

Lost in Translation: Interpretation, Theory and the Encounter with the Art Museum

Andrew Dewdney

This paper was originally invited as a review of the proceedings of a conference, *Interpretation, Theory and the Encounter*, held at Tate Britain on 9 July 2010, which was to be published in Tate's online research journal, *Tate Papers*, (Issue 15 Spring 2011) alongside other expanded conference papers. In the event, only three of the keynote papers were published: *Guided Freedom: Aesthetics, Tutelage and the Interpretation of Art*, by Tony Bennett; *What if Art Desires to be Interpreted? Remodelling Interpretation after the 'Encounter-Event'* by Griselda Pollock; and *Palpable and Mute as a Globed Fruit* by Donald Preziosi.¹ Since the paper was written from an engagement with the Tate Encounters research project, and since it addresses the problematic of theory and practice, it now seems relevant to include it in [E]dition 6 of the Tate Encounters online papers as a contribution to the development of the position of post-critical museology.

Tate's legitimate editorial act of excision can be considered as a familiar occlusion of the agency of the knowledge of reception. In this case it can be understood as the exclusion of what might, in a larger argument, be understood as the knowledge held by the audience/listener/reader. In addition, it can also be considered as an act of making the work of the conference in the art museum itself invisible. On one count this is perfectly accountable in terms of the museological practices of cultural exchange whose primary historical mode is through the display or exhibition of objects considered to have singular authorship with a corresponding assumption of the transparency of the established means by which those objects are put before subjects. This is the museum's main form of cultural exchange in which the direction of communication is understood to be from artist to artwork to viewer. This model is of course replicated in publishing in general and in Tate's online research journal would itself be unremarkable here, were it not for the specific content and stated purpose of the conference, which was precisely to call into question and make visible the museum's role in the mediation of objects.

The agency of the museum, in respect of the process of interpretation, as well as the practice of theory, was directly invoked by this museum conference and it brings into perspective the work of the academic conference in the art museum. The labour and position of contemporary institutionally funded scholarship is understood here as part of the more general process of cultural reproduction in respect of encounters in the museum and the generation of knowledge and understandings of such encounters. This paper considers briefly a repeated

quandary, if not contradiction, between the intellectual desire to entail cultural reproduction in the constitution, circulation and consumption of objects and shed light on the practices of the museum, on the one hand, and, on the other, the institutional reproductive need to maintain the separation of the spheres of theory and practice, which reproduces knowledge as the privilege of theory.

The paper is partisan in character and stems from the AHRC funded research project 'Tate Encounters: Britishness and Visual Cultures'². This was an interdisciplinary and embedded collaborative research programme focused upon audiences at Tate Britain. The brief argument put forward here is that whilst theory was being mobilised to engage and illuminate various museological practices of interpretation, the conference was treated to a consummate and conspicuous display of the practice of theory. It should be noted that the display of the practice of theory in the delivery of a conference paper is, when done well, always a good thing to experience. However, in this instance, the display of theory – its particular purposes in the instances of exposition - was grounded not in the practices of the museum, but in the discipline reproduction of academic theory, which is to say, that the conference contributions started from, as well as returned, the audience to theory. In such a scenario the museum's practices of interpretation, which theory's powers were enlisted to illuminate, were occluded by a substitution of the practice of theory for, as it were, 'the real thing', or more precisely, for the concrete embodiment and manifestation of the abstract in the everyday life of the art museum.³

The aim here is not to undermine the importance of theory, nor academic conferences focused upon theory, nor the interest of Tate Britain in initiating an academic conference, (all these things are very necessary elements in producing and exchanging knowledge), but to explore the somewhat troubled territory of theory enlisted in the service of practice. The current unsettled state of the relationship between theory and practice is not, it is argued, a localised effect of one conference, but symptomatic of a wider set of problems surrounding the production and use of 'critical' theory in relationship to the reproduction of the public realm. (It is assumed here that museums are constitutive of the public realm, as are public intellectuals whose theoretical endeavours are undertaken on behalf of the social body.) The current moment of this difficulty in the conference was located in a discussion of the relationship between academic theories of the interpretation of art and art museum practices of interpretation in exhibition and display.

The irony that the argument made here is itself a theoretical argument fashioned in the space of the museum and supported by the academy is not lost in the paper. The first reprieve of what might pessimistically be considered a hopeless reproduction of the theory/practice division with respect to the museum object, lies in the degree to which the paper amplifies the avenues of escape from an endless retrieval of the object which are evidenced in the three

keynote papers. The second reprieve is the attempt made here to contest the formal logic of these avenues of escape through a discussion of the cycle of the substitution of a theory of practice by the practice of theory.

The fundamental reason why so much theoretical work on culture occupies the established position of critical distance from its sites and objects of analysis are, it needs to be said, political, with both a small and large 'p', but to assert this general truism of cultural theory is to say very little that is immediately helpful, although it establishes the line of argument given here. In detail the theory/practice separation within the cultural sphere of operation can be understood by looking at the conditions and modes within which specialist and discrete knowledge productions and the production of the objects, sites and practices to which they refer take place. The production of a knowledge of the general practices of the museum, specifically those of management, interpretation, marketing and education, is a relatively recent phenomenon and has been generated through new relationships between funding bodies, museums and university departments across Europe, North America and Australia, (Macdonald 2010). In contrast, scholarly exchanges based upon knowledge and expertise related to historical collections of cultural artefacts is of an older kind. The relatively new field of museum studies has been focused upon generating a knowledge of the contemporary public functions of museums, whereas the private pleasures of museum objects belongs to older fields of study. In Britain studies of the public functions of the museum have been fuelled by the growth of policy led public funding for museums, as well as a renewed value for the civic and economic role of culture. In this respect culture has become publicly accountable and this in turn has professionalised the cultural sector in new ways.

Over the period of office of the last elected government Britain has seen the generation of new courses in the management of the arts, which in turn has created a new breed of arts professionals, consultants and think tanks. The same period has witnessed the legitimisation of the Arts and Humanities Research Council⁴ which has increased academic research focused upon museums and new research departments in museums fuelled by the parallel academic legitimisation projects of post colonial cultural and literary studies from the 1990s onwards. Such developments cut across as well as merge with the more established institutional disciplines of Art History, Anthropology and Archaeology in accounting for the processes by which meaning and value is assigned to material cultural artefacts. The conference in question represented a narrow overlap of discipline boundaries in focusing upon interpretation and the encounter.

The conference was organised⁵ by Victoria Walsh⁵ and Sylvia Lahav⁶ at Tate Britain and consisted four keynote papers, each with a respondent and a final panel plenary session. The speakers were, Donald Preziosi, Griselda Pollock, Tony Bennett and James Elkins. The respondents were, Andrea Phillips, Claire Pajaczkowska, Brendan Prendeville and Jonathan

Harris. Adrian Rifkin chaired a plenary session.⁷ The conference was attended by approximately 120 people, who spent from 10-6 in the Clore Auditorium on a hot English Summer day, listening, looking and responding with more than due diligence and attention. By any measure the conference was of a high standard, it was well organised, highly focused, with four esteemed academic writers and for an audience familiar with the intellectual terrain, it was enjoyable and stimulating. So why cause a disturbance, why is there a problem?

Conferences, as the first speaker Donald Preziosi pointed out in his opening remarks, are staged as a reflection of those taking part; they are, he said, a function of time, place and circumstances. Such a reflexive recognition at the start of the day was uplifting and seemed to beg the obvious question of what the particular function of this conference might be. What, as one delegate put it to me during the first break, was the conference for⁸? There are many unproblematic answers to this question in that professionals, scholars, students and researchers who share a common field of interest regularly come together to update themselves on developments in their fields, to present, speak and to listen, to engage in debate and to network. Over the last two decades many academic conferences have organised themselves along the lines of a department store, or less prosaically, like a supermarket. This method of conference organisation has catered for the burgeoning market in the production and consumption of highly differentiated, specialist knowledge products in parallel sessions packed full of eager presenters. Contemporary conferences are no longer singular, linear enterprises, but multiple and non-linear, somewhat akin to the interactivity of the Internet, in which the academic consumer can navigate their own path through any given selection, making their own sense and meaning. Much of this way of organising things is a direct reflection of the conditions that produce ever greater specialist divisions in knowledge production.

But, in what might be a growing recognition of the exhaustion of the cultural knowledge market based upon myopic specialisation (Harvey 1990, Baudrillard 1983) and a final fatigue in the face of an over production of information, it is useful to remind ourselves of an older conjuncture of the intellectual work of conferences. From 1968, if not sometime before, to at least the mid-1980s if not beyond, the work of (cultural) theory more often than not announced a social and political context to which its best endeavours were directed⁹. In hindsight this historically progressive, reforming and modernist sense of conferences focused in some way upon understanding the relationship between culture and society as a whole, and gave way to a new set of institutional forces which were reproducing knowledge as part of a new technocratic labour force in which culture was to be managed. The conference, organised as a means of striving for intellectual consensus and political programme, gave way to the managerial conference in which a new academic professionalism turned away from open public critique and debate in favour of presenting multiple technical segments of knowledge in neutral settings.

The point of this historical note is not to engage in nostalgia for an era often negatively characterised for the posturing positions and binary theories argued out by a few elitist or politically aligned intellectuals, but on the contrary, to recognise that there is much to celebrate in the further rapid expansion of higher education in Britain. What has come with the recent period of growth in education is greater and widening participation with more academics undertaking research and ultimately more positions and perspectives emerging within most disciplines. But we also need to note that the expansion in British Higher Education came with a price in the form of the lowering of the economic unit of resource for teaching and with it the commodification of the offering of knowledge. It is in this context that the corresponding expansion and professionalisation of cultural activity needs to be understood and to recognise that this professionalism has brought with it noticeable and sustained forms of managerialism. In essence, Britain under the New Labour administration experienced a bureaucratic form of state commodification, coupled with neo-liberal managerialism, and it is this contradictory hybrid that lies at the heart of the current theory/practice problematic within the cultural sphere.

The conference under discussion was organised in order to focus upon the art museum's practices of interpretation, which were identified as problematic as the conference programme defined it:

As interpretation becomes an increasingly conflicted site of meaning and representation within curatorial and museological practice this conference brings together key international speakers to consider the theoretical and philosophical issues which frame textual interpretation.¹⁰

In the first paper to conference, Donald Preziosi's thoughts upon the art museum and interpretation emphasised the constructedness of the art museum enterprise. He saw the agency of the art museum as a form of staging in which the museum itself is an interpretation, but one in which the staging is concealed, thus rendering the artifice of art historicism moot, as he put it, with respect to its own production. If staging and concealment are central processes in the agency of the art museum can this argument, by extension, be applied to the art museum conference, or are conferences of a different and transparent order? If the art museum's processes of staging and concealment extend to the art museum conference, then it presents a conundrum about what this particular conference could or did produce. In the older model of the singular cultural conference, in which it was suggested the conference would announce its relation to a given socio-political problematic, it follows that the conference could be understood by its delegates as an opposite to the concealment that takes place in museological practice by virtue of the opening given by theory to decode that which lies coded in practice. But under the present conditions of the world and its knowledges, which have given rise to the managerialist conference, the current conference

practitioners of theory uniformly gestured towards the fact that staging and masking of all kinds are inescapable in the theoretical process as well as in the worlds to which theory attends.

Such a stance is part of the longer and larger revision of theoretical grand narratives and corresponding assumptions about theory's objectifying role and, whilst such a critique humbles theory it does not absolve the tradition of critical theory from its historical and progressive agency in directing its energies to objects outside of itself. The reflexive recognition of the relative nature of the practice of theory is not a signal for a retreat of theory from all of the other practices of everyday life, but its opposite, a signal for the advance of theory towards the very practices it transforms into its own objects. As Donald Preziosi noted in his own conclusion;

.... the effective and now long-standing divorce between professional interests, activities, and forms of expertise in contemporary museology that should in theory have functioned in tandem has been an enduring impasse for a very long time. Our most pressing task today, and a job that is simultaneously pragmatic and theoretical, and indeed a task of artisanal epistemology, is to sew together what modernity has rent asunder. Including the gap between the pragmatic and the theoretical.¹¹

All the more surprising then that the work of theory in academic conference was not within the sights of Preziosi's critical gaze. Especially when he so clearly sees that:

... the principal ethical and social effects of that form of artistry we call a museum is an uncanny power simultaneously to reveal and occlude awareness of the arbitrariness and historical contingency of all modes of artistry.¹²

Clearly the theoretical enterprise is part of what theory seeks a knowledge of and this recognition has led cultural theory to various reflexive methodological strategies for dealing with the troubled and troubling state of relative knowing opened up by the more general condition of post modernity. (Beck 2004, Alvorsen & Skolderberg 2000). Perhaps the recognition of the necessity of the reflexive mode is a step in the direction of identifying more specifically the function and conjunctural moment of the conference and might lead us to see what the conference induced and restricted, what it made visible and what remained unseen, what was brought to consciousness and what remained repressed?

There is much immediately to hand in focusing upon the conjunctural moment of the conference. The conference could be 'read' through the motives and interests of the organisers; the institution in which it was held; the content of the papers; the performances of the speakers and respondents; or the questions and silences of the audience. Moreover, there is the overriding subject of the day, the interpretative process in the art museum and the viewer's encounter with material artefacts from which to draw upon. Could the various

analytical tropes of interpretation offered to the conference stimulate an interpretation of the staging and performance of the conference itself and would this get closer to an understanding of the function in time, space and circumstance of the event? In this particular instance approaching the practice of theory could mean looking in detail at the performances and papers given and to extrapolate key understandings from their account of the processes of art museum interpretation and then to apply them to the artifice of the conference. In recognising the central place accorded to theoretical exposition there is a tacit acknowledgement that the practice of theory is privileged as the mode of revelation of museological practices in which theory is implicit or submerged. Here the distinction is drawn between two orders of knowledge, one in which the museological practitioner holds a 'technical know how', in which theory remains implicit, and of the other hand an order in which the theoretician is in possession a 'technical know why', but where the condition of the practice of theory remains implicit. This professionalised distinction in the reproduction of differential knowledge would have to be understood here as a further staging of knowledge's divisions, one beyond the conference itself, but upon which the conference rests. The intellectual labour of the academician is in the last instance produced in exchange for a position within the wage labour of the university, which institutionalises the modes and economies of knowledge production. Now, such reflexive understandings as these are of course not lost upon the speakers, nor for that matter the conference audience, for they are the given conditions of the enterprise within which everyone labours. However, the question remains to be put to this particular conference of how such conditions with their staging, artifice, constructedness, and performativity impinged upon the subject of museological interpretation.

The performances of theory from the speakers in question were consummate and delegates were treated to commanding performances from seasoned academic scholars. Each was a master [sic] of the reflexive mode within his or her own specialist discipline field. Donald Preziosi in reminding us of the relative and constructed nature of the museum/knowledge enterprise; Griselda Pollock in demonstrating the continued power of the psychoanalytic to move beyond the semiotic and to produce understandings of the complex layering of meaning in the encounter with the work of art; and Tony Bennett in arguing carefully for the need to reject later day forms of the Kantian idealist aesthetic, which he sees reprieved in Rancière's work, and instead to continue the process of understanding the museum in terms of a civic processual ethics; and finally, James Elkin's treatment of the formal, linguistic like elements of the visual and linguistic grammars of painting.

It was however, Pollock, Preziosi and Bennett, who, from their different projects, brought the ethical and political sphere to bear upon the economies of power that articulate the interstitial spaces in which the agency of artwork, museum and viewer operate. This space of interpretation, that theory and museological practice had jointly problematised, called forth a

series of theorisations, each with their own theoretical penumbra. Interpretation was the space of trauma and monumental time (Pollock); it was a space of multimodalities of the hyper articulated artwork, (Preziosi); and it was the recasting of the aesthetic encounter as the space of civic reasoning, (Bennett). Each of these positions announced their intellectual allegiances and the legacies that still flow from Marxism, Psychoanalysis and Structuralism were very much in evidence. This was reinforced by detailed references across the contributions to the work of Lacan, Ettinger, Laplanche, Bourdieu, Bauman, Balibar, Jameson and Rancière, to name but the most obvious.

However, the extended theoretical legacies derived from historical materialism and psychoanalysis were called up, not to shed light upon either the theoretical enterprise being performed nor the conference's ostensible object, but to validate the academic exercise. It was as if the dead weight of historical abstraction weighed heavily upon the conscious brains of living academics (Marx 2007). Such an historical spectre raises once more the question of what work scholarly referencing does in the absence of a concrete instance or problems from the sensuous life world. Conference delegates became the collective witness to the performance of theory's labour working at the point of the abstraction of the work of art as a thing in itself, rather than as met in the actual assemblage of located, social, phenomenological and organisational networks. Because the question of the interpretation of the work of art was abstracted the four keynote speakers, almost against their better judgement, were unable to overcome the museum's own mythic privileging of the work of art. It was the work of art that desires to be interpreted (Pollock), images that think they can think (Elkins), images that are alive, (Preziosi), images as the space of freedom (Bennett). Of course such statements were qualified by social and psychic complexity, but nevertheless the art object was the site of privilege, rather than the extended practices of the art museum where other kinds of unequal distributions of power lie.

The way out of the relatively closed museological world was gestured towards in a series of equivocations focused upon the power of institutions on the one hand, specifically between the reforming and repressive state, and on the other, the power/knowledge complex within subjectivity, with the recognition of the work of repression constituted by and in the unconscious. Such formulations do take us one step closer to a cultural politics of lived encounters with works of art in the art museum, but still remain remote from a concrete politics. Delegates would have had to work hard, if they were so minded, to discern any practical prescriptions arising from the analysis presented. However, three strategies could be dimly gathered from the proceedings.

The first perspective arose from Donald Preziosi's account of the relational act of encountering producing what is encountered. In his analysis he went somewhat to calling for the need to disable the interpretative machinery in order to render the staging (of art history)

less than moot, his sense that we needed to get off the museum carousel if change is to happen. In this analysis much turns on the question of whether it is finally the impossibility or improbability of the museum being able to perform the relational. Whilst post-structuralism takes as a given that meaning is never exhausted nor definitive, but rather polysemic and now relational, this is clearly not enough for Preziosi, who, like Barthes (1980) before him wants a certain knowledge of the thing in itself and this return to the indexical, in this case the work of art, once more confronts the field of connotation. For Preziosi, the alternative to the project of visual culture is that we have to seek other, older, co-determinate notions of agency and mootness in the multi-modalities of everyday life from which visuality is extracted. In wanting this he returns himself to anthropology and philosophy rather than the messy world of organisational practices. As he said rather bleakly of the current state of affairs, the historical moment of the study of visual cultures is over whilst business in the art museum world is the 'same old, same old'.

The second moment, which addressed the cultural politics of the practices of interpretation in the museum, came from Griselda Pollock, who located her understanding of the interpretive encounter in the politics of difference. For her psychoanalytic space is precisely not legislative and so becomes a (re)source for the work of individual agency. As Pollock said: 'Rather than finding out what art is about – a project leading back to the artistic subject in whom it is thought to originate – we need to ask what artistic practice is doing and where as well as when that doing occurs. What are art's occasions and temporalities?'.¹³ In this she leaned towards the encounter as a moment of becoming and a rekindling of the politics of feminism in insisting, like Preziosi, that the semiotic moment is exhausted. For Pollock the art encounter was an event in monumental time, the time of sexuality and life, in which we regard the work of art as a register of pre-thought and essentially inchoate. The encounter with the work of art is therefore a potential moment of personal transformation, art as the trauma and the visitor as a witness to an event in which they are a key protagonist. The museum understood as a site of psychoanalytic experience is defined by Pollock in terms of a non-phallic, matrixial gaze, which is not predicated on a misrecognition of subject and other, but is redefined as a co-emergence and hence a process of trans-subjectivity. Such a feminist redefinition of the position of spectatorship is really useful knowledge for all of those considering the position of the spectator, but such an abstract account lies at a substantial distance from the practices by which works of art are actually encountered. The job of connecting theoretical revisions of the subject position to the practices by which works of art come to be works of art in the museum lies beyond the presentation. Like Preziosi, Pollock rehearsed the impossibility of the Modernist museum in its illusion of legitimate authority. For her the role of the post modern intellectual is that of an interpreter, one who does not abandon the universalist project of authoring knowledge and of establishing meta-positions, whilst at the same time admitting to the multiplicity of knowledge positions. How much the

emphasis upon the matrixial gaze rescued the conference from being lost in the museum is itself a moot point. As Pollock says of the situation herself:

Nervously, at the edges, theoretical challenges have been taken up through 'education' and other supplementary activities: conferences, symposia and networking where the competing communities of interpretative plurality could play at being intellectuals, that is, still enacting the illusion of a legislative authority even in this relativist circus. While thus enriching the institution and its publics by creating an intermediary space between gallery and academy, such educational operations have functioned productively, although the long term effect looks more like a management of the crisis which has increasingly slipped into fashion-chasing. Intellectuals become performers and the deeper arguments that have real implications and stakes are avoided for fear of creating unpleasantness or too much difficulty.¹⁴

This is a clear example of the hopeless circularity with which this paper began and Pollock's evident reflexivity comes as a recognition of the impotence of theory in the face of the museum as practice. The danger in the performance of theory as a consummate self reflexive moment is that it attacks museum practice, but exonerates the artist and work of art, whose contingent and imagined world lies elsewhere. The visitor remains a supplicant, the scholar an outsider waiting in the wings to be recognised in the museum.

Thirdly, and finally Tony Bennett represented a more distant discipline view from that of Art History, rooted in Sociology, his work has contributed to the more applied field of cultural policy studies in which Bourdieu's original critique of Kantian aesthetics remains central. Bennett used the recent findings of a large survey conducted by the ESRC funded Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change¹⁵ to demonstrate that in contemporary Britain levels of education and position in the labour market remain the defining factors in forms of cultural value and consumption. The findings repeat Bourdieu's (1987) famous study upon which he based *Distinction* in concluding that an appreciation of art and with it attendance at art museums is still largely confined to the most highly educated professional classes, for whom art is a mode of social distinction. In developing his own position Bennett argued that a limit in Bourdieu's work for an understanding of the object of art lies in the recognition of his substitution of taste for the encounter, thus leaving the Kantian universe intact. Bennett turned to the recent interest generated by the work of Jacques Rancière in reviving questions of the politics of culture. He took issue with Rancière's claim that the political operates within the autonomous aesthetic regime of art and that it can and is deployed against dominant class power. Bennett saw Rancière's claim that art's autonomy is a contemporary political space of freedom as a form of Neo-Kantian Idealism, in which individual freedom masks a hidden, reforming 'Christian' metaphysics, and that the aesthetic encounter with art spoke to 'a humanity yet to come', rather than one grounded in the politics of the present.

“It is histories of these kinds that are now most at stake in the relations between ‘interpretation, theory and the encounter’, both in the art gallery and in relation to the more general production and circulation of art in our contemporary ‘globalised’ world.”¹⁶ For Bennett, Rancière’s politics of aesthetics is ultimately a form of regressive secular holiness. Bennett recognised the separation, if not opposition, between the social and civic dimensions of culture on the one hand and the aesthetic on the other:

I have thus suggested that, when viewed as a liberal technology for governing via a particular form of ‘guided freedom’, aesthetics might be best understood as a historically and culturally distinctive form of ‘process ethics’ that is more concerned to induct individuals into particular ways of shaping their conduct via particular procedures of self-inspection than it is to prescribe particular moral codes.¹⁷

In countering the claim that art is largely useless in the realm of the social he argues for the importance of the public ‘cultural’ intellectual to work within the practices of policy and the museum:

Bureaucracy, rather than being construed as art’s other – as part of a police/politics polarity – thus emerges from the pen of Max Weber as precisely a parallel form of ‘process ethics’ embodying a commitment to disinterested forms of impersonality which detach the duty of office from any commitment to any particular set of moral or political ends. The history of the civic mediation of art practices via the use of empirical instruments to assess how such practices might form a part of programmes aimed at the amelioration of conflict in multicultural policies can equally claim an inheritance in the ‘process ethics’ of the tradition of civic philosophy which Kant opposed.¹⁸

This is a theoretical prescription of a kind that needs to be supported, although once more the terms under which it applies to practice remains unspecified other than through the implicit rendering of a certain kind of role for the public intellectual. In Bennett’s rehearsal of theory’s account of the division between the sociological and aesthetic imaginings of the socio-cultural space of encounter little advance was made in detailing the route towards practice.

In conclusion, the final question arises of the positions from which the theory entailed in the conference spoke to practice. At heart, theory speaks from the position of the desire for recognition on its own terms and for its own sake within a primary community of scholarship, teaching and research. But are the limits of speaking imposed by and represented in the international academic fields of subject based scholarship, research investment, the production and promotion of books and the occupation of institutional positions any longer a guarantor of the independence of theoretical knowledge? If the new conditions of knowledge

production in the commodified version of academia have troubled theory and its enterprise, then what kind of theory can the community of museum professionals recognise and respond to? In return, the question of the limits upon theory imposed by museum professionals might equally be asked. From both sides of the divide the question arises of what the agency of theory is within organisational processes of change?

Why is it that in a conference dedicated to the relationship between interpretation and the encounter that theory predominantly chooses to dwell upon the work of art, rather than upon the extended practices of production by which objects are brought before the public? What is the invested object of consideration for scholarship here, it is not the interactions between professionals, nor the arrangements between objects, ideas and people that constitute certain networks and practices. It is not the humdrum of everyday labour, but the museum as an unknowable and unstoppable force and the work of art as the singular and unique object, which it is admitted finally defeats theory. In considering what it means to interpret a work of art Sylvia Lahav's opening paper to conference erred on the side of perplexity and puzzlement rather than the quest for certain knowledge. In doing this she set the scene horizon for thinking about how the art museum understands itself as the mediator, or intermediary between the work of art and the public.

The older historical ghosts of Plato and Kant, rather than Marx and Freud stalked the conference at a deeper level of the art object and the act of collection. Idealist philosophies were invoked to mark out the territory of the aesthetic, in part for the purposes of critique, but also as a preferential means of signalling the continued interest in the autonomy of art and the disinterestedness of the aesthetic response. Through this marking out of the special and singular status accorded to the work of art and its encounter, we get finally to the limits and function of the conference. Theoretical erudition, with its dense formulations and complex enunciation, leads to and gives way in the presence of the material object and the ineffable mystery that is the encounter, Thus the theoretical journey stops short of explanation and becomes a performance, a conspicuous display of knowledge removed and remote from the exigencies and welter of considerations which constitute the material and everyday practices of museological interpretation. The function of the conference was, then, at the end of a long and very interesting day for academic scholars to come and pay homage to the museum and to express their allegiance to the sovereignty of the work of art. Stuck in the critique, stuck in the academy. The claim for the transformation of the museum dissolves in the face of theory's inability to directly and concretely address practice. The limit of the day can be seen and recognised in the claim of theorists to be grounded in the world of the profane, but ultimately preferring the sacred space of the museum.

NOTES

¹ The three essays are available as PDFs at: <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/>

² *Tate Encounters: Britishness and Visual Culture (2007-2010) Funded by AHRC. Archival website: www.tateencounters.org/ Collaboration between Tate Britain, Wimbledon College of Art and London South Bank University. Investigators, Andrew Dewdney, David Dibosa and Victoria Walsh.*

³ Marx.1970.p42

⁴ Established in April 2005, the Arts and Humanities Research Council [AHRC] is a Non-Departmental Public body. AHRC evolved from the Arts and Humanities Research Board, which was founded in 1998

⁵ Dr. Victoria Walsh, Research Department, Tate Britain

⁶ Dr. Sylvia Lahav, recently completed a research degree on Interpretation based at Tate Britain.

⁷ At the time of the conference the speakers held the following positions:
Donald Preziosi, Emeritus Professor of Art History at the University of California.
Griselda Pollock, Professor of Social and Critical Histories of Art, Leeds University.
Tony Bennett Research, Professor in Social and Cultural Theory at the Centre for Cultural Research, University of Western Sydney.
James Elkins. Chair of art history, theory, and criticism at the Art Institute in Chicago.
Andrea Phillips, Reader in Fine Art, Goldsmiths University.
Claire Pajaczkowska, Senior Research Tutor at the Royal College of Art, London.
Brendan Prendeville Senior Lecturer, Department of Visual Studies, Goldsmiths..
Jonathan Harris. Jonathan Harris is professor of art history and director of the Centre for Architecture and the Visual Arts (CAVA) at the University of Liverpool.
Adrian Rifkin, Professor of Fine Art, Goldsmiths University.

⁸ The remark was made by Dr. Raimi Gbadamosi, a contemporary conceptual artist and writer.

⁹ Of note were the conferences stimulated by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University and reflected in their approach to the publication of Working Papers.

¹⁰ Taken from conference delegates notes

¹¹ Preziosi. D. (2010) *Palpable and Mute as a Globed Fruit*. Tate Papers

¹² *ibid*

¹³ Pollock (2010) *What if Art Desires to be Interpreted? Remodeling Interpretation after the 'Encounter-Event'* *Tate Online Papers*

¹⁴ *ibid*

¹⁵ The Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change is a £4.5 million ESRC funded major international Research Centre analysing socio-cultural change in collaboration with Manchester University and the Open University.

¹⁶ Bennett. (2010) *Guided Freedom: Aesthetics, Tutelage and the Interpretation of Art*. *Tate Online Papers*.

¹⁷ *Ibid*

¹⁸ *ibid*

Bibliography

Alvesson. M & Skoldberg. K. (2009) *Reflexive Methodology*. London. Sage.

Barthes. R. (1980) *Camera Lucida*. London. Flamingo

Baudrillard. J. *The Ecstasy of Communication* (1983) in Foster. H. *Postmodern Culture*. London. Pluto

-
- Bourdieu. P. (1986) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. London.
- Bourdieu. P & Passeron. J. (1977) *Reproduction in education, society and culture*. London. Sage
- Beck. U. Giddens. A. & Lash.S. (2007) *Reflexive Modernisation*. London. Polity
- Harvey. D. (1990) *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry in the Origins of Cultural Change*. London. Blackwells.
- Thrift. N. (2008) *Non-Representational Theory*. London. Routledge
- Latour. B. (1993) *We Have Never been Modern*. Harvard University press
- Latour. B. (2007) *Reassembling the Social*. Oxford. Oxford University Press
- Macdonald. S. (Ed) (2011) *A Companion to Museum Studies*. London. Wiley-Blackwells
- Marx. K. (2009) *The Eighteenth Brumaire Of Louis Napoleon* New York. Dodo Press
- Marx. K. (1974) *The German Ideology*. London. Lawrence & Wishart
- Rancière. J. (2004) *The Politics of Aesthetics*. London. Continuum