

Critical and Theoretical Issues in Museum Studies
MUSM/ARTH/ANTH/HIST 6150
Spring 2010 - Thursdays 1:00-3:50pm - Henderson 212

Prof. Donald Preziosi

COURSE GUIDE

Museum Studies 6150 is a graduate-level introduction to key critical and theoretical issues affecting museums, collections, and related cultural institutions and professions. The seminar is cross-listed in several departments – Museum & Field Studies, Art & Art History, Anthropology, and History, and may be taken for credit by registering under the 6150 rubrics in any of these departments.

The University of Colorado at Boulder is the home of two important museum collections – both the older CU Museum (Henderson Hall) where our seminar is meeting, and the new CU Art Museum, soon to be opened in the new Visual Arts Center (VAC), next to the recently-opened Art, & Technology (ATLAS) building. The new CU Art Museum is a state-of-the-art museum facility, housing important campus art collections currently stored and scattered around the university.

1. General introduction to the course

More seems to have been written about museums in the past two decades than in the previous two centuries, and it is not easy to characterize this massively diverse body of work in any simple or singular way. This is due in part because not only does the literature engage multiple professions, academic fields, and disciplines, but the aims and functions of this literature are diverse and often at cross-purposes. A lot of it deals with contemporary institutional shortcomings and inadequacies, and much of that has treated the museum as basically a form of infotainment, and as a merely technical problem of managing, packaging, and dispensing various kinds of cultural, historical, political, or scientific information to general or targeted audiences. Often, questions of technology are imagined to be pre-, post-, or extra-political, with institutional problems commonly framed so that they might appear to be solved by yet more refined imagineering, marketing, management, administration, or subtly prefabricated interactive opportunities for audiences - in short, by turning up and fine-tuning the fascination, spectacle, and dramaturgy.

A good deal of other writing, also addressing current problems, has involved museum content and the activities of professional “content-providers” (anthropologists, ethnographers, historians, scientists, art historians, curators, information managers, and heritage managers) and aims at redressing perceived biases and imbalances in the institutional portrayal of racial, national, ethnic, class, or gender identities. The general concern has been with teaching museums to become better “representatives” of the wider (multi- or trans-) cultural world. Yet virtually all of the recent literature treats this concern as if it were a classic map-territory problem of representational adequacy. The most common result has been to call for redress by more refined versions of

conventional museum stagecraft, or by the revision, re-staging, or replacement of museum contents by different versions of the same thing, and by more “accurate” and nuanced representations.

Many solutions to the perceived problems have in fact perpetuated the same problems but under different guises. Yet as we shall see, they invariably share a fundamental thesis - that a museum is primarily a *representation*, an artifact as natural as the specimens or examples it preserves, rather than being an institution operating for the construction, legitimization, and maintenance of cultural realities. A principal corollary of this assumption is that “representational adequacy” consists of a map-territory relationship between an exhibition’s contents and a wider world of cultural objects and social practices (the museum as microcosm of the world). The assumption that an exhibition could represent that wider world in a meaningful way has been the prime justification for taking objects out of the settings for which they were initially made and reassembling them for study and contemplation.

Such assumptions justify the institutional framing of objects as *specimens*. They may also masquerade the artifice and constructedness of the museum frame as natural historical truth or consensus. Most museum-goers are not prepared (and not often educated beforehand) to critically analyze *both* the framework and its contents, with the result that museums, as educational institutions, wittingly or not, often perpetuate racial/ethnic/national/gender/class/religious stereotypes. Yet, in the modern museum setting, responsibility for the perpetuation of untenable beliefs and assumptions is distributed across a spectrum of individuals ranging from trustees to curators and educators--with the frequent result that the perpetuation appears to be nobody’s fault.

The extraordinary fact is that we live in a world in which virtually anything may be exhibited *in* a museum, and in which virtually anything can be made to function as a museum, often through little more than verbal designation. In the 21st century, it is often difficult to distinguish museum practices from the entertainment, tourist, and heritage industries; department stores and shopping malls; cultural, historical, or even religious theme parks; the market in artistic commodities; and even site-specific artistic practices. (Is a museum just another site-specific artwork?)

In such a world, the question of “representation” (adequate or otherwise) is, to say the least, very complex indeed. The *distinctiveness* of the museum as an institution, and of museology as a distinct professional practice, has come to be conceived as a mode of representation that deploys and disseminates knowledge. And many museums, aside from their ideological and political usefulness, are successful because they are good business investments, in every sense of that term.

But is the current organization of Denver’s Museum of Nature and Science, or the new Hamilton building annex to the Denver Art Museum, designed by international celebrity architect Daniel Libeskind, merely a repackaging of original content? Or the creation of new contents and meanings? Is a museum a method of managing, packaging, and disseminating information, or an instrument for producing, manufacturing, and marketing new ideas and information?

But this is also a time – as the readings prepared for our seminar clearly show - when critical studies of the museum have begun taking up the arduous task of trying to understand and account historically and theoretically for the evident *indispensability* and

universal dissemination of this remarkable and uncanny European invention to so many different cultures, societies, and political regimes around the world. The institution of the museum stands at the intersection of a wide variety of social, cultural, scientific, and political developments in every corner of the world. There may be upwards of some 100,000 museums in the world today, of every conceivable form, size, and mission – to the extent that it is fair to claim both that we live in a world in which virtually anything may reasonably be exhibited *in* a museum, and that virtually anything may be made to serve as a museum.

It may be more useful, today, to ask not *what* is a museum, but rather *when is a museum?* A principal aim of this course is to plot a critical, historical, and ethical understanding of the practices centered on what we commonly understand today about museums as a key force in the fabrication and maintenance of modern identities. More than an artistic genre, and more than simply one institution on a par with others, museums are essential sites for the fabrication and perpetuation of our ideas of ourselves as cultural communities and as autonomous individuals with unique subjectivities.

More than simply one among many “ideological apparatuses” in the institutional arsenal of contemporary society, then, museums worldwide pervade many of the social practices - both institutionalized and informal - that determine our perception about the functions of objects and environments, no less than of ourselves as social subjects.

There is much more to museums, then, than the documenting, monumentalizing, or theme-parking of identity, history and heritage. Although they are commonplace in the cultural landscape, museums are far from “natural.” (Nor does it remedy our perception of museums simply to label them “cultural,” because the terms of such a discussion are tautological. For what does “culture” signify besides the stuff that museums collect?) In general, the power and persuasiveness of museological constructs - their artifice, in effect - is inseparable from that of art, technology, or science. And the gradual invention and expansion of the categories of art or science to encompass all “cultures” has been a crucial instrument by which the history of the world's peoples have been retroactively (re)written in the five centuries since European expansion reached global proportions.

The success of museums devoted to history, heritage, and identity is based on a particular *kind* of object – the artifact or specimen – and certain characteristic modes of stagecraft. Museum objects are staged or framed to be “read” in a variety of ways, or in ways that privilege their historical, aesthetic, social or scientific significance or their documentary status (as a relic or as “evidence” of a time, place, people, spirit or mentality) or, commonly, some combination of these. In any case, as an *evidentiary* institution, the museum’s power and persuasiveness has rested in no small measure upon the deployment of objects of *oscillating* determinacy. That is, they crucially depend for their persuasiveness on the manner of their staging; on how they are staged to be seen and read. Yet however they are framed, museum objects – works of fine art, scientific specimens, mechanical inventions, ethnographic artifacts, historical relics, etc. – simultaneously function as *diagnostic devices and measures for making sense of all possible worlds and the knowledge and experience of their subjects.*

Collections of objects are framed, superimposed, and transformed by the discursive practices of history, psychology, anthropology, sociology, ethnography, aesthetic philosophy, art history, - all of which are simultaneously grounded in and follow

from the principles, categories, and assumptions of museology. A museum is not only a cultural artifact made up of other cultural artifacts, for it serves as theater, encyclopedia, and laboratory for reconstructing, representing, or simulating and demonstrating all manner of causal, historical, and ethical relationships. As such, museums are “performances” - pedagogical and political in nature - whose practitioners (its makers and users, including ourselves as visitors) are centrally invested in the activity of making the visible legible, thereby personifying objects as the representations of their makers, simultaneously objectifying the people who made them and, in a second order reality that is part of the same historical continuum, objectifying the people who view made objects in their re-contextualized museum settings. Museums are indispensable epistemological technologies of modernity.

But if museums were the answer, what was the original question? What exactly is or was the idea of the museum? What is (or are) the theory (or theories) of which the museum is their embodiment? And what would be the effect of making such theories or ideas more directly explicit? Would they then be less effective or powerfully persuasive? Would their aura be dispelled or disappear?

This seminar is devoted to exploring these and related theoretical, critical, historical, and ethical issues, problems, and challenges. The following syllabus is an outline of the major directions our reading, discussions, and investigations will follow.

2. Syllabus

Please obtain and bring to each class the two required texts, (a) Donald Preziosi & Claire Farago, *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum* (GTW), 2004, & (b) Sharon Macdonald, *A Companion to Museum Studies* (CMS), 2006. Both at CU Bookstore.

First unit - The institution of the museum as a problem of representational adequacy.

The historical invention of the modern museum was one response to widespread crises of knowledge accompanying early modern Europe's encounter with new societies and cultures around the world beginning in the late 15th century. The idea of the museum as an epistemological technology designed to address the problems raised by that encounter.

1. January 14 – first assignment: One of the most basic questions facing anyone interested in the nature, current state, and future prospects of museums and related cultural institutions is this: *Is a museum factual or fictional?* In preparation for our 2nd seminar meeting on Thursday, January 21, there is a double reading assignment: (A) read the introductions to our 2 texts, GTW & CMS; and also (B) *read* (1) Hayden White, 'The Fictions of Factual Representation' (GTW I.1., 27-35) and (2) Stephen Bann's 'Poetics of the Museum' (GTW I.4., 65-83) for discussion during that meeting. *Evaluate White's arguments in a min. 2-3-page paper, to be discussed in class 2, regarding the taken-for-granted distinction(s) between 'fact' and 'fiction'. Is a museum an historical or theatrical artifact? What are some of the implications of either perspective, or even of a view of the museum as a combination of both? Are these problematic alternatives, and if so, why?*

2. January 21 – *Continued Introduction to the work of the seminar*, and class discussion of first two reading assignments. Are there different criteria for what counts as 'history'? *For next class on January 28, read* (1) Michel de Certeau, *Psychoanalysis & Its History*, GTW I.2., 35-50, and (2) Susan Crane, 'The Conundrum of Ephemerality: Time, Memory & Museums,' CMS I.7., 98-110, and *evaluate the arguments of both in a min. 2-3-page paper, to be discussed in class 3.*

3. January 28 – class discussion of readings to date; evaluation of progress to date on issues raised in readings and discussions. *Read for February 4:* (1) M. Foucault, 'Texts / Contexts: Of Other Spaces' (GTW, 371-379), Paul Hirst, 'Power / Knowledge: Constructed Space and the Subject' (GTW, 380-400), and Hans Haacke, 'Museums: Managers of Consciousness,' GTW, 400-413, and *evaluate the arguments of one or more of these three texts in a min 2-page paper, to be discussed next class. NB: prepare these short written reports / critiques of assigned texts to be handed in each subsequent class meeting.*

4. February 4 – class discussion of readings to date. *Read for February 11:* (1) Rhiannon Mason, 'Cultural Theory and Museum Studies,' CMS I.2., 17-32; (2) Anthony Alan Shelton, 'Museums & Anthropologies: Practices and Narratives, CMS I.5; and (3) D. Preziosi, *Art History and Museology: Rendering the Visible Legible*,' CMS I.4., 5-63. *Evaluate the arguments of these in a min. 2-page paper to be discussed at next classroom meeting*

Second unit - The structural and ideological implications of museum practice; the theatrics and dramaturgy of material and virtual museum spaces.

5. February 11 – [During this week of February 8-13] – **1st group site visit to the Denver Art Museum (DAM), Hamilton Building, in connection with the ‘Embrace’ exhibition (day & time to be arranged).**

6. February 18 – Class discussion of site visit. Read for February 25: (1) Bill Hillier & Kali Tzortzi, ‘Space Syntax: The Language of Museum Space,’ CMS III.17., 282-301; (2) Michelle Henning, ‘New Media,’ CMS III.18., 302-318.

7. February 25 – Discussion of readings to date. *Read in preparation for March 4:* (1) M. Foucault, ‘Texts, Contexts: Of Other Spaces,’ GTW IV.2., 371-379; (2) Paul Q. Hirst, ‘Power / Knowledge – Constructed Space and the Subject,’ GTW IV.3, 380-399, and (3) Vittorio Lampugnani, ‘Insight vs. Entertainment: Untimely Meditations on the Architecture of Twentieth-century Art Museums,’ CMS III.5., 245-262; (4) Donna Haraway, ‘Teddy Bear patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908-1936,’ GTW III.2.

Third Unit – Globalization & culture wars: the political machinery of the museum.

8. March 4 – [During this week of Mar 1 – 6] **2nd group site visit to the Denver Museum of History & Science (MHS) (day & time to be arranged);** read for March 11 (1) Carol Duncan & Alan Wallach, ‘The Museum of Modern Art as Late Capitalist Ritual’ (GTW, 483-499); (2) Rosalind Krauss, ‘The Cultural Logic of the late Capitalist Museum’ (GTW, 600-613), (3) Steven Conn, ‘Science Museums and the Culture Wars,’ CMS VI.30., 494-508; and (4) Steven Dubin, ‘Incivilities in Civil(ized) Places: “Culture Wars” in Comparative Perspective,’ CMS VI. 29., 477-493, or

9. March 11 – Evaluation of the 2nd site visit & the texts read for today. *For March 18: prepare for first informal presentation of work in progress for final research project being discussed and negotiated with DP.*

NB: attend the ‘Embrace’ Symposium at DAM on Saturday March 13: “The Entwined Embrace of Art & Space: A Day of Dialogues with Artists, Curators, & Architects” (detailed program to be announced)

10. March 18 – Discussion of individual work in progress. Read for April 1: (1) Mark Rectanis, ‘Globalization: Incorporating the Museum,’ CMS V.23., 381-397; (2) Bruno Frey & Stephan Meier, ‘Cultural Economics,’ CMS V. 24, 398-414; (3) Tristram Besterman, ‘Museum Ethics,’ CMS V.26., 431-441.

[Week of March 22-26: Spring Break]

Fourth Unit - Disciplinary dilemmas and current state & future prospects for the institution of the museum and the profession of museum studies.

11. April 1 – *Discussion of readings assigned on March 18; read for April 15:* (1) Tony Bennett, 'Civic Seeing: Museums and the Organization of Vision,' CMS III.16., 263-281; (2) Homi Bhabha, 'Double Visions,' GTW III.1., 236-241; (3) Beverly Grindstaff, 'Creating Identity: Exhibiting the Philippines at the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition,' GTW III.5., 298-319; (4) Sherry Errington, 'The Cosmic Theme Park of the Javanese,' GTW III.7., 340-360.

12. April 8 - [**NB:** The annual *Council on World Affairs* week-long symposium will be using our classroom as its headquarters today, so we will meet today for our **3^d group site visit to the CU Natural History Museum** to discuss and evaluate current exhibitions and collections space]

Fifth Unit – Final group meetings classes 13,14,15 (April 15, 22nd & 29), including

(A) a general discussion of critical and theoretical issues considered and unconsidered to date, and

(B) (optional but recommended) [semi-]formal oral reports on individual projects.

Last meeting (April 29): seminar conclusions and prospects for future museum studies classes and expanded curricula at CU. Exact schedule of individual seminar member presentations to be arranged.

3. Course Requirements

(pre-requisite: instructor permission, or general introductory class on museum studies)

Requirements for successful completion of work for the course include the following:

- (1) Completion of weekly reading assignments of selected texts; each class meeting is devoted to discussing and critically evaluating the assigned readings. (*Attendance and active contribution to seminar discussions required, along with a written two-three-page critical response to / evaluation of each assigned reading = 30% of final overall grade.*)
- (2) *Field trips* to three different museums, exhibitions, or collections, to be scheduled (*min. 5 pp. written report / evaluation of each: 10% x 3 = 30%*);
- (3) *Final written research paper* critically evaluating one or more institution, collection, exhibition programs, or interpretative theory or ideology, to be submitted at the end of the semester. The nature of work is accommodated to individual backgrounds, interests, and academic, disciplinary, and professional needs (*10-15 pp. = 40%; may include a*
- (4) [*voluntary*] *informal oral work-in-progress report during the latter part of the term – projected for March 18*).

Members of the seminar are expected to maintain close communication with the instructor through periodic individual meetings.

4. Readings

The pace and amount of reading each week will vary according to the subject and issues being discussed, along with the evolution of student interests and experiences during the semester. NB: as with any seminar, as the semester progresses, our discussions will most likely expand into areas not projected at the outset, the list of readings and dates given here at the term's beginning will inevitably change over time, and some substitutions will be made. With occasional (rare) exceptions, all will be drawn from one or both of the following:

(1) *Primary Texts available at the CU Bookstore:*

a. Donald Preziosi & Claire Farago, eds. & authors, *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum* (Ashgate, 2004)

b. Sharon Macdonald, ed., *A Companion to Museum Studies* (Blackwell, 2006)

(2) *Supplementary Readings:*

Books and articles relevant to the issues discussed in the seminar will periodically be assigned, relevant to the evolving directions of our classroom discussions, presentations, and site visits.

Prof. Donald Preziosi, Spring 2010: office W348 MCOL (Curtis / Museum Collections Bldg) tel. t.b.a.; open office hrs to be announced first class, most likely Weds afternoons. Instructor emails: preziosi@colorado.edu, or preziosi@ucla.edu

Institutional addendum)

(1) The Boulder Provost's Disability Task Force recommended syllabus statement:

If you qualify for accommodations because of a disability, please submit to me a letter from Disability Services in a timely manner so that your needs be addressed. Disability Services determines accommodations based on documented disabilities. Contact: 303-492-8671, Willard 322, and <http://www.Colorado.EDU/disabilityservices>. If you have a temporary medical condition or injury, see guidelines at <http://www.colorado.edu/disabilityservices/go.cgi?select=temporary.htm>. Disability Services' letters for students with disabilities indicate legally mandated reasonable accommodations. The syllabus statements and answers to Frequently Asked Questions can be found at <http://www.colorado.edu/disabilityservices>.

(2) It is the responsibility of every instructor to clearly explain his or her procedures about absences due to religious observances in the course syllabus so that all students are fully informed, in writing, near the beginning of each semester's classes. Campus policy regarding religious observances states that faculty must make reasonable accommodation for them and in so doing, be careful not to inhibit or penalize those students who are exercising their rights to religious observance. Faculty should be aware that a given religious holiday may be observed with very different levels of attentiveness by different members of the same religious group and thus may require careful consideration to the particulars of each individual case. See http://www.colorado.edu/policies/fac_relig.html. A comprehensive calendar of the religious holidays most commonly observed by CU-Boulder students is at <http://www.interfaithcalendar.org/>

Campus policy regarding religious observances requires that faculty make every effort to deal reasonably and fairly with all students who, because of religious obligations, have conflicts with scheduled exams, assignments or required attendance. See full details at http://www.colorado.edu/policies/fac_relig.html

(3) Faculty and students should be aware of the campus '-Classroom Behavior' policy at <http://www.colorado.edu/policies/classbehavior.html> as well as faculty rights and responsibilities listed at http://www.colorado.edu/FacultyStaff/faculty-booklet.html#Part_1. These documents describe examples of unacceptable classroom behavior and provide information on how to handle such circumstances should they arise. Students and faculty each have responsibility for maintaining an appropriate learning environment. Those who fail to adhere to such behavioral standards may be subject to discipline. Professional courtesy and sensitivity are especially important with respect to individuals and topics dealing with differences of race, culture, religion, politics, sexual orientation, gender, gender variance, and nationalities. Class rosters are provided to the instructor with the student's legal name. I will gladly honor your request to address you by an alternate name or gender pronoun. Please advise me of this preference early in the semester so that I may make appropriate changes to my records. See policies at <http://www.colorado.edu/policies/classbehavior.html> or http://www.colorado.edu/studentaffairs/judicialaffairs/code.html#student_code

(4) The Office of Discrimination and Harassment recommends the following syllabus statement:

The University of Colorado at Boulder policy on Discrimination and Harassment, the University of Colorado policy on Sexual Harassment and the University of Colorado policy on Amorous Relationships apply to all students, staff and faculty. Any student, staff or faculty member who believes s/he has been the subject of sexual harassment or discrimination or harassment based upon race, color, national origin, sex, age, disability, creed, religion, sexual orientation, or veteran status should contact the Office of Discrimination and Harassment (ODH) at 303-492-2127 or the Office of Judicial Affairs at 303-492-5550. Information about the ODH, the above referenced policies and the campus resources available to assist individuals regarding discrimination or harassment can be obtained at <http://www.colorado.edu/odh>.

(5) The Boulder campus has a student Honor Code and individual faculty members are expected to familiarize themselves with its tenets and follow the approved procedures should violations be perceived. The Honor Council recommended syllabus statement:

All students of the University of Colorado at Boulder are responsible for knowing and adhering to the academic integrity policy of this institution. Violations of this policy may include: cheating, plagiarism, aid of academic dishonesty, fabrication, lying, bribery, and threatening behavior. All incidents of academic misconduct shall be reported to the Honor Code Council (honor@colorado.edu; 303-735-2273). Students who are found to be in violation of the academic integrity policy will be subject to both academic sanctions from the faculty member and non-academic sanctions (including but not limited to university probation, suspension, or expulsion). Other information on the Honor Code can be found at <http://www.colorado.edu/policies/honor.html> and at <http://www.colorado.edu/academics/honorcode/>