

Institution: University of Manchester
Unit of Assessment: 34 (Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory)
Title of case study: Putting Critical Museology into Practice
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>The case study demonstrates how research conducted by staff in the Centre for Museology has informed the development of innovative display and interpretation practices in public museums in the UK and overseas. It shows how applied critical and reflexive museology has been used in a range of curatorial contexts, thereby directly affecting institutional practice and, in turn, providing visitors and volunteers with new opportunities for engagement. The impact is evident in the curatorial process, involving both staff and stakeholders, and in critical responses from practitioners and policy-makers.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>The impact is based on research conducted by Professor Helen Rees Leahy (appointed 2000) and Dr Louise Tythacott (appointed 2003) in the Centre for Museology, Manchester, from 2000-date. It demonstrates the impact of their shared research interests in curatorial praxis, drawing on histories and theories of embodiment, interpretation, assemblage, material culture and the politics of display.</p> <p>Rees Leahy's interest in practices and experiences of exhibition display and interpretation distinctively focuses on the significance of visitors' embodied encounter with the museum, past and present. Between 2002- 2006, Rees Leahy tested some of these ideas in practice via a series of experimental exhibitions in collaboration with the Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester: <i>The Object of Encounter</i> comprised three exhibitions designed as museological practice-based research (<i>Aura and Authenticity</i>, 2005; <i>Resonance and Wonder</i>, 2006; <i>The Cultural Lives of Things</i>, 2007). The academic evaluation of these exhibitions informed an approach to exhibition analysis that gives equal weight to a critical reading of both their curatorial intention and the visitors' experience. Developing this field of enquiry, Rees Leahy has traced how visitors' conduct has been regulated and assessed according to its alignment (or not) with institutionally prescribed norms of spectatorship (3.1, 3.3). The research has developed a historically and theoretically informed understanding of the museum as a space of embodied social and cultural encounters. The relevance of this approach to contemporary practice and critique was explored during a research programme in 2007 to mark the 150th anniversary of the Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition, comprising a journal article (3.1), a conference and an exhibition, each of which addressed the relationship between historical and contemporary exhibition practice, including the potential use of historical sources as a reflexive tool for curation and interpretation (3.4).</p> <p>Tythacott's work on the praxis of display of non-Western art is equally informed by her previous experience as a senior museum curator (Head of Asian, African, American & Oceanic collections, National Museums Liverpool, 1996-2003). In particular, her examination of the lives of museum objects and her research on the politics of the display and interpretation of non-Western museum objects (3.5, 3.6) provides a professionally-informed account of how 'object biographies' can be used to enrich and extend the public understanding of and engagement with museum objects in post-colonial contexts. The same focus on the cultural lives of objects and, in particular, the use of assemblage theory to interrogate the history of art collecting, informs Rees Leahy's work on the agency of objects within networks of social relations (3.2). These are approaches that the Centre for Museology has tested, adapted and applied in professional and practical contexts, through curatorial practice and advisory work for a range of museum and heritage organisations in the UK, Italy and Malaysia. What makes this work distinctive is the Centre's commitment to using approaches grounded in critical museology as practical tools for the development of appropriate, reflexive and sustainable strategies for collections management, display and interpretation.</p>

Impact case study (REF3b)

3. References to the research (AOR – Available on request)

- 3.1. Rees Leahy, H., ‘“Walking for Pleasure?” Bodies of Display at the Manchester Art-Treasures Exhibition’, *Art History*, Vol 30. no.4 2007. pp. 543-563. Peer reviewed journal article. DOI:10.1111/j.1467-8365.2007.00562.x
- 3.2. Rees Leahy, H. ‘Assembling Art, Constructing Heritage: Buying and selling Titian, 1798 to 2008’, *Journal of Cultural Economy*, Volume 2, Issue 1 and 2, March 2009. pp. 135 - 149. Peer reviewed journal. Reprinted in Tony Bennett, Chris Healy (eds) *Assembling Culture*, Routledge, London: New York, 2010. pp. 131-145. (AOR)
- 3.3. Rees Leahy, H., *Museum Bodies. The Politics and Practices of Visiting and Viewing*, Ashgate: Farnham, 2012. Described by one ms reviewer as ‘a ‘foundational text’. Monograph. (AOR)
- 3.4. Rees Leahy, H., ‘Making an Exhibition of Oneself: Reconstruction and Reflexivity in the Art Museum’, ed. Kate Hill, *Museums and Biographies*, Boydell and Brewer (Heritage Matters series), 2012. pp. 145-155. Based on plenary lecture at 2010 Museums and Galleries History Group conference at the National Gallery, London. Peer reviewed chapter in edited book. (AOR)
- 3.5. Tythacott, L., *The Lives of Chinese Objects: Buddhism, Imperialism and Display*, Berghahn: Oxford and New York, 2011. Described by one reviewer as ‘a uniquely comprehensive study’. Writing of monograph supported by AHRC-funded research leave. (AOR)
- 3.6. Tythacott, L., ‘Race on display: the “Melanian”, “Mongolian” and “Caucasian” galleries at Liverpool Museum (1896-1929)’, *Early Popular Visual Culture*, Vol. 9, No. 2, May 2011, pp 131-146. Peer reviewed journal article. DOI:10.1080/17460654.2011.571039

4. Details of the impactContext:

The expansion of critical museology within the academy during the past 30 years has often not been matched by the capacity of museums to respond to the institutional challenge that it implies. The ensuing disconnection between theoretical and practical approaches to the museum has impoverished the work of both analysis and implementation. This is particularly true in small museums that have limited professional resources. Working on a range of new display and interpretation projects, the Centre for Museology demonstrates the value of reflexive methodologies as tools for developing inclusive curatorial processes. The critical approaches developed in the listed research outputs have been applied in three different contexts to: influence organisational policy and practice; and to develop robust advocacy tools, and thereby support organisations in attracting increased peer recognition as well as stakeholder and visitor support.

i. Casa Museo di Palazzo Sorbello, Perugia (opened 2011).Pathways to Impact

In 2000, Rees Leahy became Curatorial Advisor to the Uguccione Ranieri di Sorbello (URS) Foundation on the conversion of an 18th-century urban palazzo into a house museum containing a previously un-researched and unseen collection of art, decorative arts and books. Her input produced a re-orientation of the initial museum concept: instead of an approach based on art historical connoisseurship, she advocated a broad socio-historical interpretative frame (based on her research into the agency of objects within networks of social relations) in which a wider range of material culture would be used to tell the histories of changing family fortunes and notions of taste over 250 years.

Reach and Significance

The conservation of a historic collection and the creation of a new heritage asset for the benefit of diverse local, tourist and specialist audiences (average 110 visitors a day), based on recommendations for the:

- specification of a collections management system, to research, preserve, store and record a hitherto unknown collection (5.1);

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- development of an interpretation plan and materials, based on a combination of reflexive museology, archival research and a commitment to inclusive engagement (5.1);
- publication of an Italian/English collection catalogue, (700 copies of English edition sold by January 2013) (5.2);
- job description and appointment of a part-time Curator (5.1);
- content and structure of a conference "House Museums, The Owners And Their Art Collections" (2012): of 160 delegates, 75% were museum/heritage managers and policy-makers, from Europe and the USA (5.3).

ii. The Gaskells' House, Manchester Historic Buildings Trust (2013 ongoing).Pathways to Impact

Rees Leahy was appointed (January 2013) as Curatorial Consultant to the 'The Gaskells' House' project: the restoration and conversion of 84 Plymouth Grove, Manchester, into a public museum (opening 2014). Research and practice conducted at the Palazzo Sorbello is feeding directly into this project, which raises similar questions of restoration and reconstruction, access and authenticity. The project also draws on Rees Leahy's work on cultural institutions in mid-19th century Manchester. She has authored a Curatorial Plan, which explicitly focuses on the relational function of objects, museological reflexivity and diverse modes of interpretation and engagement. Leading directly from this, Rees Leahy submitted a successful application to the John Rylands Research Institute (JRRI) for the digitization of Gaskell manuscripts and texts for display within the house and online. The Project Manager notes how Rees Leahy's research record was key to her appointment and has significantly extended the ambition and reach of the museum: 'Professor Rees Leahy's understanding of the wider field of museological practice has had a marked influence on the development of our approaches to interpretation and display, and her academic research skills have enabled us to develop exciting collaborations with, for example, the John Rylands Library.' (5.7)

Reach and Significance

The project is in development; already the impact of the Curatorial Plan is evident in the:

- endorsement of stakeholders, including Heritage Lottery Fund (5.4,5.7);
- successful negotiation of long-term loans from regional and national museums (5.5);
- recruitment of volunteers and user-groups to collaborate in processes of research and interpretation (5.4,5.7);
- digitization of Gaskell manuscripts and texts, which constitutes a new literary and historical research resource with local significance and global reach (5.6).

iii. Asian Heritage Museum, Kuala Lumpur (2011 ongoing).Pathways to Impact

In 2011, Tythacott was appointed Chief Curatorial Consultant to the planned Asian Heritage Museum in Kuala Lumpur, scheduled to open 2015. The Museum, with support from the Malaysian Federal Government, is at concept stage, consisting of a collection of several thousand Chinese and Southeast Asian objects. Tythacott visited Malaysia in May 2012 to: examine the collections; confirm the display concepts and themes; and advise on preliminary gallery plans. Her research on the politics of representing Asian and Southeast Asian cultures, and an 'object biography' approach, has directly influenced the proposed interpretation of a pan-Asian display of material culture: its focus on the historic relationships between Malaysia and other countries in Southeast Asia, and between Asia and the West, is unprecedented in Malaysia. According to the museum's Chief Executive, this input was critical in providing the team with the 'confidence and encourage[ment] in our belief on the quality of our artifacts and from that, we would be able to create a great museum.' (5.8)

Reach and Significance

The project is in development; the impact is evident in the:

- endorsement of the Museum and its curatorial approach by associates, stakeholders and advisors, such as the Deputy Minister of Home Affairs, the former President of the Senate, and a retired senior civil servant (5.8);

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- agreed display schema and principles of object selection (5.9,5.10);
- preliminary gallery layouts (5.9,5.10).
- fundraising (5.8)

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

All claims referenced in section 4

- 5.1 Rees Leahy, H., 'From House to Museum', *Ten Years of Activity of the Uguccione Ranieri Di Sorbello Foundation, 1995-2005*, URSF, Perugia, 2007.
- 5.2 Rees Leahy, H. (ed.), *The House Museum of the Palazzo Sorbello in Perugia*, Uguccione Ranieri di Sorbello Foundation, 2011. Edited book.
- 5.3 <http://www.fondazioneranieri.org/en/conference-2012/>
- 5.4 <http://www.elizabethgaskellhouse.co.uk/>
- 5.5 Rees Leahy, H., 'The Gaskells' House: Curatorial Plan', approved by the Trustees of Manchester Historic Buildings Trust, March 2013.
- 5.6 'The Gaskells at 84 Plymouth Grove, Manchester', Pilot Project Plan John Rylands Research Institute, June 2013. <http://www.library.manchester.ac.uk/jrri/projects/>. See also, <http://enriqueta.man.ac.uk/luna/servlet/s/97765q>; <http://enriqueta.man.ac.uk/luna/servlet/s/4p6p0a>; <http://enriqueta.man.ac.uk/luna/servlet/s/r0tm00>
- 5.7 Letter from John Williams, Project Manager, The Gaskells House, Manchester
- 5.8 Letter from K K Tan, Chief Executive, Asian Heritage Museum, Kuala Lumpur
- 5.9 Museum Plans, Asian Heritage Museum, Kuala Lumpur, 2012 (powerpoint presentation)
- 5.10 Museum Storybook, Asian Heritage Museum, Kuala Lumpur, 2013 (powerpoint presentation)