

## ***Hot Topics, Public Culture, Museums* edited by Fiona Cameron and Lynda Kelly**

Noelle Serafino

Cameron, Fiona and Lynda Kelly, eds. *Hot Topics, Public Culture, Museums*. Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010. 340 pages; 13 illustrations. \$67.99 hardcover.



Museums are places of wonder, pleasure, and learning; they are spaces in which to encounter what Caleb Williams, in his contribution to Fiona Cameron and Lynda Kelly's *Hot Topics, Public Culture, Museums*, calls the “unsettling experience of the truly new” (20). But museums also remind us of uncomfortable pasts, an unsteady present, and a challenging, unknowable future. Museums—19<sup>th</sup> century monuments to the classifiable and containable—have taken on a new role in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as forums for public debate. Beginning in the 1970s, there has been a shift in museum practice and theory influenced by the rise of identity politics. The focus on educational programming and visitor needs signaled an upsurge in museum engagement with issues of local and global pertinence, morally and politically “transgressive” content, disputed histories, and underrepresented communities. Initially perceived as a challenge to museum authority, such “hot” topics have more recently been embraced by experimental museums as a means of achieving broader relevance and increased visitor engagement. However, these changes have been accompanied by a number of negative incidents that garnered national and international press and may serve to deter even the most progressive of museum professionals.<sup>1</sup>

In *Hot Topics, Public Culture, Museums* editors Fiona Cameron and Lynda Kelly present a collection of essays that questions the traditional role of museums in contemporary society, encouraging the reader to imagine the possibilities for participatory action and public involvement in inclusionist museums. Based in part on the findings of two research projects, *Exhibitions as Contested Sites: The Roles of Museums in*

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*Contemporary Societies* (funded by the Australian Research Council) and *Contested Sites Canada* (funded by the Canadian Museums Association), this volume is concerned less with *what* constitutes museum controversies than with *how* and *why* they happen. It examines content from museums as diverse as Jersey City's Liberty Science Center, the Justice and Police Museum of Sydney, Australia, and the Virtual Museums of Canada, to name a few. Fiona Cameron's introduction traces the transformation of the museum establishment from modernity to post-modernity. In a world characterized by uncertainty and doubt, public confidence in museums as institutions of veracity and neutrality has waned. *Hot Topics* is organized into two parts, beginning with theoretical frameworks and moving to examples of audience engagement. In what follows, I highlight some of the key essays of the collection.

In "The Transformation of the Museum into a Zone of Hot Topicality and Taboo Representation: The Endorsement/Interrogation Response Syndrome," Caleb Williams offers a range of institutional models to understand how museums have engaged with complex issues and pervasive societal doubt in order to reestablish themselves as sites of critical engagement and empowerment. Meanwhile, Linda Ferguson, in "Strategy and Tactic: A Post-Modern Response to the Modernist Museum," examines modes of tactical resistance utilized by the public in constructing museum exhibitions as controversial. Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, Ferguson highlights the power relations at work in the interactions between museums, visitors, and citizens (39). In her own essay, Fiona Cameron deftly uses Ulrich Beck's concept of work risk society to theorize the blurring of museum culture and social space. World risk society names the societal transformations—general uncertainty and a pronounced skepticism of formerly trusted institutions—that arise from the perceived threat of the unintended hazards of modernization and the mechanisms used to control them (56). Here, Cameron posits that controversy, when handled with care, may lead to new opportunities within museum practice. Controversy can and does situate museums at the fore of public political culture while simultaneously placing greater responsibility on museum visitors to form their own opinions and to contribute to knowledge production and circulation. Richard Sandell and Stuart Frost's "A Persistent Prejudice," which closes the first section of the collection, examines recent successful forays into exhibitions and collections assessment around LGBTQ histories.

All of the authors included in this volume agree that museums can successfully maintain societal relevance if they include greater public participation. For example, in the second part of the collection, Juan Francisco Salazar suggests that social media can increase citizen involvement so long as it doesn't perpetuate dominant ideologies rather than question them. Salazar notes the difference between information access and information ownership, suggesting the latter must cease to be the exclusive stronghold of curatorial authority. Andrea Witcomb's powerful essay, "The Politics and Poetics of Contemporary Exhibition Making: Towards an Ethical Engagement with the Past," emphasizes the value of sensorial, affective forms of museum interpretation. She counters the familiar critique of such museum experiences as nostalgic and escapist by chronicling her own physical, emotional, and cognitive reactions to

historical interpretation in Greenough, Western Australia, calling upon museum visitors to activate their senses, question received knowledge, and challenge themselves to fill in the gaps in historical narratives. In “Hailing the Cosmopolitan Conscience: Memorial Museums in a Global Age,” Paul Williams draws connections between collective memory, tourism and memorialization, and national atrocities, acknowledging tragedy as a unifying force in his discussion of memorial museums. Like Witcomb, he suggests that evocative, visceral experiences in the common spaces of memorial museums enact a “cosmopolitan conscience” (228), but he also warns against the troubling comparison of recent atrocities, which render such events interchangeable and dehistoricized.

Overall, the strength of *Hop Topics, Public Culture, Museums* derives from its depth and breadth. The collection is potentially appealing to academics and practitioners alike in that it addresses theoretical concerns of new museology and practical concerns of institutional self-censorship, funding cuts, and marketing schemes. Perhaps the most exciting of the research findings is evidence that visitors want museums to ask questions as much as they want museums to provide answers. The best museums are those that offer delicately balanced and clearly communicated content and incorporate a narrative approach. Communication, transparency of mission, and confidence in institutional goals on the part of museum professionals help to ease the tensions of controversial subject matter and allow for thought-provoking, nuanced, and dialogic exhibitions. This is precisely what the editors of *Hot Topics, Public Culture, Museums* envision as integral to the revitalization of museums as useful and shared public spaces.

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**Noelle Serafino** earned an M.A. in Performance Studies at New York University with a focus on heritage tourism, material culture, and museum interventions. She received a B.A. from Hampshire College with a concentration in dance and performance and Latin American and Caribbean studies. She lives and works in Western Massachusetts.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For example, the *Enola Gay* affair is one of the most highly publicized museum controversies to date. In 1995, the Smithsonian’s National Air and Space Museum (NASM) experienced fierce backlash from the Air Force Association, World War II veterans, politicians, and other interested parties for their proposed exhibition marking the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the Second World War. The exhibition was to include the fuselage of the B-29 bomber—the *Enola Gay*—that carried the first atom bomb to Hiroshima. B-29 veterans weren’t satisfied with NASM’s interpretation, which they considered too politically correct and disapproving of airpower, and insisted that the museum display the fuselage with pride (44). The ensuing controversy drew considerable press coverage and resulted in

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multiple exhibition document revisions and the resignation of the Director of NASM. The *Enola Gay* ultimately went on display in a very different exhibition than initially conceived. (Air Force Association. “The *Enola Gay* and the Smithsonian Chronology of the Controversy Including Key Documents 1993-1995.” Accessed 16 March 2012. <http://www.afa.org/media/enolagay/chrono.asp>).