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*From museum as text to museum as experience ?*

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***Introduction***

I would like to dedicate this to the memory of Helen Coxall who died in 2009 and who woke us up in the UK to museum text and how it might be - but usually isn’t. Helen investigated ways in which language serves ideological ends and constructs meanings that often privilege existing power structures in society and in the museum. (Coxall 1991, 1995, 1997, 1999) Does that sound familiar?

In my experience, there is still more confusion (and blood on the museum carpet) about exhibitions, permanent galleries and text than almost anything else in our world- and more disappointment. I wrote about this at some length in ‘The Responsive Museum’ (chapter 12 in Lang Reeve& Woollard 2006) Why is it still such a problem and what can we do about it? Does theory help? Who does it well- and why don’t we learn more from them or ourselves? Let me start with theories.

***Theories***

Having worked in museum education for 30 years I now teach on a Masters course at London University for future museum, gallery and heritage educators. We start with a gentle introduction to cultural and learning theory beginning with modernism and postmodernism. To caricature only slightly:

The Modernist museum or gallery is museum as text and curriculum: male, often white, exclusive, controlling, traditional, doesn’t like small children- and it doesn’t go away! Modernist Text is authored, anonymous, authoritative, with grand narratives of wholeness even though based on strange samples of actual stuff; as text often bland and boring, asks no questions and suggests no uncertainties. Modernism has audiences who are regulated and usually deferential. Modernism enforces the authority not only of the curator but also of us the educators, favouring more passive and bounded learning through the didactic exhibit, the lecture by an expert, the worksheet and the guidebook, and teacher education where we know best.

The Post- modernist museum on the other hand is the museum as experience- more female: touchy, feely, interactive; personalised meaning making as part of learning that is more free choice; post- colonial and just about post everything; accessible and inclusive (Falk and Dierking 2011) ‘Where the modernist museum was (and is) imagined as a building, the museum in the future may be imagined as a process or an experience.’ (Hooper-Greenhill 2000:152) Pine and Gilmore (1999) tell us we live in an experience economy; Kolb and others focus on experiential learning (Kolb and Fry 1997; Black 2005: 132-137). Here in a world of constructivism it is the meaning-making reader who counts rather than the author of the text; and we understand- at least in theory- that text is an event, a piece of chemistry, not an object or a fixed menu. (Freire 1993; Hein 1998; Hein in Fritsch 2011) Meaning is ‘never merely passively received’ (Hooper-Greenhill, 2006: 374) Narratives are mini-narratives if at all, not grand ones. The Post-modernist museum has users, co-creators, co-curators, interpretive communities rather than ‘the people formerly known as audience’ (Rosen 2006) Postmodernism is ‘sceptical of truth, unity and progress, opposes what it sees as elitism in culture, tends towards cultural relativism, and celebrates pluralism, discontinuity and heterogeneity’ (Eagleton, 2004)

Modernist museums have education departments; Postmodernist ones have learning, access and interpretation teams, and heads of engagement. ‘The semantic shift -from ‘education’ to ‘learning’- represents a major philosophical change in the way in which the educational functions of museums are being understood. The use of the word ‘learning’ indicates an increased focus on the learning processes and outcomes of users, and a shift away from thinking about the museums and its educational delivery.”(Hooper-Greenhill 2007: 4)

But how does this look out there on the gallery floor? This how the head of learning at a major gallery (with a background outside the museum sector) sees this paradigm shift in museum cultures: Anna Cutler is corporate head of learning at tate (lower case/ soft focus logo: UK’s national galleries of modern, contemporary and British art.) She characterises this shift as:

\*from the passive to participative

\*from standardised delivery to personalisation

\*from the didactic to co-learning

\*from knowledge acquisition to knowledge application

\*from a single authorial voice to plural voices

 \*from private knowledge to public access

(Cutler 2010)

You may be thinking how much of the left hand column has really gone away in your museum or gallery?

***Museum as text and experience***

Many museum experiences do not have a visible text, but they are contained and often circumscribed by the museum’s larger text- itself. Barthes and others talk about the museum itself as text - not just words but the total thing (Barthes 1977; Whitehead in Fritsch: 54- 59) Meaning making in the experience museum depends on the texts tangible or intangible that underpin it, as experienced and interpreted by the educator /volunteer /actor as well as the user. The new 18thcentury gallery at the Museum of London is a good example of this- many people (including my students) felt it was under interpreted and lacking information when the actors were not there as text: I enjoyed it as experience, but as I studied 18thc history I could supply my own context .

Some critics also believe that display as text works ‘grammatically and syntactically’: curator, critic and artist Robert Storr talks of galleries as paragraphs, walls as sentences and so on in the collective text but doesn’t see the need for too many actual words - especially for contemporary art. (Whitehead 2012: 62-63) For Barthes ‘the text is always plural,’ (1977: 160) and so is rather like the Rosetta Stone - three versions of the same text on the same slab but meaning many different things (or perhaps nothing) to the millions who look at it every year in the British Museum, and who in effect supply their own text. The combination and chemistry of elements ‘is unique at every reading,’ Barthes says, and always changed by time, language, culture, identity and context – and, one might add, how desperately you need a strong cup of coffee, or to sit down, or to escape. In the supposedly ‘real’ world, we- educators, text makers and users of other peoples’ texts- are all working with a messy mix of text and experience- and text is a battlefield and often an expressive signifier of what is happening backstage at the museum.

***Text and power***

Iwona Blazwick (director of the Whitechapel Art Gallery, a pioneering modern and contemporary art gallery in east London; and one of the creators of Tate Modern) asks if the modern art museum is temple, white cube or laboratory. (Marincola 2006) Well, if the latter, how many experiments do we need to get it ‘right’? In ‘The Responsive Museum’ I quote Michael Spock (a pioneer of US children’s museums and ‘non-directive, open-ended exploratory exhibits’) who was mystified about why exhibitions, interpretation and text are still a problem: ‘few of us seem to be paying attention to what we already collectively know.’ (Lang Reeve& Woollard 2006: 191)

Well sadly it’s not just a technical issue of label length, and headings with questions in the right type size. But it is all about power- and control of language, information and experience. As Paulo Freire and Foucault show: ‘one of the basic elements of the relationship between oppressor and oppressed is prescription’ (Freire 1993:29) Foucault, Duncan, Bennett, Hooper-Greenhill, Coxall all describe how the text is so often the disembodied voice of the controlling modernist institution- big brother or big sister, nanny. So text in their view is a tool of power play at the museum as everywhere else in the disciplinary state; but we educators and audience advocates do also sometimes get the power and influence we need over texts and the underlying scripts. In a typical exhibition, gallery or publishing project team- if there even is one- it’s often a struggle for interpretive power between vested interests. We as audience and learning advocates don’t always succeed (cf Reeve in Lang Reeve & Woollard 2006 ch 12) In Britain this situation is generally getting better and so is text, though the V&A British galleries and the current Roman London Gallery project at the Museum of London are atypical examples of educators taking a lead on major gallery projects in major museums as well as editing and creating text.

At one extreme we have museum text as holy writ in the temple of knowledge written by normally anonymous high priests often in a style that relates only loosely to normal speech or colloquial text- or indeed what anyone wants to know. Sometimes it is literally holy writ- as with the British Library’s ‘Sacred’ exhibition on Judaism Christianity and Islam. I edited the catalogue: yes, we had a writing workshop with the curators, agreed text style and length and admired clear text from other museums- and then several of the curators wrote as they normally did and had to be savagely edited and in some cases reconstructed, causing great resentment (power play again and competing advocacies- all but one were curating material from their own religion.) However, the project as a whole was multi-voiced, multi-platformed, overtly addressing different appetites, audience types and learning styles. So written texts - on the wall and in the book - were only part of the deal; and the computer terminals with access to the excellent websites were nearby. (Reeve 2012)

At the British Museum (BM) the paradigm shift around text and power has been complex and still has a long way to go. In the early 1980s when I started work there we regularly had to take a completed exhibition, gallery or text to the equivalent of a hospital accident and emergency unit, after the accident that could have been avoided. Not for nothing were the earlier progress meetings called Director’s surgeries! It is still too often assumed in many museums and galleries that the programme and learning department will somehow pick up the pieces, and scatter magic dust over a product that has been ill conceived by curators, designers and directors who may never be confronted with users finding it difficult or just boring. Most of the older galleries in the BM today are the product of a 1980s design office ‘house style’ that sought to produce uniform levels of edited text and display, products of a need for control and order. (Hall 1987)These galleries are now redolent of a modernism that can convey a grey sameness, and a degree of asceticism rather than visual delight and engagement. This is changing. The main Asia gallery (33) and the Enlightenment gallery (1) are very traditional looking galleries from the 1992- 2003 era that are however halfway between modernism and post- modernism: Asia is a flexible teaching and performance space, based on the shared experience of teaching in its predecessor by curators and educators, and with varyingly accessible texts and concepts. Both galleries have far too many objects and no interactivity except for volunteer-manned handling tables. The Enlightenment gallery- a pastiche of the early 19thc disciplinary museum- also operates as an open store with many objects in the wall cases unlabelled and no overt access to further information.

***Responsive museums?***

Previously visitor interests were represented by advocacy at museums like the BM, but now visitors can speak for themselves: the BM is consistently researching its audiences, and sharing its exhibition evaluations on its website and changing some of its displays and their texts as a result. The latest version of the Money Gallery for example is a response to the visitor reaction that there was a need to slim down the number of objects, texts and stories being told in a corridor space. The Japan galleries started out austerely in 1990 as Japanese style galleries with minimal text and very select exhibits, and that was difficult for a western audience and especially for those of us wanting to teach in there- though it was very beautiful as an artwork in itself. Recent visitor research has reconceived and layered text all on the same plane at the bottom of the case so it doesn’t interrupt the gaze at the object. Panels are crisp and directive; and there is a return to historical narrative. (Francis, Slack and Edwards in Fritsch 2011). The BM’s Wellcome Trust gallery - ‘Living and dying’ - shows an uncomfortable collision between modernist and post-modernist ideas; and between art and ethnography, ideas and things. The physical text of the exhibit dominates- and so does the physical narrative of the space –it’s a major through route. The intentions of the curators are too implicit, and the visitor responds to the art installation down the centre when some directive text- particularly questioning- could make a big difference (Mordhorst 2009)

Visitor research in the BM’s experimental space room 3 is revealing. An average 30% only of visitors apparently read texts or labels in some of these exhibits, even when the text is interesting. The exhibit on the Warren Cup (a Roman, silver object depicting men having sex with boys) was helped by text panels that questioned: ‘How did the ancient Romans view sexuality?’ ‘Was the Warren Cup ever used?’ A contemporary connection was made with images from the film ‘Brokeback Mountain’ and a David Hockney. There were contrasting figures for permanent galleries such as North America where 73% of the visitor sample read labels - perhaps adults with a strong interest, infinite patience and lots of time, as it’s plastered with text and layered with objects. One gallery isn’t therefore better ‘text’ than the other because of the statistics- the two exhibits have very different purposes: room 3 is a tiny crowded space near the entrance, North America frequently empty and off the main routes.

<http://www.britishmuseum.org/pdf/Warren%20cup%20final%20online.pdf>

<http://www.wpi.edu/Pubs/E-project/Available/E-project-022008-115324/unrestricted/British_Museum_IQP_C08.pdf>

<http://www.wpi.edu/Pubs/E-project/Available/E-project-042507-070939/unrestricted/British_Museum_D07_IQP.pdf>

<http://www.wpi.edu/Pubs/E-project/Available/E-project-042507-070939/unrestricted/British_Museum_D07_IQP.pdf>

At most 20% of families read information panels at the BM. Families were critical of the lack of appropriate text in the right places and that it was dry and didn’t explain enough: ‘it’s a bit Spartan.’ Similarly, at the National Maritime Museum comments from families included the need to make the ‘Royal River exhibit more interesting for kids, too much to read’, ‘children’s gallery, want more hands-on, less reading’(Katharine Alston pers.com.)

The Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) got a lot right with their British galleries (Lang Reeve & Woollard 2006 ch 12) but there are still problems elsewhere at the V&A, judging by recent guidelines:

‘It should be noted that the majority of complaints from our visitors relate to inadequate labelling
in the Museum. The complaints generally cover:

* Text too small
* Insufficient contrast between text and background colour
* Position is too high or too low or not clearly related to the object it describes
* Graphics are poorly lit/in shadow and therefore difficult to read

We must take steps to acknowledge these issues and be able to prove that they have been addressed in the designs we approve and implement in our galleries. ‘

[<http://media.vam.ac.uk/media/documents/legacy.../file.../41253_file.doc> <http://media.vam.ac.uk/media/documents/gallery_text_writing_guide_updated.pdf>

<http://eric-leyland.blogspot.co.uk/2011/09/guidelines-for-good-interpretive-text.html> all accessed 09.12]

So we have a more precise idea of what users make of museum text- but what about art galleries and especially contemporary collections?

***Art and text…and learning?***

A lot of the literature on text in museums and galleries relates to art galleries and also science museums (Bitgood 2011). There are of course many shared problems. One of our worst collective crimes in whatever kind of museum is being implicit. We may be reluctant to appear bossy or didactic- too Modernist- but making meaning can’t happen easily in a vacuum, and that is how many people appear to experience contemporary art.

So what do the curators think? Ingrid Schaffner (a Philadelphia contemporary art curator) greatly admires exhibitions that take text off the wall entirely:

‘all of the usual didactic material- from the introductory wall panel to the explanatory labels- was rolled into one hand-carried item that afforded viewers a chance to look at art, undistracted by text and labels’ or ‘patronizing wall texts, the babble of acoustiguides and other evidence of marketing and education’

To be fair she does also say ‘when treated as writerly text and not just a mode of description or information what is written on the wall can provoke a receptive and associative state of mind. Labels have the potential of art itself to be sensual, smart and experiential.’ So ‘artists have a lot to teach curators about the rhetorical power of text’ but not apparently educators who shouldn’t be allowed anywhere near it. Only curators like her should write wall text (Marincola 2006: 154 159 166)

Curator Robert Storr thinks that ‘the primary means for explaining an artist’s work is to let it explain itself’ (Whitehead 2012: 62-63) as living artists often don’t want text about their work, and so curators may prefer to say nothing. Penelope Curtis the new director of Tate Britain doesn’t like room numbers or text on her walls so we can do without and make our own map as well as meaning. But she does accept that ‘Tate Britain needs to be a laboratory as well as a showcase, and to this end we have set aside galleries within the outer circuit to act as spaces where we can present new ways of thinking about British art, whether in terms of its origins, subjects or media. Here we want to respond to outside initiatives and to new research projects’

Art educator Sylvia Lahav (who has worked at tate and the National Gallery) feels that text is always interventionist and should be avoided wherever possible (Fritsch 2011) So are freedom, ambiguity and resonance for some in the gallery often incomprehension or frustration for many? Does uncluttered access for the ‘in the know’ mean exclusion for the rest of us? Since few contemporary art galleries consistently publish any evaluations or visitor surveys it’s hard to tell what people really think. For Tate Modern’s 2008 exhibition on Mark [Rothko](http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/markrothko/roomguide/room4.shtm) the Interpretation team, working with the exhibition curators, developed a set of interpretative materials for visitors: wall texts and captions, a booklet and a multimedia tour. The number of wall texts was limited but the multimedia tour quite elaborate, including poetry, music and different perspectives on the work. Evaluations reveal high expectations of background information (Scott & Meijer 2009; Lahav in Fritsch 2011: 92). One contemporary art gallery that always has to try harder is in Sunderland (an industrial town in NE England): Whitehead describes the challenge faced by a contemporary art gallery there where only a small proportion of the audience are aware of ‘the protocols of contemporary art’ before they enter the gallery, and so texts are essential and have to work harder (Whitehead 2012: ch 7)

Several exhibition designers and design theorists have also talked about trying to do without text: Frank den Oudsten sees ‘The theatre and the exhibition [as] the mirror of society’ and therefore a decline of text in the theatre is also true for him in exhibitions. (den Oudsten 2011: 2-3) Dinah Casson (known for her work on the V&A British galleries) tries to avoid being dependent on text and believes in creating ‘narrative environments’ in which visitors make their own meaning since as she puts it ‘visitors are no empty buckets’. (den Oudsten 2011:153,179)When he was director of the National Gallery Neil MacGregor also wanted ‘unmediated experiences’ for his visitors, whatever that means (MacGregor 1994) But there is no innocent eye and no unmediated experience in the modern museum or gallery even if the text is minimal. (cf.Bradburne:<http://www.bradburne.org/downloads/learning/UserlanguagesWEB.pdf>)

Text can be useful and expressive and personal and still include received knowledge without being intrusive or resorting to what Meszaros calls ‘the reign of whatever.’ (Whitehead 2011:61) There is obviously a parallel to these arguments about interpretation on the wall to interpretation in the teaching session: about how much the educator should intervene / structure / scaffold the experience by providing a text. US art gallery educators Rika Burnham and Elliott Kai-Kee (2011) have reviewed teaching in the art museum and its transition from a modernist model of imparting and sharing information to a more constructivist one of encouraging perception, enhancing experience and even performance as part of the gallery visit. Burnham says ‘Museum teachers must be prepared to give up full control of the shared interpretive process… Museum instructors must always be able to step back, to step aside, or to step beyond the unfolding dialogue…’(Burnham and Kai-Kee 2011, 131-2) For some the postmodern pendulum has swung too far. Veteran US gallery educator Danielle Rice critiqued in particular the approach of ‘visual thinking strategists’ like Philip Yenawine as too relativistic, for whom all meanings are equally relevant. We should not, in her view “abdicate the responsibility of actually teaching visitors about the broader, consensual understandings that constitute an informed perspective” ((Burnham and Kai-Kee 2011, 131-2; see also Hooper-Greenhill 2000, 119).

So text and experience walk hand in hand like twins, but often scrap and fight - just like twins. Rather than just focussing on the artist’s genius and the ‘closed, cursory and monovocal’ (Whitehead 2011: 59) we need the polyvocal approach that so many UK museums and galleries now adopt intrinsically. For example, Chinese focus groups advised on text, display and programme for the ‘First Emperor’ exhibit at the BM and a new gallery of Chinese ceramics in Birmingham. The African Worlds gallery at the Horniman Museum in south London has personal comment panels by black Londoners and others, illustrating Freire’s axiom that a pedagogy “must be forged with, not for” those engaged with educational practice. The key in all these examples is co-production and consultation: co- created, focus grouped as part of re-negotiation by interpretive communities.

Personal, experimental text like these is often stimulating and refreshingly different. The British artist Grayson Perry provided a personal commentary on his recent BM exhibition juxtaposing his work with his selection from the collections. We all need help with writing different style text for different situations- whether for learned catalogue, app., pop up display in a disused shop, or family trail: text to be skimmed by non -native speakers or non – specialists or read aloud by parents. BM workshops for young people recently experimented with writing museum ‘manga’- Japanese style graphic magazine style captions- inspired by a residency and exhibition by a manga artist. In the UK we can join up for text writing workshops with journalist Dea Birkett: feedback from museum participants included “I really learned how to inject fun and creative language into trails” “I feel like I’ve not just dipped my toes, but plunged into a new world!” “I went home last night and wrote a few labels that I had been putting off and was able to have a good night’s sleep knowing I had faced a fear.” (<http://textworkshop.co.uk/> )

Cajsa Lagerkvist (2006) gives this example of personal, highly expressive text from the Gothenberg Museum of World Cultures:

‘I left my country albeit young, unwillingly and unprepared. I left everything behind me, near and dear, brothers and sisters. I left my school, I left childhood friends and I left all memories. I left the football made of old socks, the one we used to shoot towards the goal made of stones. The porridge before sunrise during Ramadan, the juice after sunset and the weekend candy – all this I left together with the traditional games of my country. I left the lust and playfulness of youth. I left mountains, valleys, hills and fields. I miss the sun and the moon and the sea. I also miss the brown desert, the one I look like, the one that looks like me.’ Said Abdellah

 ***All change?***

In my talk I showed a slide of young tate members with their placard ‘we are the experts.’ Paul Willis, guru of youth culture, thinks it’s essential to allow young people ‘to colonise cultural organisations’ (Lang Reeve & Woollard 2006: 54) and this is certainly happening. A recent [conference in the UK was entitled](http://www.shcg.org.uk/) “Visitors are the new curators”. So are today’s youth focus group tomorrow’s demanding audience and co-curators? Not if some museum directors get their way.Nicholas Penny, the current director of the National Gallery, hates all this consultation and audience responsiveness, and ‘wants to make us look at art with more patience.’ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2008/mar/27/art>‘

On another occasion he explained that he is ‘terribly against targeting..... I would define targeting as what is done by someone who has given a lot of thought to what visitors might want to see or need to know… I am against spoon-feeding in these galleries.’ ‘I do wonder whether a really wonderful, captivating display is going to be put on by people who have an in-depth research analysis of the potential visitor profile.’(Lang Reeve & Woollard 2006 ch 12)

***Conclusions***

James Bradburne, Robert Janes and Graham Black are the latest to see museums as without a future unless they adapt much faster to the contemporary world, especially when it comes to exhibitions and interpretation. Black quotes Kathleen McLean‘s concern ‘that museum exhibitions might be an obsolete medium, out on the dying limb of an evolutionary tree….headed towards extinction’ (Black 2012: 241) Robert Janes in ‘Museums in a troubled world’ is scathing about exhibitions as unaffordable dodos ploughing old ground for old people, with more and more of the same: ‘a lack of imagination about what exhibitions could be in our complex world.' Janes’ book is subtitled ‘renewal irrelevance or collapse?’ Clearly we all believe renewal is possible-or I hope we do. But we know it is difficult: as Denzin puts it, ‘We are in a new age where messy, uncertain, multi-voiced texts, cultural criticism and new experimental works will become more common.’ (Denzin 2003: 38) Our challenge is to convince our colleagues, funders and indeed many of our users that the museum as laboratory -especially for text -will provide a richer and less bloody experience for everyone.

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