

Joan Kjaer:

Hello and welcome to WorldCanvass from International Programs at the University of Iowa. I'm Joan Kjaer and we're coming to you from Merge in downtown Iowa city. Thanks for joining us for this conversation about the future of museums. In this portion of the program we'll be talking about historical and ethnographic museums. We'll also be talking about performance and I'm going to turn first to Jen Buckley. Jen Buckley's next to me here and she teaches in the English department. Glenn Penny is a history professor and I think we'll start with you first, Jen, because you are going to help us understand how things have changed maybe many years ago, but certainly, now, performance within museums, bringing theater, dance, different kinds of performance into museum spaces is really, it's happening a lot and people enjoy it. So what difference does that make to the appreciation of the art?

Jennifer Buckley:

So thank you first for having us on the program.

Jennifer Buckley:

I want to say that unlike my colleagues who gave us such illuminating talks in the first couple of segments, I am not a GLAM professional. I like to think I'm GLAM,

Joan Kjaer:

You are, you are.

Jennifer Buckley:

but I'm a professional. But you're quite right. One of my research interests is in how performance is living in museums and galleries and libraries and archives. And these days it's living very large.

Joan Kjaer:

Mm-hm.

Jennifer Buckley:

So when I say performance, I am first of all referring to what most people would recognize as the performing arts, right? Especially theater and dance as you were saying. And also what some would call body art. So art that uses the body of the artist as its primary medium, otherwise known as performance art. So for a long time the academic and perhaps curatorial party line on what these forms of performance, especially body art could do in museums was, was not much, right.

Jennifer Buckley:

It's live art, it's experienced in the moment by groups of people. And when it ended, it was over. That was the thinking. It couldn't be acquired or conserved or exhibited in museums because they're made and received, live in the moment. And it's true that many of the best known performance art pieces of what I'd like to think of as the heroic era of the 1960s and 1970s and eighties that were staged in galleries were performed. I'm thinking of artists here like Adrian Piper or Allan Kaprow, a number of the artists who came through the University of Iowa's pioneering intermedia program.

Jennifer Buckley:

In fact, they were making art outside of institutional spaces and when they made them in gallery spaces, it was seen as kind of an affront to the gallery or an affront, a rejection of what it is that museums with their paintings on the wall and their sculptures or prints really stood for. Those arts are what we call time-based and like I said, seemingly when the performance ends, the work is over, so how could that be saved? How could that be collected? That conventional wisdom has changed and changed very, very dramatically over the last few decades.

Jennifer Buckley:

At first, the thinking was, like I said, a performance's live-ness. the way that it ended, the way there was nothing to conserve, nothing to save, was seen as not just a rejection of museum practice, but also of the art market. Right. It couldn't be commodified. It couldn't be bought and sold. It disappeared. To use a word that came up earlier in the program. It was ephemeral, but one of the symposium keynote speakers, and I'm going to try to mention this symposium whenever I can. My way of advertising on this program, one of the symposiums, keynote speakers, Amelia Jones, started arguing in the late 1990s that live performance in fact didn't disappear when the initiating event ended. That documentation of performance like photographs and video and artifacts that they offered people an experience of the performance that they perceived with their own bodies in their own time, whether or not that occurred in museum spaces and so documentation, too, could be considered performative.

Jennifer Buckley:

That's the term she uses. I have no doubt that will come up in her keynote lecture, but in this century performance artists, the artist Tino Sehgal comes to mind immediately, started selling live performance pieces to museums. Now the way he does it is really distinctive. There's no documentation at all. It's done by verbal agreement and handshake. The Hirshhorn Museum, which is part of the Smithsonian institutions, bought one in 2017 and it makes museum professionals really, really, really nervous to buy a work that only exists live in time and there's no contract associated with it. I'm seeing our GLAM professionals in the room, their eyes are going like wi-widening with horror at this, but what, what museum professionals are finding is that visitors, patrons, and even donors are hungry for this type of live work that the kinds of interactive, sometimes for positive and negative depending on how aggressive the work is, the interactive exchanges that happen in the time and space of performance within the museum, within the gallery is powerful for patrons perhaps especially at this moment, which we call the digital era.

Jennifer Buckley:

And we've talked a little bit in earlier segments about how the digital does not replace the museum, the space, the people, the collective experience of receiving artwork and in this case participating in the artwork. And I think performance, the hunger for performance, the art market's rush to acquire performance. Museums' rush to commission and stage performance and to exhibit its artifacts is precisely part of a response to that hunger that people have for live embodied experience often with other people in real spaces, which are infrastructures that need to be preserved. I did say,

Joan Kjaer:

Mm-hm, mm-hm, mm-hm.

Jennifer Buckley:

and so that's how I'll start.

Joan Kjaer:

And yeah, no, that sounds good. Well, so I'm sure that this, you know, there are a thousand different ways to do it, but is the intention sometimes from the performing artist or the person who's doing this embodied activity, do they want to somehow interact with paintings that may be hung on the wall or with sculpture in a given room?

Joan Kjaer:

I mean, is the idea that usually those objects aren't just there as background,

Jennifer Buckley:

Yes.

Joan Kjaer:

they're integrated into the work?

Jennifer Buckley:

Yes, and that's becoming an increasingly common practice. I don't want to say it was invented in the 21st century. One of the performance artists, really a multimedia artist I wrote about in my own book, Carolee Schneemann, was performing in an among the collections at the Brooklyn Museum in the 1970s, two other artists who come to mind, really famous examples are Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gomez-Pena, who performed in art museums, natural history museums, anthropological museums, a live performance piece back in the early 1990's, so this is not an entirely new practice, but the scale on which it's done now, the breadth of performance practice within galleries and museums very often in conjunction with and sometimes in really pointed conjunction with the collected artworks I think, is notable. So I'm thinking also of very well-known museums, museums that will be known to almost all of our listeners.

Jennifer Buckley:

The ways in which they're also privileging live performance. One example of the kind of performance you described conducted with and among the artworks was at the Tate Modern-- two Romanian artists staged a piece. This was back in 2016 called Public Collection, Tate Modern. It was very pointedly titled and the artists performed live with and among the permanent collection as a way of pointing to what it was that the Tate Modern collected, how they collected it, how they exhibited it.

Jennifer Buckley:

And so what the embodied performance did, and it involved participants as well as the performing artists, was to make visible in a way that bodies could receive in real time what collecting practices were. You know, our guests on the previous segments pointed out that there is a kind of relatively new reflectiveness about collecting, the ethics of collecting, the ethics of exhibiting the ways in which these practices share our values as a culture, as institutions, and part of what I see these performances pointing out is precisely making visible and making perceptible those values for audiences who, in many cases, will line up or, I can think of multiple cases in which this is true, will line up around the block to be part of these experiences in museum spaces and gallery spaces.

Joan Kjaer:

Wow. Yeah. Very cool. Well, let's, let's jump over to Glenn now and talk a little bit about some of your research, some of your writings, some of the work you've done. I think much of it based in and around Germany with ethnographic museums that, I think, in many cases what, go back to the 19th century or perhaps even earlier. What, what do you learn by looking at these ethnographic museums in the context of today?

H. Glenn Penny:

What do I learn personally or [inaudible 00:09:55]

Joan Kjaer:

What does one learn, yes.

H. Glenn Penny:

What does one learn? The thing about the ethnographic museums is that if you'd gone there in the 70's you would have found sort of dusty places where not a lot of people went, and where the scholarship seemed to have stopped or been frozen. And as the popular museums went up at the end of the 20th century, all the boats floated together and suddenly people got a new look into these museums. And what they found was actually a treasure trove full of human history and every single object, somebody earlier mentioned that you open a drawer or you find an object as a story. This is true, but the thing about ethnographic museums is that they're all things have been produced by people, in very specific times and places, and every object that's created contains a little piece of the creator's world view.

H. Glenn Penny:

So what you have are not just collections of objects, but collections of ontologies, collections of the ways in which people engage with the world around them. Most of which we don't know much about anymore because the vast majority of the people who produced them were illiterate. So there are no written records. These are the records.

Joan Kjaer:

Mm-hm.

H. Glenn Penny:

So what's happened, and the really exciting thing that's happened in museum anthropology in the last two or three decades, but, really has hyped up in the last five or six years, is the notion that the objects are texts that can be read and can teach us a great deal about history that we just don't know.

H. Glenn Penny:

And the funny thing is that most people walk into a museum and don't realize that 94/95% or maybe 99% of the objects aren't on display. The vast majority are hidden away and in storage facilities and depots, sometimes in basements and back rooms, a lot of them, in the case of the big German museums, the one in Berlin has over half a million objects and a lot of them haven't been unpacked in decades. So a lot of the people working in the museum have never seen the objects. So I think one of the big moves now at this very moment is to unpack the museums to free the objects from the seclusion, to allow them to teach us to see a history that we forgot.

Joan Kjaer:

Right, right. And maybe here also, in some cases, if, if there is an existing community that relates historically to those objects, to, to include those folks in the discussion of maybe understanding what these all mean and you know, what should be done with them and should they be returned to the community or whatever, are these discussions that go on?

H. Glenn Penny:

Oh, they're going on constantly. Yeah. Patriation has been, I don't know, for the last 30 years or more incredibly important. And Europe, just in the last two or three years, there's basically, basically an explosion of discussion. Some of them are driven by, I guess you'd call it indigenous activists or cultural practitioners, professional repatriation experts that come from wherever the objects came from. Some of them are driven by also just efforts at human rights. Right. When you get an indigenous movements meeting at the UN talking about rights, they also have rights to histories that are stored in these different places. So a lot of the work, the really interesting work is collaborative and in fact I would, I would go so far to say that most of the really good exhibits have been collaborative when the exhibits are about particular times and places.

H. Glenn Penny:

There was one recently in Munich called "From Samoa with Love" and the entire thing was about objects in the museum that were collected by Samoan performers that had toured through Germany at the turn of the 20th century and then they found descendants and then they talked to the people about what these objects were, why the people that come to visit Germany, what it had been like, what they knew impacted it, had their family histories. And then the entire exhibit was a collaborative exhibit.

Jennifer Buckley:

Mm-hm, yeah, just if I could add to that and also plug the symposium again.

H. Glenn Penny:

So good, the symposium.

Jennifer Buckley:

So several of the symposium participants, the round table participants are going to be speaking on how museums perform cultural values. And the one that comes to mind, sort of drawing on what you've just said, is Jill Albert Yohei, who is a curator at the Minneapolis Institute of Art and working with the Kiowa artists, Terry Grieves. They curated, with a board of indigenous women artists, a groundbreaking exhibition of Native American women's art at the M.I.A. It was called "Hearts of our People" and it was by all accounts precisely the collaborative shared effort to determine what would be both the ethical and be artistically and culturally valuable way of exhibiting these artworks, many of which in previous generations would not have been considered art. How can we do that in a way that involves communities in decision-making around how to strike those balances? That's precisely at the heart of the work that Jill and Terry did with their, their curatorial board and from what I know of the exhibition and what I've seen, it seems to have been a, a strikingly successful collaboration.

Joan Kjaer:

To Glenn: So as an historian, you focus much of your work on Germany.

Joan Kjaer:

Was there, was Germany special in the way that it-- in its interest for collecting these various materials for creating ethnographic museums? Was there something about Germany that, that represented a unique interest in these things?

H. Glenn Penny:

Yeah, so this is actually the 250th, last year was the 250th, anniversary of Alexander Von Humboldt's birth or his death, I don't really remember, but anyway, he was around a long time, so we had a celebration. Everyone remembers.....[inaudible]. The Humboldtian world is actually an effort to try and understand the entire cosmos and its inner reactions and interrelationships and there's reasons why people like Muir and many others became environmentalists. Even like Rachel Carson would look back to Humboldt and say, here's an interconnectedness. It's all one whole, how does it relate? And this drove a kind of science that was pretty ubiquitous in the 19th century and formed German ethnology, which is why the largest collective museums in the world were in Germany and not somewhere else because essentially they knew already what I just said, that the objects are texts, that they are historical records created by people who didn't write down their history.

H. Glenn Penny:

So they went out trying to collect them at a moment in time where, because of industrialization bringing quite rapid transformations of the world, they saw records about the past evaporating and they tried to capture as many as they could and then store them and that's what they did. So yeah, there is a particular wealth of historical material in those places as a result.

H. Glenn Penny:

But I, I'd like to just give another plug for rethinking what exhibition is all about. Museums...because I think one of most exciting things happening in museum anthropology today is not thinking of exhibits as places that are didactic in which knowledge that we have created either collaboratively or individually is then distributed or dispensed or given to a broader public, but rather a place where objects become interlocutors, become part of the conversation. They actually teach us juxtapositions of objects, help us see things, and the "us" is not necessarily a group of pointy-headed academics, it could be a bunch of broader, a more interesting group of people that can bring together their (I'm sorry), we can bring together their individual perspectives and talk, have dialogue about what the objects are saying to them.

Jennifer Buckley:

Yeah, yeah, yeah, and Glenn. Here's, here's another point where our research interests intersect. I mean in performance studies, which is that the sort of broader field with which I identify as a scholar. There's a huge amount of energy, intellectual energy and insight, being geared toward the question of how museums perform and by juxtapositions of objects that is itself performing knowledge about those objects. And so my field's really excited about what's happening in your fields. So you know, one scholar who comes to mind is Barbara Christian, who's a, a major figure in performance studies who has worked, I mean if you were to place your field of study in my next to each other, she'd be standing right in the middle somehow talking to both of us equally powerfully. But, but this is a real center of, of intellectual energy in the field of performance studies.

Jennifer Buckley:

And so I, for one, am really pleased to see these exciting developments in museum practice and museum anthropology crossing over into theater and performance studies scholarship. We have a lot to learn from one another.

H. Glenn Penny:

I agree.

Joan Kjaer:

And here on the campus of the University of Iowa, is there performance happening in our various museum spaces or do you expect to happen?

Jennifer Buckley:

Oh, my, yes, and so I don't want to announce pieces that have not been scheduled or formally announced yet, but I know of multiple faculty members and students and student groups that are already generating performance in relationship to the old museum of art and toward art work on campus, including outdoor artwork. We have a colleague working in the dance department, Stephanie Miracle, who's been working on (her name really is Miracle). I've been working on some really exciting choreographic work with students. Also at the symposium, one of the intermedia programs, recent MFA graduates, Heidi Wiren Bartlett is going to be premiering a film that she made that is attached to an environmental performance piece that involves the old museums structure and areas around that.

Jennifer Buckley:

And so there's something about a decommissioned art museum that it seems to be drawing dancers and performance artists really powerfully. But I have no doubt that the new museum space will also be a site for performance energy.

Joan Kjaer:

I suspect this creates complications for, for the curatorial staff or for the, you know, it's, it's not always easy depending upon what the performance is to move things around or to reallocate spaces and whatnot. But I assume the begging isn't happening so much these days. It seems museum directors can see the value in it. Audiences love it.

Jennifer Buckley:

Absolutely. I mean, to the point that, I mean, it's not just the Tate Modern that basically reconfigured an entire space and devoted it to performance. As many of you know, the Museum of Modern Art in New York shut itself down and then reopened with performance privileged in a way that's never happened before.

Jennifer Buckley:

I will defer to my GLAM professional colleagues. It sounds like an insurance nightmare, but I mean it's certainly of interest both for patrons and for artists and I can't imagine that museums wouldn't know our museum, wouldn't want to somehow.

Joan Kjaer:

Well then you mentioned the ephemeral nature of some of these performances and so on. Obviously, there are video cameras and now things can be taped. Is that part of it or is the whole idea to make it, keep it ephemeral? It happens now and that's it!

Jennifer Buckley:

I think it depends on the artist. There are some artists like Tino Sehgal who I mentioned who are absolutely ruthless about maintaining the ephemerality to the point that he won't even sign a contract because he doesn't want a paper trail. But so many artists, and this is true since the 1970s, have folded other media documentation, video maintaining artifacts as part of the performance practice and many of them work through those documentation pieces into future performances.

Jennifer Buckley:

So the lifespan of the performance is worked back into the live moment through documentation. I should also say, curators around the world are also much more open to exhibiting performance art attacks, performance artifacts across the performing arts. There was a groundbreaking exhibition on Judson Dance Theater not so long ago. And so I feel like live experience is having a really powerful moment here. That said, there is the entire Instagram genre of the museum selfie.

Joan Kjaer:

Mm-hmm.

Jennifer Buckley:

So for better, mostly for worse. And so you know, documentation of various kinds is part of what performers do, but also part of what visitors do and what patrons expect as part of their museum experience.

Joan Kjaer:

Well, I think before we close we should hear about the symposium. What are the dates?

Jennifer Buckley:

So this symposium, What Can Museums Become?, which is generously supported by the Obermann Center for Advanced Studies, will be the 5th to the 7th of March, 2020. So less than a month from now is when it opens.

Jennifer Buckley:

Our keynote speakers come to us from extraordinary institutions including this one. The format will be three keynotes and several round tables, and the round tables are intended to be interactive and so there will be participant opportunities for engagement. There's also going to be an object-based pedagogical session. So discussions and activities and how we teach with the objects in our collection are part of the symposium. The symposium is absolutely free and open to the public. We have the website up thanks to our fabulous colleagues at the Obermann Center, uimuseumsymposium.com is the website address.

Joan Kjaer:

This transcript was exported on Feb 17, 2020 - view latest version [here](#).

Great. Gosh. Well thank you both, Glenn, thank you for being here. Jen, thank you so much and good luck with the symposium with everything else. Really appreciate it. You bet. I want to let everybody know that our next program is on March 26th in this room and it's called All Eyes on Korea and we have a really fun group for that program. So come if you can, and thank you for being here tonight and good night. [applause].