

Guest Editorial

The Vocal Turn

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When myself and Sarah Byrne began formulating the series of seminars at UCL in which the following papers were presented, we sought a common area of inquiry that could 'speak to' our respective interests in anthropology and museology on the one hand, and curatorial practices and histories on the other. What better hybrid and transversal medium, we soon agreed, than the voice, traditionally seen as unwelcome in the silent precincts of the museum? Through the voice, not only would the seminars be able to scrutinise their own format and rules of engagement – the speaker, the lectern, the microphone and the listener/note-taker – but also the audiences traditionally addressed by such academic exercises. To probe the variety of voices involved in the museum, we invited artists as well as academics, curators as well as musicians, writers as well as anthropologists. In the audience we saw the effects of the diversification and multiplication of voices: not only undergraduate and graduate students, but older students, curators, practitioners and attendees curious about how the museum could break the silences that have defined it since its beginnings.

In the *Museum Without Walls* – first published in 1947 as part of his multi-volume *The Voices of Silence* – French politician and author André Malraux proposed an imaginary museum composed as a non-chronological sequence of photographs of 'great' artworks from pre-history to the 20th century, ranging from African to Asian and European cultures. 'To love painting', Malraux wrote, 'is to know that a painting – the *Mona Lisa*, the *Avignon Pietà*, or Vermeer's *Young Girl with a Turban* – is not an object, but a voice' (Malraux 1967: 233). For Malraux, collating images of masterpieces would allow a rhythm to emerge, not an 'infallible monologue' but an 'intermittent and invincible dialogue of resurrections' (Malraux 1967: 234). This decidedly theological narrative transcends the mere human voice, becoming 'a secret brother to music', a 'song of metamorphosis' (Malraux 1967: 239-240).

Over sixty years since Malraux's vision of the museum as a sanctuary for intermittent song-like voices, the institution has diversified acoustically and become more attuned to 'ordinary' human voices, common parlances, accents from across the social scale, dialects and foreign languages. No longer the sole province of a disembodied Western heteronormative 'master's voice', or the hushed tone of the specialist audience member, the museum has gradually (and

not without resistance) morphed into a site of vocal, and more generally sensorial and affective interaction. Migrant communities, the elderly, the young, those with physical and emotional impairments, help transform the 21st-century museum into a complex discursive social space, which in turn has the capacity to reform other institutions devoted to the production and sharing of knowledge – perhaps foremost among them, the university.

Oral histories – a respected academic research method since at least the 1960s – are now considered worthy of exhibition in their own right, on par with artworks and artefacts. Objects once considered mute remnants of dynamic social and economic processes are seen today as inseparable from the stories – both 'popular' and those supported by formal research – surrounding them, such as the testimonies of their makers and users. Similarly, the voices of curators and conservators, once heard only via 'audioguides' or viewed on wall texts and captions, tend to shed their anonymity and accompany the object's display. As outreach increasingly becomes a prerequisite for funding, the voices of educators echo through the museum, making the silent gallery more of an anomaly than the norm. And contemporary artists are showing sustained interest in voices and story telling, forcing the museum to recognise an aesthetic dimension determined by sound instead of colour or form.

The papers included in this issue of the *Journal of Conservation & Museum Studies* reflect on the museum's newfound openness to the voice. Despite their diversity, they share a willingness to displace traditional questions of an artefact's identity, provenance and meaning with an attention to the voice's power to reveal the socio-political, historical, economic and artistic underpinnings of the museum. The voice can reanimate ancient Egyptian objects in an academic museum (Debbie Challis) as well as inform an imaginary time-based museum reliant on sound (David Toop). The voice is an overlooked (or better put, overheard) means of recording an institution's own history, revealing the labyrinth of offices, store rooms and galleries to be a dense network of stories and recollections (Sue Hawkins, Linda Sandino). Indeed, the voice has the capacity to make the museum walls separating the object on display from the spaces beneath and beyond it porous (Sarah Byrne). Not least, the voice has the capacity to affect the role attributed to the museum by certain governments, such as the UK's (Seph Rodney).

Ruth Holt's summary of the seminar series and Paul Elliman's historical, artistic and political account of a particularly sonic architectural landmark (St Paul's Cathedral, London) point to the voice's role in the constitution of

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memory and archives. The voice presents different challenges to the archivist and conservator than the image or the artefact: arguably more fleeting and subjective, but thereby potentially more revealing and affective. These challenges are embodied in the digital form of the present proceedings, which enables fragments of voices to be presented in a variety of means – textual, visual and aural. As technologies to render the voice become more accessible (Jack Maynard and Allison Foster), museums (and academic platforms such as journals) will be able to draw on the voice with greater ease. This vocal turn will need to be accompanied by new research methodologies, in order to understand the ways in which the voice can convey information and stir emotions in the museum as well as in academia. The papers in this issue constitute steps

towards formulating such methodologies, and underscore the need for the museum, as well as the academic institution, to adapt to an era where the voice enjoys as much 'visibility' as the object and the image.

We would like to extend our warm thanks to all the speakers who agreed to lend their voices to the seminar series; to the authors whose texts feature here; to the UCL Mellon Programme, which supported the series; and to Anastasia Sakellariadi for her editorial insight and perseverance.

References

Malraux, A 1967 *Museum Without Walls*. Translated by S Gilbert and F Price. London: Secker & Warburg.