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Editorial

Jennifer Fisher and Helena Reckitt

Introduction: Museums and Affect

***Journal of Curatorial Studies*, Volume 4 Number 3, 2015**

We are delighted to publish this issue of the *Journal of Curatorial Studies* on the topic of 'Museums and Affect'. This is the first of two issues that we have co-edited addressing affect theory as a mode of analysis for curatorial and exhibition studies.¹ Affect accounts for the feeling of exhibitions. It is sensed before cognition or meaning occur – qualifying and charging the interstice among artworks themselves, as well as in the links between exhibitionary agents, institutions, communities, technologies and platforms.

As exhibitions have become understood to operate as the communication medium by which art is conveyed, theories of affect can usefully expand upon processes of mediation inherent in curatorial practice. This issue on museum affect builds upon thinking in multiple disciplines. There is a long-standing feminist engagement with thinking about experience, embodiment and relationship more recently formulated as affects. As well, media studies, cultural studies and psychoanalysis provide productive strains of conceptualizing affect while sustaining dynamic tensions and contrasts.

Museums, galleries, art world events, and artworks themselves function as contact zones where affect is transmitted. Every element in an exhibition can be infused with, and productive of, affect. Some affects are provoked deliberately, others less consciously. In the five articles in this issue the authors recognize that the transmission of affect in a museum or exhibition goes beyond specific works and their supposed meanings to a wide range of social, sensory and emotive registers. In addition to the

¹ The forthcoming second issue will focus on affect and relationality entailed in, and created through, curating.

selection of works, affect theory helps to understand how the mediating agencies of curating simultaneously encompass context and relationship. The authors here analyze diverse facets of museological architectures, installations and media platforms to explore a range of affects including empathy, love, darkness, trauma, banality, curiosity and devotion. How do these affects operate contextually in museums? How might the articulations of museological affect contribute to the production of curatorial knowledge? The case studies considered provide a dynamic range of perspectives illuminating the relevance of affect theory to curatorial studies.

In his article about the Museum of Everyday Life, Gabriel Levine highlights this para-museum's exhibits of outmoded, yet resilient, everyday objects, and the simultaneous affects of banality and curiosity, boredom and comfort, that they inspire. Levine considers the vernacular affect of 'glorious obscurity' that encompasses the running of a museum in rural Vermont and examines the political resonance of its non-mainstream, DIY curatorial stance. Alexis L. Boylan investigates a different affect involving a museum public – love. Her discussion of an impressionist exhibition at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, which was selected through online crowdsourcing, questions the Museum's evocation of lovability as the primary interface with its collection. Shedding light on the role of the curator as social mediator, Boylan argues that museums and curators need to recognize works that are also difficult, antagonistic and even unlovable. Jenny Kidd also focuses on museums' efforts to engage audiences, specifically through the empathy evoked by online games that are often used as an extension of education and outreach programs. Through case studies of online games from museums in New Zealand and Canada, Kidd asks when appropriate affective stimulation ends and dubious emotioneering begins.

Kit Messham-Muir's consideration of Holocaust exhibitions and architectures focuses on atmospheric affects. Highlighting the creation of light and dark spaces in gallery and installation design, Messham-Muir discusses how such affective choreographies stimulate visitors' embodied responses to the traumas of the Holocaust. Finally, Christopher R. Marshall analyzes museums' display and mediation of spiritual artefacts. He looks at how these exhibits attempt to pay justice both to the aesthetic power and

the devotional significance of religious objects, and points to a 'third space' of exhibition design that bridges this divide.

Together, these articles assemble diverse affects with a focus on their attendant display rhetorics: how artworks are mediated, who they are intended to impact, where and when they are exhibited. Each author signals how distinct modes of engagement are produced through particular manners of invitation and address, from affects provoked by online interfaces to those produced by the physical movement through museum spaces. Ultimately we hope these perspectives will contribute to discussions on how affect theory can inform the articulation of curatorial processes, museum experience and knowledge production.