



## ARTEFACT

### NOISE ...

The essential function of the museum is a non-function. A monument to the insufficiency of nomenclature and memory - it exists, not to preserve the paraphernalia of a lifetime in perpetuity, but rather to allow for reminiscence and reflection. The museum is a knowledge system; a belief in an order of things; a collection of collections; an archive of archives; an archaeology of dreams, stories, drawings, obsessions, relics, inventories and souvenirs... A slippage between the self-enclosed paradigms of abstract order and the materiality of the world.

More than storehouse or repository, the 'new' museum is understood as both a physical and phenomenological reality – a blue print for an unimaginably labyrinthine architecture. Standing somewhere between a quasi religious temple-like space for poetic reflection and the ideal of the public institution as a cultural venue and educational and economic force - it is a space to ponder the relationship between that experience and the world beyond.

*The very fullness of museums makes me rush through them.<sup>1</sup>*

Objects can be made or found, kept or discarded. At the intersection of art and architecture, history and archive, reverie and storytelling, totality and void lies the symbiotic relationship between the museum and object. In the 18th Century *Wunderkammern* – personal collections that mingled naturalia and artefact – objects held a revelatory power linked to the cosmos. In the modern museum, a ritualised function of display and collecting links objects to ideas. The irrational, miscellaneous and confused are eschewed... It is an orderly experience to wander through the museum.



In this intimate museum of a city and its ontology, a disparate collection of objects is made to narrate within the Treasury's walls... It is as if the city imagines itself. Objects are displayed chronologically, in various rooms, beautifully preserved within glass vitrines. Strangely familiar, they conjure stories of grief and loss, love and struggle, salvage and ordinariness. Totem pieces bear the trace and touch of the body, like the Boomtown silk and velvet day dress from the 1870s, and the paired woollen bathing costumes of the 1890s. Heartbreaking relics, such as the passenger list of the Royal Charter, wrecked in 1859 and a cherished child's leather shoes exist in a kind of eternity of display alongside intriguing time pieces like the nearly illegible layered script of the overland letter from the mid 1800s. These stilled artefacts convey a sense of disintegration – of the pathos and ineffable beauty of change and dissolution.

*Any disturbance of a true museum's soundlessness, timelessness, airlessness, and lifelessness is a disrespect.<sup>2</sup>*

The museum is a good place to look at contemporary art. Intersection with materiality is something that artists do, they have an intimate rapport with their materials. For artists the museum is often a site of sanction and of inspiration – a place to read the fabric of history in its forms and legacies, aporias and resonances. The world of contemporary art is a good place to investigate the way the museum framework structures our experience of looking at art and artefacts – to ask questions about who should be speaking and listening; about the way things circulate in the world; and to reflect upon issues of ownership, censorship, privilege, curatorial prejudice, taste, and the links between commerce and art.

Invited in to play, contemporary artists respond to the museum collection. Their 'unsettled objects' bring the outside in to dissemble the hermeticism of the space. They interject, contaminate and surprise. They shift the sense of constancy and institutional rigidity – to loosen, challenge, parody, critique, adopt... They point to the need to reconstruct contexts of meaning and to the seamless narratives we construct around objects. They investigate the museum's interface with the public by capturing the act of viewing and reveal our complicity.

In distinguishing the art object from the museum artefact, a 'disrupture' happens between the *place of gesture* and the *gesture of placement*. We realize the intellectual rigor of the art work and the poetry of the relic. Intuitive or associative systems, rather than didactic approaches are triggered. New fictions run alongside or counter to the official stories. Personal and cultural memory become hard to disentangle. These 'interjections' collaborate to transform and reimagine the collection, and we begin to see continuities between historical and contemporary ways of thinking and seeing, viewing and telling.