**Museums, scholarly enterprise and global assemblages: a response to ‘Artifacts and allegiances: how museums put the nation and the world on display’**

Peggy Levitt’s book (Levitt 2016) is a positive addition to the stock of scholarly ways of thinking about the impact of global socio-economic and political change upon collection-based representational displays in museums. It raises important questions about the purpose of museums in the 21st century. It is also a book that wants to make the world a better place and to make humans more tolerant and understanding of cultural difference in an era of heightened global economic crisis and mass migrations. In this sense, the perspective offered by the book joins a long and venerable tradition of thinking about the social role of museums as places where the civic is enacted and valued. In its method, the book wants to insist that progressive change is a matter of small steps and that the scholar’s role in this is a modest one, as a respectful observer and translator of what is going on.

The book is based upon 183 interviews with museum professionals in seven cities within the US, Sweden, Denmark, Qatar and Malaysia. The key analytical concept, or conceptual axiom applied to this comparative study of museums, is that of a cosmopolitan–national continuum. At one end of the continuum, museums display their collections within traditional historical narratives of singular national unity, imagined or not, whilst at the other end, collections are used to construct new narratives, which emphasize and celebrate world histories, cultural difference and interconnectedness. However, as the book points out through its detailed comparisons, cosmopolitanism can be rendered as a quality of the national, as much as the national remains entailed in perceptions of cultural difference. In this sense, it is possible to ask of the book whether nationalism and cosmopolitanism aren’t just two sides of the same coin, rather than alternative currencies. The question such a view raises is whether or not cosmopolitanism can be a significant challenge to the inherent conservative discourse of museums. The book’s working definition of cosmopolitanism is offered as ‘the willingness, curiosity, critical thinking, and courage needed to engage, openly and respectfully, with people who are different’ (p. 136).

This is by no means the first time that national museums in Europe and North America have been subjected to a critique of their unexamined narratives of nation, empire and colonialism implicit in their collections and continued in representational displays. Museums have been in the sightlines of postcolonial studies for over two decades. The resulting critique of Eurocentric and Imperialist world views, contained by what has and has not been collected and displayed in national museums, is well known to more than one generation of students of museums studies. If change were only a matter of critical reason and sound argument, then the postcolonial critique would have already transformed most liberal museums in Europe and North America, given the relatively small-scale and connected community of museum professionals. But then Levitt knows all this, recognizing that the cultural assemblage (her term) that is a museum is a result of complex interactions between curatorial knowledge, cultural policies, financial models and even direct state intervention. Change, especially radical change, is no easy matter in the organizational hierarchies and cultural imperatives of the museum assemblage, as Levitt points out, like the giant oil tankers, museums need a lot of distance and time to turn.

What can the cosmopolitan perspective, now seen in a global context, usefully offer that is not already current in the liberal end of professional museum discourse? Reluctantly, one can’t help thinking that the necessary political re-socializing of the economic and military forces unleashed by late capitalism’s voracious appetite for accumulation calls for a more radical perspective on whether the museum can play a progressive role. As Levitt points out, the question which comes into view, raised by Bruno Latour amongst others, is what kind of cosmos is under consideration and how the museum, whose organization and practices still owe more to the 19th and 20th centuries, is configured within it. Again Levitt rehearses the problem of this situation, citing Mark W. Rectanus, whose analysis recognizes that the globalization of museums has been achieved by a standardization of marketing and merchantizing, globalizing tropes of national culture, as state instruments of democratization and reaching new audiences and of trying to entertain and enlighten at the same time (p. 154-55). Of course, cosmopolitanism is entailed in the globalization of museums by virtue of the international mobility of museum professionals, who, more than many other groups, personify the values, outlooks and practices of the cosmopolitan. It is this international group of museum professionals, who as Levitt says, can be parachuted in, who are busy reshaping the cultural capital of museums according to global demand and the book is essentially a conversation with this group. Reciprocity, it is argued, is the paradigm shift in museum practices and upon which the promise of a new form of international critical enquiry rests. But worryingly, this reciprocity might just as easily be the necessary currency of an accelerated trading of objects and ideas being used to establish the newly commodified global museum.

Levitt recognizes the tensions and contradictions contained by the very idea of cosmopolitanism in citing Hiro Saito’s view of cosmopolitanism as containing three parts: cultural omnivorousness, ethnic tolerance, and cosmopolitics. Whilst the account of the new global museum culture contains abundant reference to the first two of these qualities, it is cosmopolitics, defined by Saito in Levitt’s words as ‘the collective project of forming a transnational public and debating global risks as citizens of the world’, which is lacking in the majority of examples of museum practices discussed in the book. In the conclusion, Levitt acknowledges that cosmopolitanism is a flawed term, which ‘sidesteps the intractable for the sake of the possible’ but argues that ‘we have no choice but to bet on cosmopolitanism’s promise in the face of global economic crises and heightened inequality’ (p. 142). Is this the case?

In accepting the given limits of what is possible in the global museum assemblage, Levitt’s analysis falls short of engaging with other possible debates through which the museum is being reimagined for the 21st century. The problem with setting out the material of the book along a cosmopolitan–national continuum is that it treats all the elements of cosmopolitanism as equally contributing to the same ultimate political goal. This is clearly not the case. The cultural internationalism of the emerging world museum phenomenon represents a specific geopolitical axis and alignment of economic and political interests, which is not at all the same thing as finding a new global politics capable of expressing the needs of a world citizenship.

The book looks at how museums put the nation and the world on display by examining the practices of museum directors, administrators, curators and educators. It is particularly illuminating in examining in detail how policy and practice play out in relationship to specific historical collections, exhibitions and museum locations. The book is eloquent about relating the entanglements of policy and practice in specific museum practices to the discourses of nation, but it stops short of integrating a third strand of the assemblage, which is theory itself. In the introduction, Levitt makes the point that the book is two books in one, the main narrative account is intended to reach a readership beyond academic borders, whilst the extensive notes, notably equal in length to half of all of the chapters, addresses a readership knowledgeable about and engaged with academic theory. It is hard to disagree with the laudable aim of writing to engage a general and wider readership, but treating theory as a footnote to the main account comes at a cost to the analysis. What is theory if not the application of critical and analytical concepts to real situations? or the abstraction of broader truths from concrete lived situations. The global cultural assemblage under scrutiny is of course itself a theoretical construct, just as much as is the main analytical axiom of the book, the cosmopolitan–nationalist continuum. Theory in both of these conceptual deployments is a way of articulating a politics, a politics the book seeks in part to explain. The author’s humility towards her subjects, her desire for an ethnography that ‘sees both the forest and the trees’ is a rightful corrective to the time and world of grand theories. However, in the real cultural assemblage of the globalized and globalizing museum, policy, practice and theory are all equally entailed in professionalizing relations. The book is well aware that scholarship does not sit on the sidelines, but takes sides, as the book does in supporting those museums that are grappling with the articulation of a cosmopolitan approach and values. But in disengaging theory from the main narrative the book it is less reflexive than it might otherwise have been about its own position and context. The scholar, like the international museum professional, is, after all, part of the mobile class that shapes the narratives of the museum and the academy is part of the global assemblage that is the museum. Without an integrated theoretical narrative, the scholar is at a disadvantage in being able to steer the course of research itself, i.e. the choices of what to study, as well as subsequently being able to act back upon the course of the narrative. Reflexivity entails the struggle to see fully and articulate the world out of which we write, as well as the world we seek to write towards.

In considering the outlines of the emerging global cosmos of which museums and received notions of liberal cosmopolitanism are a small historical part, we now have to consider the movement of capital and labour, the continuation of the military-industrial complex, climate change and the human relationship with other species. This is the new global assemblage and, as in any network, we should be able to discern, as in the manner of fractals, the elements of the whole within specific networks or sub-assemblages. One of the problems with the way the ethnography of the book treats the movement of people is as a social reality external to the museum. This has a number of consequences for how the museum assemblage is constructed.

The impact of the migration of people is seen as something museums have to adapt to, rather than as part of the assemblage of the museum itself. Levitt is right in pointing to migration as a crucial factor in the future of human habitation, culture and communication: why then leave the movement of people within the museum, the museum’s audience, out of the account? Of course, there are serious conceptual, logistical and resource issues entailed in studying audiences in any depth and the project of the lone scholar is singularly ill equipped to undertake such research. But without some way of considering the practices of audiences, we know little of the cosmopolitan outlook or otherwise of the museum’s visitors. Even more saliently in terms of migration, the book can tell us nothing about the cultural and political outlook of those sections of the population in cosmopolitan centres or their monocultural hinterlands, who, for a complex variety of reasons, don’t visit museums at all. In the cultural assemblage of the museums in the study, it is as if they are empty or that the exhibitions exist only for those who fashioned them. In a network view, an exhibition without an audience would not be an exhibition. In the discussion of museums in the US, Levitt points out that the AAMI’s Centre for the Future of Museums Project’s first report, ‘Museums and Society 2034: Trends and Potential Futures’, discussed changing population demographics in which the museum’s audience was made up of only 9% of minorities against their standing as 34% of the population, a figure which is due to rise to 46% by 2033. A similar story can be told across most museums in Europe, in which the core audience for the museum remains white, educated and broadly affluent. Of course, such a demographic hides a greater diversity and raises one of the museum’s biggest problems of how to know, understand and engage with their audiences. However, without a significant change in audience demographics, only the spectacular global museums, located in major tourist destinations, will have an audience. Whatever the reasons, the absence of the museum’s audience, both actual and potential, imbalances the idea of the museum as a cultural assemblage, or network. It is the visitors to the museum whose performance in and beyond the museum is central to its assemblage and to defining global cultural value. The book tells us that 3.2% of the world’s population are international migrants and that 232 million people are now estimated to live outside their country of origin. How audiences encounter museums, how they make sense of the narratives they are offered and the connections museums make with everyday life is an important and practical way of linking the museum to the politics of global migration.

The absence of audiences in the book leads to a further limit upon the network of practices, which make up the museum assemblage. In most museums, whether permitted, encouraged or not, increasing numbers of visitors record what they see and hear using digital cameras and mobile phones. During the Ai Weiwei exhibition at the Royal Academy in London (10 September-13 December 2015), it was the majority of visitors who were mediating their experience of the exhibition in some technical way. Museums are having to recognize that they cannot retain their monopoly, let alone copyright over the reproduction of images of their objects and displays which now circulate on the Internet. The Internet is part of the same global cultural phenomenon as migration and is producing virtual forms of transnational communication, and museums are attempting to work out how to relate to this new global networked culture. This sense of the museum as distributed also has to be added to the cultural assemblage which is the museum. As Levitt recognizes about transnational migration, the new technologies of communication create hybrid communities and this impacts upon traditional notions of identity and belonging. It also impacts upon the cultural authority of the museum, placing its objects in a transmedial flow, which disrupts the representational narrative and representation itself.

Early on in the book the reader is presented with three possible perspectives on the museum’s role. The first is given by the stark and iconoclastic view of Hans Haacke, who sees museums as instruments of social control, which act in the interests of capital and power in maintaining the status quo. A second view, expressed by James Cuno, holds that museums stand outside of politics acting purely to collect, classify and present facts. A third view is that museums must reinvent themselves as socially relevant institutions for the 21st century and that they can do this through the project of cosmopolitanism. In the cultural assemblage of the museum, or the museum ecology, all three of the above positions are present and active. It is not a choice between them, but a recognition of the hybrid, if not paradoxical, state of the museum in network culture. Levitt’s book, especially in its extensive notes, rehearses many of the academic and professional arguments of progressive museology; however, seeing the museum as part of a much large assemblage makes the task of reassembling the museum for the 21st century more extensive, unknown, risky, but exciting.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

1. **References**

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