BOOK REVIEW

**Experimental museology: institutions, representations, users**, edited by Marianne Achiam, Michael Haldrup and Kirsten Drotner, London, New York, Routledge, 2021, 240 pp., £34.99 (paperback), £120 (hardback), Free, Open Access (ebook), ISBN: 9780367406776

With this volume, the editors establish an agenda for museums that seeks to build upon, and move beyond, analysis: ‘We need to adopt experimental approaches that foreground co-design and co-creation so as to transform current, often binary, discourses and existing practices’ (3). This call to arms is, of course, an assertion of practices already present in the sector. My colleagues in the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries at the University of Leicester and their professional collaborators, for example, base their practice around experimentation and for many practitioners working in anthropological and historical subject areas, co-creation is a long established and ethically critical approach to museum making. Indeed, as the editors recognise, experimental practices have been part of museum making for several hundred years. Conservative and canonical forms of representation that are so deeply embedded in these institutions have arisen from an iterative process of experimentation, normalisation and emulation. The authors and editors of this book, however, see experimental museology as a means to challenge these institutional behaviours. The book’s unequivocal assertion of experimental museology as a form of research and practice is to be welcomed, as is the editors’ decision to base this work on fully worked examples drawn directly from the practice of its authors.

While ‘experimental museology’ might refer to any of a wide range of front-of-house and behind-the-scenes practices, here the focus is on the museum as a place of exhibition and display – practices that are and have always been to some degree experimental. The book’s 12 chapters, written by a diverse group of international authors, are divided equally into the three sections given in the book’s subtitle. These are said to deal respectively with the institution and society, museum performances, and users and knowledge, but several of the chapters are so admirably expansive they challenge this neat editorial logic. The final chapter, which has been placed in the section ‘Users’, is actually a conclusion to the book as a whole.

The editors argue successfully that an experimental approach permits the merging of professional and academic discourses. This is demonstrated particularly well in Sarah Kenderdine’s opening chapter. Having led the development of the Laboratory of Experimental Museology (eM+) at École polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne, she here gives a panoramic view of the use of visualisation technologies to interrogate and interpret big data, such as might be present in museum collections. Focused, informed, and grounded, and valuing open and polyvocal engagements, Kenderdine shows how through a succession of experiments a museum future is being negotiated that fully realises the potential of digital. This is being achieved through rational practices of experimentation underpinned by deep theoretical and technical understanding and clear philosophical vision. The chapter leads to a renegotiation of the museum as a multimedia entity. It is not simply about the role of tech. It is about communication in the future.

The reporting of authors’ actions and achievements is at the heart of these chapters. Rodrigo Tisi Paredes, for example, continues the digital theme by exploring his work at the...
Chilean Museum of Pre-Columbian Art where he used digital technologies to realise immersive experiences and manifest ‘impossible objects’ (to make the invisible visible). This desire to engage with the intangible dimensions of contemporary culture is shared by Kenderdine and also emerges in Jennifer Carter and Cristina Lleras’s use of the temporary exhibition, *Voices for the Transformation of Colombia*, as a space to develop content for a planned Museum of Memory in Bogotá. The goal of this latter project was to develop a polyvocal interpretation of Colombia’s 60 years of internal conflict: ‘one that would escape the … victim-perpetrator binary and involve visitors in an introspective and self-reflexive engagement toward a peaceful future’ (50). Assessing public reactions through ethnographic study, this future museum was imagined to be “open”, a place of quotidian activities and daily life, a space for life with trees and not cement, with water that cleanses and gives way to rebirth and as “festive” (63). ‘Columbians seemed to associate the museum less with an idea of the sacred … and more a space to inhabit’ (64). These papers all sit within the ‘Institutions’ section of the book but they are predominantly about media and users.

For some authors, the practice is experimental because it is meant to test an idea or develop a proposal; for others experimental might be taken to mean novel, different or untried. Mieke Bal’s contribution ticks both boxes. Drawing upon ideas from her book, *Double Exposure* (1996), it argues that acts of curatorial combination and juxtaposition are capable of shaking the public into active engagement. Like other contributors, and in common with much museological writing, Bal is keen to disrupt the art museum’s conservative inclinations. The experiment she reports on here was undertaken as an artistic, scholarly and curatorial intervention at the Munch Museum in Oslo in 2017. If this was an experiment for the museum, it was equally so for Bal as this was the first opportunity she has had to combine these three activities in one project. She attempted to ‘innovate from within, to produce a kind of shock effect through what might be perceived as inappropriate mixing’ (102). These actions challenged the normalities of gallery-going and sought to slow the pace and increase observation and contemplation; ‘art is performative but must be given the chance to perform’ (105). Like other authors, Bal is interested in how the museum can affect the contemporary actor.

The book’s subject matter ranges widely, from the tropical greenhouse to the planetarium. Some authors write in a form that mirrors the scientific account of an experiment. Others are more discursive and reflective. Some demonstrate the mastery of their field and considerable ambition, others are more contained. The editors have not sought to control writing style, structure or the titling of chapters; some of the latter are rather opaque and arcane. This is not a cover-to-cover read but rather a book to dip into in search of examples that might have utility for academics, professionals and students who want to consider experimental approaches. Finding the appropriate chapter is aided by short chapter abstracts published on the Taylor and Francis ebook page. These cannot be found in the book itself or on the Routledge homepage for the book. Happily, the book is fully available as an open access ebook.

*Experimental Museology* is a welcome addition to the museum studies literature. It fulfills its goal of advocating experimental approaches very well. I particularly like its commitment to providing detailed accounts of these practices. As a work concerned with contemporary museology, which seeks to push against hegemonic and conservative practices, many of these chapters have value beyond demonstrating the utility of experimentation.

**Notes on contributor**

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Knowing and Remembering Well (Routledge, 2021) and National Galleries: The Art of Making Nations (Routledge, 2016).

References

Bal, Mieke. 1996. Double Exposures: The Practice of Cultural Analysis, 352. London: Routledge.

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