



FROM MUSEUM CRITIQUE TO THE CRITICAL MUSEUM

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EDITED BY
KATARZYNA MURAWSKA-MUTHESIUS
AND PIOTR PIOTROWSKI

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Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	vii
<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xv
Introduction: From Museum Critique to the Critical Museum <i>Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius and Piotr Piotrowski</i>	1

PART I HISTORIES

1	A Very Brief History of the Art Museum in the United States (Focusing Mainly But Not Exclusively on the Nineteenth Century) <i>Alan Wallach</i>	15
2	‘The Contemporary Museum is a Laboratory of Knowledge’: The Origins of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Russia <i>Andrzej Turowski</i>	37
3	Wilhelm R. Valentiner’s <i>Reshaping Museums in the Spirit of the New Age</i> (1919) and its Reception <i>Monika Flacke</i>	53
4	Myth and Reality of the White Cube <i>Charlotte Klonk</i>	67
5	Jerzy Ludwiński’s Testing of the Dysfunction of the Museum: On the Museum of Current Art in Wrocław (1966) <i>Magdalena Ziółkowska</i>	81

PART II TOOLS: OBJECTS, SPACE, VIEWING PRACTICES

- | | | |
|----|---|-----|
| 6 | Masterpieces and the Critical Museum
<i>Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius</i> | 99 |
| 7 | From the White Cube to a Critical Museography:
The Development of Interrogative, Plural and Subjective
Museum Discourses
<i>J. Pedro Lorente</i> | 115 |
| 8 | From the Inside Looking Out: The Possibility of a Critical
Establishment
<i>Penelope Curtis</i> | 129 |
| 9 | Making the National Museum Critical
<i>Piotr Piotrowski</i> | 137 |
| 10 | Historical Space and Critical Museologies: POLIN Museum of the
History of Polish Jews
<i>Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett</i> | 147 |
| 11 | Museums that Listen and Care? Central Europe and Critical
Museum Discourse
<i>Mária Orišková</i> | 163 |
| 12 | Towards Embodied, Agonistic Museum Viewing Practices in
Contemporary Manchester, England
<i>Alpesh Kantilal Patel</i> | 179 |

PART III CRITIQUE

- | | | |
|----|--|-----|
| 13 | The Context and Practice of Post-critical Museology
<i>Victoria Walsh</i> | 195 |
| 14 | ‘Is the Contemporary Already Too Late?’ (Re-)producing
Criticality within the Art Museum
<i>Jacob Birken</i> | 215 |
| 15 | Neuromuseology
<i>John Onians</i> | 229 |

<i>Index</i>	245
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Chapter 12

Towards Embodied, Agonistic Museum Viewing Practices in Contemporary Manchester, England

Alpesh Kantilal Patel

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This chapter argues that for a contemporary encyclopedic museum to shake off and interrogate its collection's didacticism, it must not only make visible but also make *felt* its often implicit conceit and mediation. The museum, therefore, must offer embodied rather than overwhelmingly optical experiences and construct collections as potential sites of contestation rather than of fixed meaning. In short, the viewer is brought in as an active agent in the process of meaning-making. Shifting attention from objects to audiences is a chief characteristic of Eilean Hooper-Greenhill's neologism 'post-museum.'¹ For Greenhill, the post-museum is a foil for the modernist museum, which, she writes, constructs knowledge as disciplinary or subject-based. In the post-museum, specialist knowledge is still important, but so is knowledge based on the everyday human experience of visitors. Whereas the modernist museum transmits facts, the post-museum tries to involve emotions and the imagination of visitors.² The viewer in a post-museum is active not passive and a producer not a consumer. Such a mode of viewing shifts the conceptualization of an object (whether it be artistic or ethnographic) as a static entity to one that is performative; and our thinking about an object as doing rather than merely being.

Through case studies connected to Manchester Museum and Whitworth Art Gallery – both cultural assets of the University of Manchester³ – in the eponymously named city in the northwest of England, I will animate my points above and illustrate that a post-museum may be possible by making objects embodied and recasting collections as sites of conflict, or as agonistic (a term I describe later). To

1 Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 2000), 22.

2 Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*, 142–143.

3 Cultural assets of the University of Manchester include Whitworth Art Gallery, Jordell Bank, John Rylands Library, the Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Race Relations Resource Centre, John Rylands Library, and University of Manchester Library. See 'Cultural Asset Liaison Activities,' Manchester Museum, accessed July 24, 2013, <http://www.manchester.ac.uk/undergraduate/schoolsandcolleges/liaison/cultural-assets/>.

clarify, by ‘embodied’ I do not mean to suggest that one has to experience works in a collection in person. Though nothing replaces one’s personal experience of viewing a work of art, it nonetheless fails to give us the ‘liveness’ we believe it will offer.⁴ The live body promises something ‘more’ than representation but always already fails to give that which can secure meaning (the real, or immortality) once and forever. Given that our live experience is just as mediated as the supposedly virtual one, I will refer to material within and without the physical museum – from museum installations to YouTube videos – as evidence.

I will draw upon my own involvement in projects connected to one of the museum spaces, the Whitworth Art Gallery. I do not intend to offer my personal anecdotes as autobiographically anchored ‘fact,’ or any less mediated than the case studies I explore where I may not have a vested interest. Instead, I consider my personal musings as the kind of ‘self-fictions’ Nancy K. Miller theorizes.⁵ Also useful to invoke is Roland Barthes’ 1977 ‘autobiographical’ sketch *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* in which he rigorously refuses to revert to an underlying reality or essence by revealing the construction of subjectivity itself as a product of language. My transcriptions of my experiences aim to achieve a similar effect; of particular interest here is to de-abstract my own body as an interpreter, viewer, curator, and theorist through words – an ambitious goal but one worth attempting.

To begin with, I further justify the critical importance of encouraging particularly embodied museum-going practices by going back over 150 years ago in Manchester’s history. By doing so, I aim both to explore Mancunian⁶ museum visiting practices, with particular attention to issues of class, embodiment, and classical aesthetics, and to historicize the background against which Manchester Museum and the Whitworth Art Gallery emerged.

Victorian-era Manchester: (Dis)Embodied Viewing Practices

As well known as Victorian-era Manchester is for its industry – in fact, the metropolis was nicknamed ‘Cottonopolis’ because of the number of cotton and

4 Derrida thus writes: ‘Thus understood, what is supplementary is in reality *différance*’; and ‘this concept of primordial supplementation ... implies nonplenitude of presence.’ ‘Speech and Phenomena: Introduction to the Problem of Signs in Husserl’s Phenomenology,’ in *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*, trans. David Allison (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 88.

5 Nancy K. Miller, ‘Getting Personal: Autobiography as Cultural Criticism,’ in *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 24, as quoted in Keith Moxey, ‘After the Death of the “Death of the Author”,’ in *The Practice of Persuasion: Paradox and Power in Art History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 138.

6 Mancunian refers to anything ‘of or related to Manchester.’ See *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. ‘Mancunian,’ accessed August 16, 2013, <http://dictionary.oed.com/>.

textile processing centres in the area⁷ – it is at least equally as notorious for the hardship, poverty, and huge class divide that accompanied the city's rapid industrialization.⁸ In 1841, the life expectancy in the city was just 26 years of age – the lowest of any UK city – due to widespread pollution emanating from factory chimneys, the presence of fatal waterborne diseases such as cholera and dysentery, the inhumane and overcrowded conditions, and severe malnutrition.⁹ Friedrich Engels, whose family owned a Manchester cotton mill, would go on to use his experiences living in Manchester as the basis for his influential *The Condition of the Working-Class in England in 1844*.¹⁰

In 1857, Manchester's elite hoped the Art-Treasures Exhibition – held just four years after Manchester gained city status – would not only rebuff the charges of philistinism by Londoners, but also quell claims of callousness towards the lower classes upon whose labour the wealthy relied.¹¹ A special exhibition venue, the Art-Treasures Palace – located on 3 acres just outside the city centre in Old Trafford – was designed to house approximately 16,000 objects of art.¹² It remains the largest temporary art exhibition in Britain's history.

Helen Rees Leahy has argued that the commentators who believed the exhibition was successful in its aim of reaching out to the broader public and those who did not 'were unanimous' in noting a peculiar attention to 'working men – and specifically working men's bodies – within the exhibition.'¹³ In her analysis of eyewitness accounts and personal memoirs of the exhibition, Leahy notes that it 'stimulated a commentary of comportment that was intended to rectify a lack of decorum – and, by extension, of aesthetic apprehension – among certain [working-class] visitors.'¹⁴ For instance, Charles Dickens wrote the following concerning

7 Manchester City Council, 'Spinning the Web,' accessed August 16, 2013, <http://www.spinningtheweb.org.uk/places/cottonopolis.php>.

8 In German the word 'Manchesterthum' denotes a rapidly industrialized urban area.

9 Manchester Art Gallery, 'Manchester 1857, A City of Art Lovers,' accessed August 16, 2013, <http://www.manchestergalleries.org/whats-on/art-treasures-in-detail/a-city-of-art-and-industry/>.

10 Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working-Class in England in 1844* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1892).

11 The Art-Treasures Exhibition's primary focus was on art, as opposed to contemporaneous exhibitions that focused on industry and art, such as the Great Exhibition in London (1851), the Great Industrial Exhibition in Dublin (1853), and the Exposition Universelle in Paris (1855). See Alastair Sooke, 'Art Treasures: The Birth of the Blockbuster,' *Telegraph*, November 13, 2007, accessed October 24, 2008, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2007/11/13/batreasures1.xml>.

12 Helen Rees Leahy, "'Walking For Pleasure?'" Bodies of Display at the Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition in 1857,' *Association of Art Historians* 30: 4 (September 2007), 546.

13 Leahy, "'Walking For Pleasure?'," 556. Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, working-class women were largely ignored in the official commentaries available.

14 Leahy, "'Walking For Pleasure?'," 548.

his visit to the exhibition: ‘they [the working class] want more amusement, and particularly something in motion, though it were only a twisting fountain. The thing is too still after their lives of machinery; the art flows over their heads in consequence.’¹⁵

Dickens’s remarks belie the patronizing attitude that lurked underneath the desire to educate the masses. A correction to bodily comportment, or ‘hexis’ per Pierre Bourdieu, expected of the working class to ensure proper enjoyment of art – such as a disavowal of ‘amusement’ and other bodily feelings – is an example of what Bourdieu termed an ‘embodied’ form of cultural capital (in this case an ironic *disembodiment*). Bourdieu, drawing on Marcel Mauss’s influential ‘Techniques of the Body’ (1934), describes a ‘bodily hexis’ as a ‘political mythology realised, embodied, turned into a permanent disposition, a durable way of standing, speaking, walking and thereby of feeling and thinking.’¹⁶ The ‘way of standing’ as linked to ‘feeling and thinking’ required of the working class indicates the complex manner in which the larger ‘political mythology’ separating classes manifested itself in the exhibition space.

Part of Bourdieu’s aim in *Distinction* is to undermine the aesthetic theory of Immanuel Kant (the subtitle of Bourdieu’s book is based on Kant’s famous critiques of judgement). He argues that aesthetic judgement is an eminently social faculty, resulting from class upbringing and education. Much of *Distinction*, in fact, examines the aesthetic of distance and refinement, as distinguished from the sensuous, as defining French intellectual, middle-class culture. Bourdieu points out that the ‘basis of high aesthetics since Kant’ has been an opposition ‘between the “taste of sense” and the “taste of reflection” [or disinterestedness].’¹⁷ He further notes that Kantian aesthetics structure ‘the popular “aesthetic”’ as its ‘negative opposite.’¹⁸ Given Bourdieu’s compelling argument that the latter is a specifically class-based refinement in *Distinction*, the devaluation of the senses can be linked to a performance of class and erudition, which the working class are constructed as lacking. In fact, the Manchester Art-Treasures Exhibition, an important marker of western museological history, has the dubious distinction of being part of the institutionalization of disembodied viewing practices, and the suppression of the

15 Charles Dickens, *The Letters of Charles Dickens, 2 (1857–1870)* (London, 1880), 23 as noted in Leahy, “Walking For Pleasure?,” 558.

16 Marcel Mauss, ‘Techniques of the Body,’ *Economy and Society* 2: 1 (February 1973 [1934]). Mauss described ‘[t]he ways in which from society to society men know how to use their bodies,’ but it was Bourdieu who expanded on his scholarship by further contextualizing the movements of the body in terms of class. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1990), 70. On the social implications of bodily comportment, also see Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. R. Nice (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 218.

17 Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 7.

18 Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 41.

highly interested issue of class bound up with them. That is, Manchester becomes an important marker in how cultural viewing practices developed in the West.

Aesthetics in the modernist sense of veiling of a class-based bodily hexis excluded the multi-sensorial, more generally. The visual and auditory senses were placed above the tactile, the olfactory, and the gustatory. In particular, as Caroline Jones notes, ‘smell, at least since Locke, Kant, and Condillac, has been relegated to philosophical abjection, with fragrance, odor, scent, aroma, perfume, and stench all placed at the bottom of the epistemological hierarchy.’¹⁹ Anthropologists put a particularly xenophobic and racist spin on the olfactory by yoking smell with non-western populations, who were constructed as being closer to the earth and lower on the development scale.²⁰

The epistemological origins of aesthetics and taste are indeed tied up with the shifting of desire, or the inability to contain it, onto non-western cultures, as noted by William Pietz.²¹ Even the rise of the soap industry in Victorian England (around the time of the Art-Treasures Exhibition in 1857) can be connected to the need to distinguish the white, British body from that of the supposedly uncivilized colonized subject, as well as from the lower classes. (Ironically, ingredients gathered from colonial conquests fuelled the soap industry.)²² Indeed, Jones notes, ‘smell was identified as something distinct ... in order to provide the basis for its own administration.’²³ The innumerable gut-wrenching, ‘eye’ witness reports of the filth and stench of mid-nineteenth-century Manchester surveyed in historian and journalist Tristram Hunt’s book *Building Jerusalem: The Rise and Fall of the Victorian City* indicate the degree to which the olfactory became a matter of increasing official concern.²⁴ In 1844,

19 Caroline A. Jones, ‘The Mediated Sensorium,’ in *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology, and Contemporary Art*, ed. Caroline A. Jones (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press), 12.

20 Alain Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and French Social Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), 6.

21 William Pietz has noted that aesthetics and religious fetishism were both coined not only in relative historical contiguity by Alexander Baumgarten in his *Aesthetica* (1750) and Charles de Brosses in his *Du culte des dieux fétiches ou parallèle de l’ancienne religion de l’Egypte avec la religion actuelle de la Nigritie* (1757), respectively, but also in ‘theoretical proximity.’ For instance, Kant in his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (1764) described the quasi-religious fetishes that supposedly characterized African culture as products of a debased aesthetic sensibility whose degraded sense of the beautiful lacked all sense of the sublime.

22 Anne McClintock, ‘Soft-Soaping Empire: Commodity Racism and Imperial Advertising,’ in *The Body: A Reader*, ed. Mariam Fraser and Monica Greco (London: Routledge, 2005), 271–276.

23 Jones, ‘The Mediated Sensorium,’ 16. Jones is drawing on the research of Alain Corbin, who studied stench in the context of another city, Paris, in his book, *The Foul and the Fragrant*.

24 Tristram Hunt, *Building Jerusalem: The Rise and Fall of the Victorian City* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004). In an article in 2007, Hunt uses the commemorative

Engels wrote of Manchester's rapid industrialization and its 'hypocritical plan,' that he had 'never seen [such] a concealment of everything that might affront the eye.' At this time, the poor were not only concealed from a disembodied eye, from which Engels implies nothing was held, but also distanced on multiple sensory levels, such as the olfactory, as outlined above.²⁵

If Victorian-era Manchester and its modernist viewing practices privilege seemingly affect-less, 'still' viewing practices, then the post-museum needs to promote the sort of embodied viewing that can challenge the racist, classist, xenophobic, and – as I will argue more clearly in the next section – misogynistic assumptions underlying them. My chapter henceforth will shift to explore contemporary museum practices and the ways in which they might engender the latter.

Bringing the Queer, Female, and South Asian Body into the Museum

My test case is contemporary Manchester and I begin by describing the art project *Sphere: dreamz*, originally a spring 2006 outdoor installation in the city. It was produced by Sphere, a collective of Manchester-based, queer-identified South Asian women who worked under the creative direction of co-founder Jaheda Choudhury, multi-media artist Shanaz Gulzar, and writer Maya Chowdhry.

In late 2005, Sphere put out a call for women of South Asian descent from the northwest of England who identify as queer to share their 'dreams' and 'hopes.'²⁶ Poetry written by Chowdhry about the many responses received became the foundation of the installation, which was strategically situated next to Canal Street, the epicentre of the city's Gay Village, in Sackville Park in Manchester. It was up for a few hours as part of that year's queerupnorth – a Manchester-based annual international arts festival dedicated to promoting queer arts and culture in the northwest of England.²⁷ The thirteen beds of *Sphere: dreamz* – all placed in a circle – provided a foil, or counter narrative, to the gay, white, and male narrative of Canal Street.

The headboard of one of the beds in *Sphere: dreamz* had been replaced with a girl's bathroom door from a queer bar or club, while the bedspread and pillow of another were composed of a patchwork of clothing items, such as jeans, a choli, or short-sleeve blouse, a skirt, and a golden-colored salwar kameez. The pastiche of the

Art-Treasures Exhibition as a rallying cry to 'modern Manchester's merchant princes – its entrepreneurs, architects and football millionaires – to embrace their duty and endow today's cultural institutions.' Tristram Hunt, 'A City United in Culture,' *The Guardian*, October 4, 2007, accessed August 16, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/oct/04/comment.society>.

25 Engels, *Condition of the Working-Class*, 87.

26 This information was culled from the leaflet available on the day of the installation.

27 queerupnorth, accessed August 16, 2013, <http://www.queerupnorth.com/index2.php>.

queer club/bar bathroom door and jeans with traditional South Asian clothes not only highlighted the invisibility of South Asian women in Canal Street bars and clubs, but also confused the presence of these subjects on Canal Street as non-normative.

The beds also functioned as sites of intimacy between the viewer and the artist. That is, each bed reflected its creator's particular concerns and interests, but was presented in such a way that the bodies of visitors became intertwined with the bed and therefore with the creator's decidedly queer, female, and South Asian subjectivity as well. For instance, visitors were encouraged to sit or lie on the beds – many of which not only had incense infused in them, but also had the aforementioned poetry piped up through their bases – ensuring that the bodily experience of 'viewing' the artwork was deeply synaesthetic, directly incorporating every sense except taste. In this way, Sphere's project elicited a multi-sensory engagement from the viewer.

The *Sphere: dreamz* installation became an important point of departure for a series of Arts Council-funded exhibitions I organized in fall 2007 and winter 2008 in Manchester under the rubric *Mixing It Up: Queering Curry Mile and Currying Canal Street*.²⁸ In particular, the artwork inspired (incited?) me to consider more carefully what kind of impact the installation would have had had it been situated outside of the Gay Village and in another type of space, such as a cultural institution.²⁹ In December 2006, I approached Sphere to discuss the possibility of positioning several of the beds and associated ephemera from the original installation in various sites in Manchester. Sphere was eager to support the overall concept of *Mixing It Up*, in particular how the work might read differently in various sites, including a museum.

One of *Sphere: dreamz*'s beds was ultimately installed in the Whitworth Art Gallery. Founded in 1889 as the Whitworth Institute and Park – and named in memory of Sir Joseph Whitworth, a prominent industrialist – Whitworth Art Gallery was originally a hybrid cultural, educational, and technical institution. Sixty eminent Mancunians were involved as 'Governors' of the Institute and in 1958 it became part of the University of Manchester.³⁰ When I approached Mary Griffiths, the museum's curator of Modern Art, she had been working on an exhibition utilizing the permanent collection that broadly explored 'the body.' Drawings and paintings – primarily portraits and some self-portraits – from the gallery's permanent collection, which is well known for its British watercolours and prints as well as textiles, were part of the exhibit.³¹ A sample of the artworks included Pablo Picasso's *Femme Vue*

28 Details on the entire exhibition can be found at <http://mixingitupmanchester.blogspot.com>.

29 Part of the original Sackville Park installation was installed in Manchester Museum, Contact Theatre, and the greenroom. However, the points I wished to draw out regarding the effect of geography and type of space remained implicit.

30 'A Short History of the Whitworth Art Gallery,' Whitworth Art Gallery, accessed August 14, 2013, <http://www.whitworth.manchester.ac.uk/aboutus/history/>.

31 'A Short History of the Whitworth Art Gallery.'

de Dos (Woman Seen from Behind), 1922, Edgar Degas' *Study of Four Dancers*, c. 1895–1900, Lucian Freud's *Man's Head (Self Portrait I)*, 1963, and Camille Pissarro's *La Petite Bonne (The Young Maid)*, 1896.³² Griffiths made the wonderful suggestion to include Sphere's bed as part of this exhibition.

The bed in the exhibition was also a self-portrait, although an abstract one. Col Bashir, one of the few individuals of Sphere who attached her name to the bed she made, made palpable the difficulty of being self-identified as queer, South Asian, and a woman within the largely white, male, and heteronormative corporate world by depicting a ghostly body pushing out from under the sheets of the bed. The bed also doubled as a boardroom table on which folders were placed; and the crisp, white sheets heightened the implied homogeneity of the corporate boardroom. Visitors could sit on the bed, or in the swivel chair positioned next to it, and listen to Chowdhry's poetry being piped in from the bottom of the chair.

Part of the rationale of placing the bed within the museum context was to situate the artwork among broader issues in the history of western art. For instance, the bed served as a corrective to the archetypal artist's model used by many of the other artists in the exhibition. The depicted body in Sphere's artwork was androgynous and not sexualized, as opposed to the white, female nude depicted by many of the other artists in the exhibition. Indeed, Sphere's artwork was also the sole artwork by an artist of South Asian descent in the exhibition.

While the bed did involve active and intimate involvement with viewers, the curatorial conceit prevented this intertwining from becoming a largely apolitical one. Chantal Mouffe's theorization of an agonistic public sphere is particularly appropriate in elaborating on this point. 'Agon' is an ancient Greek word that refers to a contest or struggle, the end result of which is not as important as the process itself.³³ Mouffe's agonistic public sphere highlights *conflictual* consensus in the spirit of agon. She further notes that 'while there is no underlying principle of unity,' there is not the kind of affect-less dispersion envisaged by some postmodernist thinkers.³⁴ Rather, discrete articulated forms of knowledge often connect the diversity of public spheres, if only provisionally.

The inclusion of the bed as part of the otherwise largely modernist group of works created a kind of friction that one might refer to as agonistic as Mouffe theorizes. Given it was not a drawing or watercolour but a conceptual contemporary artwork – a bed – it immediately demanded attention from viewers. It nudged one

32 Many thanks both to Mary Griffiths and Maria Balshaw, Director, Whitworth Art Gallery.

33 Chantal Mouffe, 'For an Agonistic Public Sphere,' in *Democracy Unrealized*, ed. Okwui Enwezor et al. (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje-Cantz, 2002), 87–97. For a more elaborate theoretical account of the notion of 'agonism,' see Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000), ch. 4.

34 Chantal Mouffe, 'Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces,' *Art & Research: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods* 1: 2 (Summer 2007), accessed October 24, 2008, <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n2/mouffe.html>.

to consider both the beauty of the historical watercolours and drawings on display while also keeping in mind the exclusion of women as authors; and interjected complex issues of race and sexuality as bound up with gender, too, but as deeply personal subjects rather than as broad abstract themes. That is, if one spent more time with the bed and sat in the chair, one would hear the poetry based on the dreams and fears of queer South Asian women from the northwest of England.

Anonymous feedback by visitors is worth discussing as a foil for the manner in which I just described how I hoped visitors would experience the installation. One visitor wrote: 'I felt guilty for liking the works of the white artists from the collection.'³⁵ This reflects a conflict, for sure, but it is not one that I had intended. Bringing to the fore in the visitor's mind the paucity of work by artists who are not white in dominant art history was not meant to denigrate the artworks of white artists. Another visitor wrote that the Sphere installation made him more aware of his 'own whiteness with all its implicit privileges' and that the other museum-goers were '(mostly) white or at least arty-type people.'³⁶ The viewer's anxiety about his and others' apparent whiteness and class status was also an unintended effect. More to the point, I did not consider how interrogating the whiteness of art history might affect a viewer's self-perception or perception of other viewers in the museum space. The surprising feedback of these visitors – which I have singled out for polemical reasons rather than to represent all the responses – made clear that though whiteness as a signifier was a part of the entire project, it was much too implicitly addressed. Therefore the visitors' conflictual agonism failed to find an appropriate vehicle in the exhibition through which to further feel and think through (but not resolve) the guilt of enjoying the work of Degas or Pissarro or the anxiety regarding the homogeneity of museum audiences.

This is not to suggest the artwork or the curatorial structure failed as a whole or that they can or should address all issues. Instead, I argue that these kinds of curatorial misfires can be productive. The viewers' responses helped bring otherwise tacit knowledge to my attention. In so doing, they unwittingly affected my own scholarship in exciting ways – such as a book project-in-progress, which partially explores how whiteness (among other things) can complicate and trouble the borders of art histories organized around genealogy. Indeed, I argue that knowledge transfer between the viewer and the curator and/or theorist is a seminal characteristic of the post-museum; it potentially avoids reinscribing theory as disembodied and troubles theory in academia and curatorial practice in museums as a simplistic binary.³⁷

³⁵ Anonymous response #8. All viewer responses were arbitrarily numbered.

³⁶ Anonymous response #4. I have arbitrarily for the sake of clarity used the pronoun 'he' and 'him' to refer to the respondee. No visitor was asked to reveal his or her gender identity.

³⁷ This point is argued much more strongly in Andrew Dewney, David Dibosa and Victoria Walsh (who also contributes an essay to this book), *Post-critical Museology: Theory and Practice in the Art Museum* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).

Collecting ... Gossip?

As above, personal stories or anecdotes become key to my final case study – not a part of *Mixing It Up* – connected to the collection of Manchester Museum, the origins of which lay in the cabinet of curiosities of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century manufacturer and collector John Leigh Phillips.³⁸ The birth of the museum as well as that of the Whitworth Art Gallery can be directly linked to the rise in the cotton industry and textile trade in the city of Manchester. More problematic are the indirect links of this wealth to slavery. Even after the abolition of slavery in England, the massive exploitation of slaves in the United States on cotton plantations (on which Manchester was dependent) reveals the unsavoury aspects of the source of the accrued wealth on which both museums are based. Manchester Museum, as part of its ‘Revealing Histories, Revealing Slavery’ project in 2007, was able to bring these complex histories to the fore by shifting attention from the collection as one of tangible objects to one of intangible stories of individuals who had various connections to the objects – including their donors, museum curators who had a specialist knowledge of them, and even museum-goers who just happened to take an interest in an object.

The ‘Revealing Histories, Revealing Slavery’ project was a partnership among eight different Manchester-based institutions to commemorate the bicentenary of the abolition of the British slave trade in 1807 and to explore ‘the legacy of slavery in our collections, in our communities and in our region.’³⁹ I focus on a series of video clips that can be found on Manchester Museum’s YouTube channel.⁴⁰ They show a discussion of a nineteenth-century Nigerian Ijo figure in the museum’s collection by two relatives of Thomas Sowood who donated it to the museum,

38 In 1890 a new building built by the famed architect Albert Waterhouse (who also designed the Natural History Museum in London) opened to the public. For more information on the history of Manchester Museum, see ‘History of The Manchester Museum,’ Manchester Museum, accessed July 23, 2013, <http://www.museum.manchester.ac.uk/aboutus/history/>. Over the course of the twentieth century, the collection continued to benefit from donations, and grew to 4.5 million items; these were eventually split into a number of different categories including archery, archaeology, botany, Egyptology, entomology, ethnography, mineralogy, paleontology, numismatics, and zoology. ‘Research Impact: Who We Are,’ Manchester Museum, accessed July 23, 2013, <http://www.museum.manchester.ac.uk/aboutus/researchandstudy/researchimpact/>. The number of objects is listed in at least one place on the museum’s website as being closer to 6 million items. The museum is unique in England for having collections connected to both the natural sciences and the humanities. ‘The Manchester Museum: Facts and Figures,’ Manchester Museum, accessed July 24, 2013, <http://www.museum.manchester.ac.uk/aboutus/reportspolicies/fileuploadmax10mb,128931,en.pdf>.

39 ‘About us,’ Revealing Histories, Revealing Slavery, accessed August 14, 2013, <http://revealinghistories.org.uk/about-us.html>.

40 Manchester Museum, ‘The Ijo and a Family History,’ accessed August 16, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL47C20674E054A94B>.

Wendy Gallagher and Sheila Roche. Overall, there are 15 short video segments ranging in length from 2 to 4 minutes. Each segment gives the viewer a slightly different framework through which to view the object.

Gallagher mentions that as part of her job at Whitworth Art Gallery she was asked to research objects in the collection in connection with the 'Revealing History, Revealing Slavery' project and through this she found herself back with the Ijo sculpture to which she felt she had a certain familial duty, if a conflicted one. She explains in the introductory segment that all the information she knows about the object is from her father, Christopher Gallagher, Sowood's grandson. The Ijo figure was gifted to Sowood, her great-grandfather, as he left the Gold Coast of Africa where he worked on a lumber plantation. Wrapped in newspapers, the object was given to him by two slave boys just as he was leaving; he did not see what was under the wrapping until he arrived back in England. Gallagher notes that the object was likely stolen or taken without consent, but Sowood decided to keep it not knowing to whom it should be returned. At the same time, Roche notes that Sowood's wife believed the Ijo figure might have been an object of worship and felt it was an insult to the culture from which it came to keep it in England.

Roche points out that the piece is currently in such fragile condition that transporting it back to what is now a part of Ghana would likely irreparably damage it. She also notes that given the figure was only a little over a hundred years old it might not be classified as a historical artifact worthy of preservation. Roche asks the curator Lisa Harris whether anyone from Nigeria who has seen the object here in Manchester has asked about it and wondered why it was here. The curator indicates that this particular piece has not come up for discussion as far as she knows, but others have sparked debates about repatriation.

Already the compelling story brings up questions of repatriation, as well as the unfortunate construction of the object as a fetish as further articulated in another clip in which Gallagher says that the Ijo figure sat for a long time in the hallway of Sowood's home and functioned as a hat holder. Roche even believes that it was an umbrella holder at one point and notes that it was dressed up as Father Christmas, too. Gallagher says that this obviously could be offensive to the people of the culture to which the figure is associated, but it was not intended to be so. Moreover, she goes on to explain that many calamitous events in the family have been ascribed to the Ijo figure, and that one of her brothers who is mentally ill had on occasion reacted badly to and around the object. On a lighter note, she jokes that she is certain that her grandfather used it as a way to keep her father in line. These anecdotes about how the object functioned prior to its arrival in the museum are alternatively quaint, funny, disturbing, and horrifying. Curator Lisa Harris remains neutral and refrains from excessive comments and allows the viewer to take in the scene in all its conflictual complexity.

Throughout all the video segments the Ijo figure remains prominent; it sits on a table between Roche and Gallagher and appears to loom over them. As the discussions unfold, the object is one that at initial view is stoic, then charged with a talismanic quality, and eventually begins becoming not an object but an interlocutor

in the room. In one of the more revealing clips, Gallagher is asked by the curator to discuss her off-camera interview with her father Christopher about the object and his attitudes and beliefs more generally. Gallagher says right away that her father felt the object belonged in Africa and that the people associated with the object should go back to Africa, too. As she says this, she is clearly uncomfortable, yet still respectful of her father and therefore does not demonize him. She discusses her father's views as a 'British nationalist' (a euphemism for racist, which Gallagher herself acknowledges) and speculates that his views might be 'colored' (Gallagher's term) by his profession prior to retirement – he was a police officer. She explains that a lot of his experiences with subjects of African descent were unfortunately ones in which they were criminals. Nonetheless, Gallagher indicates that she and her father have had many arguments about his parochialism. Indeed, Gallagher notes that it is particularly troubling to her that the racist attitudes of her great-grandfather's time are still prevalent today as evidenced in her father.

Gallagher's stunning and open revelation of the complexities of the family's relationship to the object not only shed light on the reasons behind the Ijo figure's arrival in the museum but also provided an opportunity to explore attitudes and mores that lay just beneath the polite surface of contemporary British everyday life. This entire scene is a little over four minutes long and is both riveting and incredibly difficult to watch. It seems like the sort of family discussion, which might normally be kept from public view. In this sense, I felt like I was shamefully eavesdropping. Yet this particular affective response ensured that I would not become the silent, invisible spectator – the voyeur – I critiqued in the previous section as being largely unmarked; instead of being detached I felt immersed.

There were more traditional museum discussions of the formal qualities of the Ijo figure. The curator indicates that the work symbolized two cultures coming together. It was made by an African but also has influences of European imagery and art. Gallagher, trained in art history, agreed but also says that her father would not share this opinion. The back and forth from the more formalist description of the work to the more personal makes clear what gets missed in traditional assessments of objects in museums; their back stories do not get sanitized as much as forgotten or deemed irrelevant.

Gallagher frankly says that she had always thought the object was 'rather ugly' and probably did not give it much thought because of the rancor it could cause in her family when brought up for discussion. However, she goes on to note the artist's hand in the carving of the figure was particularly evident up close – something which she had not noticed before and particularly liked. She notes that the more she sits in front of the object, the more she appreciates it. There is a shot of Wendy in the museum where we get a sense of where the figure was kept: in a glass-cased box among other objects. It looked quite lifeless.

It is perhaps easy to dismiss much of the above as gossip or unverifiable fact. Irit Rogoff specifically notes how gossip in visual studies can be productive: '[i]n Foucauldian terms it [gossip] serves the purpose through negative differentiation, of constituting a category of respectable knowledge ... In

Derridean terms gossip allows for the formal boundaries of the genre and its outlawed, excessive and uncontrollable narratives.’ Rogoff compellingly argues that a consideration of gossip can be useful in re-assessing the mechanisms that bind and define certain knowledge as ‘true’ – in this case what kinds of materials can and cannot accompany or be considered part of an object.⁴¹ Indeed, the conversation between Roche, Gallagher and Harris might have been largely expunged for its inability to produce some sort of definitive closure. Instead, I would argue, Manchester Museum as a post-museum pushes audiences to think about and personally feel the impact of issues they otherwise might not want to. I refer specifically here to contemporary British racism and xenophobia which Gallagher seems to genuinely address.

The object is not just dissimulated in the sense it is a representation on a video uploaded onto a website – and then viewed in my case across the Atlantic in Miami, Florida – its meaning, too, has become pluralized or less metaphorically rigid. The different aspects of this multiplicity, though, are not necessarily equivalent, easily reconcilable, or apolitical. That is, the object functions as a site of contestation of meaning rather than bound by its inert materiality. The museum could have presented family photos and playful anecdotes – and Roche does present some lovely photos of Sowood, who, she reminisces, treated her like a granddaughter even though she was not. These are the kinds of ‘proper’ materials that one might find archived with the Ijo figure. More provocatively the museum chose to present conflict over the origin and potential repatriation of the object as well as one family’s complex relationship to the figure, which they had donated. These are the kinds of complex historical genealogies that are expunged from the record because they do not fit prescribed parameters.

Manchester’s Post-museums

The case studies in this chapter explore museums that have re-assessed their collections by promoting practices in which audiences are empowered to actively think and feel through complex issues, which might be unresolvable or agonistic in the end. Though Manchester Museum and the Whitworth Art Gallery are in the same city, they do have different origins and remits; nonetheless, key to both has been an engagement of the object (artwork or historical artifact) as performative, or contingent, and recognition that it is a nexus of multiple but not equivalent histories. More importantly, both shift meaning from the object to the viewer with all of his or her conflictual baggage.

41 Irit Rogoff, ‘Gossip as Testimony: A Postmodern Signature,’ in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (London: Routledge, 2003), 272. Gavin Butt, drawing on Rogoff, also uses gossip to reconsider art world practices, especially in relation to homosexuality. See his *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948–1963* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

Transference of knowledge from specialist to layperson is now not unidirectional. The curator, though, for instance, has not been thrown to the wayside. He or she plays an important role in setting up ‘situations,’ which have parameters – but porous or less rigid ones – rather than ‘exhibitions’ which dictate. Situations might be said to privilege viewers as embodied and always already embedded in the world as opposed to hegemonic exhibitions, which function to dislodge the viewer from the world while simultaneously inculcating a rather disembodied and circumscribed form of knowledge.

Using gossip and synaesthesia as critical tools to explore knowledge as unresolved, precarious, and sensual rather than fixed, settled, and disembodied, Manchester Museum and the Whitworth Art Gallery approximate the post-museum sensibility espoused by Eilean Hooper-Greenhill over a decade ago. Indeed, if historical Manchester represents the consolidation of a modernist viewing practice as I argued earlier, then contemporary Manchester represents an embodied, agonistic viewing practice that can challenge the encyclopedic museum’s deeply entrenched misogyny, racism, classism, and xenophobia.