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Civic Laboratories: Museums, Cultural Objecthood and the Governance of the Social

Tony Bennett

Abstract

This paper examines the extent to which the perspectives of science studies and actor network theory can be combined with those of post-Foucauldian governmentality theory to understand the processes through which cultural institutions fabricate distinctive entities and bring these to bear on the governance of the social. The argument is developed by considering the respects in which the procedures of museums and the distinctive forms of cultural objecthood these give rise to can be illuminated by comparing them to laboratories. This prepares the way for an examination of the ways in which such forms of objecthood have been mobilized in programmes of social and civic governance both within museums and outside them, paying due attention to the differences between their functioning in these regards in the context of liberal forms of government and more directive forms of role. These general arguments are then illustrated with reference to contemporary debates focused on the refashioning of museums as instruments of cultural diversity. The paper concludes by reviewing the respects in which the perspectives it develops suggest the need to question the analytical effects of the extended concept of culture that has underlain the development of cultural studies and contemporary sociological understandings of culture.

Keywords: civic; cultural diversity; laboratory; liberal government; museum; science studies

My primary purpose in this paper is to explore the extent to which methods developed in the field of science studies for the study of laboratory practices can usefully be applied to the processes through which, in museums, new and distinctive forms of cultural objecthood are produced and mobilized in the context of programmes of civic management which aim to order and regulate social relations in particular ways.¹ I pay particular attention in this regard to current concerns to refashion museums so that they might function as instruments for the promotion of cultural diversity. In addressing these concerns, however, I also explore a more general set of questions

¹ This paper arises out of the research theme 'Culture, governance and citizenship: the formation and transformations of liberal government' of the ESRC Centre for Research on Socio-cultural Change (CRESC) at the University of Manchester and the Open University. I am grateful to the members of this theme for their comments on the initial version of the paper at a theme meeting, and more especially to Grahame Thompson and Kath Woodward for their more detailed comments on the later version that was published as CRESC Working Paper 2. The paper published here is a revised version of that working paper.

concerning the relations between specific forms of cultural expertise and processes of social management, and the historical configuration of the relations between culture and the social in those societies we call modern.

There is, of course, nothing new in the suggestion that museums are usefully viewed as machineries that are implicated in the shaping of civic capacities. To the contrary, in the late-nineteenth-century debates leading to the establishment of the Museums Association museums were commonly referred to as ‘civic engines’ to be enlisted in the task of managing a newly enfranchised mass male citizenry (Lewis 1989). The value of viewing them specifically as ‘civic laboratories’, then, depends on the light that such an analogy is able to shed on the *modus operandi* of museums as technologies that, by connecting specific forms of expertise to programmes of social management, operate in registers that are simultaneously epistemological and civic. Nor is the suggestion that there is a kinship – a family resemblance, say – between museums and laboratories a new one. It informs two recent assessments of the distinctive qualities of the modern art museum. In the first of these, Donald Preziosi characterizes the nineteenth-century art museum as ‘a laboratory for the education and refinement of bourgeois sentiment’ (Preziosi 1996, p. 168) in view of its role in providing both a setting and an occasion for a new set of practices of inwardness which, in turn, were connected to the fashioning of new forms of civic virtue. In the second, Philip Fisher argues that art museums furnish a context in which what he calls portable objects – easel paintings is the case he mentions – are ‘open to resocialization and resettlement within this or that cluster of what are now taken to be similar things’ (Fisher 1996, p. 18). It is, however, the laboratory that serves Fisher as the epistemological model for this form of portability in view of its ability to replicate experimental arrangements of objects from one laboratory setting to another and so make possible portable, and hence generalizable, results.

That these essays should have been written by art historians is not entirely accidental. For there is now a fairly developed literature in which a number of art institutions have been likened to laboratories. Although concluding that it does not fit the laboratory case as well as she had thought it might, Svetlana Alpers none the less finds that laboratory practice provides a useful means of probing the respects in which, like the laboratory, the artist’s studio provides a means of withdrawing from the world for the purpose of better attending to it (Alpers 1998). Bruno Latour’s remarks point in the same direction when he compares attempts – including his own – to free science studies from its epistemological past to the work of those who have struggled to free art history from aesthetics. Science studies, he argues, has learned a good deal from the new material histories of the visual arts that have formed a part of this severing of the aesthetic connection, especially for the light they have thrown on the multiplicity of heterogeneous elements (from the quality of the varnish and the organization of art markets, through the history of criticism, to the organization of the studio and the operations of art museums) that have to be brought together to make the work of art. It has also, he suggests, a good deal more to learn from the respects in which these new material histories of art have helped to displace dualistic constructions of the relations between ‘the representing Mind and the represented World’ (Latour 1998, p. 422) by demonstrating the extent to which each of the poles of such dualities is the effect of the material instruments and practices through which their relations are mediated.

While acknowledging the force that the art museum/laboratory connection has thus accumulated, I shall argue for a broader approach. This will involve, first, drawing on the perspectives of science studies and actor network theory to look at the processes through which different types of museum are able to fabricate new entities as a result of the distinctive procedures (of abstraction, purification, transcription, and mediation) through which they work on and with the gatherings of heterogeneous objects that they assemble (Latour and Woolgar 1986). It will also involve considering how the ordering of the relations between objects, and, to bring the visitor into the picture, between objects and persons, that such procedures give rise to mediate the relations between particular forms of expertise and citizens in the context of programmes of social and civic management. I shall, in pursuing these issues, be particularly concerned to distinguish the role that museums play in these regards in liberal forms of government from those associated with their role in more directive forms of rule.

There are, it will be clear, some tensions in these formulations which, in aiming to incorporate the methods of science studies within a post-Foucauldian concern with the role played by specific forms of cultural expertise in the governance of the social, have none the less to engage with the different, albeit related ways in which these traditions theorize and engage with both culture and the social, and the relations between them. I shall, therefore, return to these questions in concluding. I want first, though, to probe more closely how far and in what respects museums are usefully likened to laboratories.

Museums as laboratories

The work of Karin Knorr-Cetina is the best route into the issues I want to explore here. This is partly because she has always been alert to the similarities between the ways in which laboratories arrange the relations between objects and persons and similar arrangements in other scientific settings (the psychoanalytic situation) and cultural contexts (cathedrals) (Knorr-Cetina 1992). It is, however, what she says about laboratories as such – with the qualification that it is the experimental laboratory she has in mind – that I want to focus on here. The essence of laboratory practice, she argues, consists in the varied displacements to which it subjects ‘natural objects’.² Rather than relating to these as things that have to be taken as they are or left to themselves, there are three aspects of ‘natural objects’ that laboratory science does not accommodate. First, she argues, laboratory science ‘does not need to put up with the object as it is’ but can work with a variety of substitutes – the traces or inscriptions of objects on recording machinery, for example, or, and Pasteur’s production of microbes is a case in point (see Latour 1988), their purified versions. Second, since they do ‘not need to accommodate the natural object where it is’, anchored in a natural environment; laboratory sciences bring objects home and manipulate them on their own terms in the laboratory’. And third, ‘laboratory science does not need to

² I place ‘natural objects’ in quotes since, as Frow (2004, pp. 358– 61) shows, there can be no clear-cut distinction between culturally defined and naturally occurring objects. The ‘naturalness’ that is at issue here then concerns those objects which laboratory practice takes as natural.

accommodate an event when it happens ; it does not need to put up with natural cycles of occurrence but can try to make them happen frequently enough for continuous study' (Knorr-Cetina 1992, p. 117).

The conclusion she draws from this capacity of laboratories to reconfigure objects and their interrelations is as follows:

Laboratories recast objects of investigation by inserting them into new temporal and territorial regimes. They play upon these objects' natural rhythms and developmental possibilities, bring them together in new numbers, renegotiate their sizes, and redefine their internal makeup. ... In short, they create new configurations of objects that they match with an appropriately altered social order.(Knorr-Cetina 1999, p. 27)

What Knorr-Cetina has in mind here in referring to 'an appropriately altered social order' concerns the ways in which reconfigurations of the relations between objects, and between objects and persons, that are enacted within laboratories come to be connected to, and play a role in, the reconfiguration of social relations. The example she gives concerns the effects of laboratories connected to the medical sciences and their relation to the clinic in undermining the earlier system of bedside medicine in which the authority of the physician, resting mainly on the notoriously unreliable interpretation of symptoms, was easily challenged and contested by both patients and their families. The substitution of a new set of relations between doctor and patient in which the patient was de-individualized as diagnosis came to depend on the laboratory analysis of samples altered the balance of power between them as the patient was obliged to submit to the authority of the new social collective of doctors and technicians that the laboratory brought into being.

Bruno Latour's contention that it is 'in his very scientific work, in the depth of his laboratory' that 'Pasteur actively modifies the society of his time' (Latour 1999b, p. 267) points in the same direction. For it was his ability to mobilize the microbes produced in his laboratory that gave Pasteur the ability to reshape society as an example of the processes of translation understood as encompassing 'all the negotiations, intrigues, calculations, acts of persuasion and violence, thanks to which an actor or force takes, or causes to be conferred on itself, authority to speak or act on behalf of another actor or force' (Callon and Latour 1980, p. 279). By virtue of the microbes he was able to control and interpret, and which were enrolled as actants in and through the practices of the whole corps of socio-medical personnel who invoked them as allies in their strategies for managing the social, Pasteur's scientific activities became directly political:

If by politics you mean to be the spokesman of the forces you mould society with and of which you are the only credible and legitimate authority, then Pasteur is a fully political man. Indeed, he endows himself with one of the most striking fresh sources of power ever. Who can imagine being the representative of a crowd of invisible, dangerous forces able to strike anywhere and to make a shambles of the present state of society, forces of which he is by definition the only credible interpreter and which only he can control. (Latour 1999a, p. 268)

The scope for thinking of museums analogously as places in which new forces and realities are constructed, and then mobilized in social programmes by those who are empowered to act as their credible interpreters, is readily perceptible. Museums have served as important sites for the historical production of a range of new entities (like art, community, prehistory, national pasts or international heritage) which, through contrived and carefully monitored ‘civic experiments’ directed at target populations (the workingman, children, migrants) within the museum space, have been brought to act on the social in varied ways. The role that museums have played in mapping out both social space and orderings of time in ways that have provided the vectors for programmes of social administration conducted outside the museum has been just as important, playing a key role in providing the spatial and temporal coordinates within which populations are moved and managed. ‘Give me a laboratory and I will raise the world’ is the title of one of Latour’s articles (Latour 1990). This suggests, as a rough equivalent, ‘Give me a museum and I will change society’ in view of the museum’s capacity, through the studied manipulation of the relations between people and things in a custom-built environment, to produce new entities that can be mobilized – both within the museum and outside it – in social and civic programmes of varied kinds.

However, before pursuing this line of thought further, it needs to be acknowledged that both Knorr-Cetina and Latour have been taken to task for working with a more generous interpretation of the idea of the laboratory than others think is warranted. This is Ian Hacking’s view, who has cautioned against seeing too much overlap between laboratories and more open network systems (Hacking 1992a). Moreover, whereas Latour includes collections and archives in his definition of laboratories, Hacking explicitly excludes the classificatory and historical sciences from his definition that stresses instead the ability of the laboratory sciences to interfere directly with the object of study. ‘The laboratory sciences’, he writes, ‘use apparatus in isolation to interfere with the course of that aspect of nature that is under study, the end in view being an increase in knowledge, understanding, and control of a general or generalizable sort’ (Hacking 1992b, p. 33). This means, Hacking concludes, that while museums may undoubtedly contain laboratories in their basements, they cannot be so considered in their archival and classificatory functions since these lack, or do not comprise, an apparatus of intervention on the laboratory model.

The point is debatable. John Pickstone has thus shown how the intellectual operations of a range of early-nineteenth-century sciences were essentially museological in the respect that their comparative and classificatory procedures depended on the ability to make observations across the large bodies of material collected in museums and to abstract from these the systems of relations between them that their assemblage in collections made visible (Pickstone 1994, 2000). Nélia Dias also reminds us of the relations between the skull collections of late-nineteenth-century anthropological museums and craniological experiments, and between both of these and the forms of intervention in the social represented by the colonial administration of colonized peoples (Dias 2004, pp. 220–8). However, when these caveats are entered, I suspect that, technically speaking, Hacking is right here. The knowledges that have been most closely associated with the development of museums and that have provided the basis for their curatorial specialism have been a mix of historical and cultural sciences which, while often drawing on laboratory sciences (through carbon-dating techniques,

for example), have typically fabricated the entities they construct by different means (the fieldwork situation and the archaeological dig, for example). Yet the laboratory analogy is still a productive one in drawing attention to the ways in which the museological deployment of such knowledges – alongside those of education officers, designers, and so on – brings objects together in new configurations, making new realities and relationships both thinkable and perceptible. The crucial point, though, is the occurrence of this within a space that is simultaneously epistemological and civic for it is this that enables such assemblages and the relationships between persons they enter into in the museum space to constitute an apparatus of intervention in the social.

It will be useful, in developing this argument, to go back to the three aspects of laboratory science identified by Knorr-Cetina: namely, that laboratories do not have to make do with objects as, where, or when they ‘naturally’ occur. For it is true of the museum just as much as it is of the laboratory that it does not need to ‘put up with the object as it is’. The museum object is, indeed, always non-identical with itself or with the event (natural, social or cultural) of which is the trace. Its mere placement within a museum frame constitutes a detachment from its ‘in itselfness’, and one that renders it amenable to successive reconfigurations through variable articulations of its relations to other, similarly constituted objects. It is equally true that in ‘bringing objects home’, detaching them from where they ‘naturally’ occur, museums are able to manipulate those objects on their own terms in ways that make new realities perceptible and available for mobilization in the shaping and reshaping of social relationships. This was, indeed, Hegel’s central contention concerning the productivity of the art museum. By severing the connections linking works of art to the conditions of their initial production and reception, the art museum opened up the space for a properly historical cultural politics that would be alert to the possibilities presented by transformations of the relations between cultural artefacts. It constituted a space in which the meanings and functions of artefacts could be made more pliable to the extent that, once placed in a museum, they were no longer limited by their anchorage within an originating social milieu or immanent tradition (see Maleuvre 1999, pp. 21-9). Latour’s conception of anthropological and natural history museums as centres of collection in which objects from a range of peripheral locations are brought together is another case in point (Latour 1987, pp. 223-8), one which foregrounds the relationship between collecting expeditions and museums as ‘the sites in which all the objects of the world thus mobilized are assembled and contained’ (Latour 1999b, p. 101). Their functioning in this regard has played a pivotal role in the organization of the socio-temporal co-ordinates of colonialism as a consequence of the differentiation they established between, on the one hand, the far-away and the primitive and, on the other, the close-at-hand and the modern (Bennett 2004, p. 19-24).

There are, however, many other examples that might be cited. The *ensemble ecologique* developed by Georges-Henri Rivière at the National Museum of Popular Arts and Traditions in Paris has played a key role in producing, as both a surface of government and a locus for new forms of agency, communities identified in terms of the regional cultural ecologies, or territorially defined ways of life, that such arrangements make visible (see Poulot 1994). The close relations between art museums and art history in producing art as an autonomous entity as the necessary

precondition for its (contradictory) mobilization in civilizing programmes or as a key marker in processes of social differentiation is another case in point. In all of these cases, museums are a prime example of those processes through which technologies are able to accumulate in themselves powers and capacities derived from the different times, places and agents that are folded into them through what they bring together – powers and capacities that can then be set in motion in new directions (Latour 2002a). They are all cases, too, in which the productive power of institutions is made manifest in their ability to fabricate new entities out of the materials they assemble. ‘Boeing 747s do not fly, airlines fly’: this is how Latour once summarized his contention that only corporate bodies could absorb and regulate the proliferation of mediators through which we and our artefacts have become ‘object institutions’ (Latour 1999b, p. 193). If it is true, similarly, that it is art museums and not artists who make art, the perception is one that needs to be extended to the wider range of entities (community, heritage, regional cultures, etc.) that are produced by museums as ‘object institutions’ *par excellence*.

If such entities are museum fabrications, then, to come to the third aspect of Knorr-Cetina’s characterization of laboratory science, it is through the observation of the effects of the different orderings of the relations between visitors and such entities that museums dispense with ‘natural’ cycles of occurrence to organize experimental situations in which contrived and staged encounters between people and objects can be arranged for the purpose of both continuous and comparative study. Museums are, in this regard, one of the most intensively monitored spaces of civic observation that we have with countless studies drawing on a plethora of quantitative and qualitative techniques (sociological and psychographic visitor profiling, exit interviews, time and motion studies, etc.) to assess and calibrate the museum’s precise civic yield in terms of learning outcomes, improved visitor attentiveness, increased accessibility, social cohesion or greater cross-cultural understanding. And it is through the variety of ways in which they thus monitor and assess the outcomes of such ‘civic experiments’ that museums generate ‘civic results’ that are portable from one museum to another.

While acknowledging that there are, of course, limits to how far the museum/laboratory analogy can and should be taken (not least, of course, because visitors practice their own forms of often quite unpredictable agency within the museum space), there is one further aspect of Knorr-Cetina’s approach to laboratories I want to draw on. It is her contention that what she calls the ‘epistemic objects’ that are produced through the research process in settings like laboratories have a complex, necessarily unfinished structure that breaks with everyday and habitual relations to objects to generate an ongoing creative intellectual engagement with them. Here is how she puts it:

The everyday viewpoint, it would seem, looks at objects from the outside as one would look at tools or goods that are ready to hand or to be traded further. These objects have the character of closed boxes. In contrast, objects of knowledge appear to have the capacity to unfold indefinitely. They are more like open drawers filled with folders extending indefinitely into the depth of a dark closet. Since epistemic objects are always in the process of being materially defined, they continually acquire new properties and change the ones they have. But this also means that objects of knowledge can never be

fully attained, that they are, if you wish, never quite themselves. (Knorr-Cetina 2001, p. 181)

It is, Knorr-Cetina argues, this open and unfolding, never completed, form of objecthood, one that is always at odds with itself, that produces the epistemic desire that motivates and animates the process of scientific inquiry. One question to be considered, then, is whether and, if so, how the forms of objecthood that are produced by museums are characterized by a similar internal complexity that gives rise to similarly complex and dynamic forms of interiority on the part of the persons who become entangled with them. A second concerns the respects in which, contrarywise, the object regimes of particular types of museum might, as Knorr-Cetina puts it, have the character of ‘closed boxes’. It is to this question that I now turn as one that goes to the heart of debates concerning the relations between museums and liberal government.

Cultural objecthood and self/other governance

There are two general aspects of objecthood I want to consider here. The first concerns the respects in which the arrangement of the relations between the individual objects that are assembled together in museums bring into being the more abstract entities – like art, prehistory, community, national heritage – that then subpoena those objects as aspects of the realities and relations they organize. The focus here is thus on the operations of cultural institutions in producing distinctive kinds of objecthood understood as a product of the arrangements of objects that they effect rather than on distinctive kinds of object: objects classified as natural are just as much caught up in distinctive kinds of cultural objecthood through their inscription in natural history displays as are objects classified as archaeological or as artistic in art museums. Made durable and sustainable by the institutional ordering of the relations between material objects, such regimes of objecthood operate much like the quasiobjects Michel Serres discusses in his account of the role that the stabilization of objects plays in the constitution of social relations (Serres 1982, pp. 224-34; see also Brown 2002, Latour 1993, pp. 51-5). Like the tokens in a game that, for Serres, constitute the paradigm case of quasi-objects, such regimes of objecthood are very much ‘in play’ in the processes through which social collectives of various kinds (whether classed, regionalized, gendered, racialized or sexualized) are organized through the positions that such collectives take up in relation to each other via the quasi-objects through which the moves and counter-moves of identity formation are mediated. Niklas Luhmann recognizes this in the case of works of art which he interprets as quasi-objects in the sense that they maintain their concreteness as objects throughout changing situations while also assuming ‘a sufficient amount of variance ... to keep up with changing social constellations’ (Luhmann 2000, p. 47) in view, precisely, of the fact that their significance as art is not a given but derives from their social regulation.

Second, however, Knorr-Cetina’s observations on the open structure of ‘epistemic objects’ and its consequences for the organization of epistemic desire and the distinctive forms of activity and relations to the self this makes possible suggest the need to also take account of the ways in which the regimes of objecthood produced by

museums are differentiated with regard to the distinctive kinds of work and self-work that these make possible. What kinds of complex inner organizations do objects acquire from their insertion in different regimes of objecthood? What kinds of interiority on the part of the subject do these enable and/or require? What kind of work of self on self do different kinds of cultural objecthood make possible? Or what kinds of closure do they operate? And how are their roles in these regards related to processes of identity formation? While her own interests in these issues have been prompted by her concern with the relations between object regimes and the libidinal aspects of scientific inquiry, Knorr-Cetina's contention that 'objects understood as continually unfolding structures which combine presence and absence will have to be added to the sociological vocabulary' (Knorr-Cetina 1997, p. 15) suggests a broader canvass in which the organization of object regimes associated with specific forms of expertise becomes crucial to 'postsocial' understandings of the organization of contemporary forms of sociality.

It will be useful, in exploring the relations between these two aspects of cultural objecthood, to consider Donald Preziosi's arguments concerning the ways in which the historicization of objects in the art museum has put those objects into play in processes of identity formation. The key aspect of the art museum's operations in this regard, he argues, consists in its capacity to make objects 'time factored' such that they 'are assumed to bear within themselves traces of their origins; traces that may be read as windows into particular times, places, and mentalities' (Preziosi 2003, p. 19). The art museum adds to this a classificatory operation according to which the place of each individual work is fixed by assigning it an address within 'a universally extensible archive within which every possible object of study might find its place and locus relative to all others' (Preziosi 2003, p. 24), and an evaluative operation in which, once placed in this archive, works of art are ranked relative to one another in terms of their historical 'carrying capacity': that is, the semantic density of the historical information that is coded into them for retrieval. The greater this is, the greater the work of art in view of the greater degree to which, compared with works accorded a lower 'carrying capacity', it can thus be subpoenaed in testimony to the cumulative self-shaping of the universal that was the art museum's post-Enlightenment project. It is, Preziosi contends, this quality of the artwork, as produced by the art museum, that allows it to be connected to the processes through which social collectives are formed, differentiated and ranked hierarchically in relation to each other. As he puts it:

The most skilled works of art shall be the widest windows onto the human soul, affording the deepest insights into the mentality of the maker, and thus the clearest refracted insights into humanness as such. The 'art' of art history is thus simultaneously the instrument of a universalist Enlightenment vision and a means for fabricating qualitative distinctions between individuals and societies. (Preziosi 2003, p. 36)

Valuable though these insights are in underlining the relations between the art museum's hierarchical ordering of differences and the formation of ranked social collectives, there are other aspects to the depth structure of the artwork that is produced by the historicizing procedures of the art museum that Preziosi's formulations do not quite fathom. Hans Belting (2001) provides a useful point

of entry into these in his assessment of the distinctive kind of objecthood these procedures give rise to as each work of art comes to be haunted by the ideal of 'absolute art', which, while motivating artistic practice, also necessarily eludes it. This ideal differs from the 'classical masterpiece' of the eighteenth century when canonicity was more typically a matter of producing an artwork that would conform as closely as possible to the prescribed formulae of the academies. The canonicity of the modern art work, by contrast, is, Belting suggests, tilted forward, constantly pointing, as a step beyond or behind the ends of the developmental series the art museum constructs, to an unachievable ideal of perfection – an 'invisible masterpiece' that remains always hidden and out of reach.³

Belting's interest in the form of objecthood produced by the art museum primarily concerns its dynamizing consequences for the forms of artistic production associated with the modern art system with its succession of avantgarde movements. These, while pitching themselves against the prevailing forms of the art museum's canonicity, succeed only in realizing its deep structure by eventually falling into their pre-ordained places as the most recent approximations to, yet still incomplete realizations of, the ideal of absolute art that is the promise of unblemished perfection held out by the 'invisible masterpiece'. This form of objecthood has, however, proved equally consequential in fashioning those historically distinctive forms of interiority through which the kinds of work of self-on-self associated with aesthetic relations to the work of art proceed. For the incompleteness of the artwork has also served as a template for the organization of a division within the person between the empirical self and an unreachable ideal that motivates an endless process of self formation as the beholder strives to achieve the ideal, more harmonized, full and balanced self that is represented by the standard of perfection embodied in idea of the absolute work of art that hovers just behind or beyond the art on display.

This, the central 'civic experiment' of the nineteenth-century art museum, was made possible by the liberation of the lower faculty of the aesthetic from its tutelage to the higher one of reason that had characterized the relations between aesthetic thought – especially that of Christian Wolff – and state reason in the arts policies of the Prussian state. Wolff's formulations, as Howard Caygill summarizes their political effects, 'restricted the scope of culture to the cultivation of the lower, sensible faculty by the higher, rational one' and, thereby, made 'the realization of perfection and freedom' the responsibility not of 'individual citizens making judgements in civil society, but that of philosopher bureaucrats who judged what was best for the common good' (Caygill 1989, p. 141). Kant's autonomization of the aesthetic as an independent form of cognition allowed a reconceptualization of the space of the art museum as one of self-formation through the acts of judgement – and, via the art work, of self-judgement and formation – on the part of a free citizenry. Yet, if this annexes art to the practices of liberal government in the stress these place on the free and autonomous self-activity of the governed in governing themselves, it would be wrong to conclude that it has ever entirely eclipsed the earlier, Wolffian orientation. It is, indeed, possible to illuminate significant aspects of the subsequent history of art museums in terms of the different ways in which these contradictory orientations have

³ Belting develops his conception of the invisible masterpiece via a commentary on Balzac's 1845 short story 'The unknown masterpiece' (see Balzac 2001).

inscribed artworks in, on the one hand, processes of social differentiation and, on the other, those of governance. Art museums have, in the case of twentieth-century practices of connoisseurship for example, formed a part of the processes through which classed collectives have been formed by differentiating those able to enter into the transformative relation to the self that the artwork's conception as an 'invisible masterpiece' makes possible from those who are judged to lack this capacity (McClellan 2003). Equally, though, works of art have also been caught up in 'extension movements' where what is at issue is organizing an extended circuit for the distribution and circulation of art objects that will co-opt new constituencies into the transformative relation to the self that engagement with the complex interiority of the artwork makes possible (Barlow and Trodd 2000). Except that, very often, the artwork, when it is brought into contact with 'the people', loses that complexity in being refashioned as a more straightforwardly didactic instrument – a closed box in Knorr-Cetina's terms – through which popular tastes and practices of seeing are to be managed and regulated in a more directive fashion.⁴

The relations between art museums and forms of cultural objecthood is, in other words, a variable depending on the nature of the civic experiments in which they are engaged and the populations concerned. If the insights that can be generated by looking at museums as laboratories are to be generalized, however, attention needs also to be paid to the distinctive forms of cultural objecthood that have been fabricated by other types of museum. This is something I undertake in *Pasts Beyond Memory* (Bennett 2004) where, by examining how the uses of the historical sciences (archaeology, anthropology, palaeontology and geology) in evolutionary museums contributed to the fabrication of the new entity of prehistory, I also consider how this produced a new and distinctive kind of objecthood in the form of 'archaeological objects'. These were objects which, whether in natural history displays or in exhibitions of the development of technologies, weapons or ornaments, acquired a new depth structure by being interpreted as summaries of the stages of evolution preceding them. Viewed as the accumulation of earlier phases of development that had been carried forward from the past to be deposited in the object as so many sedimented layers, the archaeological architecture of the objects in evolutionary museums produced a new form of complex interiority in the object domain. Objects in typological displays, for example, constituted both a summary of the earlier stages of development stored up in the objects preceding them as representatives of earlier stages of evolutionary development and a departure from that accumulated past in registering a new stage of development. Yet, as well as storing the past, each object in such displays also points to the future: not what it once was, it is not yet what it will become – thus introducing a new kind of dynamic historicity into the field of objects.

This found its echo in a parallel construction of the person as similarly an archaeologically stratified entity made up of so many layers of past development folded into the organization of the self. Operating in the relations between these forms of objecthood and personhood, evolutionary museums functioned as mechanisms for differentiating collectives, primarily racialized ones, in the form of a division between

⁴ The nineteenth-century literature contains many examples of arts administrators and museum directors who are prepared to sacrifice aesthetic complexity for the accessibility of more familiar kinds of art as the price of enlisting art in the cause of improving public manners. This was especially true of Henry Cole whose reasoning on this matter I have discussed elsewhere (Bennett 1992).

those with thickly and those with only thinly stratified selves: white Europeans in the first case, black ‘primitives’ in the second. In relation to those with thickly historicized selves, evolutionary museums served as a template for a process of developmental self-fashioning in which the legacy of earlier layers of development was to be sloughed off in order to update and renovate the self so that it would be able to respond appropriately to the imperatives of social evolution. Where this architecture of the self was judged to be absent – as was the case with the construction of the Aborigine as ‘primitive’, an evolutionary ground zero – the template provided by the archaeological structure of the museum object was deployed differently.

We can see this in the early twentieth-century programmes of Aboriginal administration that were developed by Baldwin Spencer. Cutting his museological teeth by assisting in the arrangement of Pitt Rivers’ typological displays when they were moved to the University of Oxford, Spencer subsequently introduced typological principles into the arrangement of Aboriginal artefacts at the National Museum of Victoria in Melbourne during his tenure as its second Director. When he later became involved in the administration of Aboriginal affairs, Baldwin introduced the principles of sequence on which typological displays rested into the civilizing programme he proposed for Aborigines. This involved forcibly removing ‘half-castes’ from their communities and moving them through a series of staging houses until, once they had been ‘fully developed’, they would be able, at the end of the process, to be absorbed into white society. The logic underlying this programme depended on interpreting the racial impurity of ‘half-castes’ as a sign of developmental possibility in comparison to the utterly flat, undeveloped make up of the ‘full-blood’ and consisted in the movement of bodies through social space as if they were so many museum pieces being moved along a continuum of evolutionary development. As such, it aimed at the compulsory introduction of sequence into the Aboriginal population – previously (and, of course, erroneously) judged to lack it – as a necessary prelude to their being accorded, but only as individuals severed from their communities, a capacity for self government.⁵ Once the epidermal-cum-cultural transformation of the Aborigine that this programme envisaged had been managed to the point of giving rise to an archaeological splitting of the Aboriginal self into a division between its primitive and archaic layers on the one hand and its civilized and modern ones on the other, then so the Aboriginal – as, now, an individualized persona – would be able to assume direct and personal responsibility for his or her own evolutionary and civic self-fashioning.

This is a telling example of the respects in which, to recall Knorr-Cetina’s formulations, museums, like laboratories, ‘create new configurations of objects that they match with an appropriately altered social order’. For it illustrates how distinctive configurations of the relations between things produced by the deployment of particular knowledges within museums actively shapes the contours of the social within which, once they are mobilized by agents outside the museum, those new

⁵ The individualizing aspect of this strategy is important and in sharp contrast to both the earlier forms of Aboriginal administration based on a logic of protection of Aborigines as communities on separated reserves and to Aboriginal (mis)interpretations of these strategies as ones which would, through the application of Lockean principles, eventually earn them the right to community-based forms of freedom and self-governance in recognition of the rights derived from the application of their labour to the lands granted them (see Attwood 2004).

realities and relations become active agents in specific programmes of social management. Dominique Poulot's sharp observations regarding the redistribution of national heritage associated with the development of ecomuseums point to a similar set of processes. By breaking the national heritage down into discrete environmental cultures, Poulot argues, the ecomuseum has formed a part of the 'regionalization of the social', allowing its organization to be conceptualized as a set of relations between regionally defined communities (Poulot 1994). In being pitted against earlier French statist conceptions of the museum as a civic technology acting on citizens who are placed in direct, unmediated and identical relations to the state, the ecomuseum produces the territorially defined community as a key point of identity formation. It does so, moreover, by reversing the operation of the universal survey museum, reattaching objects to the specific regional cultural systems that the latter had detached them from, and, thereby producing, in the notion of a regional cultural ecology, a new surface of civic management – a space in which identities can be caught and nurtured in spatially defined programmes of cultural or community development. This, in its turn, is connected to the specific forms of objecthood that the ecomuseum fashions by resocializing ordinary and familiar objects. By placing these in the context of what might be an environmentalist, geographical, folkloric or sociological knowledge of the operative principles connecting them together in a distinctive cultural ensemble, the ecomuseum enlists such objects for new processes of identity formation that depend on the active acquisition of new forms of self-knowledge rather than, as Hegel had feared, simply confirming existing identities as organic quasi-vegetal entities rooted in the local soil.

A final and related example is given by Bill Brown's discussion of the regionalization of the artefactual field that was carried out in late-nineteenth-century American anthropology. The key figure here was Franz Boas whose displays, focused on life-group exhibits in specific geographically defined tribal and environmental settings, served, as Brown puts it, 'to 'regionalize' anthropology, and to displace artefacts from their traditional place within a taxonomic and evolutionary scheme' (Brown 2003, p. 88). Brown's concern is with the relations between this regionalized object-based epistemology and parallel tendencies in American letters, especially the writing of Sarah Orne Jewett, seeing these convergences as parts of new ways of operationalizing regionalism as a framework for thought and action. It is relevant in this regard to note the respects in which Boas's work contributed to a distinctive kind of 'regionalization of the social' which, in the post-Indian Wars context, replaced the temporal co-ordinates that had been proposed by evolutionists like Spencer for the management of indigeneous peoples with a new spatialized conception of indigeneous peoples as regionally distributed, holistic cultures (Hinsley 1981).

Re-socializing objects, diversifying the social

I turn now to the directions in which these remarks point when they are brought to bear on current attempts to redeploy museum collections for new civic purposes by re-socializing the objects that are contained within them so that they might function as the operators of new kinds of action on the social. The most important of these tendencies consist in the now more-or-less ubiquitous concern to refashion museums as 'differencing machines' that, in varied ways, are intended to ameliorate conflicted

racialized differences. What different kinds of cultural objecthood are produced by the reconfiguration of the relations between objects, and between objects and persons, within museums where such concerns predominate? What role do these play in putatively reshaping the social by being mobilized as parts of civic programmes that aim to act on relations between ethnically differentiated communities as opposed to those between hierarchically ranked social classes?

It will help in answering questions of this kind to identify how the approach developed in the foregoing discussion differs from those forms of discourse analysis that – quite contrary to those advocated by Foucault, which, as Frow reminds us, treat of discourses as complex assemblages of texts, rules, bodies, objects, architectures, etc. (Frow 2004, p. 356) – convert the museum into a text that is to be analysed to reveal its ideological effects in occluding the real nature of the social relations it represents.⁶ These typically exhibit three main shortcomings. The first concerns the lack of any clear attention to the distinctive forms of objecthood associated with different kinds of museum. Dissolving objects too readily into texts in order, thereby, to make museum arrangements readable as ideologies, such approaches fail to grapple adequately with the different and specific kinds of qualities objects acquire as a result of the ways in which the relations between them are configured in different museum practices. Second, and as a consequence, they fail to deal adequately with the distinctive operations, procedures, and manipulations through which different knowledges – art history, anthropology, natural history – fabricate new entities through the new alignments of the relations between objects that they establish. They deal with such questions largely abstractly by positing homologies between the intellectual structure of particular knowledges and museum arrangements, paying little attention to the whole set of technical procedures (from accessioning, classification, conservation, etc.) through which objects are actually manipulated and managed. Third, they pay little attention to the distinctive relations to the self and ways of working on it that are made possible by different forms of objecthood.

The kind of displacements of these approaches that my comments point toward echo those advocated by Alfred Gell in his concern to develop an action-centred approach to art in which art is viewed as ‘a system of action, intended to change the world rather than to encode symbolic propositions about it’ with the consequence that it is ‘preoccupied with the practical mediatory role of art objects in the social process, rather than with the interpretation of objects ‘as if’ they were texts’ (Gell 1998, p. 6). The difference, however, and it is one that Gell points out himself, is that when such perspectives are applied to the distributed relations between objects and persons associated with western art institutions, it is the action of art objects in the supra-biographical relations between classes, or castes, or states groups, or communities that has to be attended to rather than, as Gell’s own concern, their role mediating more personalized forms of social interaction. And this means, as he puts it, attending to the institutional processes through which some objects come to be ‘enfranchised’ as art (Gell 1998, p. 12). In seeking both to apply this perspective to art museums and to generalize it to the processes through which other distinctive kinds of objecthood are produced within western collecting institutions, I have found the methods of science

⁶ See, for example, the contributions – including my own – in Lumley (1988), an early and influential collection of the ‘new museology’ in English.

studies helpful precisely because of the centrality they accord to those processes that approaches to museums as texts neglect. They bring with them the kind of attention to technical procedures through which the realities that science works with take on a phenomenal form by virtue of their construction through material techniques that is necessary if the operation of museums as epistemological-cum-civic technologies, working on and with objects in distinctive ways, is to be understood in adequately specific terms.

At the same time, they also warn against the temptation to approach these in terms of epochal divisions of the kind implied by Foucault's historical sequence of epistemes. This is so for three related reasons. First, the ways in which the relations between objects are configured and, accordingly, the agency that is attributed to them, is viewed as always provisional. The fixity into which they are ordered is always a loose and pliable one. Grahame Thompson puts this well in his account of the operation of 'immutable mobiles' in actor network theory. While always the same, such objects – and the museum object is a classic example – take on different values and functions when moved from one set of configurations to another. 'Whilst 'fixed' in one sense', Thompson says, 'these are also made 'mobile', by being arranged and reconfigured through the network of places and agencies to which they are attached and through which they operate; they have the combined properties of mobility, stability and combinability' (Thompson 2003, p. 73).⁷ Second, a point I take from Latour's account of the ways in which technologies fold into and accumulate within themselves powers and capacities derived from different times and places (Latour 2002a), objects carry with them a part of the operative logic characterizing earlier aspects of their history as they are relocated into reconfigured networks. Their organization in this respect is, Latour argues, always archaeological as aspects of their earlier use and inscriptions are sedimented within them. Third, this process of enrolling objects in networks always has multiple, and often contending, dimensions at any one time just as it lacks a single point of origin or definite finality.

These considerations caution against ruptural accounts, such as those based on Foucault's notion of epistemes, in which museum objects are said to be disconnected from one configuration to be inscribed in another governed by entirely different epistemological principles.⁸ This is not to dispute the usefulness of such accounts in identifying significant shifts in the permissible forms of combinability of objects that have proved relatively durable and widespread. It is, though, to caution against the view that such shifts entirely cancel the earlier operative logic of the objects they enrol, or that they are only enrolled in single and stable configurations at any one point in time. This, of course, is precisely what we find in the current flux and fluidity of museum practices: not a simple transition from one episteme to another, but a profusion of different ways of rearranging the relations between objects and persons in the museum environment and of enrolling these in social and civic programmes of varied kinds. Yet, it is here, perhaps, that the laboratory analogy begins to break down. For – and this is where Hacking's (1992a) objections ring true – the laboratory situation usually involves a more singular and authoritative manipulation

⁷ Thompson, though, does go on to take actor network theory to task for subscribing to too unbounded and open-ended a conception of the capacity for networks to be endlessly rearticulated.

⁸ This is true, in some degree, of Eilean Hooper Greenhill's *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (1992) and of my own *The Birth of the Museum* (Bennett 1995a).

of the relationships between objects than has been true of museums over the last quarter of a century or so. The challenges to the classificatory procedures of the cultural and historical sciences that are the mainstay of Western curatorial practices that have come from a range of quarters – from postcolonial theory, indigenous critiques and counterknowledges – and the divisions that these have occasioned within Western systems of thought closely associated with museums, especially archaeology and anthropology, mean that there is now a much greater tug-of-war between competing knowledges regarding the arrangement of the relations between objects and persons within the museum space. There is little disagreement – at least, little public disagreement – with the view that such relations should be reordered with a view to reconfiguring the social in more culturally plural ways. All the same, this shared commitment belies a real variety of practice and effect as museums are variously conceptualized as contact zones, as spaces for dialogic encounters between cultures, as instruments for the promotion of cultural tolerance, or as means for promoting and managing the identities of differentiated communities.⁹

Rather than developing this point abstractly, a brief comparison of the *Living and Dying* exhibition at the British Museum with contemporary rearrangements of Aboriginal materials in Australian museums will help to identify some of the issues posed by these debates and practices. Opened in 2003 as a part of the British Museum's 250th anniversary celebrations, *Living and Dying* involved the re-socialization of objects from both the British Museum's own collections and those of the Wellcome Trust. Lisant Bolton, the curator of the Museum's Pacific and Australian collections, has contrasted her experience as the lead curator of *Living and Dying* with her earlier work at the Australian Museum and the Vanuatu Cultural Centre in terms that usefully foreground some of the tensions concerning the relations between different curatorial practices, the ways in which they are institutionally authorized, and the implications of these considerations for the ways in which museums construct and fashion the social they seek to act on (Bolton 2003). In the Australian Museum, Bolton argues, the authority exercised by Indigenous Australians over how indigenous cultural materials are presented results in forms of cultural advocacy which expose and critique the historical particularity of the earlier colonial frameworks in which such materials had been exhibited.

A more recent example, and one with I am more directly familiar, is that provided by Bunjilaka, the Aboriginal Centre at the Melbourne Museum, where Aboriginal curation and extensive community consultation has resulted in a re-socialization of the Aboriginal weaponry that had been a part of the evolutionary exhibitions introduced into the National Museum of Victoria by Baldwin Spencer in the early twentieth century. Displayed in a vitrine alongside a reconstruction of Spencer – so that the collector of Aboriginal culture is collected alongside his collections in an Aboriginal framing of both – these artefacts are wrenched from the evolutionary time in which they had originally been installed to open up a new, indigenously-marked time in which the forms of hunting and collecting that characterized anthropological practice along the colonial frontier are depicted as archaic. Equally important, Bunjilaka provides a space that is both in the Melbourne Museum and not in it, of it and not of

⁹ I have discussed the range of positions on the relations between museums and cultural diversity more fully elsewhere: see Bennett (2006).

it, to the degree that it is marked out as a semi-separate space in terms of its location (to one side of the Museum), the community-auspiced history of its curation, the Aboriginal guides who mediate the visitors relations to the Centre, and its inclusion of a meeting space for the conduct of Aboriginal affairs. The consequence is a form of cultural objecthood that establishes a tutelary relation in which an Aboriginal framing of objects in the present seeks to detach them – and the visitor – from their past inscriptions, thus mobilizing the museum’s capacity as a civic and reformatory apparatus in distinctive ways.

The contrast Bolton draws between such strongly marked re-socializations of objects and the British Museum is not, however, one in which the ethnographic authority of the curator prevails over that of indigenous knowledge so much as one in which the institutional ‘voice’ of the Museum prevails over both. Conceived as a cross-cultural exhibition on the theme of health and well-being, *Living and Dying* examines, in the words of the exhibition’s summary description, ‘how people everywhere deal with the tough realities of life, the challenges we all share but for which there are many different responses’ – sickness, trouble, sorrow, loss, bereavement and death. The main organizing principle for the exhibition echoes the concerns of contemporary anthropological theory (Bolton studied for her PhD with Marilyn Strathern) by exhibiting objects as mediators in complex and varied sets of relations: those between Native Americans and animals, represented as non-human persons, in the vitrine focused on the theme ‘Respecting animals’; the relations between human persons in the Pacific Islands in the vitrine focused on the theme ‘Sustaining each other’, for example. Eschewing any normative framework, the exhibition is presented as a testimony to the insights into the variable responses to shared human problems that can be gained from bringing together under one roof so many objects from many different cultures and periods. This results in a distinctive, although not uncommon, form of objecthood in which the specific, culturally variable meanings of any particular set of object-mediated relations are eclipsed in being subpoenaed as stand-ins for anthropologically constant, universally shared human concerns. The result is an exhibition of a set of what are largely ‘disconnected diversities’ – disconnected from each other as well as from any particular histories connecting them to each other in either allied or hostile relations – as a testimony to the creative ordering capacity of human beings as evident in the varied ways they respond to, and make sense of, death, pain, and suffering. In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes discussed a photographic exhibition held in Paris under the title *The Great Family of Man* which, much like *Living and Dying*, aimed ‘to show the universality of human actions in the daily life of all the countries of the world: birth, death, work, knowledge, play’ (Barthes 1972, p. 100). The effect of this, Barthes argued, was to magically produce unity out of pluralism: the diversity of different ways of life does not belie, and cannot eclipse, ‘the existence of a common mould’ (Barthes 1972, p. 100). The effect of *Living and Dying* is not quite the same: rather than invoking a universal humanness, it reconfigures earlier hierarchical forms of difference into an abstract form of ‘side-by-sideism’ through which the social is mapped as a set of equivalent differences.

The significance of this, however, is fully evident only when *Living and Dying* is viewed in the context of its juxtaposition with the *Enlightenment* exhibition. Opened at roughly the same time, these two exhibitions – both of them permanent – are also adjacent to one another, occupying connected sides of the Great Court, and both have

featured strongly in the British Museum's institutional discourse in seeking to fashion a new role for itself as a universal survey museum. At one level, the aim of the *Enlightenment* exhibition is a self-consciously relativizing one: in seeking to rediscover how the world was intellectually ordered at the time of the British Museum's foundation, the Enlightenment's claims to universality are discrowned by being revealed in all their historical particularity and peculiarity. Yet this message of historical difference, like that of cultural difference suggested by the *Living and Dying* exhibition, depends on an affirmation of the continuing value of the universal survey museum for its ability to bring together people and things from all places and times for the purpose of exploring relations of similarity and difference. The relations between the two exhibitions thus comprise the means by which the universal survey museum is detached from the particular normatively weighted concept of universality associated with the Enlightenment to be, in the words of its Director, 'reinvented' as a machinery for exploring relations of sameness and difference (MacGregor 2003, p. 7) where this means laying out the social as a set of equivalent differences to be tolerated as equally valuable.¹⁰ The *Living and Dying* exhibition's place in this scheme of things is thus signalled by its location in what the British Museum describes as its World Cultures galleries exploring the many ways in which different cultures are shaped by their attempts to make sense of 'a common experience of what it means to be human'. The resonances of this are echoed in the wall plaque acknowledging the sponsorship of the Wellcome Trust. Designed as a tribute to Sir Henry Wellcome, it suggests a connection between the exhibition and Wellcome's role as a collector, particularly his unrealized aspiration to establish a Museum of Man – passing in tactful silence over the colonial and evolutionary ordering of the Hall of Primitive Medicine in the Historical Medical Museum that Wellcome *did* establish (Skinner 1986).

Conclusion

In his account of why critique has run out of steam, Latour groups sociology and cultural studies together, castigating both for the terrible fate they have inflicted on objects (Latour 2004, p. 165). His objections to sociology have been developed at some length and have now been widely rehearsed in the literature: the rationality of the nature/society distinction is challenged as the simultaneously enabling/disabling fiction of the 'modern settlement'; the division of society into different levels – micro and macro – inhibits understanding of the mechanisms through which particular societies are made up of actor-networks of human and non-human agents that form chains of connected relations and actions rather than separate levels; and his dismissal of invocations of Society as an invisible totality or underlying structure capable of explaining observable actions and relations as nothing but a power play on the part of sociologists, from Comte to Bourdieu, in their attempt to lord it over other disciplines

¹⁰ This was an especially evident aspect of Neil MacGregor's address in a public seminar held to mark the opening of the Enlightenment exhibition. Organized around the contemporary role of universal survey museums, the seminar was addressed by the Directors of five such museums: the Louvre, the Hermitage Museum, the National Museum in Berlin, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the British Museum. Macgregor invoked the *Living and Dying* exhibition as an example of the Museum's commitment to diversity, and a way of exhibiting diversity that would not be possible but for the ways of accumulating and storing the world developed by Enlightenment forms of collecting.

(Latour 1993, 2002a). While he has paid less attention to the concept of culture, he argued, in answer to a question at a public lecture he gave at the University of Oxford in 2003, that it could have no general value for analysis. The implication, although with some hesitation in his more recent work (see Knox et al . 2005), is that there are only actor-networks of humans and nonhumans subject to variable and impermanent inscriptions, translations, articulations, and enrolments; that there are no independently existing grounds (whether of nature, culture or society) outside of these and their effects that can be invoked to explain their operations. ‘All that one can do’, as Andrew Pickering summarizes the position, ‘is register the visible and specific intertwinings of the human and the nonhuman. But this is enough; what more could one want or need?’ (Pickering 2001, p. 167).

Foucauldian conceptions of the social are, of course, different from sociological ones; indeed, they frame these as a part of a broader account of the emergence of modern forms of governmentality and their production of both the economy and society as autonomous realms, differentiated surfaces of government constructed through the application of new forms of description, classification and enumeration in the context of regulatory practices. In his explorations of this analytical territory, Timothy Mitchell (2002) draws freely on the vocabulary of actor-network theory to account for the processes through which national economies are assembled out of a variety of human and non-human forces and agencies, constantly stressing their role in the making of new realities and processes of production and exchange. It is in this light, and for the same reasons, that I want to suggest, contra Latour, that the concept of culture retains a similar validity provided that we interpret it as a historically fabricated – in the sense of ‘materially made’ not ‘invented’ – set of entities, and provided that we place limits on it. This involves, in the first place, paying attention to the processes – proceeding roughly in parallel with the production of the economy and the social – through which culture was produced as an autonomous realm that was made to stand apart from the social in order that it might then act back on it as a moralizing, improving force. Patrick Joyce (2003) usefully illuminates the architectural aspects of these processes in his account of the transition from the ‘display city’ of the eighteenth-century to the ‘moral city’ of the nineteenth century in which the new institutions of culture – art galleries, libraries, museums, concert halls – were separated from both commercial zones and city slums in order to civilize and moralize the circulation of bodies within the city.¹¹ The perspective of museums as ‘civic laboratories’ similarly focuses on the processes through which, via the organization of distinctive forms of objecthood, distinctive cultural entities are separated out from other relations and practices and made durable, but only so as to be then connected to the social in varied programmes of social management and reform.

To suggest the need to place limits on such an understanding of culture is not merely a matter of stressing its historical specificity: culture, in this sense, did not pre-exist the processes of its making in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and, although

¹¹ The debates leading to the establishment of the South Kensington Museum at South Kensington rather than Trafalgar Square are an extraordinarily vivid example of this: a clear case of withdrawing culture from the city, organizing it as a separate and separated zone, so that it would be better able to act as an improving force upon it (see Bennett 1995b).

still an effective (albeit weaker) force in the twenty-first century, there is no reason to expect it will prove a permanent one. It is also a matter of disentangling culture in this sense from those other practices with which it has become hopelessly enmeshed as a consequence of two of the key defining moves of cultural studies which have now also become widespread within sociology. The first of these, as Francis Mulhern describes it, consisted in ‘a radical expansion of the corpus’ so as to include the role of the symbolic in everyday life in an expanded definition of culture, while the second consisted in ‘the unification and procedural equalization of the field of inquiry’ (Mulhern 2000, p. 78) that this expanded understanding of culture produces. The difficulty here lies in the second proposition which does two things: first, it asserts that all kinds of culture, whether ‘high’ or ‘low, are equally important and worthy of study; and second, it asserts that similar methods of analysis can be applied in studying all forms of culture and their role in the organization of social relationships. While not quarrelling with the first of these contentions, the second is patently not true since, first, it occludes the respects in which the forms of cultural objecthood I have been concerned with are the products of distinctive processes of fabrication, involving specific forms of expertise in specific settings, and second, it forecloses on the possibility of analysing the ways in which these operate on the customs, beliefs, habits, traditions, ways of life, character systems, etc., which comprise the surface of the social to which they are applied in programmes of social regulation and management. Just as many anthropologists have had cause to question the value of the anthropological extension of the concept of culture and to insist on the value of distinguishing customs, habits, beliefs, etc., from culture rather than bundling them all up into one omnibus concept (see Kuper 1999), so too the purposes of social and historical cultural analysis will be better served by a more careful differentiation of the different sets of relations and processes that the extended concept of culture yokes together.

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