

# THE EMBODIED MUSEUM AND ITS MISCELLANEOUS ANATOMIES

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## **Introduction: The Museum's Bodily Parts**

Boundless body bits lurk in museological texts and, if one accepts that appropriation "lies at the heart of any museum collection" (Beard & Henderson, 1994: 7), it is unremarkable that the museum has appropriated the body metaphor, but what does the museum's body metaphor signify? In a bewildering array of anatomies, the body metaphor seems to permeate more than elucidate. Some anatomical examples may help illustrate the pervasiveness of this metaphor in Euro-American museological writings.

Wittlin (1970: 143) unravels the museum's umbilical cord and stresses that public museums have yet to cut "their navel cord from private collections of the past". Cameron (1992a: 378) also casts back to the museum's early infancy and asks: "[W]ho brought us into being; who nurtured us? Do we know the hand that rocked the cradle?" Such questions are more knotty now, since museum history has splintered into several lines of descent, enabling "multiple genealogies for a promiscuous breed of institutions" (Starn, 2005: par. 10).

The museum is a "living organism"; its "central artery" is the permanent gallery; and exhibitions are the "museum's tongue" (Strong, 1983: 76, 79, 78). Moreover, the museum "speaks in a variety of human voices" (Weil, 1997: 252). On the matter of museum collections, anatomies are muddled. Kavanagh (1994: 7) claims: "If the collections are the skeletal system, then the visitors are the life blood of the museum." In contrast, Cossons (1991: 24) indicates that "the lifeblood of the museum is their collections, the heartbeat is provided by good curatorship and conservation", whereas Pearce (1985: 198) maintains that "collections are at the heart of a museum".

Museums are "living entities" (Schouten, 1989: 107), with "multiple pressure points" and "organizational nerve endings" (Dubin, 1999: 8). The museum building is pictured as "the connective tissue of the displays" (Radley, 1991: 69). Large-scale museums are "muscle-bound" (Weil, 1988: 37), and museums are "slow-moving bodies" (Karskens, 2002: 50). In this way the museum is made flesh. Nor are we left in doubt about its genetic

constitution: "Eurocentricity seems to be genetically coded in our museum ethos" (Cameron, 1992a: 382).

### **Heart-(Mind)-Body-Soul**

The selection of a particular body symbol implies that something remains unchosen (see Ellen, 1977: 365). In the anatomy of the museum, the body comes minus its head. Is there a defective gene in the museum's Eurocentric genetic encoding? Stam (1993: 271) underlines that the concerns of the 'new' museology are "largely cognitive", but how are we to understand this cognitive process which not only spawns a museum body, but a mindless body at that? Although the museum is destitute of a mind, it does possess a memory (e.g. Crane, 2000; Lake, 2006; Levin, 2007). Indeed, it may be reduced to disembodied memory, as proclaimed in the chapter heading: 'The Museum as Memory' (MacDonald & Alford, 1989). It must be remembered that institutions inevitably generate "structural amnesia" (Douglas, 1986: 70; see also Dubin, 1999) and thus systematic forgetting is the Janus-face of systematic remembering.

As with the mind, the soul is largely absent in the embodied museum. Aagaard-Mogensen (1989: 205) dismisses the museum as "soulless". Some detect a soul, but it is an amorphous entity. Gurian (2001:26) contributes: "I believe the debate has missed the essential meaning (the soul, if you will) of ... the museum. Objects are not the heart of the museum." This conviction is contested by the following two statements: "Collections are the heart and soul of any museum" (Pearce, 1994: 62) and "Selling violates the soul of a museum" (Spalding, 1991: 168). These two express a kindred doctrine: collections are the key to immortality. In Witcomb's opinion (2003: 60), the struggle in museums between research and communication is "the subject of intense pain and soul searching". Other glimpses of the soul remain elusive.

Conversely, the 'heart' receives ample attention, both as a bodily part and in the sense of centrality. In a heart-warming panegyric, Pearce (1992: 99, 219, 244) lauds "the heart of the museum enterprise", "the heart of the museum experience", and "the heart of the museum aesthetic". Cameron (1992a: 386) is an exception: he tries to recontextualise the museum's 'heart' by incorporating emotions so that "bringing the heart and the mind together can give us the most precious amalgam of our humanity".

Cameron would find a correlation in Chinese philosophy, with the unitary concept of 'heart-mind' (*xin*)—the centre of will, emotion, and intellect—which morally directs the body (for details, see Hanson, 1989: 85). Unfortunately, the museum's anatomies appear absurdly inept for the labour at hand: a "change of heart" to forge "the new museum" (Cameron, 1992a: 385).

The 'new' museum clutches on to its familiar body. For instance, *Towards a New Museum* flaunts the imagery of the body on its first page: "Museums satisfy ... a deep natural want ... as deep and as natural as sex or sleeping" (Johnson quoted in Newhouse, 2006: 1). The museum is as natural as sex and, one can further explore its "pleasure and seduction" in 'Towards an Erotics of the Museum' (Marcus, 2000: 230).

If the museum is constructed as a body, it is only 'natural' that it is a gendered body. Marstine (2006: 18) observes that despite feminist critiques, the museum is still dominated by "masculine gendering". Although numerous attempts have been made at gender engineering (see, for example, Belk & Wallendorf, 1994; Deepwell, 2006; Jones & Pay, 1990; Porter, 1996), these endeavours resemble piecemeal tinkering rather than an exhaustive overhaul of the museum's body.

### **Body Language**

It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the museum's relationships with living bodies (its publics), dead bodies (displays of human remains) and the body politic. These are routine areas of museological inquiry. Yet, museological construction of the body has received only skin-deep analysis, as in Pearce's assessment (1992: 56-57) in which collections are viewed as extensions of the curatorial self, hence the terms "body of the collection" and "heart of the collection". However, Pearce unveils only a fraction of the body. Feher (1989: 16) provides a three-dimensional portrait:

When the organs are concerned, the reason for resorting to a metaphor or to an organic model is essentially to naturalize a political institution, a social hierarchy or a moral principle: it is, one might say, the ideological aspect of things.

Metaphorical projection is more than a mode of linguistic projection. The 'body' is a metaphorical sanctuary which offers museological rationalisations for the 'natural' order of things. The body metaphor translates the museum institution into a 'natural' body, with 'natural' functions and a 'natural' right to exist.

The body metaphor is a conceptual sleight of hand; it is a double illusion, for without close scrutiny, it may slip unnoticed through one's fingers. Weil (1995: ch. 1) devotes an entire chapter to metaphors, garnering a collection which includes the museum as temple, as treasure-house, as educator, as forum, and as mausoleum. Yet, his metaphorical forays fail to bring the museological body back home. To anatomise the body, therefore, requires forays into sociology and anthropology.

In Douglas' anthropological analysis (1973:16) of the human body as a symbol of the social body, she indicates that if the body is conceived of as an "organ of communication", the main preoccupation is with its functioning efficiently. In the museum's anatomical vocabulary this means: "Communication through material culture ... lies at the heart of what museums are all about — the other functions are secondary" (Moore, 1997: 27). Communication may even become a matter of life and death: "Museums must communicate or die" (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994: 34).

Faith in the communicative function (see also Hooper-Greenhill, 1991, 2004; MacDonald & Alford, 1989: ch. 6; McManus, 1991) goes hand in hand with the museum's 'voice', an attribute that takes on a larger-than-life role. Pickering (2002: 3) maintains that the museum "must speak with more than one voice", but Cameron (1993: 167) pointedly reminds us that "the museum can speak only in the language of its own reality".

The communication paradigm has been cannibalised from several disciplines and, significantly, the museum has been described as "a form of cannibalism made safe for polite society" (Tompkins quoted in Ames, 1992: 3). In his *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes*, Ames (1992) pronounces museums as intrinsically cannibalistic in their modes of appropriation and representation. Root (1996) also recounts the museum's cannibalistic practices in *Cannibal Culture*. But worse is to come, for the museum body is very sick indeed.

## **The Ailing Body**

The museum suffers from a variety of major and minor maladies, as well as "infirmities" (O'Doherty, 1972a: 2). Sola (1991: 129) declares: "The museum body has been, from the very beginning, contaminated with the viruses of ownership and specialisation." According to Hudson (1987: viii), ethnographic museums are "anemic", with the exhibits deficient in "blood". Bazin (1967: 278) diagnosed "sclerosis" of the museum, in which its body suffered from state control.

Vision impairment is also evident. In Wittlin's account of museums, the subheading 'The Life and Death of Organizations' is followed by the quotation: "[M]ost ailing organizations have developed a functional blindness to their own defects" (Gardner quoted in Wittlin, 1970: 216). Hooper-Greenhill (1992: 8) regards museum's history as "blind history".

The museum also appears to be afflicted with some sort of pathological skin condition. Sorensen (1989: 72) ponders the futility of adding more and more "skins", that is, layers of material evidence, as a means of "embodying" the fundamental truths. Cameron's concern in 'Getting Out of Our Skin: Museums and a New Identity' (1992b) is of a different magnitude and he concludes that the prospects for the museum shedding its skin are bleak.

Disorders of the digestive process have been definitively identified. The unceasing project of museum acquisition and display is "an invitation to indigestion" in Mumford's appraisal (1966: 435). In a similar vein, the director of Australia's Art Gallery of New South Wales justified de-accessioning in the following terms: "[Y]ou'll get indigestion. The collection will simply clog up. ... there can only be so much ingestion without a certain amount of excretion" (quoted in *The Australian*, 16 Aug. 1996). This is identical to the sociological concept of the body as an "input-output system", whereby equilibrium can be restored through periodic "purges" (see Turner, 1984: 178).

The body is a powerful metaphor of society and, in sociological terms, disease represents a potent metaphor of structural crisis (see Turner, 1984: 114). In the 1990s museologists found a salient metaphor—anorexia—for the corporate crisis within the museum's corporeality. Pearce (1991: 1) lamented that museums would be "losing their hearts and souls in the struggle to become leaner and fitter, in a kind of moral anorexia". The Editorial in *Museum Management and Curatorship* (1996: 116) also weighed up the

anorexic museum: "The balance sheet may temporarily look healthier, but corporate anorexia has set in and the museum has been permanently weakened."

Interestingly, over-indulgence once appeared the norm. Just over a century ago, *Natural Science* informed: "The museum as a whole is painfully suggestive of what museologists call 'the fat boy'" (see *Oxford English Dictionary*, 1989, vol. 6: 781). In comparison to the bodily obesity of the past, the museum has become a mere anorexic shadow.

Is there a condition more deleterious than illness? 'Is There Life in Museums?' asks Spalding (1991). The museum's "deathly image" as Merriman (1989: 155) puts it, is a familiar motif. In addition to the museum as mausoleum (see also Altieri, 1989; Cameron, 1995: 49; Witcomb, 2003), the funeral register is inscribed with the museum as graveyard (Ripley, 1978: 38; Aagaard-Mogensen, 1989: 211), as monument to the dead (Merriman, 1989: 155; Radley, 1991: 71), and as a tomb with a view (Gold, 1988; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1991: 416). 'The Museum is Dead. Long Live the Museum' is the beguiling title of Michaux's (1992) article, and equally revealing is Reeves' (1998) title: 'The Age of Living Museums'. The catchphrase 'living museum' (see also Gale & Bryant, 1993) works to neutralise connotations of death and thus a partial explanation for the prevalence of the museum's body metaphor is that it evokes images of the 'living' as opposed to the 'dead'.

The imagery of death does not impede museum growth, for museums "are proliferating at a remarkable rate" (Clifford, 1999: 455), but the museum's "ability and willingness to breed" (Hudson & Nicholls, 1985: viii) is not always interpreted as a "healthy" development (see Sola, 1991: 128). Long ago, Wittlin (1970: 217) counselled against unbridled museum growth, for it could engender "misfits". On the other hand, when museums fail 'to breed', that is, when proposed museums fail to materialise, Price and Price (1997: 97) advocate an "autopsy".

### **Bodily Crises**

The museum's multiple crises are all fleshed out in the lexicon of the body. In Douglas' (1973: 16) exegesis of body symbolism, if the social body is seen as vulnerable, one of the major tasks is protection of its boundaries. Pertinently, Vaessen (1989: 27, 26) brandishes the word "invasion" to describe the crisis of the museum's boundaries,

boundaries which formerly articulated and maintained "a special identity". Where has this lack of vigilance led?

While Cameron (1992b) was contemplating the museum 'getting out of its skin', the museum had already burst out of its body, or its legs had run away with it, as in Hudson's (2003) definitional survey: 'The Museum Refuses to Stand Still'. This hyperactivity has given us 'fly-by-night museums' (Hudson, 1987: 194); 'para-museums' (van Mensch, 1988: 5); 'non-museums' (Sande, 1992: 185); 'anti-museums' (Cameron, 1993: 168); 'real museums' and 'pretenders' (Watkins, 1994: 33). It has given us the 'meta-museum' and the 'mega-museum' (MacDonald & Alsford, 1997: 277), as well as the vague but voguish 'new museum' (Marstine, 2006; Message, 2006; Newhouse, 2006) — which is not new (see Cameron's usage, 1992a) — and a new contender: *The Delirious Museum* (Storrie, 2006).

Has this 'out of body' experience been accompanied by an altered state of consciousness? To accommodate the museum which has outgrown its body, Sola (1991: 132) proffers the label "heritage care unit" as the "species" that includes the "variety" of museum, library and archive. Furthermore, Sola (1991:132) depicts these institutions as "social glands pump[ing] in the secretion of collective wisdom". The gaze and the metaphor move inextricably in tandem. Mindful of the heritage challenges ahead, Sola (1991: 128) cautions: "But the task should be a challenging one ... For centuries we have passed time in the body-building parlour, we should give our brains the same attention."

Predictably, the issue of the museum's 'body maintenance' has been metaphorically dissected. Cameron (1992a: 381, 379) emphasises that the tendency has been "cosmetic instead of radical surgery", and he proposes museum "metamorphosis" in his article, which is tellingly entitled 'A Change of Heart'. It appears the museum is in need of heart surgery or a heart transplant. Where does one find a donor? Some museum writers look to developing nations for innovative approaches (e.g. Ames, 1992: xv; Hudson, 2003: 91). Is this another form of polite 'cannibalism'? In contrast, Cameron (1993: 167) speculates that non-Western museums are already dangerously contaminated, since the Western museum is an "alien transplant", with transplantation carrying "the risk of a festering, alien implant, infecting its host or doomed to atrophy and die".

The metaphorically meaningful 'identity crisis' of the museum was first diagnosed more than a quarter of a century ago (Cameron, 1971; ed. O'Doherty, 1972b). In the early

1970s, O'Doherty (1972a: 2) wrote despairingly in *Museums in Crisis* of the museum's "state of physical, financial, aesthetic and spiritual disarray". During the same period, Cameron (1971: 11) recommended "psychotherapy" for museums stricken with "schizophrenia", "delusions of grandeur" and "psychotic withdrawal". Jordanova (1989: 40) proposed "a thorough-going psychoanalytic account of museums", and Weil (1997: 252) bravely attempts such a feat by psychoanalysing the museum's personality: it is "inwardly focused, stately, solemn, and remote", as well as "outwardly focused, accessible, unpretentious and lively".

Some fragments of the body may be read as a somatic shorthand of the identity crisis. To retrace earlier bodily parts, we have seen the collection labelled alternatively the 'heart', 'soul', 'skeletal system', or 'lifeblood' of the museum. Is there any connection between the identity crisis and the museum's body with its jumbled, misplaced or missing anatomies? The body metaphor may also signal shifts in emphases. The collection as an inalienable part of the body in the previous examples may become something that 'clogs up', that requires 'excretion'. Thus, the collection may be transformed from the sacred to the scatological, shifting from within the body to the bodily orifices.

### **The Museum's Magical Metaphor**

Although the odds and ends of the museum's body metaphor sometimes seem lost in the burgeoning literature on the museum, their persistent presence raises questions about the 'new' museology, which emerged as a "corpus of thought" in Europe in the 1970s (see Harrison, 1993: 165). Does this new 'corpus of thought' offer anything new or is it simply taking old bodies out of storage and exhibiting them in new garments? The organic analogy was a notable feature of social theorising in late nineteenth-century Europe (Turner, 1991: 9), but Eurocentric 'new' museology puts it into service for contemporary theorising, whilst studiously turning a blind eye on its implications.

Metaphorical activity is not a meaningless exercise; it is an intentional construction of analogues (see Ingersoll, 1987: 1). When the 'new' museology resurrects an old metaphorical body, it unearths a potent means of invocation. The body metaphor creates a 'heart-mind' grasp of the museum, and even the process of rethinking the museum bodies forth in an embodied format. Three brief examples must suffice. In *Re-Imagining the*



*Museum* we are told that museums must "learn to 'smile'" (Witcomb, 2003: 60). In *Reinventing the Museum* we learn that the reinvented museum is not "one-size-fits-all" (Anderson, 2004: 7). In 'Redefining Collecting' we discover that the museum "is neither the heart itself, nor the machine to stand in its place, but a pace-maker to help it function" (Sola, 2004: 254).

Giving the museum a facelift with the prefix 're-' or proposing more drastic measures, as Cameron does, with 'A Change of Heart' (1992a) or 'Getting Out of Our Skin' (1992b) merely re-animates somatic industry. As Birenbaum (1988: 68) cogently argues, metaphor is a form of magic. Cameron (1993: 167) also refers to magic: the magic of "museum alchemists", but alchemy is additionally an art for the transformation of consciousness. Re-arranging the museum's anatomy will not transform the body — it will only make it more corporeal.

What, then, does the body metaphor say about the museum? It is a propagating, cannibalistic, Western body. It is headless and mindless. Its soul plays truant. It is erotic, promiscuous and gender-imbalanced. Some anatomical parts are missing; others are in disarray. It has a surplus of hearts — all located in different places. One of its hearts is out kilter. Its absent mind has selective memory. It never stands still; it is a slow-moving body. It is simultaneously dead and alive. It is a sick body.

Paradoxically, metaphorical overkill is a museological formula for vivification. Cameron (1993: 167) argues that the museum is "a powerful weapon in the battle for the mind" and, equally, the 'body' is a powerful weapon in the battle for the museum.

### **Conclusion: Mentality and Corporeality**

The museum's anatomy is a miscellany of bodily parts, but there is no mention of the museum having a cerebral component—except in Sola's (2004: 250) tantalising statement: "Museums do make sense, however, as part of the 'mega-brain' that we are creating as a product of civilisation." This appears to veer to the other extremity, in that the museum is all brain and no body.

In the same breath, Sola (2004: 250) informs: "Today, we are witnessing both an unprecedented flourishing of museums and their deepest conceptual crisis." Starn (2005: par. 48) points out that museum literature teems with crises, despite three decades of a

worldwide museum boom, and he explains this paradox as — not surprisingly — "a kind of bipolar disorder in the museum world".

In his museum musings Weil (1995: 7) stresses that metaphor has the power not only to convey, "but to shape our thought". In what shape will our thoughts be after prolonged bouts in the 'body-building parlour', to borrow Sola's phrase? The persistence and pervasiveness of the body metaphor suggest it has settled comfortably in the museum mentality.

The body may have triumphed in 'the age of living museums', but to be 'living' is no cause for optimism. The museum is ailing, infected and infecting, feeble with infirmities, virus-ridden, sclerotic, skin-diseased, blind, dyspeptic, anaemic, anorexic, painfully fat, pain-riddled, cardiac-impaired, deliriously demented, schizophrenic, psychotic. It is a candidate for autopsy.

Nevertheless, one may take heart at self-ministration. According to numerous museological prognoses, the museum is successfully treating itself with 'self-reflexivity' and 'self-examination' (e.g. Macdonald, 1996: 7; Message, 2006: 37; Prior, 2003: 67). No doubt, the 'soul-searching' will continue, but will it relinquish the body?

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