits are sometimes construed as being part of a ‘Disneyesque’ museum-as-theme-park trend. Keith Windshuttle, in his criticisms of the National Museum of Australia, likens the *Welcome Space* to MTV. Similar criticism was levelled at Te Papa in Wellington by Rodney Wilson, director of the Auckland Museum, who said that “[p]eople who flock to the British Museum in London don’t do so because they really want to go to Disneyland.” (Robinson 1998) Such views tend to overestimate the importance of structured narratives and underestimate the importance to visitors of tacit information.

Multimedia technologies, then, do have a place within the rise of affective experiences in museums, but the extent of this is largely dependent upon how museums understand and utilise those technologies. The mouse-and-monitors approach will remain as important as the need to provide visitors with factual and cognitive information. But we should not underestimate the possibilities that multimedia technologies may hold beyond this effective but very straightforward role. The use of technology in an exhibit like the *Welcome Space* demonstrates a different, imaginative and more open understanding of what constitutes interpretation – in which contextualisation is provided by experiences rather than facts.
Fundamentally, this entails a rethinking of what constitutes ‘information’ in museums. As Chakrabarty says, “information is now also what addresses other senses – of seeing, hearing, smelling and touching.” (Chakrabarty 2002: 11) Ultimately, museums stand to benefit from this more expansive understanding of information. As Charles Saumarez Smith notes:

The museums which have the greatest grip on the popular imagination are not those which are most modern and systematic, but often those which are most disorderly and individual… the experience of these places is not of history, ordered and systematic, but of memory, provocative and strange. (Saumarez Smith in Kwint, 1999: 7)

Regardless of the technologies that museums use, whether high-tech interactives or low-tech dioramas, a broader understanding of information and interpretation opens up visitors for more intense encounters within museums.