

## BOOK REVIEW

## The Body in the Museum

*Museum Bodies: The Politics and Practices of Visiting and Viewing*, Leahy, H R, Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 216 pages, 2012

Jamie Larkin\*

Helen Rees Leahy's *Museum Bodies* is an original and provocative contribution to an emerging sub-field within museum and heritage studies, which takes as its concern the relationship between the museum institution and the body of the visitor. This volume is timely as it not only makes a valuable contribution to an emerging corpus of museological literature but also comes at a point when 'embodied' writing and experiences are re-emerging as part of a wider contemporary cultural zeitgeist. Leahy's well-written and accessible work will be of use to academics addressing museum history and theory and to practitioners looking for an astute analysis of the interplay between visitor and museum and the pressures that may be faced during the museum visit.

The principal focus of Leahy's work is the emergence of the museum in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century. She deftly shows how many of our contemporary museum behaviours have been shaped by arts and cultural institutions, for example walking (not running) in the galleries, whispering rather than talking, and the prohibition of touch. Conceptually, Leahy's work aims at 'redirect[ing] our attention away from the museum as a collection of objects to the museum as a site of social and corporeal practices' (p.3). If John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972) shifted the focus on how the visitor gaze is constructed in art museums, then *Museum Bodies* is the opening salvo in a wider, critical discussion of how museums have developed 'normative practices of spectatorship' (p.50) by regulating visitors' bodies and of how these practices continue to be negotiated.

Attention to bodily practices in the museum is not a wholly new departure, but is an area that is under-documented and under-theorised. Throughout her work (especially in chapter four: *Performing the Museum*), Leahy uses examples from the contemporary art movement of relational aesthetics (Bourriaud 1998), which focuses on human actions and behaviours embodied in particular social contexts. The movement sees artists draw attention to and challenge established social relationships, particularly the authority and conventions of museums and galleries. While there has been critical commentary on this movement within an art historical context (e.g.

Robb 2013), Leahy examines artists such as Tino Sehgal and Carsten Höller and their concerns with regulating mobility and interaction in the gallery with a focus more specific to museum studies.

The two significant predecessors to Leahy's book covering similar theoretical material are Tony Bennett's *The Birth of the Museum* (1995) and Carol Duncan's *Civilizing Rituals* (1995). Both volumes, which largely apply the work of Foucault to museums in a 19<sup>th</sup> century context, examine the underlying power relations that produce practices of viewing, and the performative, ritualistic functions at play on an institutional level – what Bennett terms the 'exhibitionary complex'. Similarly, other works highlight social formation and exclusion in more grounded, contextual detail, notably Richard Altick's *The Shows of London* (1978) and Kate Hill's *Culture and Class in English Public Museums, 1850–1914* (2005).

Leahy's contribution to this discussion is twofold. Firstly, by focusing on the physiology of the visitor in the gallery she really gets to grips with the experiential nature of the visit. Here the visitors are no longer masses being acted upon and shaped indiscriminately: they are people unsure how to look, how to walk, what to say – they are learning how to be museum visitors. Leahy documents how the visitor's body affects and is affected by the museum and begins the long overdue theorisation of the body in the museum through recourse to the anthropological literature (particularly following Marcel Mauss). Secondly, rather than relying on more traditional sources for 19<sup>th</sup> century museums, she utilises newspaper reports, prints and paintings, and both first-hand and fictitious accounts to provide a richer and more vivid insight into visitors' encounters in this period. Such images and texts provide useful, untapped resources ripe for analysis. Indeed, while specific reference is made to the British Museum and the Royal Academy of Arts, the additional focus on the 1857 Manchester Treasures Exhibition provides a welcome counterpoint to the usual London-centric focus of analyses of museum history in this period.

Leahy's work is welcome because it puts understanding visitors and their experience to the forefront of museological practice. Of particular interest here is the emerging application of 'affect theory' to museum and heritage practices. This theory ties the analysis of visitor experience to the emotional, physical, and interactive components of a visit, as opposed to more traditionally visual or

---

\* Institute of Archaeology, UCL, UK  
[j.larkin@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:j.larkin@ucl.ac.uk)

linguistic understandings. A particularly pertinent work, which in many ways makes a good companion piece to *Museum Bodies*, is Emma Waterton and Steve Watson's recent volume *The Semiotics of Heritage Tourism*, which takes as its premise that '...there is a whole repertoire of embodied performances and sense registers rooted in the framing of tourist experiences that hinge upon the body' (2014: 5). An understanding of such bodily practices also calls for new methodologies to apprehend the museum visit in more nuanced ways than through the ubiquitous visitor survey. Certainly, more anthropological methods – particularly phenomenology, ethnography, and psychogeography – could fruitfully be employed here. Congruent calls have recently been made for such changes in archaeology syllabi (e.g. Zarger and Pluckhahn 2013) and could perhaps be further developed across museum studies courses.

Concerning the book's contents, chapter one explores the institutional framework surrounding the prospective visitor's ability to visit the museum by considering how 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century arts institutions cultivated suitable publics. Here, Leahy contrasts the admission practices of the British Museum and the Royal Academy of Arts to show how these could regulate, restrict, but also (sometimes) liberate the visitors and their experience.

The British Museum, opened to the public in 1759, was free to enter yet particularly restrictive in practice. Tickets were only granted after an application in person, and two trips to the museum were therefore necessary. This was a method deployed to restrict the entrance of undesirable visitors, as it was assumed that only people of independent means would have enough leisure time to be able to adhere to such onerous requirements. Upon arrival, groups were escorted through the galleries, often at great speed, by uninformative guides whilst passing by unlabelled exhibits. Mandatory guided tours were ended in 1810, and visitors were finally allowed to explore at their leisure. Yet certain regulatory practices continued – in lesser form – with stipulations related to proper attire, further highlighting the institutional control over the corporeal aspects of the visit.

Conversely, the Royal Academy of Arts charged an entrance fee from its outset but allowed visitors to explore the galleries freely. Consequently, a visit there was more loosely restricted, and bore closer resemblance to the popular exhibitions and circus shows of 19<sup>th</sup> century London. As a result, the gallery became a social affair: it was a place to be seen as socialite, connoisseur, or dandy. Leahy describes it as 'a critical venue for the development of exhibition going as a social as much as an aesthetic experience' (p. 37). Of particular interest is how these two atavistic museum experiences form the poles that still, to some extent, govern the visitor experience today. The museums and galleries willing to open themselves up to their audience by placing fewer restrictions on visitors and their bodies and embrace their role as aesthetic, critical, yet inclusive spaces are the ones which, today, ultimately provide a greater degree of relevance for their broader societies.

The subsequent chapters take up the story of the body in the gallery with more sustained focus. Chapter two considers the physiological act of looking at art and explores what Leahy terms the 'spatial and visual relations between visitor and artwork' (p. 45). Here she shows that spectatorship – where to stand, how to look, how long to look – is an acquired technique and considers how the 'spectating body' has been developed. She then considers the dichotomy between motion and stasis (oscillating between 'glancing' and 'gazing') and the allure of a particular artwork versus the imperative to keep moving through the gallery.

Chapter three addresses mobility in the museum. Leahy shows how museums determined the way that visitors should proceed through the galleries and apprehend the art: to 'move at a pace that is "rhythmically resonant" not only with the curatorial script, but also with the visitor's judicious editing of that script' (p. 85). The physical effects of this joint intellectual and physical activity manifest themselves as the museum fatigue first described by Benjamin Ives Gilman in 1916 (or 'an aesthetic headache' according to Henry James (1877)), and Leahy recounts some of the early measures museums attempted to take in order to mitigate this, namely alternate organisations of gallery space.

Chapter four presents an analysis of performance in the museum through the emergent movement of relational aesthetics mentioned above, while chapter five explores the direct physiological effects of the museum on the visitor. The latter include maladies such as Stendhal Syndrome, wherein visitors are mentally overwhelmed by their experience, as well as instances in which the visitors themselves cause physical harm to the galleries, such as the slashing of the Rokeby Venus by suffragette Mary Richardson in 1914. Finally, chapter six returns to the challenge of exclusion within the gallery space itself (as opposed to the access issues dealt with in chapter one), focusing on traditionally marginalised groups including the working class, women, and children.

As accomplished as the book is, there are a few points that I felt required some elaboration. My main concern was the lack of coverage of contemporary museum visitor practices. Leahy's focus on the development of bodily practices at the 'birth' of the museum in the 19<sup>th</sup> century is quite understandable, and the inclusion of examples of contemporary artwork highlight some current issues well. Yet the cursory treatment of today's visitor in the epilogue (three pages) is somewhat disappointing. As the book's text runs in its entirety to 192 pages, an additional chapter outlining some of the significant changes in terms of practical technologies – audio devices, smartphones – and how they work on the body would have been welcome and within the scope of the volume. Furthermore, there is an overt focus on art galleries/exhibitions and large, national (or quasi national) institutions in the book. While this is entirely necessary in this context due to a general paucity of source material, further study into museums of different scopes and scales, probably conducted through painstaking archival research,

would provide a useful companion and comparison piece to this research.

Nevertheless, this is a welcome addition to a burgeoning literature. It is only through a comprehensive understanding of how the dynamics of power and control play out in the museum, affecting not only the eyes but also the bodies of visitors, that we can bring about meaningful change. Leahy has provided a provocative and stimulating volume with which to begin this conversation.

## References

- Altick, R D** 1978 *The Shows of London: a panoramic history of exhibitions, 1600–1862*. Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Bennett, T** 1995 *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics, Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Berger, J** 1972 *Ways of Seeing*. British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books Ltd.
- Bourriaud, N** 1998 *Relational Aesthetics*. Dijon: Les Presses du Réel.
- Duncan, C** 1995 *Civilizing Rituals: inside public art museums*. London: Routledge.
- Hill, K** 2005 *Culture and Class in English Public Museums, 1850–1914*. London: Ashgate.
- Ives Gilman, B** 1916 Museum fatigue. *The Scientific Monthly*, 2 (1): 62–74.
- James, H** 1877 *The American*. James R Osgood and Company, Boston.
- Robb, E** (ed.) 2013 Special Issue: Perspectives on relational art. *Public Art Dialogue*, 3 (2).
- Waterton, E** and **Watson, S** 2014 *The Semiotics of Heritage Tourism*. Bristol: Channel View Publications.
- Zarger, R K** and **Pluckhahn, T J** 2013 Assessing methodologies in archaeological ethnography: a case for incorporating ethnographic training in graduate archaeology curricula. *Public Archaeology*, 12 (1): 48–63. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1179/1465518713Z.00000000027>

**How to cite this article:** Larkin, J 2015 The Body in the Museum. *Journal of Conservation and Museum Studies*, 13(1): 1, pp. 1–3, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/jcms.1021219>

**Published:** 09 January 2015

**Copyright:** © 2015 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License (CC-BY 3.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>.

**] *Journal of Conservation and Museum Studies* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Ubiquity Press.**

**OPEN ACCESS** 