

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Kate Hill, ed. *Museums and Biographies: Stories, Objects, Identities*. Heritage Matters Series. Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 2012. x + 338 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84383-727-5; \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-84383-961-3.

Reviewed by Alexandra Woodall (University of Leicester, School of Museum Studies)

Published on H-Material-Culture (December, 2014)

Commissioned by Marieke Hendriksen

In 1855, Bayle St. John wrote *The Louvre, or Biography of a Museum*, just a year after the term “biography” was first used to describe anything other than a person’s own story (according to the Oxford English Dictionary and noted in the chapter by Jeffrey Abt). Published over a century and a half later, this volume, edited by historian Kate Hill from the University of Lincoln, United Kingdom, does likewise, providing an excellent series of discussions moving way beyond St. John’s ideas and positing biography as a new approach through which to understand museums as living entities. It draws together and problematizes interdisciplinary writings, insightfully linking the museum as a collecting, practicing, corporate, and peopled institution, with notions of individual, collective, and object biographies. At its heart are complex epistemological and ontological questions around the relationship between subject and object, biography and museum. Yet despite this difficult central paradox, which could all too easily become a philosophical stumbling block, the book is deeply engaging and accessible, providing unique and varied snapshots into the lives and histories of museums and of those associated with them, while at the same time asking deep questions of agency, knowledge, affect, narrative, object, and self.

The development of the book came out of the Museums and Galleries History Group Conference, “Museums and Biographies,” held in September 2009 at the National Gallery, London, organized by the International Centre for Cultural and Heritage Studies at the University of Newcastle, United Kingdom. Many of the original conference papers are included in the book, but section headings have changed somewhat from the original panel titles (which were “Museums and the Self,” “Donors and Legacies,” “Oral History,” “Women and Museums,” “Object Biographies,” and “Individuals Shaping Collections”), and several additional chapters and an endpiece by Donald Preziosi have been added. The list of contributors reads something like a “Who’s Who” of current museum studies, including well-known figures from such disci-

plines as art history, English, archaeology, anthropology, architecture, and museology, as well as experienced museum professionals (mostly from Europe but with a few from North America).

Biography is conceptualized as a fluid construct, even a fiction, yet the authors do not share a common understanding: indeed a real strength of the book is the contributors’ reflection on such definitions, and it clearly has a place not only within museum literature, but also within biography, life-writing approaches (such as that undertaken by the Oxford Centre for Life-Writing under the directorship of Hermione Lee), and history. In her introduction, Hill suggests that biography can elucidate museum stories, and museums can expand our understandings of what biography might be. However, in a later chapter, Anne Whitelaw criticizes biographical approaches as being limited, since they cannot account for an institution as complex as a museum, and tend to glorify some voices while neglecting others. And of course the real crux of using such a framework might be found in Preziosi’s final words on museums. They “permit us to see fiction as fiction, to see the fictiveness or contingency of our world” (p. 325).

The collection is split into six distinct yet overlapping sections, each of which could be a book in itself. The first part, “Individual Biography and Museum History,” looks at the role of various individuals’ lives and interests in shaping museum collections and practice. Its contributors usefully weave in gift theory: Bruno Latour’s actor-networks (in Felicity Bodenstern’s exploration of the Paris Cabinet des Médailles et Antiques); Pierre Bourdieu’s distinction (in Stuart Burch’s rich and not uncritical discussion of Pontus Hultén’s “store in the gallery” at Sweden’s Museum of Modern Art); and issues of self-publicism (in Laura Gray’s fascinating account of Sydney Paviere at the Harris Museum and Art Gallery, United Kingdom). In this section, we clearly see the impact of individuals on shaping institutions.

The second section, “Problematising Individuals’ Biographies,” interestingly focuses particularly on the stories of women in relation to developing museum collections. Julie Sheldon looks at the “formidable” Lady Eastlake’s role at the National Gallery, and Anne Whitelaw discusses the role of Maud Bowman and “do-gooder” women’s societies at the Edmonton Museum of Arts. A final chapter, by Linda Sandino, draws on empirical data (one of the only chapters to do so) collected through interviews with staff at the Victoria and Albert Museum, using Paul Ricoeur’s “narrative identities” to look at how curating is understood, including through sensory engagements with objects.

The next section, “Institutional Biographies,” could be viewed as stories of the merging of the historic with the contemporary, of the collision between the individual and the political. Suzanne MacLeod’s rich exploration of entanglements between architecture and politics at Liverpool’s Walker Art Gallery brings ethical debates over capital builds to the fore, while Wallis Miller’s discussion of exhibiting architecture in Berlin feeds into current definitions of what can be included within material culture studies. In his chapter, Jeffrey Abt explores the bodily metaphor of the corporation in relation to the histories of American museums as “fictive persons” (p. 143). Helen Rees Leahy asks questions of the (im)possibilities of historic exhibitions being restaged in the present, referring to the London art gallery Tate Modern’s 2009 exhibition *Bodyspacemotionthings* as “just another jolly exercise in relational aesthetics” (p. 150). Of particular interest is Christopher Whitehead’s call for more transparency to the public in sharing with them the paradoxical identities of museum buildings as both conservative and innovative.

If the third section takes the museum institution as representative of a macrocosm, the fourth part, “Object Biographies,” starts with the microcosm. Using such theorists as Arjun Appadurai, Ivan Kopytoff, and Alfred Gell, essays in this section dance around some of the paradoxical issues inherent within material culture studies of objects, namely, that the very materiality of their subjects/objects is lacking. Lucie Carreau notes some-

thing similar in the development of collections themselves: sometimes objects were collected not for their own materiality, but for their relationship with the institution. Louise Tythacott traces the biographies of Buddhist bronzes at Liverpool Museum but notes concurrently the intimate link with the biographies of key staff and individuals in this process. Likewise in Mariana Françaço’s tracing of the journey of an Amazonian red feather coat into the Danish National Museum, cultural identity and the movement of objects become the subject, rather than the coat in itself. Mark J. Elliott draws to our attention a disturbing set of Indian sculptural “types” out of place in a contemporary museum practice with its emphasis on dialogue with source communities and social justice.

The penultimate section, “Museums as Biography,” examines such complex genres as the literary house museum (Alison Booth), the scientist’s house (Sophie Forgan), and the role of visitor participation in the completion of a story (Alexandra Stara). Each chapter is concerned with absence and presence, and as Forgan states: “Personality museums work by using sites and artefacts to collapse imaginatively the distance of time and space” (p. 259). The final section, “Museums as Autobiography,” explores museums in which, as Belinda Nemeš notes, “the principle subject is the story of the life and/or career of the person who established the museum” (p. 279). This section also takes in use of oral histories (Steffi de Jong) and community stories in current museum practice (Elizabeth Crooke).

Despite the book’s physical unwieldiness (the hardback is rather large and heavy), it is a book to which one will return time and again in relation to all sorts of other museological subjects: restitution, museum ethics, object materialities, exhibition histories, people’s stories. Clearly museums do have lives, whether real or imagined, factual or fictive, individual or communal, and these lives deserve further research. Behind many of the contributions to this book are important current preoccupations with visitor engagements and audience participation in museums, and this book will play an important role in practice and in future museological research.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Alexandra Woodall. Review of Hill, Kate, ed., *Museums and Biographies: Stories, Objects, Identities*. H-Material-Culture, H-Net Reviews. December, 2014.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=42317>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.