

Book Reviews

Christiane Paul (ed.), *New Media in the White Cube and Beyond*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2008, paperback, pp. ix+273

In 1974, William Rubin, then Director of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, declared that the museum should not be seen as 'infinitely expandable' when it came to contemporary art. It would be wrong, he argued, to automatically expect institutions to collect and exhibit 'the outer edge of the avant-garde', as he termed it. Rather, the museum should accept the fact that there are some things it cannot accommodate and should also remain within its traditional remit of canon building after the fact, waiting a few years before validating new artistic practices. As he put it: 'a museum can just as easily be too early as too late' (Alloway and Coplands cited in Sandback 1984:166). The turbo-charged nature of today's museums nonetheless demands a more rapid and instantaneous level of topicality, so that one would probably be hard-pressed to find a curator espousing such a position today. Yet the question remains as to whether museums really have taken on board a series of related contemporary art forms that are vitally connected to current developments in society at large and that have also been already fully validated by the art world many times over. As this important volume makes clear the evolving practices known variously as digital art or new media have developed a long history that has been the subject of numerous publications and exhibitions – both actual and virtual. These include such 'tipping points' in the history of mainstream recognition of the area as *Documenta X* (1997), the Walker Art Center's Gallery 9 (since 1997), *Data Dynamics* (Whitney Museum of American Art, 2001), and the Tate's online "net.art commissions" (from 2002). If we add to this the more broadly defined practices of intermedia or variable media more generally, then this history becomes longer still. In her overview of current models of new media art curatorship, for example, Sarah Cook begins with Jean François Lyotard's ground breaking *Les Immatériaux*, held at the Pompidou Centre in 1985, although she could just as easily have gone back further than this.

So what happened along the way? Why has new media art in museums remained pigeon-holed in what is effectively a creative ghetto despite its potential for opening up new ways for engaging with art? The answer, as Christiane Paul points out, lies partly in the assumptions that the public makes about new media. Paul characterizes the barriers that art of this kind often has to overcome as including the idea that 'it's all about technology and not about art', 'it's too difficult to use', and 'I work on a computer all day so don't want to stare at a screen in my spare time'. Added to this are the still unresolved difficulties experienced by most architects and exhibition designers when faced with the task of creating effective exhibition environments for work of this kind. The white cube – noted by Paul – is generally not a sympathetic setting since the networked basis of digital art often feels awkward and constrained in the its decontextualized atmosphere. The alternative of the black box is equally problematic since most new media art is not made to be experienced in immersive, darkened environments. The third option of the dedicated media lab is also unsatisfactory since it creates a literal ghetto in the museum that begs the question as to why such a space is effective. Finally, as is underscored in Joasia Krysa's chapter on what she terms 'distributed curating', the process-oriented and collaborative nature of much media art goes against the grain of the aura of originality and uniqueness that remains central to art museums and that also, by implication, impacts on the traditional role of the museum curator as a unified producer of a fixed and singular exhibition narrative. This is one reason why digital art repositories tend to proliferate outside the museum system in such collaboratively curated open source mailing lists as Rhizome, runme.org or CRUMB.

There have been many notable exceptions, and *New Media in the White Cube and Beyond* is particularly good at highlighting innovative exhibitions of these kinds. Lichty, for example, is refreshingly frank in his account of the difficulties as well as rewards involved in the curatorial processes leading up to his *(re)distributions*: an online exhibition of 2002 that explored the creative potential of 'nomadic' technologies like blackberries and mobile phones. Baumgärtel, Christ and Dressler are also informative on the issues they encountered when developing their collaboratively curated, *Games: computerspiele von KünstlerInnen (computer games by artists)*. This 2003 exhibition, on artist manipulations of computer games, was particularly challenging for a contemporary art kunsthalle since computer games have not been, as the authors note, 'naturalized as materials for contemporary art' (249). Finally, Jones and Stringari contribute an illuminating chapter on their *Seeing Double* exhibition held at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, in 2004. This exhibition addressed the widespread issue of the ongoing maintenance of media artworks in museums. Technology becomes materially compromised much faster than most traditionally defined art materials making it difficult to preserve and display. *Seeing Double* explored this problem by creating a series of exhibition adaptations and reconstructions of key works by artists such as Robert Morris, Nam June Paik and Cory Arcangel/BEIGE. The resulting exhibition gave visitors the unique opportunity of viewing original yet 'degraded' artworks alongside their re-created doubles, in the process inviting them to reflect on the issues of authenticity, originality and the ongoing 'life' of artworks in collections that are fundamental to museums and yet so rarely addressed in exhibitions.

Part of the innovation of *Seeing Double* lay in its cross-disciplinary approach, resulting from collaboration between the Guggenheim's curatorial and conservation departments together with high levels of consultation with the artists involved. This mandate to move beyond the artificial boundaries created by the silos existing between related professions and disciplines is, of course, one of the fundamental ideas informing new media art. It was precisely this level of multi-disciplinarity that was however largely absent from *New Media in the White Cube and Beyond* which marked one of its major limitations as a publication. It seemed a shame, in the first instance, that a volume dedicated to the impact of new media art in museums did not draw to any major degree on the parallel literature on new media in museums more generally. This is a literature that is not yet fully developed admittedly but it is now coming to the fore in such publications as Ross Perry's *Museums in a Digital Age* (Routledge, 2009). More significantly, the volume tended to cling to a rather narrow band of museums for its analyses. There was very little discussion for example of the key role played by art programs and commissions in science and technology museums, which are to be counted among the most seriously considered applications of media art in museums today. Finally, the volume felt frustratingly narrow on a cultural level. One could be excused for thinking on the basis of this book that new media art in museums was something that occurred solely as a result of the work of a small band of closely aligned writers, curators and artists shuttling between key institutions in England and America, with occasional digressions into Eastern Europe, Germany and Canada. Asian Pacific perspectives, for example, remained conspicuously absent save for a brief reference to the 'Aboriginal contribution' to new media applications in collaborative community practices (149). In this sense, *New Media the White Cube and Beyond* tended to reinscribe a somewhat antiquated view of a city-based, centralized Anglo-American art establishment that ran counter, in other respects, to the fundamental expansiveness of new media as well as the increasingly globalized reach of contemporary art more generally. But if the volume did at times run the risk of seeming to be in certain respects symptomatic of the continued limitations restricting the application of new media art in museums, it also nonetheless attested to the vitality of the field and its continuing potential to expand our awareness of the possibilities for the integration of art and new media in museums however – and wherever – we define those terms today.

University of Melbourne

Christopher R. Marshall

Reference

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Brian Graham and Peter Howard (eds), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Heritage and Identity*, Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008, hardback, £80, 461 pp.

The way in which scholars have been talking about heritage in the past few years has been shifting considerably, or at least their interpretations have been continuously redefined and nuanced. First prompted by insightful literature treating heritage as a cultural phenomenon and as a way of popularizing the past for ideological purposes (Lowenthal 1985 and Walsh 1992), the theoretical approaches to heritage have undergone continuous change. This change is a constant reminder that heritage is all about the present, being continually defined and redefined with reference to a particular historical, social and cultural context. The focus on the national, so prominent in the first works on the subject (Wright 1985 and Hewison 1987), was nuanced by the consideration of other layers of significance that frequently overlap and sometimes even conflict. The pervasiveness of the global increasingly penetrates heritage discourses as noted by several works on the matter (Boniface and Fowler 1993 and Alsayyad 2000). But at the same time scholars have been documenting the somehow paradoxical up-surging of the significance of 'place' in heritage discourses (Dicks 2000 and Ashworth, Graham and Tunbridge 2007). On the other hand, if the maintenance of the importance of the national in its post-war configurations is to be accounted for, the experience of mass mobility and the relevance of trans-national communities alongside the increase of mass global travel and tourism have also captured the attention of scholars in the heritage field (Winter 2007). Furthermore, the role of popular culture in the mediatization of the past, the fragmentation of heritage narratives and the claims for recognition for the damages wrought by past injustices or violences have heightened the debate around the importance of heritage in today's societies (Huysen 2000; 2003).

Not surprisingly, heritage practices also undergo constant change, revealing new, and sometimes unexpected, fashioning, incorporating new languages and instruments of gazing available in the information age, for instance as noted in the works of MacDonald (2006) and Parry (2007). As such, heritage is a rich and fluent observatory of more general cultural practices and processes that characterize an ever-changing social reality. *Heritage and Identity*, edited by Brian Graham and Peter Howard, moves a step forward in this respect by not only identifying new strands and scopes of attention within the heritage field, but mainly by emphasizing that *things* and *minds* are not dissociable, but rather mutually constitutive of ever-changing social relations (see Henare, Holbraad and Wastell 2006)

Although corresponding to its general aim of being a companion identifying the main areas of research within the heritage field, the book is intentionally open-ended as it stresses the heterogeneity of heritage and its plural facets and dimensions. The nation-state, as acknowledged in the book, still remains the main identity referent but there are other dimensions that need to be considered, ranging from the international with its many intersections with the national and the local, to the more localized and even personal experiences of heritage. This is one of the most compelling aspects about the book as it readily acknowledges that there is a need to fully address this ubiquity through new, flexible, and interdisciplinary approaches.

The twenty-five chapters of the book are a constant reminder that heritage is all about the present. This companion is thus something of a manifesto against common-sense readings and interpretations of the notion of heritage, disentangling it from the past from where it supposedly originated. On the other hand, by stressing the relationship between heritage and identity the introductory chapter by the editors is a careful drawing of the argument that heritage is 'the past' that signifies and, as such, positively acknowledges the role of heritage in negotiating belonging in the present. This moves aside from static notions of heritage that see it either as things we receive unchanged from the past or as ideological mechanisms that a-critically foster consent and domination.

This is not to say that the book strives for a presentist approach. One of the things I liked most about the book was the analytical prominence given to political, social, economic and historical contextualization. Part I of the book is precisely themed 'Context', fully recognizing the need to acknowledge that cultural processes don't come out of thin air and that they are closely tied to the social, political, economic, and historical conditions in which they emerge and by which they are fueled. This analytical framework is embraced by most of the chapters and pays due tribute to the inter-disciplinary approach the book adopts. In relation to this, one of my favorite chapters is the one by Jo Littler (Chapter 5). Drawing on the relationship between

heritage and race – understood as a cultural, political, and economic concept – the author neatly calls attention to the need to devise an analytical framework that is both able ‘to theorize longer-term historical strands’ and to address ‘specific cultural, political and social contexts’ (97).

The three chapters in this part are successful at introducing some of the general issues addressed in the book. They offer both the intellectual and historical depth needed by anyone who wants to go into this particular area of study, and bring to the fore the main critical issues that heritage research is currently addressing. These include: the intersection between the public and the more personal, private readings of the past; the tensions and conflicts that characterize all heritage processes; and the interconnectedness of multiple realities with plural heritages and identities. In this respect the book, instead of a structure, presents a ‘net’ of heritage complexities, as the editors point out in their Introduction (8). Nonetheless, the organization of Part II (Markers of Heritage and Identity), Part III (Practices of Heritage and Identity), and Part IV (The Challenges of a Post-modern and Post-colonial World) are less satisfying in this respect as they ‘close’ the general aim of thematic and theoretical openness to a certain extent. In addition, it is sometimes not easy to understand the choices made by the editors in assigning chapters to sections. Take the chapter on heritage tourism (Chapter 15) for instance, which is in Part III. Isn’t heritage tourism, albeit a heritage practice, one of the key expressions of the post-modern world? Other examples could be given as most of the chapters deal with issues that are simultaneously identity markers, heritage practices and challenges in the contemporary world. But here is illustrated the recurrent drama that scholars face when they have to catalogue items that exemplify cross-cutting themes.

In terms of geographical scope, the book covers vast and distinct areas, paying considerable attention to less conventionally addressed regions. As stated by the authors in the Introduction, the book deliberately focuses on particular regions including Australasia, South Africa and Central and Eastern Europe. This focus proves to be particularly useful to tackling the main issues that are today receiving considerable attention from the social sciences and humanities in general, because of the great changes and identity re-orderings they are facing. Nonetheless, as some chapters fully acknowledge, the status of heritage in Western societies still needs further understanding, moving away from the over-used ideological/consumerism model. In this regard I especially liked David Atkinson’s chapter (Chapter 21) on the heritage of mundane places and its intrinsically dissonant nature.

One of the most compelling aspects about the book is that it doesn’t take for granted the top-bottom arguments that so frequently explore the ‘memory-nation nexus’ or the dynamics of power and domination. On the other hand, it also doesn’t take a bottom-up stance for granted. Rather, following the leads of works that encourage a multi-vocal approach to the understanding of representations of the past in the present (Bodnar 1992), it assumes the complexities, dynamics and even paradoxes that characterize all heritage constructions. As a matter of fact, if there is a general focus to the whole book then that focus is on conflict: in one way or another all the chapters refer to, directly address or analyze in depth the conflicts that all heritage-work involves. These conflicts arise from the fact that heritage is plural, concerning several agents at the same time that range from international organizations to small groups or even to individuals. If one is to fully understand heritage constructions, one needs to address the cultural practices and social realities which, while they underline and give meaning to those constructions, are at the same time able to disrupt them.

Regarding this last point, I especially appreciated the chapter by Laurajane Smith (Chapter 9). By giving voice to private sensibilities the chapter offers an understanding of the cultural practices and social relations that underlie all heritage-work, sometimes engaging with it, sometimes conflicting with it. Unfortunately most of the chapters only analyze these complexities fairly superficially. The arguments too often lie in the institutional domain and fail to give full analytical prominence to private understandings. Although it proclaims the growth of scholarly interest in the more private (even personal) dimension of heritage, the book actually gives little voice to that particular sphere. Some deeper ethnographic work would have perhaps better illustrated the whys, whos, whens and what-fors of identity and heritage processes.

I also found the relationship established between ‘memory’ and ‘heritage’ misleading. How are the two concepts related? Are they meant to mean the same? Is heritage part and a parcel of a broader, more complex way in which people relate to the past and recall it in the present for future needs? The two concepts are used throughout the book somewhat

indiscriminately, which, while it may not entail many problems for the scholarly understanding of what is meant by heritage, nonetheless does pose many conceptual and operative complications in dealing with memory. What is memory, after all? Do all societies, in all times, have memories in the same sense that the notion is depicted in the book? 'Heritage, Memory and Identity' by Sara McDowell (Chapter 2) raises many interesting questions on that subject, but nevertheless fails to convey a more satisfying understanding of the notion of memory as the term is used so many times as a synonym for heritage. Nonetheless, *Heritage and Identity* is a valuable and timely contribution to the heritage field; it not only brings to the fore new and challenging directions of study, but also pays a very positive tribute to the clarification of its analytical and theoretical frameworks.

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Sharon Macdonald, *Difficult Heritage: Negotiating the Nazi Past in Nuremberg and Beyond* (London/New York: Routledge, 2009). viii+231pp.

A great deal has been written about memory and materiality in Berlin, with important works by Brian Ladd, Karen Till, and Jennifer Jordan, among others. Until recently, the rest of Germany had been neglected by comparison. But, with significant publications such as Gavriel Rosenfeld and Paul Jaskot's edited collection, *Beyond Berlin*, and Neil Gregor's book on Nuremberg, *Haunted City*, this situation has changed. Even amongst this distinguished company, Sharon Macdonald's book is original and thought-provoking.

The book's originality lies in Macdonald's use of both historical and anthropological approaches. Her analysis of Nuremberg's Nazi heritage, including in the Rally Grounds 'the largest single complex of monumental buildings ever constructed in National Socialist Germany' (28) draws on both disciplines to good effect. For example, Macdonald explains her use of the term 'negotiating', as opposed to more familiar terms such as 'haunting' or 'trauma', as a way of being able to study how such terms are used locally, rather than presupposing them as part of her analysis. She can operate as a historian, seeing how changing perceptions of the Nazi past have affected the city and its inhabitants, but also as an anthropologist, interviewing people who she calls 'history workers', such as tourism officers, exhibition organisers, tour guides, journalists, and those working in the city's historical preservation office (*Denkmalschutzbehörde*) and building office, and carrying out 'participant observation' at the Rally Grounds. To what extent is this ambitious combination of roles successful?

Macdonald's first chapter offers a brief historical guide to the Rally Grounds, covering the choice of Nuremberg as the Nazi Party's City of the Party Rallies, and Albert Speer's gigantomaniac plans for their development, only parts of which were realised. She combines this historical narrative with some well-chosen anthropological theory (Durkheim, Handelman, Connerton, among others), to emphasise the affective power of the architecture and the rallies themselves. The chapter sets the scene nicely for the following discussions of Nuremberg's negotiations with its difficult past. That said, with the exception of the chapters on guided walking tours of and tourism to Nuremberg's Nazi heritage, the book is a study of negotiations over collective memory that will be quite familiar to historians. It succeeds admirably in its project, but the anthropological input seems relatively marginal, apart from some interesting asides in text boxes which highlight particularly revealing interviews or encounters.

Macdonald is very good on the difficulties of the early post-war decades, in which 'repression' or 'silence' dominated, but when there were also attempts to acknowledge the meanings of the site. Her examples of the uses to which the site has been put include motor racing, rock concerts, and, in the 1980s, a particularly garish plan for a shopping centre and luxury flats. In the 1980s the site first became a *Mahnmal*, with the narrow defeat of the shopping centre plan. Eventually, by the 1990s, the city was able to accept the fact that incorporating the Nazi past into its self-image and into the image it projected to the rest of the world, was essential in promoting Nuremberg; by then, there was 'widespread political consensus that Nuremberg's image would be harmed more by appearing to be *not* acknowledging its terrible past' (p.188). From the 1990s onwards, in the context of unified Germany, the new problem thus became how to manage the new phenomenon of 'dark tourism' and how to reconcile promoting a sensitive handling of Nuremberg's Nazi past with the city's desire to promote itself as a major centre of commerce and culture. Finally, the decision was reached to build a new Documentation Centre with a large permanent exhibition, at the former Rally Grounds; it opened in November 2001, as a contribution to the new aim of positioning Nuremberg as a 'City of Peace and Human Rights'.

What Macdonald highlights especially well is the way in which the materiality of the site gives rise to a wide variety of responses in visitors, showing how meaning is contested and ever-changing. Although the site, broken and amputated, is relatively 'ineloquent' by comparison with better-preserved sites, for that very reason the former Nazi Rally Grounds work as particularly-instructive examples of how difficult heritage is constructed and fought over, whether by 'history workers' or visitors. Indeed, all that is missing in this exemplary illustration of the processes by which collective memory is formed and continually reshaped is – until the very last pages – an explicit articulation of Macdonald's own opinions on questions such as preservation, the

strength of the historical and artistic exhibitions, or the different uses to which the site is put.

Beyond the specific case of Nuremberg, Macdonald's work asks important questions about 'dark heritage' and difficult pasts in general. As she notes, 'Heritage protection turned the Nazi Rally Grounds into heritage' (87); that is, once officialdom stepped in to preserve (some of) the site, it acquired symbolic value as something worth preserving. Does 'heritagisation' imbue such sites with an aura they might otherwise lack? Macdonald's appreciation for the city council's policy in the 1970s and 1980s of 'profanation' (*Profanierung*) or 'banalisation' (*Banalisierung*) is well taken, for it allowed for the buildings to be maintained but reduced the risk of their being endowed with a mythical or mystical aura of authenticity or sacredness. Permitting fire-fighting practice by the Association for the Prevention of Accidents in the home of Nazi ritual was a stroke of genius! Yet profanation was not enough, indeed it came over time to be seen as contributing to the downplaying of Nuremberg's Nazi past. Accordingly, Macdonald's study delves into the complexities of dealing with the material past in a sophisticated and multi-layered way, reflecting the debates themselves in Germany. Unsurprisingly, the city's more unpleasant history tends to be presented as a 'reflex of the nation as agent' (p. 141), whereas its friendlier face is put forward as the result of local initiative.

Macdonald shows how *Ratlosigkeit* (confusion, or not knowing what to do), or what she calls 'continuing oscillation', can engender productive engagements with the past, a useful counterpoint to the oft-expressed need to 'wrap up' the problems of the past with a 'single solution'. When Macdonald cites a tour guide to the effect that: "The time since 1945 is also a theme of our tour: the Party Rally Grounds have remained through to the present an exemplary mirror for 'the Germans' and their attitude towards the past'" (p. 159), this is also a précis of Macdonald's project. To her credit, she not only provides an exemplary study of the power struggles involved in negotiations over collective memory, she also highlights how local and national issues, in a country that has been at the forefront of dealing with 'difficult heritage', resonate very widely indeed.

Royal Holloway, University of London

Dan Stone

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