

Chapter 8

Activating the Networked Object for a Complex World

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ABSTRACT

The 'networked object' is a concept that resonates with the notion of the operation of virtual collections within mobile fluids and flows of culture outside and beyond the specific museum context concerns of traditional documentation systems. It acts as a mediator between the museum world and public culture, as it circulates between these spaces, and in various cultural, social, political and technological formations, consumed in many different and unexpected ways. The context in which the networked object now circulates and interacts is what cultural theorist Mike Featherstone (2000, pp.166-67) described as 'global variability, global connectivity and global intercommunication'. This chapter interrogates what happens when the networked object re-connects with public culture in an uncertain, complex and globalising world and how this process intersects with, challenges and re-works the 'authoritative' position of heritage institutions.

BACKGROUND

Museum institutions historically operate according to three seemingly contradictory dialectics – a framing founded in an elite high culture, a mission promoting democratic education (Bennett, 1995, pp. 89; Prior, 2005, pp. 17) and a rationale that seeks to operate above society in terms of the production and dissemination of knowledge.

These constructs developed alongside the state, and developments in science disciplines in the nineteenth century, along with these three aims reflect various trajectories of power between various actors – the museum, the state and public culture. Reconciling these historical frames and sets of activities with digital initiatives has produced a particular set of conclusions around current and future museum digitisation and online collection activities. For the museum as a sacred space in which notion of truth and facts based on a science

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60960-044-0.ch008

epistemology has prevailed, digitisation initiatives enabling the reconnection of museum culture with public culture would seem to transform and unravel museum authority and expertise.

On the other hand within a policy discourse emphasising the value of museums as centres for knowledge and education (dcms, 2006, pp. 6), digitisation and online access to collections offers a tool for museums to achieve democratic remits. Beyond this, digitisation and networked access enables a productive relationship between public culture and museum culture to emerge as a way of gathering a broader range of associations around collections, intimately connected to cultural, social and political formations, debates and events. Here the ontological relation between public culture and museum culture in knowledge creation and dissemination becomes permeable.

The suggestions offered in this chapter do not reference the fleeting and ephemeral but rather, question what happens when collections interact online and the cultural frame of reference is widened beyond the authority of the state/museum trajectory to take into account what cultural theorist John Urry refers to as 'hyper-complexity'. Hyper-complexity according to Urry is a contemporary world characterised by mobile, global flows and fluids of culture producing new levels of inter-connectivity and interaction never seen before (Urry, 2006, pp. 111). As museum collections are inducted into this world of 'hyper-complexity' through online initiatives, they become subject to these mobile flows and fluids.

THE CONTEXT: NETWORKING THE OBJECT

The Australian Research Council funded grant *Reconceptualising Heritage Collections* project in which the authors (Cameron as chief investigator and Mengler as researcher) were the lead investigators studied the 'networked object' within the context of the Powerhouse Museum's collections.¹

The Powerhouse Museum, Sydney is New South Wales government's prominent state museum with over 385,000 objects in its collection, covering decorative arts & design; Australian history and society; engineering and design; sciences, Koori (Indigenous) history, and culture and transport.

Like many cultural institutions, only a small percentage of works (around 3% at the Powerhouse Museum) can be displayed at any one time in exhibitions. Therefore the role of an online database occupies an important role in offering access to museum collections. At the Powerhouse Museum their online projects are ambitious, intriguing and both verify and challenge notions of the role of the museum and the relations between collections and knowledge production. This, coupled with the museum's focus on community, creativity, design, and its relation to society and everyday life made the museum an interesting partner for the project. Moreover, the diversity of the Powerhouse Museum collection meant there were significant opportunities for cross disciplinary comparative studies.

The induction of the museum's collections more directly into public culture and into mobile flows arose in June 2006 with the advent of Google-enabled searches. Such an event allowed the researchers to closely observe how this initiative enabled new forms of interaction between the various public spaces existent in networked society, and that of the museum detailed later in the discussion. It also allowed the researchers to reconceptualise what these types of interactions might say about existing and potential documentation practices within these networked environments, and how cultural theory might inform this reconceptualisation.

Google mediated searches enable the 'networked object' to play a role in political interventions in public culture. Iranian protesters for example angered over the Hollywood movie *300* launched in early 2007 and the representation of Persians in the battle of Thermopylae² (Figure 1) mobilised museum collections through Google to

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