At the Edge of the Curatorial Gaze.

A critical reflection on a photographic exploration of museum storage spaces.
Introduction

Thank you, as someone with an interest in the workings of museums today has been a great insight into the practices and debates that are ongoing within field of cultural and heritage imaging. I also appreciate that it is late in the day and so will not keep you from the pub/informal conversations any longer than is necessary.

I would like to start by thanking the Association for the opportunity to speak to you today and start by outlining my interest in the subject area of ‘behind the scenes’ of museum spaces as a photographer and university lecturer. It stems primarily from my own experience of public museums, both as a child, being drawn into a world of objects and stories, and as an adult with children – observing them encountering similar spaces with a mix of curiosity towards what is being presented and imagination (devising new narratives and scenarios perhaps less reliant upon the official explanations provided by the institution).

But as a practitioner and academic I am also conscious of some of the historical associations of the photograph to the museum; Kynaston McShine (1999) draws out a long lineage of photographic incursions into museum spaces, noting a variety of intentions but within a seemingly narrow range of visual methodologies. Initially, these photographic works were dictated by the technological limitations of the medium and primarily documentary, rather than analytic, in nature, following early expectations of the photographic medium, especially within Great Britain, as an inseparable adjunct to the ‘real’. As the first official photographer to the British Museum (or indeed any museum) in 1853, Roger Fenton’s images demonstrated a clarity of reproduction that would help the museum to catalogue, classify and also publicise its growing collection.

In so doing, Fenton’s photographs also instigated a longstanding and complex relationship between the camera and the museum that would mirror the shifts in cultural and critical understandings of the space and the medium within broader social contexts.

The early histories of photographic development and the rise of publicly accessible museums could be considered to be relatively concurrent, with major movements in both occurring during the early- to middle nineteenth century. The progression from the display
of the private collections of wealthy individuals, families or institutions towards state-sanctioned access to artefacts of historical or cultural ‘significance’ for people of diverging social status coincides with the unparalleled rise and ubiquity of the photograph as a tool to shape and reflect collective memory of cultural and social experiences. But just as the emergence of both bear some commonalities, so too have they been influenced by social sciences and post-structuralist theory that has seen suppositions around their relative objectivity and narrativity debated and critiqued.

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The works to be presented here, form a part of an ongoing project titled “The Chaos of Memory”, and have been produced in a variety of city museum environments. They aim to explore these very particular museological spaces as a literal site for the representation and reception of histories, memories, natures and cultures, but they may also be considered to engage with an expression of the museum as a more abstract, theoretical site for critical and creative thought, on whether and how the museum operates as “a system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events”, (Foucault) and what it means to encounter these spaces.

In this critical reflection I intend to locate the development of my project work alongside contemporary photographic representations of museum spaces and within specific debates relating to the effects of entering into what Bennett (1995) describes as an “exhibitionary complex”, upon both objects and individuals within an institutional consumption of culture.

Theatres of the Real

By deciding how the past is presented and memorialised, museums not only preserve the past, they also play an important role in the construction of ideologies, identities and the understanding and interpretation of ourselves. Thus the relationship between the museum and the museum artefact in constructing a notion of ‘meaning’ is both complex and critical in beginning to understand the nature of the environments depicted in my, and others, project works.
According to Bennett, there are two distinct museological environments in which ‘meanings’ are both created and consumed; those of display and storage. Whilst the construction and design of display areas and exhibition halls are increasingly mediated through the lens of ‘space syntax’ to examine how curatorial intent might be enhanced through architectural planning, storage spaces have received much less attention – despite moves towards increased levels of public interaction with collections through online or physical access, such as ‘store tours’.

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Bennett interprets sites of display in theatrical terms; as a ‘stage’ in which objects are bidden, through ‘behind the scenes’ processes of classification and interpretation, to become ‘performers’. The performative nature of display spaces has invited a range of creative exploration by artists and photographers; for instance, the quiet interiors of Candida Hofer or the work of Richard Barnes, whose images of diorama’s undergoing renovation or repair break down the seemingly impenetrable membrane between the viewer and the viewed – producing images in which the pathos of the objects on display vie for our attention with technical staff and mechanics of the exhibition process.

However, the ‘backstage’ processes by which mere ‘things’ transition into museum artefacts are themselves open to acts of arrangement and ‘reading’ by museum professionals in order to generate increasingly coherent narratives. It is here that my photographic practice looks to operate.

In the book *Museum, Media and Cultures*, Michelle Henning examines how both historical and contemporary museums have sought to restage the relationship between things and their audience.

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Working from a materialist agenda, Henning argues that objects are not compliant in being reduced to documents, texts or representations. Indeed, rather than being objects, they are obstinate ‘things’ within which museum content is embedded to be drawn out by the institution. For Henning, these things exist within a “community of objects” and that our ability to interpret them is reliant upon a process of acculturation; acts of interpretation that enable
us to distinguish the significant from the insignificant. Of course, the museum aids this interpretation through the use of display practices such as arrangement, labelling and framing (either architectural or actual) and could be seen to assemble, or disassemble, what an object ‘is’ through the designation of rules of access. It is through being placed within these networks of relationships that things acquire a sense of ‘objecthood’. As Hilde Hein states;

“objecthood, …, results from multileveled acts of attention by individuals, social groups and institutions. Socially objectified things are imbued with meaning, layer upon layer, within sanctioned structures of reference.”

Thus the artefacts situated within the public display arena of museums exist within a highly delineated environment but, what happens to these aspects of object performativity in areas where these activities of control and display are less rigorously applied – perhaps, where they slip out of the peripheral gaze of the curatorial eye?

The representation of artefacts, photographed in situ in storage areas or removed to a separate photographic studio has been a persistent theme during the development of my practice, and my work has sought to make sense of the dialogue between the environment and the object by playing on a theme of the stage; exploring the relative agencies of objects when they are seen to be ‘acting’ and when they could be considered ‘at rest’.

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For instance, The Chaos of Memory no.10 portrays an antelope, temporarily removed from its storage cabinet, depicted as though caught momentarily in the cross hairs of the camera lens in a depiction that is part wildlife documentary, part hunting scene and part theatre.

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Or no.25, in which a pair of birds of prey hover in ominous repose above an assembled audience of penguins, owls and primates. We can also view how there is a tacit recognition of the nature of the objects depicted – the birds positioned as though flying, the penguins
grouped together in a waddle. Here the objects inhabit their own meaning which continues to be respected even when ‘off-stage’.

In *no.39* a disarranged collection of wooden panels, shelving and gardening tools is rendered with the warm tonality and softness redolent of the seventeenth century Dutch school, or *no.58* which depicts a Victorian table where its surface has been silenced and reduced to a palimpsest by layers of blank, opaque conservation tissue.

Extending from Bennett’s quote, if the museum acts as an ‘impresario’, setting the stage upon which these ‘actors’ are bidden to perform, then perhaps ‘back-stage’ hosts a range of improvisational acts, in which actors from an avian collection present a fragmented comedic double act, a zebra performs a tense, dramatic monologue or a Promethean amalgam of tailor’s dummy and child’s doll is transfixed in a splintered chorus line, caught in the beam of the spotlight. Unfettered by the structures of taxonomy and the weight of narrative that is shaped by and shaping of the museum visitor’s attention, something of the obdurate ‘thingness’ of the artefact returns and along with it a sense of curiosity that, in regard to its nineteenth century usage, could be seen to be at odds with the rationalistic intent of the public museum enterprise.

The notion of ‘curiosities’ is often associated with the *Wunderkammern* (or curiosity cabinets) of wealthy European noblemen of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in which objects were often selected for their singular or ritualistic properties and, despite the fact they were understood to reflect a scholarly interest in the wider world, many were arranged on the basis of highly complex philosophical, religious or occult theories. Some of the most popular curiosities were hybrids, anomalies or ‘freaks’; collections would include two-headed foetuses (animal and human) or objects from miraculous events (such as rains of toads). Henning (2006) views the curiosity cabinet as an agent in the response to a European fixation on the exotic during the ‘Age of Exploration’ in the fifteenth/sixteenth centuries, which threatened to dissolve a secure sense of selfhood by turning that wonder into an acquisitiveness. As she states;
“The curiosity cabinet allowed the assimilation of the extraordinary into a framework in which it made sense, without taking away its extraordinary qualities.”

It is this combination of consumption and spectacle prevalent in pre-modern acts of collection and (predominantly private) display that sat in antithesis to a less prurient sense of curiosity exercised within modern public museums as served by its distinguishing principles of “specialisation and classification” (Murray, 1904). The move to specialist museum types (such as natural history, geology, art, and so on) led to forms of collections and display in which inherited specimens were allowed entry only if their singularity could be transformed into an example of the typical and subsequently arranged within a scientific view of the world for educational purpose. Thus, by attempting to distance itself from other forms of exhibition and framing ‘curiosity’ firmly within the development and acquisition of systematic knowledge of the representative, the museum was able to stabilize the narrative possibilities of things and modify them into objects of legitimate scientific, historical or aesthetic interest.

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Another method historically employed by museums in pursuit of this stabilization is through the display and layout of the public spaces, and consequently the performative relationships between audience and artefact. Bennett identifies practices of audience performativity, such as the original ‘anthropological rotunda’ proposal for Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. She traces Henry Pitt River’s belief that, through correct spatial design in architecture and display “the meaning of every object... was both readily visible and capable of being learned simply by following its track, [thus] a museum’s message should be capable of being realized or recapitulated in and through the physical activity of the visitor” (1995).

Critiques of the use of classification and organisation within museological practices to establish regimes of truth finds an echo in contemporary photographic discourse, particularly with regard to the medium’s use within archival systems. The facility for mechanical inscription and the perception of a direct relationship between the photographic image and an indisputable statement of the subject’s existence has made the photograph an integral part of the museum’s apparatus for recording and archiving materials.
For the photographic historian John Tagg, the notion of the photographic image as an analogue of a substantiated ‘real’ or fact present within the world has an intrinsic link to its usage within certain institutional structures. Elaborating on Foucault’s notion of ‘institutional technologies’, Tagg (1988) identifies photography’s use within nineteenth century institutions such as prisons, police forces, hospitals and asylums as a key factor in “its nature as a practice” (Tagg, 1988), emphasising it’s deployment a regime of truth or ‘the real’, rather than the image as index.

It is within this dialogue between the photographic image and museum site as a regime of truth and as a function of subjective ‘ways of seeing’ (or perceiving) that my work is placed. The project’s responses to the debates outlined here were to, firstly, acknowledge that there exists a range of ways of attending to museum displays and that not all visitors to exhibitions choose to follow prescribed routes and so may not be subject to such directed practices of looking as those described by Henning and Bennett. This is reflected in my approach to the museum storage spaces, where I adopted the practice of wandering often associated with the figure of the urban flâneur, with the intention of railing against forms of a “sequentialized” gaze and embracing the opportunity to go where my curiosity took me. At first this approach proved problematic as I was often accompanied by a member of the museum’s curatorial team, anxious that I did not point my camera lens at any unsightly objects or areas that might draw disapproving noises from wider public exposure. However, once I had provided them with copies of the resulting contact sheets, most felt able to enable me to work in the storage areas with less oversight, leaving me able to roam their facilities with relative freedom. These digressions enabled me to chance upon examples of the singular and curious dialogues between objects and within environments, going on to form the core of the project works shown here. There were limitations imposed upon a truly free-flowing physical experience of the space, as architectural restrictions often impacted upon where I could place my camera tripod or point the lens, however, the resulting fractured appearance of these images served to heighten the sense of the ‘uncanny’ present in those storage areas.

Images from The Chaos of Memory project have been exhibited both nationally and internationally, and my interest in storage spaces have continued to evolve and has resulted
in works in progress that continue to pull at the thread of the “thingness” of objects through an ongoing related project called Anonymous Objects. The Anonymous Objects project draws upon what the cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai describes as the “social lives” of things; by revealing the movement and transactions of things between (and within) different economic and cultural contexts we might begin to illuminate how people find value in things and how things give value to social relations. The work engages with the language of a visual typology as a means to produce a subverted form of the museum document; the process involves gathering together contents from the waste bins in the storage and work spaces of the various curatorial departments in which I have photographed (with permission). By collecting the bits of detritus discarded by museum staff the work aims to re-cast those things not valued by those members of society charged with the identification and classification of objects deemed to be of social and cultural worth. Through an alternative form of vernacular anthropology, the corpus of the museum is scrutinised through a re-presentation of its various parts. As Michael Baxandall states;

“The juxtaposition of objects from different cultural systems signals to the viewer not only the variety of such systems but the cultural relativity of his own concepts and values.” (1991)

Through conversations with the curators who would occasionally accompany me on photographic shoots, I developed an awareness of the variant processes involved in accessioning objects into their collections and gathered details of the time that it would take them to complete the procedure. This information presented my creative process with a structure for dealing with the detritus collected within each museum, as the times given were dependent upon each institution's own specific systems and procedures. These durations would then be used as the parameters within which I would aim to assemble and record my own works into the Anonymous Objects ‘collection’. The objects within the collection were not constructed with any preconceived notions of either hiding the identity of the components or reflecting the areas from which they were drawn – for instance the constituent parts of number 25 were collected from an area primarily concerned with social history, whilst the resulting three-legged structure sits somewhere between a petrified jellyfish and an ill-designed piece of Nordic lighting furniture. However, it is intended that through a combination of humour and curiosity, these photographs create a space for the critique of
the nature of objecthood and the social systems of value and interpretation within which they circulate.

As cultural and economic pressures impact upon contemporary museological strategies and practices, the postmodern museum continues to blur the boundaries between what is considered backstage and ‘front of house’. I view The Chaos of Memory project, increasingly, as a form of what the anthropologist Kylie Message would term ‘borderwork’; utilising forms of photographic practice informed by pre-modern notions of ‘curiosity’ and museal ‘theatricality’, in order to interrogate complementary facets within processes of collection and display, and, I hope, continuing the dialogue between the medium of photography and the museum enterprise, initiated by Fenton in the mid-nineteenth century.

This talk takes place at a serendipitous moment as I am now looking to progress a body of work that images those museum spaces that are, or have been, used as sites of photographic documentation and I would be very pleased to talk to conference members who feel that they might be able to assist in its production. Thank you for your kind attention.