

Books: A Note to My Successor—Some Thoughts on the Problems and Possibilities of Museum Books

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My congratulations to you—or should that be my sympathies?—on being chosen as *Curator's* next Books Editor. On the positive side, you're joining a team of thoughtful, creative editors who manage to generate sparks of camaraderie even though we're scattered around the country. Your postal carrier and UPS driver will soon begin delivering a steady stream of books from academic and commercial publishers—review copies and sometimes bound proofs, all with chipper press releases slipped inside the covers and publishers' glossy catalogues spilling out of the envelopes. Your bookshelves will gradually come to resemble mine, and visitors who don't know about your editorial work will be wowed by the breadth and idiosyncratic coolness of your interests, which will appear to run from Pueblo pottery to Islamic calligraphy by way of the anthropology of world's fairs and the latest scholarship in cultural property law and "glass studies." Who else, your friends will wonder admiringly, would own that gorgeous coffee-table book celebrating *Traditional Archery from Six Continents*?

Yes, the environmentally unfriendly truth is that a fair percentage of the books you'll receive for *Curator* you'll have no intention of getting reviewed, for the sensible reason that they're not really *about* museums—their work or history or guiding ideas—and have little light to shed on those topics except indirectly and in the aggregate. Instead they're about the objects

that museums exhibit or the technical study and preservation of those objects. So they tend to appeal mostly to people who are already interested in and at least somewhat knowledgeable about those kinds of objects or the periods and places associated with them—which in many cases is a small, specialized audience. (If this sounds familiar, perhaps it's because museums themselves have been accused of focusing on certain classes of objects largely for the benefit of people who already recognize and care about those classes. Not surprisingly, many of the review copies in this category are exhibition catalogues or scholarly texts published in association with new or upcoming exhibitions.) In other words, rather than books *about* museum practice, these are books *of*—that is, exemplifying or representing—museum practice. If museums' traditional activities of collection, preservation, study, and public exhibition can be thought of as a kind of object-based discourse, then what you're looking for as *Curator's* Books Editor is a meta-discourse: stepping back from those activities in order to consider their origins, meanings, functions, and futures.

Of course, a variety of those "about" books will arrive in your mail slot as well—books like *Museums after Modernism* or *Museums and Community*, books about trends in exhibition design, zoo history, visitor motivations, green museum construction, museum marketing, informal science education, museum philosophy,

and the like. A quick taxonomy of these “about” books might be organized around a distinction—or rather, a continuum—between texts written by academics and those written by museum practitioners. At one end of that continuum are books from scholars in various branches of the humanities or social sciences (or, less frequently, the natural sciences) who happen to be interested in museums or museological issues from one angle or another. (Considered as a whole, the museum field is almost absurdly multidisciplinary, as East [2008] and others have reported.) Sometimes that interest is merely one among many and results in a single book about museums; in other cases the interest becomes primary and is sustained over a career.

In the increasingly busy middle of the spectrum are texts by museum studies faculty. Here we may want to distinguish between museum studies programs that are . . . well, academic—theory-oriented, historically minded, linked closely to other university departments via interdisciplinary collaborations—and programs that keep one foot in scholarship but lean toward practice, whose faculty members often work in or consult to museums in addition to teaching. These latter programs may be interdisciplinary, but they’re also *extradisciplinary*: some of their priorities have less to do with the pursuit and creation of knowledge in some recognized domain than with preparing today’s and tomorrow’s museum professionals for the practical challenges they’ll face. Finally, at the other end of the spectrum, are books by the museum professionals themselves, including staff and consultants. Those professional books are the tip of an iceberg of museum discourse that also includes “gray literature” (confer-

ence presentations, blog postings, proprietary research reports commissioned by museums, and so on) as well as peer-reviewed journal articles and national research studies.

Of course, many books fall somewhere between these categories. It’s a continuum for good reason. There have been collaborations between academics and museum practitioners; volumes of essays by museum professionals who write from essentially academic perspectives; scholarly musings about the minutiae of museum practice (for purposes other than professional training); and so on. It used to be easier to see the difference between the insider view (museum professionals writing largely for each other) and the outsider view (academics writing about museums, often critically and also for each other). But over the last two decades or so, the academic left’s critique of museums, which began emphatically *outside* the museum—think of the line that runs from Michel Foucault to Tony Bennett, Carol Duncan, Alan Wallach, and others—has been internalized (some would say co-opted) by museum studies programs and even by some influential museum professionals. What was once a disturbing attack that felt to museum practitioners “like being psychoanalyzed in public,” as one of our book reviewers put it a few years ago (Lindauer 2007, 362), has gradually informed the profession’s own rhetoric about its challenges and ideals. I think of Stephen Weil, Elaine Heumann Gurian, Robert Janes, and Nina Simon, although the influence of the postmodern academics on these commentators’ work seems mostly indirect.

Our taxonomy would also have to take into account these books’ subject matter and what type or types of museums they

deal with. It could draw distinctions between books by a single author, multi-author collaborative works, and collections of essays by various independent contributors. (The latter category includes the museum studies anthologies that have been published with increasing frequency in recent years.) Or between university presses, independent nonprofit presses, and commercial publishing houses. (You'll occasionally receive an art-forgery saga or a great-man-of-science biography from the latter.) Or between museum studies programs in North America and those in the U.K. or other English-speaking countries. Constructing such a taxonomy in earnest would be a valuable service to the field, and I hope others take up the thread. My hope here is simply to give us a framework for discussing the challenge you're undertaking.

The good news, and the reason for those congratulations I offered, is that some of these museum books are terrific. The best of them may give you, as they've given me, a feeling of prickling excitement—a sense that something is at stake, is being risked. How they do this varies, of course. Whether or not you find a book exciting will have as much to do with you as with the book: we get most charged up about what we agree with and what we're already invested in. ("A real book is not one that we read," W.H. Auden observed, "but one that reads us.") Still, as I pass the torch—or rather, the editor's red pen—to you I'll mention some of the characteristics I've been grateful to find on the page in the seven years I've been *Curator's* Books Editor.

Good museum books reveal the ways in which the familiar ideas and practices of museology (past or present, depending on the author's project) are contingent

rather than given. They put some critical distance between us and museums, making the ordinary seem unfamiliar, even strange. With the benefit of that distance, the authors are able to interrogate the actions, rhetoric, and structures of museums at a fundamental level. This is not easy for insiders to do; we have trouble seeing the assumptions we operate within every day. Philosopher and sometime-museum-historian Stephen Asma has likened this ability to "tasting your own tongue"—an illustration of how difficult it is (Asma 2001, 154). Good museum books also manage to ground themselves in the relevant literature or practice area while also lighting out for new territory. That balance is important. Without knowledge of what museum people have been arguing about, a new perspective reads as merely naïve. Conversely, without something new to say, the contribution feels like hackwork—an apology for the status quo (a problem I'll come back to in a moment).

When good museum books do borrow theoretical constructs and examples from other domains, they do so in ways that preserve the complexity of those ideas and respect what's irreducibly foreign about them—aspects that aren't neatly assimilable to the museum issue at hand. More broadly, good authors of museum literature know how to sustain an argument or narrative over many paragraphs or chapters, and they understand the difference between a string of assertions and the methodical intertwining of observation, inference, reference, and persuasively articulated belief that constitutes a genuine argument.

Good museum books sometimes raise questions they don't and can't answer, which can feel like a radical act in a field

that is has been trying for decades to establish certainties about itself and its cultural status. By problematizing rather than tidying up, these books have the potential to influence the collective agenda and spur debate. (I say “potential” because even the best books can do little good if nobody reads them. Jay Rounds has raised disturbing questions about how much of the museum literature is actually consumed and by whom [2007].)

The best museum books display *wit*, in the sense of both mental quickness and disarmingly clever humor. These authors are confident enough to expect that they’ll be taken seriously even though they don’t take themselves too seriously, and relaxed enough to let a little of themselves into their texts, acknowledging the subjectivity inherent in any human enterprise and thereby helping us account for their presence in the argument as we grapple with it.

This list could go on: I’ve had the pleasure of discovering museum books that were heroically well-researched, that spun nuanced historical narratives, that offered powerfully simple frameworks for thinking about complex things—frameworks I’ve found indispensable and passed on to colleagues. A few have permanently changed the way I experience and think about museums. The best museum books can be very good indeed.

The problem—and the reason I offer sympathies mixed with the congratulations—is that such books are distressingly few and far between. Too many museum books that come across my desk display an intellectual thinness and logical slipperiness that limits their value to both scholarship and practice. They read as competent enough, but if you probe a little, you find they don’t support real analysis. Too often I’ve found myself

wondering if there isn’t, at the heart of the text I’m reading, a kind of dodge, something avoided or elided because grappling with it would have been too troublesome or destabilizing. The Duke University interdisciplinary scholar Cathy N. Davidson calls this “fudging,” which she defines as intentionally or unconsciously “glossing over the nuances of a complicated, inconvenient, or even controversial topic” in order to fit in, as it were, within the cozy confines of one’s discipline. She notes that the “evasions and coverups” of fudging “arise most often when a scholar is confronted with the most fundamental and potentially contentious concepts of her discipline.” So fudging is “emotionally fraught, making you susceptible to exposure,” and instances of it in a text tend to be heralded by a momentary grandiosity that both marks and masks anxiety (Davidson 2009). Although Davidson has in mind science, literature, and other fields, her analysis captures something all too common in museum books.

Too many museum books operate within a narrow and convenient sphere of reference, drawing mostly from sources, ideas, and examples already present within museum discourse. (Such books are *about* museums in a much narrower sense than, say, history books are about history, because the latter is inherently outward-referring: its subject—the human narrative—lies outside itself. Does an analogous dualism exist in museum studies?) This is especially true of books by and for museum practitioners, which sometimes feel hermetically sealed within the bubble of museums’ most gratifying assumptions about themselves. Even on the academic side of the spectrum, many are rife with what has been called (in another context)

“unexamined postulates that answer the question before it is asked” (Ragland-Sullivan 1987, xvii). New or foreign ideas from various disciplines do make their way into these books, of course, but they tend to be ones that confirm rather than unsettle the ways museum people see themselves and their institutions and are often applied in reductive ways that reveal the author’s naiveté about the discipline in which the idea originated. The result is a kind of provincialism in which the text can only consolidate museum theory or practice, even when its author seems to want to reexamine or redirect.

Too many museum books make claims they don’t support, mistaking assertion for argument and an abundance of citations or footnotes for rigor. Those citations, in fact, can be symptoms of the problem, because pointing out that an assertion has been advanced before by someone else is not the same thing as subjecting that assertion to skeptical scrutiny, yet it can lend the appearance of having done just that. Too much museum literature relies on this network of mutually reinforcing citations, which suggests an ethos of stringent standards where the reality is much grayer.

Am I being harsh about these books? If so, I’m not alone. I recently invited a professor at a well-known museum studies program to review a new release written by a museum scholar at another university, someone whose work she didn’t know. A week after receiving the book, she emailed me to decline, saying she didn’t think it was worth her time to review or the museum community’s to read. Its contents were “tied together in no coherent fashion,” with “no context. No big ideas. No discussion. Pretty much nada.” The book even made her wonder about the standards of the press in question, which

she had already noted as the source of some dubious contributions to the museum literature: “Will they publish anything?”

Similar questions have come up in book reviews we did publish on my watch, although they’ve been raised more constructively. In one typical case, a graduate student at the University of Chicago reviewing a museum studies anthology wrote that the contributors to the volume had failed “to acknowledge the obvious counter-arguments to their own positions or pose difficult questions with . . . depth and urgency,” and that the editor had neglected to bring the articles “into meaningful dialogue” with each other or “with the more mainstream positions they oppose” (Silver 2007). Other reviewers have wished for broader perspectives, deeper intellectual roots, more incisive analysis, and (while we’re at it) fewer typos and misspellings than they found in the sometimes carelessly edited texts they reviewed.

It’s worth remembering that all of these books, including the one dismissed as “nada” above, were subjected to an independent peer review process in addition to internal editorial review before being accepted for publication. So at least two museum studies scholars or museum professionals not affiliated with the author read each manuscript—without the author’s name attached—and approved it, albeit sometimes with recommended changes. This reminds us that reasonable people will differ on such judgments: quality is to some extent in the eye of the beholder. But it also raises troubling questions about the value of the peer review process itself, which may display some of the same failings as the literature whose standards it is meant to police. After all, it’s the same set of people doing most of the

writing for publication and the reviewing of manuscripts for possible publication, and one might expect the same standards, assumptions, and ideals to inform both endeavors at the deepest level. It might be easier for one museum author to hold another to high ideals when reviewing a manuscript than to hold her own writing to those same ideals, but it's unlikely that she would have in mind very *different* ideals in the two cases. To the extent that those ideals express the profession's limited or wishful vision of itself, professionalism can work against healthy self-critique.

There are also what we might call "social" constraints on the independence of the peer review process, as you'll see in the course of your work with this journal (whose articles also peer refereed). The peer review process is supposed to be blind, but the museum community is a small town; sometimes it's not hard for reviewers to guess the identity of the author of the book or article they've been sent, or for the author who receives those reviewers' comments via his editor to guess their identities. The pool of people active in those two roles is relatively small, and everyone needs—or imagines they need—to scratch each others' backs in order to obtain the outcomes they desire (tenure, promotion, job leads, freelance assignments, and so on). Collegiality can work against self-critique, too.

Of course, the flaws of peer review are only part of the problem. To round out the diagnosis, let's return to our taxonomy of museum books and try to map it onto the distinctions we've just been making between good museum books and their less useful but more abundant cousins. Recall our continuum that runs from academic to professional, or theory to

practice, with museum studies programs arrayed in the middle. It will come as no surprise that, at the academic end and in some books by museum studies faculty, the critical skepticism through which museums are observed is sharper and the sphere of reference in which they're situated is wider than at the professional end. The academics are also better at contextualizing museums among other human endeavors and bringing to bear interpretive tools from other disciplines to understand them, both of which can be richly revealing. (Some of the most powerful tools are anthropological, and while many anthropologists work in museum settings, primarily natural history museums, relatively few have made museum cultures the object of their investigations.)

Broadly speaking, standards of rigor, research, and readability are also higher on the academic side, with exceptions. What the professional texts—the how-to manuals, case studies, and research reports written by museum practitioners or consultants—offer instead (at least in theory) is "actionable" relevance; yet too many of these books are built on oversimplification and superficial analysis, so they fall into the less-than-useful category after all. To be fair, the practitioners who write these books aren't trying to create knowledge for its own sake; they're trying to support or strengthen museums in doing what they do, often by codifying "best practices" and extrapolating principles that can be applied elsewhere. So it could be argued that I'm projecting the goals of one type of museum literature onto another and predictably finding fault with the latter. But aren't creating knowledge and improving practice aspects of the same root enterprise? Don't we need to do the first in order to effect the second, and wouldn't a

little self-critique of our assumptions, impulses, means, and desired outcomes help us to do it?

There's some irony in my describing outsider and academic museum books as more useful, as a class, than those by and for practitioners, since most working museum professionals avoid the academic literature precisely because they think it's *not* useful: too theoretical and abstract to help them meet their institutions' practical and pressing challenges. Yet as Lois Silverman and Mark O'Neill have observed, the rejection of scholarly writing may run deeper than that: "Many museum staff are wary of abstract ideas and concepts that appear to threaten institutional traditions" (2004). But if I'm right that books on the academic end of the spectrum are more likely to bring outside concepts and contexts to bear on museum issues, then what we have is a tradeoff between perceived relevance and breadth of perspective—a tradeoff that, in the workaday world, relevance will always win. This is dismaying, since unfamiliar perspectives and reference points are some of the ways new ideas enter a community of practice, and new ideas can help that community evolve apace with the society it serves (Rounds 2004). Museum practitioners who eschew academic books about museums are cutting off an important route to their own success, broadly and collectively defined.

I would cast the net even wider, in fact. What museum professionals *and* museum scholars really need to read—and think, write, and argue about—are books that *aren't* explicitly about museums but which might shed bright light on the museum enterprise if we can read them with our eyes open. I'm not referring to poetry and philosophy here, although these may be

relevant in certain instances; this isn't a fantasy of communal enlightenment. I'm suggesting that if, for example, you work at a science museum or are studying how science museums define their purposes and strategies, you needn't reach immediately for the recent National Academies report on *Learning Science in Informal Environments* (Bell et al. 2009) or the Exploratorium's handbook, *Fostering Active Prolonged Engagement* (Humphrey and Gutwill 2005). Instead, you might dust off a copy of Richard Feynman's *The Pleasure of Finding Things Out*, a collection of the Nobel laureate's talks and stories from the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s (Feynman 1999), and give some thought to the distinction he draws between learning an idea and learning a mere definition. (If you're like me, you'll never look at a science exhibit the same way again.)

Or you could pull out another physicist's book, this time from your children's shelves: Brian Greene's fanciful foray into children's literature, *Icarus at the Edge of Time* (2008), which demonstrates the power of narrative and emotion in the communication of science concepts more vividly than any museum book would.

You could read journalist Richard Panek's *The Invisible Century: Einstein, Freud, and the Search for Hidden Universes* (2004), with its psychologized, un-museumlike picture of how science springs from and unfolds in individual human lives; or, somewhat closer to home, Lawrence Weschler's *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder* (1995, a Pulitzer Prize finalist), an unsettling meditation on museological truth and passion occasioned by the Museum of Jurassic Technology. All of these books raise provocative questions about science museum exhibits, programs, priorities, and philosophies, and

these questions are different in kind from those raised by the museum field's own literature on the same topics: they're looser, more agnostic, and more open-ended; "what ifs" rather than "how tos." Even by beginning to imagine answering them, we learn something about what's possible in (to use the current example) a science or natural history museum.

There's an apparent contradiction here. At the outset I dismissed those coffee-table exhibition catalogues and technical manuals as subjects for a review in *Curator* on the grounds that they weren't really "about" museums, but were instead examples or representations "of" museum work. Yet here I'm calling for us to pay more attention to books that are likewise not "about" museums. The difference is that outsider books like Feynman's lectures, precisely because of their outsider-ness, can be read as implicit critiques of museum practice and catalysts for new exploration, whereas most exhibition catalogues are (again, implicitly) assertions of the rightness of one approach over another. It's not that we should be reading the outsider books *instead* of those that are explicitly about museums. We should be reading them alongside museum books, and we should be much more open to noticing the museological questions they pose and the solutions they propose. If we can first make that leap in our imaginations, we may be able to take new steps in our scholarship and practice.

Naturally, you won't be able to review many of those outsider books in *Curator*, no matter how rich their implications for our readers. You'll be too busy trying to keep up with the stream of books about museums, more of which seem to be published each year as museum studies programs proliferate, publishers expand their

lists to meet the demand (and new publishers turn their attention to museums), and museums themselves continue to grow in size and numbers around the world (Rounds 2007; Lindauer 2007). I look forward to seeing which titles you pluck from this stream to review in *Curator* and which ones you decide to slip quietly onto your bookshelf between *Cézanne's Other: The Portraits of Hortense* and *Cars: Freedom, Style, Sex, Power, Motion, Colour, Everything*. More keenly, I look forward to seeing how the reviewers you commission to write those appraisals respond to the excellences and the failings they find in those texts. A literature is only as good as its critics. Only by reading stringently and deeply can we ensure that our books will be written stringently and deeply. We are all peer reviewers. Your job as *Curator's* Books Editor will be to remind museum scholars and practitioners of what's at stake each time we put pen to paper or expectantly open the cover of a book.

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