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Claire Robins. *Curious lessons in the museum: the pedagogic potential of artists' interventions*. Surrey, Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2013. Pp 260. £65.00. ISBN: 978-1-4094-3617-1 (Hbk).

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In this publication, Claire Robins discusses art intervention within museums, through a series of 'curious' (in the sense of 'unusual') case-studies - hence the book title. 'Art intervention' is associated with 'conceptual art', i.e. art that stimulates critical thinking beyond traditional aesthetic values. As such, art intervention describes an interaction with a certain space, audience, or previously-existing artwork, in such a manner that their 'normality' is reassessed. A typical example of art intervention - provided by Robins in the introduction - is 'Sandwork' by Andy Goldsworthy.[1] A large snake-like feature made from thirty tons of compacted sand, 'Sandwork' was exhibited at the British Museum in 1994, as part of the 'Time Machine' exhibition. The gigantic sculpture aimed at conceptually linking the past (Ancient Egyptian artefacts) with the present (contemporary art).

Although there are many memorable examples of artwork provided in her book, it should be underlined that Robins does not merely focus on art. Rather, she places emphasis on the artists who practice art intervention, specifically exploring: i) how artists engage with museum collections through art intervention, ii) how artists contribute to museum education and curation via interventionist artworks, and iii) how art intervention can alter cultural and social 'status-quos' within, and beyond, the museum. Consequently, the aim of this book is to study the didactic implications of artists' interventions in museums over the course of time. What makes this publication even more noteworthy is that the topic has been scarcely researched before.

1 An image is provided in Putnam, J. (n.d.) '*Exhibitions: Time Machine: Ancient Egypt and Contemporary Art*', available on http://www.jamesputnam.org.uk/inv_exhibition_01.html [last accessed on 29 July 2014].

In Part One, Robins provides the historical background of the pedagogic potential of artists' interventions in museums. She begins by referring to the didactic scopes of the 'cabinets of curiosities' in the Sixteenth Century. She goes on to recall the cultural and social hierarchy and Church-associated dogmatic values manifested in museums during the Enlightenment, and perceptively reports on how philosophical ideas (e.g. the views of Kant about aesthetics) have affected the development and pedagogic potential of museums. The author concludes this section with a discussion of the evolution of contemporary interventionist methodologies throughout the Twentieth and early Twenty First Centuries, placing particular emphasis on artists' interventions with parodic and ironic principles, as a form of critique with political and cultural learnings. Her discussion on how ironic and parodic displays have challenged culture and politics is supported with case-studies of interventionist artworks. Among them, in the reviewer's mind, the 'Fountain' by Marcel Duchamp (1917) stands out,[2] not only because of its peculiarity and ground-breaking artistic values, but also, because Robins profoundly discusses the parodic, didactic qualities of this 'controversial' piece. Parody is also explored in depth in Part Two, and Robins' case-studies in Part One nicely pave the way for the discussions to follow.

Part Two considers some of the methodologies of artists' interventions: parody, irony, trickery and humour, the purpose of which is to enhance communication with the audiences. Once more, exceptional examples are provided; e.g. 'An Oak Tree' by Craig-Martin, with its allegorical meaning.[3] Additionally, the author's original contribution to research can be seen in the engaging case-study of her own parodic intervention at the William Morris Gallery, London. 'An elite experience for everyone' is an interventionist performance in the style of a guided tour. Seemingly, it is very similar to the guided tours offered in many English Heritage and National Trust properties - but there is nothing conventional in this tour. Robins, who - for the sake of the performance - pretends to be a volunteer tour guide showing visitors around the William Morris Gallery, has carefully selected every single word, using parody,

2 An image is provided in Tate (n.d.) '*Marcel Duchamp: Fountain 1917, replica 1964*' available on http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/duchamp-fountain-t07573 [last accessed on 29 July 2014].

3 An image is provided in Tate (n.d.) '*Michael Craig-Martin: An Oak Tree, 1973*' available on http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/craig-martin-an-oak-tree-l02262 [last accessed on 29 July 2014].

mockery, and trickery. In the reviewer's opinion, the text and act of the performance is brilliantly composed, and the result is astonishing! The tour is received by the audience in many ways: whereas some visitors realise, even in the early stages, that the performance is a parody, others appear unable [to borrow the author's expression] '*to "see" / understand how ridiculous my speech and behaviour was*'.[4] Having drawn attention to the fact that the didactic scope of artists' interventions can harmonically co-exist with parody, irony, trickery and humour, the author rightly points out that further research is necessary in order to reappraise what artists' interventions can really offer to museums and the public. After all, as the reviewer adds, every art intervention is as unique as its creator, thus, the pedagogic values of art interventions should not be standardised, nor should they be categorised and labelled.

Part Three examines artists' interventions in the late 20th and early 21st century. The focal point of this part of the book is the triangular relationship between interventionist artists, the museum as an institution, and the public. The dynamics of this relationship, as Robins indicates, are not always in balance. As a result, museums and museum visitors often maintain a love-hate affair with interventionist artists. The reviewer finds that this is particularly obvious in the case of 'Baghdad 5th March 2007' by Jeremy Deller, another noteworthy example offered by Robins.[5] The name refers to the exhibit of a car wreckage from a fatal bombing in Baghdad, first taken on tour in the USA, and eventually displayed in the Imperial War Museum, London, in 2010. Its didactic value was threefold. Firstly, it encouraged the public to reconsider, and openly talk about the dramatic seriousness of war. Secondly, it contributed to the debate about what is art and what is not. Finally, it reinforced discussion of how much, or how little, interventionist artists should interfere with museum collections and curatorial duties. Ultimately, the question is whether such artists act in the interest of, or against museums. Still, without doubt, artists' interventions have historically influenced, and

4 Robins 2013: 142.

5 Images are provided in The Guardian (Thursday 9 September 2010) '*The art of war: Jeremy Deller's Baghdad car bomb installation*' available on http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2010/sep/09/jeremy-deller-baghdad-car-bomb#/?picture=366559572&index=1 and in Jeremy Deller (n.d.) '*It Is What It Is, 2009*' available on http://www.jeremydeller.org/ItIsWhatItIs/ItIsWhatItIs.php [both resources were last accessed on 29 July 2014].

continue to influence the broader pedagogic role of museums, in spite of the fact that they are inclined to express contradiction.

Thanks to an abundant supply of 'curious' examples of artwork, naturally, Robins' book does not fail to surprise the reader with its captivating debates and coloured images of remarkable art. In the reviewer’s mind, the aim of the book is generously met, with Robins clearly showing a deep understanding of the topic. However, the language is occasionally convoluted, and as a result, discussions can be difficult to follow, especially for readers who are not native English speakers. Otherwise, the content is well-researched, insightful and page-turning, and this work has the potential to stimulate further research and constructive dialogue in the field. This publication is appropriate for students and professionals of museum studies, while at the same time art historians, and even artists, would find the content of this book equally fascinating.