

# FEMINIST THEORY

## Chapter 5

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### LOOKING AT MUSEUMS FROM A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

#### Part I

**CONSIDER THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION:** founded with a half million dollar bequest to the United States in 1829 by James Smithson, whose ghost still allegedly haunts the institution, and endowed in the city of Washington “for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men.”<sup>1</sup> Most museums today include a wider range of objectives in their mission statements, but, consciously or not, they are grounded in theory, specifically the same epistemological and metaphysical doctrines that have guided western secular society since the seventeenth century. These, in turn, derive from philosophical ideas of much older vintage that idealize the notion of a singular and universal truth, selectively and with great difficulty accessible to reason.

This doctrine implies a hierarchy of *cognoscenti*, persons capable of apprehending truth while others are denied it. It inspires inquiry and speculative methodology for the acquisition of ultimate wisdom, and so, too, a politics of inclusion and exclusion. The result has been a world order full of dichotomies – light versus dark, right versus left, dry versus wet, mind versus body, intellect versus feeling, high versus low, good versus evil, man versus woman, and many other coupled oppositions. These are represented as existing in constant tension.

This world “order” is actually disorder, flawed at its theoretical roots, and its poison penetrates every institution of modern society. The museum is but one such institution, and it is currently in turmoil, yanked from one proposal for salvation to a polarized other. Proponents of arcane scholarship and aestheticism, for example, face advocates of branding and marketing; others are suspended between the veneration of objects and their subordination to experience. Embedded within these contests are further disagreements over discrepant means to agreed-upon ends. The museum suffers less from the failure of ingenious ideas than from their surplus and the confusion of the system that brings them forth.

Here, I will propose an appeal to feminist theory as an alternative to the dominant philosophy of previous millennia, which I call masculinist. Feminist theory has been an academic enterprise for only the past several decades: its origin is disputable, and that debate lies beyond the scope of this essay. There is, moreover, no single feminist doctrine, but only a loose assemblage of themes, not all of which are pertinent to the issue at hand. I argue here

only that feminist theorizing is a dynamic process that should be realized in practice, and I propose the museum as an exemplary site to gauge its effectiveness.

Some might contend that feminism is already operative: consider only Hillary Clinton's near miss as a presidential candidate in 2008 and the unmistakable advance of women to positions of social prominence throughout the world. Women have gained entry to the male-dominated system, and some are scratching at the glass ceiling, even within the museum. But such "success" stories do not constitute an application of feminist theory. In fact, they may deter realization of the goals of feminism as increasing numbers of women aspire and succumb to the seductions of a revisionist male order.<sup>2</sup>

Feminist theory is not vindicated by some women's perceptible assimilation into the hierarchical success structure prescribed to men. Like conventional philosophical theory, feminist theory is explicitly abstract, and it strives toward rational coherence. Indeed, a feminist objection to traditional theory is its irrational incoherence; the persistent exclusions mandated by conventional philosophy contradict its claim to universality. Masculinist theory denies humanity and thus philosophical relevance to more than half the human race.<sup>3</sup> Feminist theory aspires, ultimately, to transform the lives of women and men in a manner consistent with its premises.

Feminist theory does not pretend to universalism: reductive uniformity is not its goal. On the contrary, it begins from the diversely situated experiences of women, which necessarily reflect the impact of men, for men are inescapably a part of every woman's life. Feminist theory arises out of contrapuntal explorations of differences including, but not limited to, those derived from notions of gender. These cut across traditional dualisms, meshing mind and body, intellect and feeling, culture and the individual, the judgment of good and evil, and blending new interactions. Categories that divide give way to cohesions, sometimes of temporary duration or limited locality, for example when women's health issues coincide with nationality. A concern that exists in one place at a given time may be perceived differently elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> Feminist theorists are not bent on hammering out a definitive doctrine. Many feminists are not even persuaded that we need a singular and fixed definition of the term *woman*, since some people are invariably ignored or overlooked by any classification. We do better to think of women pragmatically in plural configurations: no one is ever *only* a woman devoid of other categorical attributes. These attributes, however, are expressed differently when the focus is on gender.<sup>5</sup> Controversies among feminists have usefully led to an appreciation of subtle perspectival distinctions that derive from individuals' life situations and histories, including their gendered locations. These differences merit attention; their consignment to irrelevance by classical individualist liberalism impoverishes all theoretical advancement.

Yet, even in the absence of unanimity, feminist reflection displays some commonalities and concurs in significant ways with theorizing about "otherness" that originates in sources heretofore ignored by the philosophical canon. Feminism makes common cause with various minority, postcolonial, racialized, gendered, and multicultural analyses. The wealth of this discourse has already yielded some inspiration to museums' exhibitionary practices. Small and university-affiliated museums are sometimes better able to be adventurous than vast bureaucratic institutions. The Wellesley College Davis Museum and Cultural Center, for example, mounted a powerful exhibition in 2008 on black womanhood. The exhibit traced contemporary stereotypes through traditional African, colonial, and modern representations using a variety of materials and media that exceeded the usual art museum fare.<sup>6</sup> The museum is an appropriate site for such experiments, since museums have long represented "the other," but all too frequently in a manner offensive to the parties so designated. Appealing to certain elements of feminist theorizing would enable museums to perform their professed task more effectively. Below are some general areas that would be affected by this theoretical shift:

- 1 Museums typically convey a sense of certainty and stability. Among other techniques, the grandeur of much of their architecture expresses patrician and patriarchal authority. Museums symbolize permanence and the continuity of cultures throughout generations. While they admit to disruptions of that order, they hold it up as an ideal, advancing the implication that the “best” will emerge and be rightfully acclaimed. The museum’s preservative and educative task is to make sure this occurs. The project of feminist theory is to facilitate change. It accommodates singularities that defy conventional classification, refusing to suppress deviance in order to save the system. Where the traditional museum collects and explains the world by assigning categories to objects, analyzing them, for example, in terms of their material composition, origin, ownership, or typical use, feminist theorizing resonates more empathically with the contextual, the specific instantiation of things in previously unacknowledged interpretive networks. Indeed, a feminist approach shines a light on features of objects that are commonly suppressed, much as installation artist Fred Wilson has highlighted rarely exhibited museum objects, such as slave shackles and whips, which might be damaged, consigned to storage, or willfully ignored by others. These objects represent another side of colonial life and tell stories other than those museums promoted in the past. Feminist theory, likewise, adopts the mundane and unexpected, the trivial and horrendous, disruptions of ordinary circumstances that undermine the determination to simplify and celebrate, which it shows to be premature and often meretricious.
- 2 The dualism of subject and object is a central feature of the museum’s structure, and it maintains the non-equivalence between active and passive (agent/acted upon), knower and known. According to this paradigm, objects do not “speak”; subjects “interpret” them, thereby wielding authority over them. That privilege was formerly exercised over mute entities by expert curators, and it was perpetuated by educators. Now it is shared with visitors, who are invited to “make meanings” of their own, turning objects into fuzzily bounded zones of potentiality. But the presumption persists that the object is passive and subordinate to the will of a subject, who is understood to be a mind or spirit. Feminist theory tends to merge mind and body, or at least to acknowledge the corporeal character of thought as a physical and social process.<sup>7</sup> The supposed dualism of subject and object is thus mitigated. Subjectivity and objectivity are conceived on the same plane, not ontologically discrete, but existentially intermingled, and even sometimes in reversed relation. Women, after all, are experts at playing dual roles simultaneously.<sup>8</sup> In a recent exemplary exhibition, the Smith College Museum of Art drew attention to frames as well as the paintings within them, thereby causing viewers to reflect upon the impact of installation and of the framing function of their own selective perceptions.
- 3 Subjectivity is itself tiered according to conventional theory, with reason given pre-eminence over sensation and emotion. Some philosophers hold that the passions ought to be suppressed or controlled by reason. Most museums do not insist upon this imperative. Those that feature the “visitor experience” tend not to be judgmental as to the cognitive or affective character of the experience elicited. “Wow” is as good as “why,” as we see increasingly in science exhibits that use new technologies.<sup>9</sup> Feminist theory approaches emotion as a complex phenomenon infused with cognitive history and understanding, which, in turn, pulses with feeling. Recent psychobiological research appears to support that conclusion, and the diametric opposition between intellect and emotion is eroding; but the struggle of mind to control matter remains strong even within popular culture, where it also carries a moral burden. The spirit, we are taught, is willing, but the flesh is weak.
- 4 Conventional museums are wedded to a hierarchical power structure that is perhaps most evident in their salary scales. While teamwork is more prevalent now than in the past, and non-curatorial staff play a greater part in exhibition design and museum

policy-making, decisions still emanate from the top and increasingly reflect a corporate model. There is also a hierarchy among museums that corresponds to an external ladder of social prominence. As demonstrated in other articles in this collection, women are entering the lower echelons of museum work in great numbers, and they achieve proportionately higher ranks in less prestigious institutions. Their presence is often noted as an index of feminist achievement, but its impact on fundamental theorizing about and within the museum is minimal. Individual women undoubtedly do bring fresh energy and creative ideas to the museum: as museum founders, some have been prescient.<sup>10</sup> I do not trivialize their individual and collective contributions, but history is not changed through infusions of estrogen. Institutional structures must be transformed as well.

Hierarchy persists in more subtle ways, notably in the organization and assessment of museum content. This reflects the traditional philosophical bias that esteems contemplative over practical activity and devalues work associated with sheer maintenance. Thus “fine” art is still elevated over “craft,” and objects meant for use achieve art status only if they are isolated from their use-context and aestheticized by display. It is assumed that societies which are not guided by this hierarchical scheme – where work and leisure are not differentiated – must be maintenance-oriented, driven solely by survival, and therefore less advanced. In fact, there is good reason to believe that contemporary, end-driven societies enjoy far less conviviality and are more relentlessly preoccupied with their needs. Be that as it may, museums that collect and present mundane things are generally less exalted. There is a comparable hierarchy within and between museums of science, natural history, and technology, where “pure” science is at the top of the scale, followed by applied and utilitarian discovery. At the bottom are museums and exhibitions with an explicitly practical intention – for instance, to teach preventive health measures, to promote a particular industry such as automobile manufacture or wine-making, or to provide alternative recreation for at-risk children and to fight juvenile crime. These museums are often housed at production sites or agency headquarters and are seen as essentially promotional. They generally lack official museum accreditation, however fascinating they may be to the public. “Body Worlds,” the recent touring exhibition of Gunther von Hagens’ “plastinated” human bodies, and a museum dedicated to plumbing in Watertown, Massachusetts, are cases in point. Without sponsorship by a “legitimate” museum or the endorsement of a major corporation, such exhibitions are frequently short-lived. Their survival is linked to the power of their subject, and they may become exhibitions without a permanent home. However lofty their inspiration, they have a difficult time convincing people that they are museums at all, and they achieve accreditation only upon satisfying formal criteria pertaining to permanent collections, staffing, and visitor accessibility.<sup>11</sup> Feminist theory does not deny the fact of these hierarchical patterns, but approaches them skeptically and often with reluctance. No doubt such restraint stems from a long history of women’s uncertain access to the resources associated with rank. We have learned the necessity of acquiring knowledge obliquely and experientially, and we have also learned the measure of its value.

- 5 Museums face a dilemma; they must make a putative choice between presenting objective knowledge of truths certified by reliable, value-free standards, or the alarming contention that all viewpoints have equal standing. The choice appears to be between universal principles and total relativism, the claim that “anything goes.” Museums have been more tolerant toward the second option than most mainstream institutions, but at some cost to their credibility and authority.<sup>12</sup>

Feminist theory meets the dilemma head on, although theorists are not agreed upon the best response to it. Unrestricted relativism that grants equal status to every conceivable point of

view is self-defeating; it precludes interaction, let alone agreement. Some connection must be constructed in order to initiate discussion, and feminists find this in social situatedness rather than in an abstract “view from nowhere.”<sup>13</sup> We can discover and encourage pockets of solidarity without insisting that non-conforming claims are illegitimate. Difference then becomes a matter of contingent circumstances. For museums, as for feminist theory, the aim is to depict differences in comprehensible contexts, appreciating their plausibility without arbitrarily favoring a given set of values. The point of theory is then taken to be the enhancement of understanding and not the assurance of certainty.

One tactic advanced in both feminist and museum endeavors is the reversal of foreground and background, which draws attention to the overlooked and suppressed, and, having exposed it, asks why it has been neglected. Consider, for example, what we mean by the term “environment.” It seems to refer to a fixed center of interest to which the surround is secondary, but centers are context-dependent and might easily be reversed. Why does the language convey fixity?<sup>14</sup> Focal designation is a function of choice, and choice is a vector of power that may be invisible, especially when the choice is restricted. Certain locutions, when institutionalized, can become a form of annihilation. Until recently, for most people in Western society, Mary Jones ceased to exist upon her marriage: Mrs. John Smith took her place. This nomenclature was heteronormative, rendering invisible individuals in same-sex relationships. Objects that are regularly discounted, likewise, fade into non-being. Reclaiming the background can therefore be a cognitive breakthrough: it can also be a warranted act of rebellion.

Reconfiguring the background, however, is not as simple a process as separating the yolk from the white of an egg. That would presume prior knowledge of the boundaries of discourse, but this is rarely available. Feminist theorists do not know the limits of the world we seek to redefine. We can say only that the grammar that currently delineates reality prohibits full articulation of what women’s experience reveals. Attempts to do more seem nonsensical.<sup>15</sup> In addition, it is necessary to articulate new concepts that will make sense even to people who are content with the prevailing theory and see no need for change. Feminist theory thus strives to reshape the contours of “normal” thinking. Rather than simply reversing or replacing old concepts, however, feminism aims at expanding the margins of conceivability. Susan Hekman illustrates this process with a model drawn from legal thought – the concept of rape. Initially defined as the offender’s violation of sexual entitlement (to a woman who does not belong to him), rape is now viewed in terms of whether the offended party consented to the sexual act. This redefinition remains problematic; it operates at the margin of existing legal theory because consent is difficult to define, yet the very attempt at change empowers women. Its logic opens the way to denoting “marital rape” and “date rape,” concepts that were previously incomprehensible – except to victims.<sup>16</sup>

Feminist theory thus aims at transforming our common universe, not by inversion or expansion, which would leave the latter’s basic structure intact, but through radical reconceptualization. Feminist philosophers are laboring to develop theory that is coherent (if not necessarily cohesive) and applicable to practice, but we are a long way from achieving that goal. In the meantime, visions not yet implemented in the lived world are trickling into the general population, where they converge and resonate with ideas from populations with comparable histories of exclusion and domination. I am proposing the museum as a proving ground where such ideas could be tested in use and modified as necessary. To some extent, that initiative is already underway, but it is mixed in a welter of innovative programs, many of which are motivated less by theory than by friction within the museum community itself and by immediate pressures for change. The influx of women and other “outsiders” into museum work has fueled some of these innovations. Some are due to criticism from those who fund, visit, and use museums for research and teaching; others derive from the growing influence

of a new cadre of museum theorists.<sup>17</sup> All of these contribute to the rich compost that nourishes activity, but this activity is haphazard, mostly reactive, often self-contradictory, and lacking in credible measures of quality. The criteria for success are dubious – increased attendance, variety among attendees, money raised. These refer to a less radical museum model than the one(s) to which feminists aspire.

## Part II

Feminist theory awaits practical realization: it has not yet yielded specific protocols for operating any institution,<sup>18</sup> and it has not been applied to museums consistently. Museum research and exhibition practice necessarily vary with the mission and objectives of individual museums and with their particular resources. Nevertheless, I will suggest some modifications of strategy and qualitative effects that could follow from museums' deliberate incorporation of feminist theory as I have characterized it.

- 1 Museums should abandon language that is falsely genderless to represent the idealized museum visitor, who appraises museum objects from the stance of a neutral, disembodied, and dispassionate observer. Aesthetic and/or cognitive distance is not, nor ought to be, the optimal attitude that the museum encourages. Visitors do not shed their individuality to become universalized subjects. Rather, they remain personally inflected participants in a conversation, inclusive of other visitors, past and present, within an environment staged by the museum. What they encounter depends on their own histories and the degree of sharing they are willing to venture. Sometimes that means being overwhelmed, drawn in, fascinated – and occasionally annoyed, indifferent, or even repelled. The notions of engaging with or figuratively grasping an object have been grossly oversimplified as a melding of two terms. So, too, is the implied agency of the subject who grasps or interprets an allegedly passive object.<sup>19</sup> In fact, many elements figure into this conjunction. Among them are powerful virtual presences, comprising a constellation of ancestry, environment, education, memory, and desire. It is very difficult, especially for art museums, to convey a kinesthetic sense of works on display, but inclusion in an exhibit of relevant clothing, furniture, and utensils would help. Few men, for example, can imagine how corsets, stiletto heels, or towering hairstyles might affect a person's posture, gait, or outlook. Renaissance or modern painting would surely resonate more with visitors if they were permitted to try on such items, and children would appreciate the masquerade.

Feminist theory would also sanction reform of the museum's attitude and language. It is not yet feasible to abandon didactic signage altogether, since visitors are accustomed to being instructed. They crave knowledge and have been trained for centuries to regard the museum as an authoritative teacher. They can, however, be welcomed – not processed – into a hospitable place. Some want guidance; others seek confirmation, and many prefer to be left to ruminate by themselves. Surveillance may be necessary, but guards, like docents, should also be mediators, trained to interact responsively with visitors. They need to be acquainted with exhibition content, not be there just to patrol and protect it.<sup>20</sup> Currently, study areas are set up with computers and books pertaining to certain exhibitions, but these are not conducive to informal conversation or "time out" to regenerate. Small gathering spaces should be available in which visitors can relax, communicate among themselves, or conduct broad-based independent research.<sup>21</sup> The museum as host can foster an atmosphere of conviviality that draws out and honors different identities, thereby radically expanding the possibilities for knowledge that staff

members and visitors bring to and take from the museum. Does it follow that “anything goes”? Not if the museum nurtures the dignity of matter and its coherence, while remaining respectful and alert to the reactions it provokes.

The museum’s role as expert has been slowly eroding over the past half century. The term “interpretation” long ago displaced stricter reference to the “increase and diffusion of knowledge,” but only recently has the public been offered a significant part in defining the museum’s content and character. Similarly, non-curatorial and teaching staff members, previously cast as disseminators, are now acknowledged to be creators and sources of knowledge. This institutional democratization began in the 1960s, paving the way for alternative visions of pedagogy and politics that include the second wave of the women’s movement. The initial aim was populist inclusiveness; however, the process of achieving this goal revealed the inadequacy of the conceptual tools then available and the enormity of the task to be accomplished.

- 2 Museums should stop foregrounding the exceptional – the “masterpiece,” “catastrophe,” “historic moment,” or “scientific breakthrough,” and the use of expressions that reinforce hierarchy. These terms have a climactic ring and suggest that what leads to the defining climax is of merely instrumental significance, when it is in fact reinforced by political and cultural agendas. Likewise, what follows the “crowning” instance comes to be viewed comparatively and is assessed as being secondary. Having classified objects and events as incidental to a more important moment, we neglect the full range of their qualities. Works presumed to shine by reflected light are cast disparagingly as being created by the “school of” or a “follower of,” and are consigned to arcane scholarly monographs. More importantly, this concentration on the unique, archetypal instance punctuates history, obscuring its continuity and the flow of phenomena. We become impervious to the subtlety of change and its multiple diversions. We fail to appreciate the contributions of false conjectures, tangents, failed experiments, almosts and also-rans, and we are unable to imagine or understand the gradual processes leading up to the climax. Today’s alarm over the accelerated rate of climate change illustrates this point. That catastrophic situation did not come about overnight, but we are conditioned to notice only when the kindling point is reached.

Museums contribute to the public’s inattention to process by emphasizing isolated highlights, reinforcing the presumption that it is in our power to identify all that is best and most important in the world – and so to preserve it. In retrospect, the absence of what we ignore seems self-justifying. Losers deserve to lose, and winners merit victory. However, a slight shift of attention might have warranted our construing the world differently. Conceivably, our descendants will find no residue of what seems important today, and very likely they will venerate things unimaginable to us now. That possibility should induce us to proclaim canonicity more cautiously and to be wary of what we preserve.

Irreverence toward masterworks and genius does not necessarily arise out of contempt. Neither should it promote derision. It expresses doubts about the criteria by which such judgments are made. As I have argued, museums are a product of a civilization whose values have dominated western society throughout several centuries. Their longevity does not demonstrate that these values are absolute or that they must persevere. Endurance is not invariably a sign of merit; it may be the residue of force or of indolent passivity. Museums have perpetuated the myths of the exemplary and the other, but now they should turn a quizzical eye upon their own didactic functions. They are beginning to respond to a clamor from those whom they formerly ignored, excluded and objectified. These newly recognized claimants are demanding more than revision of the canon; they propose a discourse that rejects canonicity along with many other

structures of the old order. Conservatives fear an assault upon a beloved institution and respond by calling for protective vigilance. But this is a struggle between incommensurables. A compromise cannot be achieved simply by enlarging the canon or fragmenting it to contain heretofore rejected, incompatible, or unknown candidates. A feminist approach considers alternatives without assuming that either synthesis or compromise must follow.

What would a museum without masterpieces and exemplary instances look like? It might bring together objects in light of their common materials, conceptual affinities, applications, or places of origin. Exhibitions might feature a single narrative (explicitly described as such) or propose a variety of associations. A germinal idea suggested by one item – a tree, a roller skate, a pearl, or a street sign – can initiate historical, scientific, aesthetic, commercial, and other explorations. Enterprising museum exhibitions occasionally do cut across categories and hierarchies in this fashion, but they tend to receive little notice. In catastrophic times, such as after 9/11, when the cost of loan exhibitions became prohibitive, museums are forced to rely on and forage within their own collections. This has led to some highly thoughtful exhibitions that re-examined familiar works and cast them in unusual company, provoking new ways of looking at them. Perhaps the unfamiliar treatments are upsetting because they cannot be easily ranked or assimilated into conventional disciplinary categories. However, even an acclaimed masterpiece gains vitality when shown in an unusual context that reveals its undisclosed dispositions.

- 3 Museums should de-emphasize the categories and classification systems according to chronology, geography, national origin, school, scientific area, or material construction inherited from conventional disciplines. Although useful for indexing, these are as restrictive as the highlighting discussed in the previous section. Such information should be available to those who seek it, but placing it front and center sends a didactic message that discourages imagination and empathy. The objective is not to invite indulgence in personal fantasy or sentimentality – although these, too, have their place – but to induce museum visitors to be guided by the experience instead of a prescriptive label. Visitors' feedback might be edifying for the institution as well and may enable it to uncover unrecognized relationships among the items already held in the museum's collections. In a related example, museums sometimes invite artists to draw inspiration from their stored treasures, commissioning them to create installations and exhibitions that defy the traditional order. These artist-in-residency programs are gaining currency, bringing new vitality to the institution. The Isabella Stuart Gardner Museum was among the first to venture into such experimentation, thereby renewing itself while remaining within the rigorous constraints set by its founder. As a frequent visitor, I found that by attending these events I came to view the museum differently and with renewed interest. By encouraging such unscripted ways of understanding, the museum expands creative inquiry rather than simply managing established information.

Objects reconfigured variously in terms of distinct ordering systems effectively enlarge the museum's collection, enriching it qualitatively by a factor of imagination and at no extra cost. Indeed, what counts as an object in the first place has always depended on just such systemic integrations. Objects have never been the dumbly discrete entities we have taken them to be – as many museums now acknowledge by promoting them as vehicles of experience. Museums are also experimenting with diverse modes of presentation, using narrative, performance, and demonstrations to soften the rigor of conventional presentation techniques. Where the museum's zeal to please becomes excessive, there is a risk of crossing into the realm mocked as "infotainment." Providing pleasure is certainly a legitimate goal, but museums should not succumb to competitive provocation from theme parks, whose amply supported business is simply to amuse.

Like excellent theater, museums can make the social, emotive, and intellectual potential of alternative frameworks meaningful and exciting.

- 4 Museums can help us learn to live with and appreciate discontinuity, fragmentation and ambiguity. Since, in today's world, it is increasingly difficult to live apart, people must coexist with their differences and try to do so gracefully. But diversity often leads to clashes of values and skepticism toward truth. These circumstances are unacceptable to those who venerate a single standard of correctness and cannot abide a less than universal order. Generally, these individuals also assume that their own perspective on the world satisfies these conditions, while alternative views can (and should) be molded to conform to theirs. This conviction is often affirmed in a tone of generous and high-minded cordiality, but the message is condescending and disingenuous. It leads to the imposition of punitive measures to keep people in line. Feminist theory admits coalitions among incommensurables; it does not demand uniformity.

The burden is thus shifted away from truth and the calculation of its degrees, and placed instead on such pragmatic values as etiquette and manners, not as superficial niceties but as genuine efforts to promote respect and communication. These are the lubricant of exploration and the wellspring of social exchange. More than skills of persuasion and argument, living with others whom we do not understand requires self-restraint, courtesy, curiosity, and watchful attention. Subjugated groups and individuals have long understood that what is at stake here is no less than their own survival, and the skills requisite for living with others coincide with those necessary for aesthetic refinement.

We can think of the museum as a site for learning good manners on a vastly public scale – and everyone benefits from that. The museum shapes judgment, but, in addition, it supports the judicious withholding of judgment. This is no less an intellectual than a social skill, one that academic institutions rarely inculcate. Precisely because attendance at a museum is not mandatory and one's performance there does not lead to certification, its benefits can be enjoyed in a relaxed manner. In a museum you can try on ideas like a costume, study them intently, or give them a cursory glance, without obligation. Few opportunities in the world are as free of risk.

- 5 Museums should strive to dissolve boundaries. A feminist-inspired museum must be skeptical of the conventional museum's vantage as a "view from nowhere." Having criticized the aloof stance of the omniscient observer as discussed above, feminist theorists insist that every view is situated, a view from somewhere – one of many somewheres – and must reflect the complexity and limits of its particular location. Feminist counsel to museums is that they must be pliable, open to multiple reinterpretations of objects. Structural compartmentalization may be dissolved in that process, and professional assignments renegotiated. That prospect might appear menacing, but it could ultimately reduce the political skirmishing that sometimes exhausts museum staffers and diverts their creative energy to surly campaigns to protect their territory.

Museums have enthusiastically collected and displayed artifacts from different civilizations, relics and symbols of diverse creeds, the history, art, tokens, trinkets, and everyday paraphernalia precious to individuals and distinctive of social communities. For several centuries, they have promoted a type of intellectual and emotional tourism that purports to transcend temporal and political borders. Museums without borders, emboldened by feminism, are capable of challenging still more deeply grounded philosophical notions – the permanence of material objects, for example, or the uniqueness of truth and the constancy of value. Museums can be "congregant spaces," safe sites for discursive exchange, where strangers can interact, trying and testing ideas without precipitous commitment to them.<sup>22</sup> Museums can create a barrier-free environment that invites reflection upon these ideas and their consequences. They can

help us communicate with one another with goodwill and without rancor. Their props and instruments become adjuncts to thought and to words in many languages, conveying what is not yet translated, but, perhaps, not beyond comprehension. They can help us choose more wisely and also abstain from choice when that is preferable.

### Part III Conclusion

In the present climate of globalization, museums, like most institutions, are striving to re-define themselves in terms of innovative practices and forms of cultural production. A vast network of professionals, amateurs, scholars, and practitioners is at work to build and mobilize the new museum. These individuals' efforts are stunted by insufficient attention to the theoretical core at the museum's foundation, in particular its adherence to a debilitating dualism that represents and appraises all things in relation to the judgment of a narrowly conceived human subject.

Of late, the museum has been overwhelmed by contradictory mandates and complex goals that pit this singular mode of reflection against a chaotically pulverized relativism. Feminist theory strives to circumvent that dilemma by proposing a concrete and non-uniform location – based in, but not exclusive to women's lives – as an experiential starting point for research. Effectively, this shift brings the strangeness of the prevailing paradigm into the foreground. Feminism's denunciation of the subject/object construction destabilizes, yet acknowledges, the power of that paradigm. It undermines the authority of the notion of a single reality while seeking tentacles that connect many realities. Without subscribing to a logic or politics that deflates the "other," feminist theory protects its otherness. Difference must neither be defined solely by negation, nor atomized into countless unrelated and fragmented mini-qualities. In other words, multiple differences are possible and possibly co-equal; they can coexist and do not entail subordination to a dominant, ahistorical truth.

Feminism's struggle to overcome the limits of masculinist theory coincides with diverse theoretical rejections of universalism and conforms to visions put forward by some innovative practitioners and thinkers in the museum world. For example, common to most of the authors assembled in the 2006 anthology *Museum Frictions* is their opposition to the established notion of the universal. Their objective is openly ethical and generally tactical, that is, committed to the local and specific.<sup>23</sup> Feminism's theoretical focus on relation and intersection, together with explorations of identity and autonomy, offers ways of thinking that can be implemented in museum practice. Prominent among these is the analysis of identity as "constituted by social contextual conditions of interaction in specific cultures at particular historical periods," hence as subject to local and temporal description rather than being generalized or abstract.<sup>24</sup> From that vantage point, the central thesis that has sustained the museum as a treasury of mankind and its culture(s) requires major revision.

### Notes

- 1 W. E. Washburn, "A National Museum," in *The Smithsonian Experience*, Washington DC: W.W. Norton and Company, 1977, p. 20.
- 2 At the risk of appearing ungenerous and disrespectful, I note the obituaries on the occasion of the death of Anne d'Harnoncourt, Director of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, on 2 June 2008. She is cited for her pedigreed associations and ancestry as the only daughter of René d'Harnoncourt, "art historian and famed director of New York's Museum of Modern Art" (J. Loviglio, "Anne d'Harnoncourt, 64," *Boston Globe*, 3 June 2008). She is also celebrated for her achievements as a museum builder and fund raiser, very much in the tradition of the men whom she equaled. On the

other hand, the Philadelphia Museum's own tribute was uncharacteristically holistic. The museum staged a full day's celebration of her life, with free public entry to the museum, refreshments, and music, including jazz, gospel, and classical selections. J. Seligson, "Remembering D'Harnoncourt and LaPaglia," *Aviso*, 1 July 2008: <<http://newsmanager.commpartners.com/aama/textonly/printall.php?id=aama20080701>> accessed 25 November 2009.

- 3 Note also the ethical disregard of conventional philosophy for entities that do not have a human identity – the natural world and its non-human contents. While subject to the scrutiny of natural philosophy, these areas have only recently attracted moral concern and much of that comes from the work of eco-feminists.
- 4 L. Gordon, review of K. Davis, I. Grewal, C. Kaplan, and R. Wiegman, *The Making of Our Bodies, Ourselves* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), in *The Nation* 16 June 2008, 36. Gordon observes that women's subordination, though virtually universal, does not take the same form in all cultures. The private and individualized access to medical care that white, middle-class American women take for granted seems alien and alienating to Latina women, who are more accustomed to mutual ministration and support. Women's health in other parts of the world, she notes, depends more on access to clean water and protection from toxic materials than on the availability of pharmaceutical products such as birth control drugs. In consequence, not just words, but ideas must be contextually adapted when translated from one culture to another. Literal translation is not sufficient.
- 5 The same observation can be made with respect to men. Their attributes are not imposed on to some featureless universal gel. The feminist quest to elucidate a woman's identity is historically necessitated by masculinist philosophy's clumsy metaphysics of inclusion and exclusion. See I. Young, "Gender as Seriality," *Signs*, 19:3(1994), 713–38. According to Young, "Feminist reflection and explicit theorizing draw on the experience of serializing gender, which has multiple layers and aspects . . . [T]here are many feminisms," 737.
- 6 Introducing storytelling and performance, for instance, enables an understanding of objects in use that enriches conventional museum explanations of objects' material construction and presumed historical functions. See I. Karp, C. Kratz, L. Szwaja *et al.* (eds), *Museum Frictions*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006, for examples of institutions that reverse the museum's traditional decontextualizing mission and reinscribe communal histories on to "remapped" sites.
- 7 This is not to deny that the body is a thing acted upon, which is an inescapable reality of everyone's actual existence. Yet philosophy that glorifies the contemplative life obscures awareness of somatic capabilities such as sensing the atmosphere or knowing through one's fingers. It demotes bodily attunement to a situation by insisting that only distanced judgment, and not proximate immersion, yields genuine understanding.
- 8 Before a mirror, for example, a woman, in the role of subject, examines herself as mere object, with unsparing severity – as other to herself and interchangeable with other others.
- 9 I distinguish between "playful" museums whose entertainment agenda may or may not generate cognitive insight, and stricter didactic institutions that design exhibitions in order to elicit specific experiences meant to stimulate visitors' reflective inquiry and to bring forth the "right answer." The latter rely on the museum experience as a means of achieving a preordained, often cognitive end. Science exhibitions cannot offer conclusive proof of a hypothesis, but they are commonly designed to make it convincing.
- 10 See Marjorie Schwarzer's article in this volume.
- 11 Such museums are often attached to research or business establishments, where they explain the history and function of the work that takes place there.
- 12 Museums tend to disguise the enormity of the first option by mounting innocuous, seemingly comparative exhibitions on themes such as "marriage rituals around the world," or "depictions of pleasure" (which was an exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum, Las Vegas, 2006). Alternatively, they may display topical exhibits that have no generalizing implication, for instance Mughal miniatures, eighteenth-century German porcelain, or herb gardens.
- 13 A huge body of literature articulates these discussions in fine detail. A small selection must include: S. Harding, *Whose Science?* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991; H. Longino, *Science as Social Knowledge*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990; and L. Code, *What Can She Know?* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991.
- 14 "Our common stock of words embodies all the distinctions men have found worth drawing, and the connections they have found worth marking, in the lifetimes of many generations." This comment

- by J. L. Austin originally appeared in a "Plea for Excuses" in *Philosophical Papers*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961, and was cited in S. Hekman, *The Future of Differences: Truth and Method in Feminist Theory*, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999, p. 182.
- 15 I pose the analogous question: To whom does one speak when asking the respondent at the door or telephone "Is anyone home?" Is the addressee not someone? The answer is that such persons are of negligible interest; this is a matter of appraisal, not ontology. Servants, children, and women are frequently thus dismissed. Assumed to be unhearing, unseeing, and uncomprehending, they are often privy to secret conversations and confessions. This is the stuff of literature, but also of life. It is the basis for the exemption of marital partners (i.e. wives) from testifying as witnesses in legal trials. They know too much.
  - 16 Susan J. Hekman describes feminist strategies for subverting the received background that "defines what makes sense in the dominant discourse of society" and shifting the beliefs that follow from it "in a direction more to our liking" See *The Future of Differences*, p. 146. See also D. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, New York: Routledge, 1991. Haraway addresses the function of language as "the tool of human self-construction," p. 81. Language, she says, "generates reality in the inescapable context of power," p. 78, italics in original. She observes that feminists understand very well that "the power of naming a thing is the power of objectifying, of totalizing," p. 79. She therefore indicates the necessary task "of recoding communication and intelligence to subvert, command and control," p. 175. This, Haraway concludes, requires not a common language, but a form of heteroglossia, a "speaking in tongues" that culminates in regeneration, p. 181.
  - 17 Museum studies and museology are now academic fields whose scholarship treats museums as cultural objects distinct from the artifacts they typically contain. Scholars in these disciplines are generally not regular employees in museums, and their perceptions are sometimes at odds with those of museum workers. See, for example D. Preziosi and C. Farago (eds), *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, Aldershot: Ashcroft, 2004.
  - 18 This is not to say that feminism has made no impact. It has affected both practice and theory in medicine, business management, and such scholarly areas as animal behavior studies. Feminist theory has broad implications that could be put to work in schools, religious organizations, secular governments, and commercial enterprises. For example, the promotion of environmental protection as a security concern that transcends military preparedness has long been an issue for feminist scholars. See J.A. Tickner, *Gender in International Relations*, NY: Columbia University Press, 1992.
  - 19 This disputed relationship arises from an earlier theoretical "correction" affirming that museums are less about things than for people. The shift away from the centrality of objects and toward the importance of experience began in the 1960s, in part due to the appearance of science centers and children's museums, some of which did not feature collections at all. See H. Hein, *The Exploratorium*, Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990, and *The Museum in Transition*, Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000. See also S. Weil, "From Being *about* Something to Being *for* Somebody," in W. Se (ed.), *Making Museums Matter*, Washington DC, Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002, pp. 28–53.
  - 20 The integration of maintenance, service, and support staff with curators, management, and educators would stimulate and refine their involvement with the museum they serve and probably mitigate labor conflicts.
  - 21 Education and learning are now major museum emphases. The trend is due in part to the demand by funding agencies for justifications for their investments and evidence of museums' compliance with the terms of grants. In principle, this is reasonable and not without benefit, but its disadvantages are seen in increasing standardization, faddish technologies, and self-righteous didacticism.
  - 22 I borrow the phrase from Elaine Heumann Gurian, who addresses the qualities of popular public spaces (libraries, department stores, and the internet) that might serve as models for museums wishing to permit unfettered browsing among objects and information as well as casual social interaction. See E. H. Gurian, "Threshold Fear," an address made to the American Association of Museums convention, 12 May 2004. See also E. Gurian, *Civilizing the Museum*, NY: Routledge, 2006. My own use of the term refers to the coming together of ideas, which are, of course, transmitted by people, but also especially in museums, through objects that people find, make, use, and love.
  - 23 I. Karp *et al.*, *Museum Frictions*.
  - 24 L. M. Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.