

Voices in (and around) the Museum: Introduction

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Sounds of traffic, birdsong, conversation fill our environments but museums are frequently places of silent meditation and contemplation. Visitors speak in hushed tones and children are often viewed with disapproval by aficionados seeking quiet reverent contemplation of iconic objects. The voice seems at first sight to have little place in this context.

I attended *Voices in (and around) the Museum*, a series of four seminars supported by the Mellon Programme at UCL, as an MA student from the Royal College of Art.¹ I am fascinated by how we access and engage with museum objects both as individuals and societies, and more specifically by the interplay of viewer, curator and artefact. I wanted to learn how the voice, so often absent, could mediate and facilitate this process, perhaps altering social context and interactions both within and outside the museum.

As a deaf person, I face specific barriers interacting with the spoken word. I am interested in how these barriers might, if they can or even should be overcome, or if there are alternative ways to access the interactions and information being offered in the museum.

Session 1. Voicing the Museum Artefact

In the first session, Antony Hudek, one of the two co-organisers of the series with Sarah Byrne, summarised a number of changes that are prompting museums to confront the voice. Modern technology has favoured the voice in that it can now be easily recorded, stored, transported and transmitted. The place of the voice in culture is now more widely recognised, and vocal material has an important place in culture, for example, with accents, dialects, rhetoric all being a part of the culture of communities. As well as growing in importance as part of museum collections, the voice, both curatorial and the audience's, is also becoming pivotal in the interaction between museums and the public, and in defining the museum itself.

Defining the place of the voice in translating museum artefacts led to reflections on more complex issues about how meaning is ascribed to objects, since the way people engage with objects goes well beyond their materiality. There is a part of human history that depends on orality and that cannot be found through objects or texts: the voice translates issues of identity, memory, language, gender and creates discourse in specific ways.

The four speakers in the first session – Sarah Byrne, Debbie Challis, Emma Poulter and David Toop – described projects where people were invited to engage with objects and

where conversation was generated around them. Byrne's paper paid particular attention to objects derived from museum stores – objects lacking exhibition narratives. As part of the Melanesia Project at the British Museum (2005-2010), relevant objects were selected by Melanesian delegates to the museum in order to develop a radio programme about Melanesian culture. In this and other projects, the participants were highly selected, coming from specific communities and/or from a particular age group. For example, Challis' discussed a project in the Petrie museum at UCL where papyruses were used to spark discussion amongst young black people living in Croydon. The papyruses acted as a starting point through which the young people could relay stories of their own lives. As presented by Poulter, projects at the British Museum similarly aimed to give voice to selected objects by encouraging groups of young people from across London to speak about their responses to the objects. These programmes of engagement were tightly structured, with participants being encouraged to develop and present their own stories after the object's history, meaning and interpretation had been described. In her presentation, Byrne highlighted the case of a man whom she interviewed about significant objects in the Thames River Police Museum in Wapping relating to his experience as a river policeman.

All of these projects generated community voices, but also included curatorial voices. The objects stood for significant traditions, ideas, customs, social relations and the voices were varied and often unexpected, with the object sometimes actively deflecting conversation away from itself. In the above projects, intense engagements developed between objects and participants; but discussions and conversations were often messy, defying neat categorisations. Nonetheless, voices have the ability to elevate insignificant objects and provoke narratives that may be quite independent of the objects themselves.

From a curator's point of view, there was a difference between using objects to spark conversations (social objects) and giving visitors tools to create their own discussions. Curators are in a privileged position in that they are able to control the choice of objects. They select the participants and as holders of knowledge about the history and narrative of the objects can sometimes be seen to guide or steer engagements, not always intentionally.

Artefacts themselves may be thought to possess or be given a voice. In research at the Petrie Museum, Challis recounted how hieroglyphic language from Egyptian papyruses has been given an audible voice, although there remain uncertainties about the sound, place of vowels and consonants in what has been constructed and articulated. Among the recordings are a love song from Rameside Egypt, a letter from the Mayor of Sennefer, and petitions – all of them in the Petrie's collections. The intention

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was to make history more accessible and bring individuals to life through orality. But sound may not be limited to the spoken word: among the BBC radio archives from the 1920s and 1930s is a recording made of an Egyptian trumpet played in the tomb of Tutankhamen.

Objects and artworks rarely, if ever, possess a literal voice. In most cases, this voice is the result of a projection onto the object by the viewer, but the projection may be made more obvious and may be directed by the artist. Inspired by John Berger's reference to the silence of Vermeer's paintings, Toop, the final speaker in the session, showed how Nicolas Maes' *Listening Housewife (The Eavesdropper)*, and other works by the same artist, clearly depict moments of listening to specific voices and sounds.

Perhaps what this important session uncovered was simply some of the engagements between artefacts, viewers, voices and sounds that are hidden by the silence of the museum. Voices are never neutral. There are issues about the primacy and significance of the curatorial voice in the construction and understanding of objects, and questions about how other voices and debates might be used in practice – these and other points emerged in discussions that evening. The projects demonstrated curatorial control, in so far as they often focused on selected cultural groups and artefacts; nevertheless, they resulted in a great diversity of voices and often-messy discussions and engagements. Retaining this cacophony without editing could be difficult. Making physical voices and sounds accessible to deaf and hard of hearing people would present an additional challenge.

Session 2. Exhibiting the Voice: Inside the Museum

The second session focused on the concept of the voice as itself forming a museum artefact, and on the ways in which it might be collected and exhibited. Unlike most museum artefacts, the voice is immaterial and methods of collecting, storing and displaying it are, perforce, very different. A large part of this session was concerned with practical issues and technology of including voices in exhibition spaces. Many of the speakers highlighted advancements in this area, particularly now that high quality recording has become relatively cheap and accessible, and is therefore influencing how it is being used in museum contexts. The choice of broadcasting and listening devices used in museums is often dictated by the acoustic quality of the exhibition space, and by the material being shown.

Steve Cross, the first speaker in this session, outlined how the concurrent *Medicine Man* and *Medicine Now* exhibitions at the Wellcome Institute included directional speakers, or handsets where directional speakers were not suitable. For the *Medicine Man* display, recordings were made of people who were not curators speaking about specific objects with which they had ties. A selection of these comments was then included in an edited recording, which could be accessed through directional speakers whilst looking at the object. In the *Medicine Now* exhibition, handsets were used in the exhibition's forum space, which was centred on feedback to the galleries by the public. In this context the voices were considered as artworks in themselves.

Using recordings of the public can help reduce the primacy of the curatorial voice. Indeed, the production of Wellcome's recordings was outsourced and was therefore largely free of curator or museum control. Voice recordings could also make possible the production of museum guides by people who have no part in the curatorial team or the museum.

Whereas in the Wellcome exhibitions the voices were mainly conceived as supplements to the objects, or responses to them, they were central to a recent exhibition at the Foundling Museum, London. Alison Duke and Sarah Lowry, co-curators of the *Foundling Voices* oral history project at the museum, described how recordings were made of the voices of some of the last people to live in the Foundling children's homes. Recordings were also made of people connected to the schools to which children were sent. A large amount of other types of material was collected from the interviewees, including birth certificates, photographs and letters. Sound was crucial to this emotionally-charged exhibition, with the narrative of people's lives dictating its form and nature.

Because of the particular configuration of the space, and the cost of directional speakers, earpieces, while not ideal, were eventually used to exhibit the voices at the Foundling Museum. The earpieces hung from the ceiling and were labeled, making it possible for visitors to select a voice, listen to a narrative and relate it to the images and artefacts on display. The curators agreed that it would have been difficult to base an exhibition on sound alone, regarding visual material as essential. All recordings had to be transcribed, and editing the large amount of gathered material was a major task. *Foundling Voices* was built around the experiences of living individuals, many of whom were elderly and had had difficult early lives. It was strongly emphasised that the needs and wishes of these individuals had to be treated with respect.

The ethics and ownership of sound material were also broached in Marysia Lewandowska's presentation of some of her art projects involving sound and voice. Her work weaves together archival material and her own voice to create a vocal timelessness. In *Tender Museum*, a project from 2009, Lewandowska juxtaposed archival material – both visual and acoustic – creating a hybrid voice that 'speaks' to a contemporary audience. In an earlier project designed for Kunsthau Graz, Austria, Lewandowska had originally planned to use material from a recorded radio interview with author Susan Sontag, which she had uncovered in the archives of the Museum Joanneum in Graz, but Sontag's son refused permission for the material to be broadcast, making the work impossible.

Listening to the four speakers in this session, it was easy to recognise the tensions inherent in the issues of ethics, confidentiality, ownership and copyright when it comes to recordings and sound-based material relating to living and recently deceased individuals. One of the questions the session raised is: whose interest is being served by either revealing or concealing archival material? For social understanding to grow, however, some stories need to be told and retold, and more importantly, to be heard.

Transcriptions of sound-based installations would make the material accessible to those unable to hear, but translating the emotional affect of the installations presents a much greater challenge, particularly in the absence of visual support.

Session 3. Exhibiting the Voice: Outside the Museum

The third session considered voices that reflect back on the museum as an institution. It included discussions of location-specific media trails (Toby Butler), the museum of the 21st century (Seph Rodney), voice as live typography (Paul Elliman) and voice as a sculptural material (Imogen Stidworthy).

Much oral history practice relates to place and identity, but the memory has been removed from its geographic location when it is heard in the museum. As an example of work that attempts to overcome this, Butler discussed a project called *Memoryscape* in which *in situ* sound recorders and transmitters were used to put voices back into the landscape. Transmitters were placed on lampposts at intervals along a guided walk route of the M11 Link Road in east London while small receivers allowed the walker to hear short clips of voices of protestors against that road being built, for example, or memories of individuals about a particular place. This material was also designed so that people could listen to it on MP3 players as they followed a particular route. The evaluation of responses to this project suggested that many people felt a strong empathy towards those whose voices they heard. Voices offered new dimensions of engagement and allowed a closeness and rootedness in the places visited.

Unlike many museums, urban and rural landscapes are full of sounds and voices, both man-made (sirens, etc.) and organic (rain, etc.). Public voices – such as those broadcasting instructions or warnings – help construct language and can guide life choices. Analysing these voices for what they are, without reference to other material, can offer new insights into the use of language.

That the experience of visiting a museum can transform lives, offering a different way of understanding the world and creating a voice for individuals, was well illustrated by the narrative spoken by Seph Rodney. Despite the benefits of the museum visit, however, there remains some uneasiness; in the silence of the museum space visitors create themselves as proper or acceptable visitors, following rules of behaviour that they may not necessarily believe in and would not follow elsewhere. The museum can act as both divisive and incorporative. Traditionally it is seen as having a redemptive and educative effect on its visitors, but this assumption, Rodney argued, is open to question.

Material collected by Stidworthy, an artist who uses voice as sculptural material, revealed how rich a resource it could be: the nature of voices, their accents and dialects, and how they are produced. By using voices and languages found in particular circumstances – such as back slang among prisoners – Stidworthy emphasised the prescribed nature of what is said by witnesses, and of the voices and stories emerging from people living in difficult circumstances.

Although more difficult to relate to, this session offered insights into how voices outside the museum may be captured and broadcast. Artists and researchers considered both what the voice conveys and its qualities as sound. Engaging with the voice, either within or outside the museum, is very different to engaging with physical objects. Among other things, the encounter with voices may be less secure, offering little guidance as to which voice can be trusted. Like the majority of deaf people I hear noise, often in such profusion that I cannot distinguish or make sense of any specific voice or voices. This in itself is an experience of sound and voices akin to some of those described in this session.

Session 4. Preserving the Voice

Archiving the voice had already been touched on in earlier sessions but was the main theme of the fourth and last session in the series. Issues of preservation, of what to record and how to archive it, should be considered before starting any personal or institutional collection.

For Susan Hawkins, recording and building an oral archive of scientists and staff who had worked at the Natural History Museum in London was seen primarily as a way of preserving and consolidating the considerable and diverse experiences of those who worked in the institution. Natural History Museum staff were asked both about their professional and personal lives, and especially about their childhoods, an emphasis some of the scientists found strange and were reluctant to answer. More than 200 hours of interviews were recorded and edited to reveal a great diversity of narratives linked to this single museum.

Another project which focused on the place of the voice in the telling of institutional history was the project *News From the Past: Oral History at the V&A*. Linda Sandino, who led the project, interviewed a number of Victoria and Albert Museum curators and administrators. Life history recordings were made focusing on family background, education and entry into the profession. At the V&A, the fundamental research question was to define what (or who) is a curator? People's identities are defined not only by themselves, but also by their culture and, for the interviewed curators, the museum was a significant part of their culture. Sandino highlighted how transcribing and studying the interviews in depth offered insights into individual identities, but also how repeated listening to the stories offered a variety of interpretations. Drawing upon the work of such theorists as Paul Ricœur, Sandino pointed out that the recordings, like much other oral history material, represent constructed memories, constructed to aid the narrator's identity. The extent to which they are historically accurate may be open to question but this does not reduce their value.

The last two presentations in this session described projects concerned with preserving and making accessible existing sound archives. Jack Maynard and Allison Foster, from Tate, spoke about the *Audio Arts* magazine produced in the 1970s by the artist William Furlong. The magazine ran for 23 issues, each comprising four parts. The work

included interviews, commentary on art works, sound performances and audio art works. The archive is now held by Tate and comprises more than 350 boxes of material. Work to preserve this unique archival material and make it widely accessible presents a series of major technological as well as archiving challenges.

Hilary Young's presentation highlighted the large amounts of sound-based archival material held at the Museum of London, including material from the Port of London Authority (PLA) and the London History Workshop sound and video archives. The PLA material comprises interviews with 260 individuals including dock employees, PLA timber merchants and other people working with the docks. The London History Workshop was a radical collective of historians and archivists who, in the 1970s, set up a sound and video archive and worked with local history working groups. The 79 projects in the London History Workshop archives – many containing up to 100 interviews, most of them in older audio formats – present similar archival challenges as the Audio Arts material. In addition to these archives, the Museum continues to collect its own oral history material, work that started in 1995.

Issues about copyright and confidentiality that were raised in the second session re-emerged in this session, since much of the material held by the Museum of London concerns living individuals. Many recordings were made before the advent of the internet and therefore interviewers as well as interviewees who might have consented to more limited accessibility may now be less agreeable to information being made available globally. Young explained how attempts to contact and seek agreement from living individuals or their descendants represented in the archive often failed, making it difficult to

decide whether material should be made available or not.

The last session showed how the facility with which oral material can be recorded and stored has resulted in large and often relatively unstructured archives. They require maintenance and preservation, and new means for them to become fully accessible need to be developed. The collection of oral historical material is an ongoing process, raising ethical problems in retaining the information and in making it accessible. The temptation is to exercise some sort of critical control over what is recorded and the reasons for doing so, but it is difficult to determine who should define or hold control over the collected data. If it is to reflect society, sound-based material needs to reflect the ordinary and commonplace and insignificant as much as the apparently 'important'. The passion for cataloguing and organising seemingly messy material runs the risk of becoming unmanageable and, if pursued too zealously, of eliminating unrecognized associations within the material.

The issue of preserving the messy nature of debates and discussions was raised, suggesting that the disorganised nature of some sound archives may also need to be preserved. Accessibility to sound-based material is critical if it is to be open to re-interpretation. This includes accessibility for those unable to hear through normal means. It was clear from many of those taking part in the sessions that exploring and interpreting audio material is complex and time consuming, perhaps accentuating the value of written summaries in unlocking this type of resource.

Note

- 1 The author was supported by a professional note taker, Rosanna Traina, who transcribed the sessions for her.