Imagining 'The Rocks'

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This article uses the current exhibition at the Museum of Sydney Painting the Rocks: The loss of old Sydney to explore the ways in which ideas of tradition and the postmodern may manifest in a museum context with reference to their different ideological contexts. More specifically, the purpose is to reveal how the geographic place known as 'The Rocks' is also an idea, constructed and 'imagined' by different groups, for different reasons, at different times. A comparison between the 1902 era exhibition which encompasses elements of tradition such as preservation and valorization of the past; and the current 2010 incarnation which combines elements of modernity and postmodernity, facilitates an examination of what characterizes an authentically postmodern exhibit or institution. Following on from this, this article seeks to identify elements such as the relativising of truth claims, the embracing of context, representation of unique individual stories and marginalized groups within the exhibit. An additional exploration of the postmodern museum as an interactive space, allowing the public to assume an active, rather than a passive position is also included, and, as an extension of this, a discussion about the role of memory, both individual and collective is presented. The purpose of this article is to reveal the ways in which historical 'evidence' is rendered meaningful by the context in which it appears, in terms of a current ethos or ideology and how this ethos can be evidenced within a wider cultural context.

In 1902, faced with the prospect of the area known as 'The Rocks' disappearing before the relentless march of progress, artist Julian Ashton sought to mount an exhibition of paintings and drawings capturing the buildings, streets and people of the area. As Historian Paul Ashton states "these promoters of history were antiquarians. They sought continuity from the past to legitimate the contemporary social order and their claimed social status while reinforcing an umbilical connection to British civilization that was under stress (Ashton, 2010: 57)". It was a desire "not to transcend the past, but to preserve it, to re-enter it and, if necessary, to recreate it" (Davison 2004: 59). In response to these burgeoning heritage concerns the government commissioned its own photographers to go out and capture images of 'The Rocks' that essentially justified their plans to re-develop the area. These photographs depict a 'Rocks' that may have been more familiar to the wider Sydney community, one of poverty, fever, squalor and vice. In essence these conflicting narratives represent a battle for the hearts and minds of Sydneysiders. This was part of the beginning of 'The Rocks' as contested ground, a public space that may contribute to our ability to conceptualize who we are as Australians. Some may suggest that the contest, originally between these opposing forces of traditionalism and modernity, continues as a battle between the grand narratives, so valuable in the Modern context of twentieth century nation building and the postmodern ethos that questions these grand narratives. A critical exploration of the exhibition, currently open to the public at the Museum of Sydney (MOS), entitled *Painting the Rocks: The Loss of Old Sydney* can provide insight into the ways in which the ideas of tradition and the postmodern are expressed in a museum context and more specifically how these ideas can provide insight into the current societal context in which the exhibit was created.

The painting's in the 1902 era exhibition present a very specific vision of the area known as 'The Rocks, one not entirely in step with reality. They presented romantic and idealized images, evoking the tradition and style of the English Gentry, of village life, of a pre-

industrial world and a very stable social order (Ashton 2010). There was a sense of urgency to "recover, to record, to 'rescue out of time'…the last images of a place about to be lost forever" (Karskens 2010: 11). This urgency was fuelled by the actions of a government that had already begun to resume entire streets marked for demolition. Both these groups, portrayed 'The Rocks' according to what their Ideological goals were at the time, it was the same area, represented in vastly different ways for different purposes. The current exhibition presents these conflicting visions, showing us the secret motivations of both the artists and the government. It is perhaps a Foucauldian concept of history whereby "history is no longer a single discourse and its narrative strategies are laid bare" (Hamilton 1994: 24-25). These opposing forces of tradition and modernity inspired a dialogue in the greater community as to what exactly was lost in the destruction of an area such as this and it's a dialogue that continues today and is carefully reconstructed in the current *Painting the Rocks* exhibition.

In this way we can see how 'The Rocks' can be a defined geographical space but also exist "pre-eminently as an Idea"(White, 1997: 12). To borrow from Richard White's description of Australia as an imagined community, 'The Rocks' may also be described as "something we carry around in our heads…an imagined community" (White, 1997: 13). White goes on to discuss how "nations, by definition, embroider the past into their fabric. Their imagined community consists not just of its present-day citizens but past lives as well…" (White 1997: 14). For example, the 1902 era artists were trying to conceptualize and perpetuate a certain idea or vision of The Rocks as a way of preserving a connection to colonial roots, to Old England' and notions which evoked the stability of Empire. They excluded elements of the area which suggested its convict, penal colony origins, its poverty and decay, while simultaneously excluding all visual reference to a burgeoning modern era. It was a Grand narrative of continuity through the overarching context of Empire. Eminent postmodern theorist Jean-Francois Lyotard describes these grand narratives as a "series of overarching stories that a culture tells itself about its practices and beliefs, and that provide a coherent interpretive framework within which subjects can understand their experiences and the events that occur around them" (Stephens 2008: 115). The exhibition provides an exposition of the way we may have constructed this imagined space.

In this way, the exhibition embodies a "poststructuralist interest in meaning, emphasizing its ambiguity, multiplicity and dependence on the reader's interpretation" (White 1997: 16). The current *Painting the Rocks* exhibition lets us see the active and creative way that the rocks has been constructed, invented and embroidered in different ways by different people for different reasons (White 1997). This also evokes the postmodern ethos within which the Museum of Sydney itself was conceived. Poststructuralism and postmodernism share a focus on the cultural processes that construct meaning within a given environment (Garton 2003). They both eschew the modernist belief that truth can be located by careful exposition of "deeper social, economic, psychological and cultural structures" (Garton 2003: 53), but instead posit that there are many truths. For instance, a postmodern critique would perhaps seek to expose the ways in which historians or curators "don't just interpret the evidence: they compose stories about these meanings, or in the words of Hayden White, they 'emplot' the past" (Garton 2003: p. 56).

The 'heightened awareness' contributed by poststructuralist scholars facilitated an exploration of the processes of mediation involved in the construction and presentation of history. In this sense history is characterized as a "conversation between the past and the present…one where both parties interact" (Garton, 2003: p. 58). The ways in which historical facts are rendered meaningful with a particular focus on the "contexts in which the facts were

produced" (Garton, 2003: p. 61), and also the current context which seeks to give them meaning. Also part of examining these processes of meaning making is an exploration of the ways in which we remember the past, including collective memory. From this postmodern perspective any historical representation inherently consists of "A return to something that never existed" (Hobsbawm 2005: 34).

This exhibition provides historical insight through, as already discussed, the inclusion of both artistic and photographic renderings of the area, but also through the inclusion of archival, official documents, material objects and elements of memory. As Historian Richard Evans admits a benefit of this kind of Postmodern approach is to "restore individual human being's to history" (Curthoys & Docker, 2010: 209). In particular this representation of the ways in which we remember and include memory as part of historical exhibitions is instructive. Chris Healy states that museums can be considered as "institutions that are constitutive of social memory" (Healy 1997: P. 37). In viewing this exhibition it is impossible not to comprehend the role of memory, both collective and individual. On first entering the exhibition the first thing you hear is the recorded voice of Jim Young, the young son of the residents of sixty-four Gloucester Street. Jim describes how he remembers daily life in 'The Rocks' in the early Twentieth Century. Jim's recollections of a bygone era illustrate two things, firstly the new validity given to oral history (Hamilton 1994) and secondly, the interweaving of historical evidence with personal recollection. The inclusion of this anecdotal element raises questions about the nature of memory.

Margaret MacMillan affirms, "We mistakenly think that memories are like carvings in stone; once done, they do not change... Memory is not only selective; it is malleable (Macmillan 2009: 45)". We edit our memories to enhance or obscure our own roles or the roles of others and we "change them because times and attitudes change over the years" (MacMillan 2009: 46). When referring to current context in which the memory is evoked, MacMillan states,

> "Collective memory is more about the present than the past because it is
> integral to how a group sees itself. And what that memory is can be and
> often is the subject of debate and argument where, in Halbwach's words
> 'competing narratives about central symbols in the collective past, and the
> collectivity's relationship to the past, are disputed and negotiated in the
> interest of redefining the collective present'" (MacMillan 2009: 47).

If we can clearly see this exhibition in terms of the competing narratives of Modernity and Traditionalism, then asking what this exhibition says about who we are today may be useful. The Museum context itself is the first logical starting point in trying to understand how this view of the past reflects the present. The Museum of Sydney (MOS) opened in 1995, conceived of within the late eighties, an era distinguished by a growing postmodern critique (Witcomb 2003)of modernist historical grand-narratives, the MOS mandate was to represent a "place of many layers and meanings" (MOS 2010). Interestingly the MOS brochure reflects the Museum's commitment to include previously marginalized groups such as women, immigrants and Indigenous Australians. It describes 1788 as "a turning point for Sydney" instead of the point of origin. The postmodern museum presents itself as a "space for dialogue…a forum, a place for civic discourse" (Davison, 2004: 57). Other hallmarks of the postmodern include the relativising of truth claims, embracing of context, representation of unique individual stories, and interactive displays.

These elements may reflect the ethos of the Museum itself and as an extension, fragmentation and ambiguity in the wider social context; however, it might be relevant to ask, is this echoed

within the *Painting the Rocks* exhibition? More specifically, does simply showing the ways in which an area such as 'The Rocks' can be co-opted by different groups for different purposes, constitute a truly postmodern exhibit? Davison describes the criteria for a pluralistic institution in this way, "the museum acts as a broad church, hospitable to a range of interpretative viewpoints…and presents itself to visitors as a forum, a place for civic discourse". Davison also quotes the 1974 Piggott report stating that this new type of museum will promote "the exploration of knowledge and ideas…providing a dynamic forum for discussion and reflection" (Davison 2004: 53). Although the inclusion of a 'range of interpretive viewpoints' seems an obvious element of this exhibition then perhaps less obvious is the way in which it provides a forum for the public and fulfils this new mandate for visitors to "share the excitement and tension of thinking about the nation's past and future for themselves (Davison 2004; 57)". One way to engage the public in this way is to include interactive elements within the exhibition, often through the medium of technology. In this way, the viewing public is re-positioned from a passive position, simply absorbing the collection presented to them and accepting the way in which it is presented as the 'truth', to an active position, in some way becoming part of the exhibition itself.

 The *Painting the Rocks* exhibition attempts this interactivity in several ways. In one part of the exhibit visitors are confronted by three large easels inscribed with the words 'Put on the artists' smock and beret and draw your favourite place'. Presumably the goal here is to demonstrate the ways in which an artist might depict a place that he/she is fond of, evoking aspects of the exhibition such as the romanticisation of place or the ambiguity of memory. Smocks and Berets are provided along with large sheets of butchers paper and pencils. On the occasion of this writer's visit school children huddled around this display feverishly drawing landscapes and figures unknown. These same school children oscillated between this exhibit's limited displays of interactive technology randomly pressing buttons, paying little or no attention to either the artworks on the walls or the material that surrounded them. The interactive technology so championed by postmodern curators as the ultimate in viewer participation (Eggert 2008), in this case consists of a display which allows you to see a map of 'The Rocks' district today superimposed onto 'The Rocks' circa 1900. These attempts at interactivity seem like thinly veiled tokenism, an attempt at fulfilling the interactive, dialogic elements of postmodernism without much substance. Other elements of this exhibit which may fall short of the vision evoked by a postmodern museology are the representation of marginalized groups. Although women and the working class, previously marginalized groups, are well represented, there is little or no mention of indigenous or immigrant residents such as the sizable Chinese community in this area in the nineteenth century (Ashton 2010).

On leaving the exhibit, once again the voice of Rocks resident Jim Young floats towards you, his childhood reminiscences on a continual loop. The material objects that serve to validate his story; a whole collection of items belonging to Jim's younger sister Jenny, her confirmation certificate, her homework book, grainy black and white photos of the family, it's impossible not to be aware of the weaving of narrative. It's a story comprising both material objects and immaterial elements of imagination and memory and it's a story more modern than postmodern.

Perhaps, a concession to the postmodern sensibilities of the Museum can be seen in the placing of labels stating when and how the material objects were located. Viewing these labels, often dated outside of terms of these people's lives, manifests as a kind of postmodern interruption to the narrative. Other decidedly postmodern elements include the inclusion of

vague labelling practices such as the one referring to the story of Sydney's first plague victim James Foy, next to which is a series of photo's of young boys with the decidedly ambiguous label 'group of children, Carather Lane, some of them possibly Foy's'. This kind of surrender to ambiguity could be said to encapsulate a postmodern celebration of "a certain kind of text that makes a game out of searching for the truth" (Lucy 1997: 15).

The placement of these material relics of 'The Rocks' juxtaposed with artworks or documentation is sometimes instructive, such as the open diary of Sophie Steffanoni a local Rocks resident around 1900. Looking at a photo of her, next to her handwriting, a painting next to her palette and brushes comes close to providing that longed for link and dialog between the past and the present, the material objects do indeed, "hold, represent, recreate, evoke, epitomise, illustrate and exemplify memories, the past, an era, an idea"(Healy 1997: 36). However this exhibit cannot be said to represent the postmodern ideal, "the dissolution of every kind of totalizing narrative which claims to govern the whole complex field of social activity and representation" (Stephens 2008: 116).

As Graeme Davison suggests "Museums are under an obligation to ensure that pluralism is genuine. Exhibitions and public programs should reflect a wide range of political, social and religious viewpoints" (Davison 2004: 59). Although this exhibit sits clearly within a broad postmodern paradigm, characteristics more often associated with Modernity are still evident. There are some strong narrative elements and the sense of something highly structured and somewhat contrived. Whereas the era of Modernity was characterised by a project to co-opt history to the function of Nation building, perhaps now there is a similar co-option of history which confirms the postmodern subject as a consumer. This postmodern exhibit, as if to underline this aspect, presents no obvious place to start your journey through it, no discernable logic to follow. It is reminiscent of a department store that allows the consumer to browse through a plethora of unrelated items, loosely grouped into categories, in no particular order, but for the purposes of easier consumption. It's still history as something that's easy to digest but now not through the convenient provision of a binding narrative but instead through the presentation of bite size sections from which you can extract whatever meaning you choose. Postmodern museums "went about liberating story — stories of many kinds and from many sources — but without offering an adjudication of their reliability... the very thing that the museum sought to put into question, it displaced with an aesthetics that turned the perplexed visitor into a disempowered consumer of image and sound" (Witcomb 2006: 21). With this in mind 'The Rocks' as exemplified in this current exhibit, in the 1902 exhibition and as it was represented through the era of Modernism is still very much a contested space that acts as a most compelling reflection of the society that interprets it.

Notes on Contributor

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