

THE MUSEUM EFFECT



FOREWORD

The Museum Effect brings together the work of a number of artists who draw on museum practice or collecting in making art. Finely curated by Meryl Ryan, the selected works combine to present the viewer with a sense of experiencing the 'museum' from the inside. Spaces designated for collection storage come alive; specimens gathered over many years are given a new life; and museum display methods are appropriated for use in varying contexts – each component of the exhibition fascinating in its own right.

Well-known British curator James Putnam has written extensively on the 'museum effect' most notably in his book *Art and Artifact: The Museum as Medium*. Ryan has borrowed the exhibition title from a chapter in this book, with the author's kind permission. I would also like to thank James Putnam for his essay contribution to the catalogue, providing a broad and international context for the exhibition.

Many thanks also to the artists for their beautiful work, and to their representatives, as well as The University of Queensland Art Museum, for generously supporting the project by either lending work or facilitating loans.

Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery is proud to present *The Museum Effect* not only to Hunter audiences, but also to a national audience through the Museums Australia National Conference staged in Newcastle between 18–20 May 2009. I trust you enjoy the museum experience as interpreted by these outstanding Australian contemporary artists.

Debbie Abraham
Gallery Director

MUSE

When we were students, a friend once advised me to keep only what I could fit into a suitcase. That way I would be ready for any new adventure, unencumbered. As I am driven by curiosity, sentiment and simple wonder to collect, I have never ceased to marvel at her ability to appreciate and move on; to resist that very human urge to possess. The more compulsive of us might subvert such counsel, arguing that with a modicum of discipline this 'suitcase' could always morph into a portable modern-day *Wunderkammer*. To all who examine its contents it would then declare – like its centuries-old pre-Enlightenment ancestor and all museums since – *these are the things that matter to me, and I would like to see matter to you*.

Peter Atkins has managed to balance a passion for collecting with opportunity for adventure, curating his Melbourne warehouse home around the classifying, storage and display of art and cultural objects, keepsakes and everyday finds. His art pillages these stores to present a meaningful partnership of narrative and aesthetic poise in museum-style box frames. Where museum operates as muse, is where *The Museum Effect* takes it cue.

The exhibition acknowledges museological conventions as a continuing and powerful resource for contemporary visual artists. This is not so much attempted by a gathering of art 'curiosities', though they are there certainly. Rather there is a consideration of a more explicit engagement with museum collections and practice.

Atkins' boxes join vitrines (Fiona Hall, Alexis Beckett), bell jars (Trevor Weekes, Cassandra Schultz), reliquary cabinets (John Wolesey and Linda Fredheim) and lighting (Gregory Pryor) to lean on the theatre of the museum and its position as an informed archivist. Traditional display mechanisms not only purport to present and protect examples of cultural, material or natural curiosity and/or significance, but also privilege close observation of those objects' formal values. An 'aura of veneration' is established, as James Putnam points out in his essay, supporting the sense of authority of the pieces on show. Thus the hybrids and 'hoaxes' of Weekes, Beckett, Schultz and Pryor, suggest credence, albeit with intentional irony.

Artists also manipulate the museum's own tools to critique the deceptions of its selective memory, particularly in connection with indigenous cultures and colonial history. With a revisionist gaze, Judy Watson's 'bloodstained' documents and Andrea Fisher's shackles are aimed squarely at institutional amnesia. Tony Albert, a collector since childhood, reworks and recontextualises pieces from his holdings of authentic 'Aboriginalia' (his term for mass-produced Aboriginal kitsch) to address cultural displacement and commodification.

A similarly curatorial strategy applies in the works of Robyn Stacey and Fiona Hall. Stacey's photographs revel in the material glory and excess of certain collections. Evoking the chiaroscuro and compositional qualities of seventeenth-century Flemish still-life painting, she constructs lush assemblies – insects, ancient herbaria, *vanitas* symbols, rustic and ornamental relics – for the eye to feast on. Hall, on the other hand, makes full use of the museum model to create

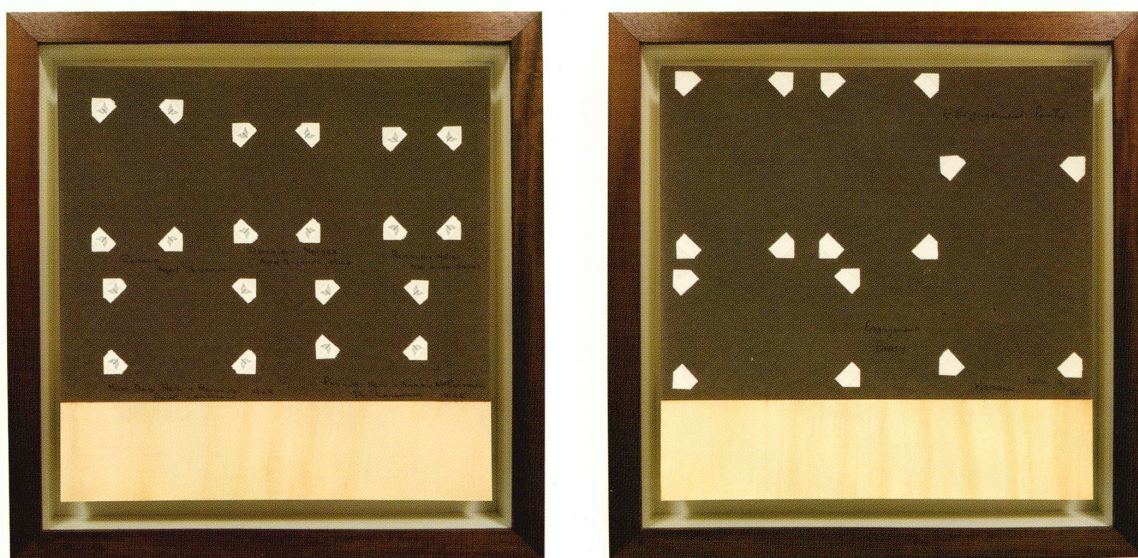
unnatural surrogates in signature attacks on consumerism. *Mourning Chorus* is an articulate memorial; the toxic 'birds' in a large-scale coffin-shaped display case describing their extinction in terms of environmental abuse.

The Museum Effect recognises the memorialising resonance of institutionalised *naturalia* collections – and ethical questions of exploitation – through artists who have worked with them directly, either front- or back-of-house. Like Stacey and Pryor, Justine Cooper and Janet Laurence have produced large series in response to international museum residencies. With unprecedented access to the American Museum of Natural History in New York, Cooper was left to discover what its countless storage areas might yield. The confrontations with lone specimens were the most unsettling; notably the unidentified lion's head she found, and photographed, on its own in a locker. Those engagements not only registered the Australian artist's complicit solitary-outsider position but also compelled recognition – as it does from all viewers of taxidermy animals – of a life lived.

In the video *S.O.S. Sounds of Science*, Cooper summons the spirits of her residency subjects, their cries and calls accompanying the camera as it tracks through the corridors of museum cabinets. There are other ghosts in *The Museum Effect*. Western Australian plants, straitjacketed on their pages in a Viennese herbarium, are traced for repatriation in Pryor's translucent drawings. Beckett's birds are blackened decoys; Wolseley and Fredheim's species are disappearing. Laurence, well known for her elegiac environmental and museological interactions, recalls the dead souls of an avian army. Loaned from the ornithological collection of the Australian Museum for the installation *Birdsong* at Sydney's Object Gallery in 2006, they are here documented on film. She elicits further tributes to the collected natural world with a palette of mirrors, translucent panels, ink, vials and charred flora. The reflective nature of her media conjures shadowy apparitions at the same time as implicating all who look on.

The 'museum effect' finds a form of concentration in Atkins' 12-panel installation of pages from a reclaimed junk-shop photo album. From some distance, the empty white photocorners on black pages chart odd constellations of stars; more intimately, the discreet text identifying absent images commemorates the ordinary landmark events in the seemingly ordinary life of an absent 'Ronald'. And we can't fail but identify with it. Magically, the presentation and this context transform Ronald into a symbolic everyman figure. Art, in collaboration with the accoutrement and/or archived wonder of the museum, has that potential. It revises the world in all its natural mystery and cultural complexity through the filter of imagination, refreshing philosophical enquiry and perhaps even providing clues to the meaning of life.

Meryl Ryan 2009
Curator



This page: Peter Atkins, *Special Project #4 – Ronald's Life* 2006 [detail]
photo corners and text on photo album pages on 12mm plywood in timber box frame
courtesy the artist & Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne; Martin Browne Fine Art, Sydney;
Greenaway Art Gallery, Adelaide

Previous page: Fiona Hall, *Mourning Chorus* 2008
resin, plastic bottles, lights, vinyl in vitrine [photo: Greg Weight]
courtesy the artist & Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

THE MUSEUM EFFECT

Museums are similar to art in that they are created environments, capable of being viewed with the same criteria used to appraise works of art. They are spatial systems that contain or frame everything they exhibit affected by surrounding elements like other objects, glass cases, space, lighting and colour. The arrangement of objects in display cases, the configuration of plinths and labels are essentially formal constructions that have an aesthetic and conceptual significance to the viewer. They can be perceived as a complex fusion of different interrelationships of objects. Many of the early museums incorporated the aesthetic ideals of their founders like Sir John Soane, General Pitt-Rivers and Charles Wilson Peale and represent a personal arrangement of their collections in space just like a contemporary art installation. The nineteenth-century encyclopaedic approach to museum display and its traditional qualities to inspire curiosity and wonder has remained a potent influence on artists. Although it represents the very antithesis of the methods of display used in the modern art museum, the two types are in fact connected, not merely through the process of museological evolution but also because many contemporary artists have been inspired by the wider notion that the museum embodies as an institution, an idea and a practice.

It is possible to trace the 'museum effect' tendency back to pre-Enlightenment Europe with sixteenth- and seventeenth-century practice of the *Wunderkammer* or cabinet of curiosities. This early ancestor of the museum possessed a special quality in tune with the creative imagination, a quest to explore the rational and the irrational and a capricious freedom of arrangement. This random juxtaposition of disparate artifacts has parallels with the assemblages of the Surrealists. There is a long tradition of artists collecting – the acquisition of images and objects for use both as inspiration and as a working medium. The studio becomes a storage area where ideas and materials are evaluated and classified for incorporation into works of art. Collections of personal keepsakes charged with memory or found objects (*objet trouvé*) can become integral with an artist's work and even called a 'museum' as demonstrated by Joseph Cornell in the 1940s. Artists can also create 'museums' of fictional artifacts they've fabricated themselves. By presenting their collections of objects as 'art', they are frequently inspired by museum ordering and archival systems, which relate to taxonomy, archaeology, ethnography, anthropology and material culture. Unlike classic collectors who acquire objects that are rare and valuable, artists tend to gather up relatively insignificant things. As if by some alchemical process, they can transform collections of worthless objects into valuable works of art, combining their authorship with the 'magical' device of the glass display case or vitrine. Besides its basic function as a symbol of protection, the vitrine like the shop window also gives the illusion of increasing the value of whatever is 'special' enough to be placed within it. It has a very specific role acting as a metaphor for both captivation and appraisal, bestowing authority and power on the encased objects. It has its origins in the church reliquary – a see-through container for holy relics – and the museum display case has inherited this aura of veneration. It defines the boundaries of the frame but unlike the frame becomes integral with the work of art both sculpturally and spatially, which is why it appeals to artists.

But it is also the institutional role of the museum that has become increasingly central to contemporary art practice and artists have dedicated increasing time and attention to their relationship with museums, those spaces that might display or in theory preserve their works in perpetuity. This has often led them to question the institutional framing of art and examine the museum's relationship with its visitors. Mimicking its classification systems and display devices, artists have thus focused both creatively and critically on practices traditionally associated with curatorship and exhibition design. Since the late 1980s artists like Hans Haacke and Fred Wilson have investigated the hidden agendas in museums' 'official' and supposedly unbiased interpretations of exhibits and exposed some of the darker aspects of their acquisition history. While some artists have criticized and shunned the museum as being a 'mausoleum', a moribund institution that sucks the life out of art, others have become increasingly dependent on the status, support and exposure that museums bestow on them. As a public institution the museum represents the supreme level in the network of validation beyond art dealers, collectors and critics. The very fact that a work of art has been acquired by a museum suggests that it is worthy of preservation for posterity and thus historically significant. The museum houses and displays its acquisitions by living, contemporary artists in the company of 'important' works which are publicly acknowledged as masterpieces – it confers on them an 'official' seal of quality and authenticity. The irony is that regardless of how radical and innovative art may seem at the time it can end up in the essentially conservative institution of the museum that neutralizes its revolutionary aspirations.

Museums have invited contemporary artists to create special projects for them as a means of shaking off their 'dusty' image and this has enabled artists to seek new meanings and narratives in objects from their exhibited and reserve collections. Such collaborations have offered individual museums an opportunity to take an objective look at their normal approaches to the presentation of their collections and learn more about themselves and their audiences. They can involve artists re-arranging or redesigning existing museum displays or making 'interventions' in gallery spaces. These initiatives allow the probing instinct of the creative mind to counterbalance the sense of permanence and order associated with the museum in a constructive dialogue. When invited by museums to curate special exhibitions, artists can select objects and works of art from their collection and choose the way they are displayed. This process of choosing, arranging, hanging and installing and interpreting them according to their own aesthetic criteria and conceptual ideas effectively blurs the boundaries between curating and art practice.

James Putnam 2009

London

James Putnam is the author of Art and Artifact: The Museum as Medium (Thames & Hudson, London, 2001), due for re-release in a new expanded paperback version later this year. Putnam's most recent curatorial project (with Ben Tufnell) was the exhibition Mythologies for Haunch of Venison, London, 12 March – 25 April 2009.

The Museum Effect

Curated by Meryl Ryan
Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery
14 May – 28 June 2009

Tony Albert
Peter Atkins
Alexis Beckett
Justine Cooper
Andrea Fisher
Fiona Hall
Janet Laurence
Gregory Pryor
Cassandra Schultz
Robyn Stacey
Judy Watson
Trevor Weekes
John Wolsley & Linda Fredheim

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