Introduction to “Rhubarb & Pearls” – John Bennett


What are Poems doing in a Museum?

Well, text is ever present in the museum experience to begin with. As Bernard Smith wrote, "we only see what we read we are seeing." Louise Ravelli, author of Museum Texts, adds: “There is a common misconception about language that it simply labels some kind of pre-existing reality and that language merely needs to be a relay to convey this. Such a view suggests that language is redundant, that objects may 'speak for themselves'.” Poets realise language bestows meaning, and that poetry offers an ecology of meanings for the objects themselves and their role in an exhibition.

Cognitive scientists George Lakoff & Mark Turner state, “Poetry, through metaphor, exercises our minds so that we can extend our normal powers of comprehension beyond the range of the metaphors we are brought up to see the world through.” Poems can also provide wonder and information, as they once did from Lucretius to Erasmus Darwin's very popular poem, ‘The Botanic Garden’ (with scientific footnotes of 100,000 words). The critic Marjorie Perloff has championed a poetics that returns, “those materials so rigidly excluded – political, ethical, historical, philosophical – to the domain of poetry, which is to say that the Romantic lyric, the poem as expression of a moment of absolute insight, of emotion crystallized into timeless patterns, gives way to a poetry that can, once again, accommodate narrative, information, pedagogy and didacticism, the serious and the comic, verse and prose.” Poetry is flexible and can work with other disciplines, including science. Jorie Graham suggests that nothing but, ‘some forms of advanced science - particle physics, for example, allows a young mind to experience the paradox, ambiguity, irrational thought, associative ‘leaping’ any good poem teaches us to think and feel in.’

What are Objects doing in a Museum?

In the first half of the 17th C, the medieval sense of curiosity as a, "morally excessive and suspect interest in observing the world, seeking novel experiences, or acquiring knowledge for its own sake", began to be contested by thoughts of its usefulness for the pursuit of knowledge. A hundred years later, some of that suspicion had transferred to "wonder" as ignorance rather than stimulating scientific enquiry. John Pointer wrote a catalogue for a cabinet of wonders (the origin of modern museums) which he bequeathed to St John's College (c1740). He defended criticism that it were purely for show and sensation by, "some of the Ignorant & Illiterate Part of Mankind (that only look upon the Out-sides of Things without examining their real & intrinsic Value)". Like early scientists’ notion of the scientific enterprise (e.g. Boyle and Linnaeus) he thought, "they lead us to the Great Author of Nature, & not only serve to puzzle the Philosopher, but also to admonish (if not convince) the Atheist." My work is aimed (to the extent it is aimed) at opening up natural history to an ecological perspective (natural and cultural) and admonishing (if not convincing) Creationists.
William Dampier justified his explorations and collecting in similar terms to Pointer. In *A Voyage to New Holland*, he wrote, "the Things themselves in the Discovery of which I have been employed, are most worthy of our diligentest Search and Inquiry; being the various and wonderful Works of God in different Parts of the World." Geraldine Barnes notes that his writings may be read as narrative cabinets of curiosities. The odd thing is Dampier was a pirate for twelve years yet leaves out the profit motive and Linnaeus was an imperial collector. Lisbet Koerner sees him primarily as not a taxonomist, but rather a patriot obsessed with Sweden’s economic self-sufficiency (through rhubarb and pears). What taxonomy and economics fail to engage with is the ecology, our health and sustainability. My contribution to this exhibition works these territories.

I try give the objects I write about a multi-dimensional life, bearing in mind Barbara Stafford’s concern for, "an 'aesthetic' display, whereby purposeless objects are left to speak for themselves, against the demands of an overwhelming textual documentation [that] too often means that artefacts of little intrinsic merit are put in the service of a theoretical distribution as tokens of an immaterial age, culture, or social system." Chris Gosden and Chantal Knowles note: “An object is best viewed as indicative of process, rather than static relations, and this process is ongoing in museums as elsewhere, so that there is a series of continuous social relations surrounding the object connecting 'field' and 'museums.’” And James Putnam of the British Museum writes, “It is a vital role of a museum to paint the larger picture, to reveal the life behind the artefact, to present the interpretation imaginatively and to provoke the visitor's thought rather than simply instruct. One of the most enjoyable features of a museum is the opportunity to browse and explore its unknown territory which offers ample opportunity for accidental, spontaneous discovery and enlightenment. . .” A museum ideally acts as a catalyst for conversations, memory, imagination, research, aesthetic appreciation, curiosity and empathy (like James Clifford’s notion of museums as "contact zones"). Poems are artefacts with the same potential to stand against industrialised kitsch or abstract ideas. Poems provide opportunities to use our cognitive techniques which connect us with our environments - facilitating awareness and understanding of the webs of meaning and skilled practice we continually weave in our dreams and every moment of our waking lives.

The Video

Linnaeus didn’t know was that the universe began at least 15 billion years ago and Earth about 4.5 billion years ago. Events leading to the origin of life three and a half billion years ago or so are a mystery. Charles Darwin wrote to Hooker in the winter of 1871 suggesting that life may have begun in a "warm little pond, with all sorts of ammonia and phosphoric salts, lights, heat, electricity, etc. present, [so] that a protein compound was chemically formed ready to undergo still more complex changes". Many theories and experiments later, that spark which separates the animate from the inanimate is as mysterious as consciousness emerging from 1.4 kilos of jellied brain matter. The emergence of RNA (a protein that codes from DNA the primary sequences of amino acids to manufacture the basic building blocks of life) was a crucial step, but how RNA came into existence is unknown. Does such a chemical exist elsewhere in the cosmos? Does life? Christopher Hugens wrote an essay *Cosmotheoros* (published posthumously, 1698) which suggested that the stars are suns like ours, and must have planets inhabited by thinking animals. Do we really believe that? Life’s energy, tenacity and will to survive on this planet alone can surprise us, whatever the species.