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Creators	Albano, Caterina

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Narrating place: the sense of visiting

Caterina Albano*

Artakt, Central Saint Martins College of Arts and Design

Abstract

Famously, Jean-François Lyotard claimed the exhibition visitor to be ‘a body in movement’ whose trajectory within an exhibition is comparable to that of a character in a novel. Moving from Lyotard’s affirmation, the article considers exhibition narrative through the theoretical framework offered by Michel de Certeau and Michel Serres. Certeau’s analogy of walking to the speech act, and the figures of speech that can govern movement in space, and Serres’ appreciation of *visiting* as a kinetic form of seeing that encompasses all the senses, offer relevant perspectives to analyse exhibition narrative and the centrality of the visitor as a an enactor within it. The article uses two case studies to explore the role of place as crucial to construction of knowledge in exhibitions and further elaborates on Serres’ notion of ‘visiting’ as a way to disrupt such construction to enhance the unfolding of narratives and responses.

Key Words: narrative, critical theory, curating, exhibition

In commenting on the landmark exhibition *Les immatûrieux* (1985, Centre George Pompidou, Paris), its curator, the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, observed that an exhibition visitor is ‘a body in movement’ and that this movement is comparable to that of the main character in an eighteenth or nineteenth century formation novel (Lyotard 1996: 167).

One young hero travels the world, has all sorts of adventures, puts them to use to test his intelligence, his courage and passions, and then returns home fully “formed”. Such an organisation of the space-time-subject is strongly marked, from the *Odyssey* up to Joyce’s *Ulysses* ...

...in an exhibition of paintings the experience of the subject is formed by one sense alone, his sight. Throughout the gallery he is offered views (*vedute*), views which are pictures opening on to sites or situations which are the ‘subjects’ of the pictures. By identifying these subjects and the matter in which they are represented, the visitor is in a situation in which he can form himself by his visual experience. Gallery: an establishment of culture, that is to say the acquisition and assimilation of heterogeneous data in the unity of an experience which constitutes a subject. (Lyotard 1996: 167)

In *Les immatûrieux*, Lyotard questioned the nature of exhibition narrative and the intrinsic relation between the sense of sight and the *views* that unravel in a gallery by upsetting the time-space-subject relation that dominates them. The exhibition challenged the experience of the visitor through its labyrinthine structure of 61 disconnected zones that one could meander through, unexpectedly encountering exhibits that mainly consisted of simulated images and virtual rendering while listening through headphones to an assemblage of texts that varied according to the exhibition area to multiform sound effects (Lyotard 1996: 167; Lyotard 1985b). No attempt was made to convey a coherent and meaningful narrative that could only be grasped as a feeling of temporality mobilized across the galleries (Jay 1993: 585; Lyotard 1985a). This loose, fragmentary, and multi-layered narrative contended with sight and the related construction of views as an established model of knowledge-making, bringing to the fore the potentials and

limits of exhibition narrative across the ever-expanding fields of information technologies and virtual reality, and the related perception of time and space that governs post and late modernity.

Drawing on Lyotard's notion of the visitor as a 'body in movement' and of the exhibition's articulation of time-space-subject relations through views, this article considers exhibition narrative theoretically by referring to Michel de Certeau's comparison of spatial and narrative practices and Michel Serres' notion of visiting as a form of seeing that mediates movements and sensory perceptions. The article situates itself within current readings of the museum in terms of psychogeography, sensorium and narrative aesthetics (Basu 2007; Bruno 2003; 2007; den Oudsten 2011; Drobnik 2005; Dudley 2012; Feld 2005; Smith 2010) and further examines exhibition narrative in relation to the production of place in terms of figures of speech inscribed in the process of visiting. In particular, the article addresses the *visibility* produced by place and interrogates the critical relation between the physical and ideological placing of artworks and artefacts and the articulation of exhibition narrative by considering two case studies, namely the exhibitions *Crossing Over: Exchanges in Art, Science and Technology* (2008, The Royal Institution London) and *Psychoanalysis: The Unconscious in Everyday Life* (2010, The Science Museum, London).¹

Narrative and place

Generally understood as the act of relating or telling, narrative 'does not merely represent what happens; it discovers and invents what can happen. It does not only record events; it constitutes and interprets them as meaningful parts of meaningful wholes, whether the latter are situations, practices, persons, or societies' (Prince 2003: 59-60). Structurally, narrative is 'the synthesis of heterogeneous elements' (Ricoeur 1991: 21). Paul Ricoeur refers to the synthesis evident in any kind of narrative as the making of one story out of multiple elements (employment) through the organization of components that are separate, unrelated and even discordant, and the drawing of temporal, intelligible, and mimetic relations (Ricoeur 1991: 21-22). In the case of museum displays and exhibitions, this synthesis implies the mutuality among the exhibits, the modalities of display (layout of the gallery, positioning of the exhibits within it, light levels, wall colour and the like) and the discursive interpretation of the exhibits (text panels, labels, leaflet, audios and catalogues) (Bal 1996: 2-4; and 82-87; Bal, 2004). Hence, in the synthesis that constitutes an exhibition narrative, place – as the physical environment of a display, but also as the contextual framing of an exhibition – is an intrinsic component (Whitehead 2009: 27; Redler 2009), rendering the meaning of an artefact on display susceptible to the narrative context in which it is located, physically and symbolically, pragmatically and ideologically, cognitively and emotionally. In this sense, we can conceive an exhibition not only as a 3D narrative that unravels in space as well as time, but also as a narrative that is conceptually defined by the very place that contains it.

Formally, there are parallels among the narrative constructs that prevail in different historical periods across genres and forms of knowledge and the modalities of exhibit displays (Bal 1996: 5-7; and 97; Ferguson 1996; Preziosi 2006). Realism, as the narrative trope of the nineteenth century novel, biography and essay writing, is evident in the traditional narrative structure of art, natural history and science, and ethnographic museums whereby the privileging of linearity and of an encompassing point of view has enabled the development of parallel stories of historical development and technological advancement that have matched the construction of modern individuality (Preziosi 2004: 77-79). As Lyotard (1996: 167) puts it,

The exhibition of paintings is a modern institution. What does its modernity imply? – the visitor as an eye. The way he looks, not only at the works exhibited but also at the place where the exhibition takes place, is supposedly governed by the principles of "legitimate construction" established in the *quattrocento*: the geometry of the domination over perceptual space; [...]. (Lyotard 1996: 167)

Postmodernity contested the presumed veridicity of sight and the totalizing perspective of a unified point of view in the understanding and configuration of reality; arguing for manifold, contextually situated, historically constructed and relative constructions of knowledge despite or rather as a reflection of the pervading presence of the visual (Jay 1993: 543-46, 581-82;

Liotard 1985b). Such critique also invested the linear narrative structure that traditionally underpins the space-time-subject of museum and exhibition displays. The use of meta-narrative, multiple voices and fragmentation characteristic of postmodern narrative techniques translates in the exhibition to experimentation with multiple intersecting perspectives, and narrative techniques derived from time-based media, such as photography, film and live performance. This creates immersive and sensory environments, often including mutable features of digital and generative web-art that introduce flow and chance mutation and render unpredictability key to the exhibition itself (Roppola 2012: 24-32; den Ouden 2011: 27-29; Dicks 2003; Greenberg 2005; Hansen 2004; Lidchi 2006). What does it mean, then, using Lyotard's phrase, to be 'a body in movement' in this narrative space (Lyotard 1996: 167)? How can we critically implicate the articulation of narrative and the visitor/character movement within it?

Broadening Michel de Certeau's comparison of the act of walking in the city to a speech act – 'a space of enunciation' – the exhibition visitor can be envisaged as a pedestrian who interacts with the spatial order of an exhibition by actualizing some of its spatio-narrative possibilities by making them 'exist' as well as 'emerge' (Certeau 1984: 97). Like a walker in the city, the visitor articulates the narrative structure of an exhibition according to the ways in which s/he relates to spatial elements, producing through tours and detours a 'rhetoric of walking' or of 'visiting' that is both individual and part of social practices. For Certeau, two figures of speech (and practices) are key to the 'rhetoric of walking': synecdoche and asyndeton (Certeau 1984: 101). These figures characterize the pedestrian appropriation and reconfiguration of a place by respectively expanding spatial elements or opening elisions within them. Intimately connected, these two 'pedestrian' figures – to use Certeau's definition – create totality and gaps in the 'spatial continuum' (Certeau 1984: 101). Following the dynamics of synecdoche and asyndeton, the pacing of visiting malleably reconfigures the spatial continuum of an exhibition, establishing its narrative at the interface of the curatorial act of narrating and the visitor's phrasing of this narration within the spatial structures of the exhibition. This brings to the fore a redefinition of seeing as critical to the narrative construction of exhibitions as postulated by Lyotard in relation to the visitor's movement as the re-phrasing of such a narrative.

In a reflection on the epistemology of the senses, French critic Michel Serres rethinks the senses through the material (veils for touch, boxes for hearing, tables for taste and smell) and argues that knowledge and experience are intrinsically interwoven and that the sensible is a condition of both cognition and emotion. This entanglement of content and form is critical to a consideration of exhibition narrative in relation to the visitor as a 'body in movement'. Following Serres, we can assume visiting is an embodied narrative where sensory experience, affect and cognition continuously merge and interact since comprehending takes place in the ever-mutable *sensorium* of the body as it moves in space. 'The sensible, in general', Serres (2008: 305) states, 'holds together all senses, all directions, like a knot or general intersection'. To unravel the knot is to produce a sensorial narrative, to allow for meandering and meditation. This means the privileging of seeing in movement – of vectorial rather than static vision (Connor 1999; Connor 2005).

Traditionally, exhibition narrative exploits the notion of static vision since it enables a detached interaction with the object on display and its sensorial qualities. According to Serres, vision encompasses the sensory qualities of what is represented and of the artefact itself by being detached, almost abstracted, from its materiality. What Serres refers to as 'the world of the image' mediates both the figurative or other reality that the image conjures, and the materiality of the artwork, its texture, size, shades of colours, and the like. As viewer, we perceive and recognize the sensory features of both the object and what it depicts but we do not physically sense them. It is this detachment that renders vision central to the construction of exhibition narratives, despite the attempt to engage other senses. The supposed withdrawal from the sensible that vision enacts pervades the illusion of an exhibition, since only through the separation that vision maintains, is it possible to mediate the encounter between the body of the object on display and that of the visitor. The hand folds into the gaze, and the eye secures distance.

This disengagement of vision is, however, only partial. Serres recuperates the physicality of seeing by comparing it to the experience of visiting, of seeing while one moves in space

(Connor, 1999). Place thus becomes central to the experience of seeing as visiting (Serres 2008: 271). The notion of visiting in Serres' utterance highlights the sensory realm of spatiality and the mediation that it enables for the formation of an affective narrative by comprising all sensory perceptions: 'to visit exceeds vision', since according to Serres (2008: 306) 'visitation explores and details all the senses of the sensible implicated or compacted in its knot'. Hence, 'The mind sees, language sees, the body visits. It always goes beyond its site, by shifting position. The subject sees, the body visits, goes beyond its place, and quits its role and speech' (Serres 2008: 306). Visiting implies the kinetic presence of the body in space and time as an enunciation, in Certeau's terms, of a place through the expansion of spatial elements (synecdoche) or their elision and fragmentation (asyndeton). Through visiting, we may argue, exhibition narrative can be understood as a narrative embedded in the 'knot of the sensible' that the body unravels by experiencing it physically, emotionally and intellectually. It is in this sensorial immersion that the body visits and the visitor, like a pedestrian, narrates an exhibition as she moves from artwork to artwork, object to object, image to image, texts and exhibits; walks through different spaces, pauses, notices different levels of light, hues of colour, perceives details, senses smells, textures, sounds, perhaps hears whispered words or listens to a voice through ear-phones. Accordingly, affect occurs as the unfolding and infolding of sensation, cognition and emotion in the intrinsic interweaving of body and place characteristic of visiting.

In what follows, we shall refer to this theoretical framework and consider two exhibitions that addressed exhibition narrative and its spatial conditioning by respectively reconfiguring the view as a multilayered rather than totalizing narrative trope, and by exploiting the sensory and affective potency of vectorial vision. Both exhibitions used visiting as a form of narrative predicated on a *body in movement*.

Two case studies

Crossing Over: Exchanges in Art, Science and Biotechnologies (2008) was the first exhibition of contemporary art held at the Royal Institution of Great Britain and coincided with its re-opening after refurbishment. Founded in 1799, the Royal Institution is renowned for its role in the public dissemination of science and constituted the conceptual milieu of the exhibition: its framework, context, and subtext. It is there that at the beginning of the 19th century the natural philosopher Humphrey Davy carried out experiments on electricity that ideally foreground current ideas in biotechnologies. On him Mary Shelley based the character of Professor Waldam whose lectures on electricity inspired Viktor Frankenstein's experiment in the homonymous novel. The resonance, slippage, and dissonance between art and science, past and present, the architectonic environment and the artefacts was thus embedded in the exhibition and in the meanings (or conflation of meanings) and responses that it sought to tease out (Albano 2008: 7-8). The exhibition included specially commissioned contemporary artworks that were displayed across the public rooms of the building to establish a dialogue with the specificity of the place – its history, function, ethos, audience and the like – to instigate a reflection upon the current developments in biogenetics and biotechnologies, particularly in relation to their meanings and metaphors. The artworks variously mobilized images and imaginations onto prospective scenarios and contestable futures through an exploration of matter and materials that included 'model organisms, bioluminescence, plants, brain cells and tissue cultures, biometric data and the human form' through living installation, video, sculpture based on rapid prototype techniques, and bio-design (Albano 2008: 7). This created a dense semantic resonance and contextual frisson with the fabric of the Royal Institution, its physical and cultural contingency as a place.

If the spatial specificity of a gallery is conditional to any exhibition, the fully furnished and densely decorated rooms of the Royal Academy determined the curatorial concept and display of *Crossing Over*. From its conception, the exhibition engaged with the imposing presence of the building that the artworks both punctuated and intersected. Hence, in the main entrance hall (Grand Entrance), a space dominated by a large staircase – the Grand Staircase – and by a life-size statue of Michael Faraday wearing academic robes and holding in his left hand an induction ring, we showed a resin bust, *Quadrid* (2008) by Alex Bunn.² The work used prototyping techniques of bio-modelling and mixed images of the human body (medical scan topography

of different tissues), historical anatomical images and architectonic features. Positioned on the opposite side of Faraday's statue, the work stood in juxtaposition of the scientist's formal effigy. *Quadrid's* artificial anatomy – the product of technological manipulation – upset the formal arrangement of the space with its eerie presence: while Faraday's statue faced visitors as they entered the Royal Institution, almost welcoming them in this sanctuary of knowledge, Bunn's bust was shown from the back and visitors had to walk around it or look at it from up the steps of the Grand Staircase. The bust made visitors aware of their own position in relation to the object on display. This concerned both the 'physical positioning' of the visitor's body in relation to the object, and their 'figurative positioning' in relation to the issues addressed by *Crossing Over*. Implicitly, *Quadrid* and Faraday's statue set the scene of the exhibition through the juxtaposition of their incoherent iconography, as they drew attention to the visual tradition of science and to the metaphors with which it is imbued.

From the outset, visitors had also to make their own visit. The exhibition had no narrative trajectory, if not that determined by the architecture of the building. Visitors were provided with a map signposting the artworks in the different rooms and free to navigate, as Certeau's pedestrians, the space at leisure. One could, for instance, walk up the Grand Staircase and encounter on the windowsills on the first floor *The Vegetable Lamb* (2008, common box, topiary, lead planter and photo-print), a site-specific living installation by Eggebert & Gould. The artwork referenced the mythical Vegetable Lamb – an imaginary hybrid believed to be half animal half plant. The artists had shaped lamblike two *buxus sempervirens* (common box) using topiary. For the lead planter, they imitated the medallion decorative motif featuring scientific instruments in the Grand Entrance and showed images related to genetics.

On the first floor, one could either visit the Royal Institution Library or enter the Faraday Lecture Theatre anteroom. In the richly decorated library, on the bookshelves, among historical and contemporary books, one could see bio-design speculative prototypes developed by the designer group Material Beliefs to suggest the theoretical underpinning ideas of design and of its definition of lifestyles. The prototypes included carnivorous robots, a cell tissue interactive devise, biometric devises for childcare, and stylized stem cells.

The reflection upon consumer culture and biotechnologies that the prototypes elicited invested both the social meanings of new technologies and contestable forms of hybrid interactions. Like the surrounding books, the artefacts were the product of intellectual ingenuity and knowledge. The library with its many cultural associations related dialectically to the artefacts on display. The antithesis suggested by the designers' name, 'material beliefs', was enacted through and beyond the artefacts in the specificity of the context in which they featured (Albano 2008: 37) (Fig 1.).

In the anteroom of the lecture theatre, *Chrysalis* (2008, video animation and film) was displayed. This video animation by film director Phoebe von Held was based on Denis Diderot's 1769 philosophical dialogue *D'Alembert's Dream*. The eighteenth century furnishing of the room allowed the visitor to experience a coalescing of times – the historical time of the story (also reflected in the display surrounding) that shifted into futuristic speculation and present knowledge through the interweaving of fantasy and reality. Imagining cloning as the future of human reproduction Diderot's text speculates beyond contemporary eighteenth century knowledge through a scenario that resonates with today's



Fig. 1 Crossing Over: Exchanges in Art, Science and Biotechnology, Installation shot (Royal Institution of Great Britain): Phoebe von Held, *Chrysalis*, 2008 © Thierry Bal



Fig. 2 Crossing Over: Exchanges in Art, Science and Biotechnology, Installation shot (Royal Institution of Great Britain): Material beliefs, installation shots Elio Caccavale, Neuroscope, 2008 © Thierry Bal

prospects of biotechnologies, producing a context for our own time and a debate for the role of science in our society of which the Institution is an advocate. The relation between the artwork and the exhibition space thus enhanced a dialogue that implicated the institutional and cultural significance of the setting of the exhibition and that engaged the visitor with the place and her own positioning within it (Fig 2.).

Through their distinctiveness, the contemporary artworks drew attention to the surrounding ambience, to the feature of the buildings and to the historical artefacts and images that were also on display. The question of what one looks at but also how one looks in an exhibition was implicitly raised. This further included long exposure photographs taken in the light produced by luminescent bacteria that were projected in the Faraday Lecture Theatre and featured illustrious scientists who had lectured there (*Exploring the Invisible* by Anne Brodie); a video-work based on video-microscopy, *Cocoon* by Kathleen Rogers, that showed the development of artificially mutated zebra-fish that was displayed on the building basement and could also be viewed from above. The work resonated with the reconstruction of a laboratory in the same area of the building and the display of scientific instruments from the Royal Institution Collection. A further video of the decomposing and recomposing of a hand-cast in water (*Fountain* by Carl Stevenson) was shown in the sitting area of the bar.

Thematically related, the artworks mobilized a range of issues concerning biogenetics and biotechnologies, and addressed some of their complexities and significance by suggesting connections between past and present, human and non-human, nature and technology. The 'views' that the exhibition deliberately created within the Royal Institution helped to question constructions of scientific knowledge and of its products as they destabilized traditional perspectives. The interfacing between the fabric of the building and the artworks on display was yet for the visitor to discover while *visiting*. Indeed, the encounter with the artworks could also be serendipitous, if one sat in the bar, or visited the Institution for a lecture or other events. For some visitors, curiosity might have triggered the desire to find out more about what on display, for others it might have been a mere fortuitous encounter. Equally, the exhibition brought to the Institution people who did not know about its activities, creating a different kind of encounter with its environment and consequently with the artworks. As the title suggested, *Crossing Over* aimed to criss-cross boundaries, creating encounters and dialogues.

An exhibition on psychoanalysis – *Psychoanalysis: The Unconscious in Everyday Life* – at the Science Museum in London in 2010, presented a different, though equally critical, relation to place and the views that underpin exhibition narrative. The exhibition was part of a series of events to mark the centenary of the British Psychoanalytical Society. It was intended as a celebration of psychoanalysis as a cultural discourse as well as a form of therapy. The context of the Science Museum inevitably brought about the positioning of the discipline of psychoanalysis as a science. Both the museum and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, that had commissioned it, embraced the implicit provocation that this caused – and that occupied most of the reviews and blogs. The nature of the debate tells of forms of institutionalization that are culturally relevant, and that impinged on the background though they were not directly addressed by the exhibition. As a guest curator, the issue for me was part of the conditions and

the set up I was working with, and that contextually defined the space of the show.

The place assigned for the exhibition was on the bridge in the main ground floor area of the museum. The question of the representability of psychoanalysis, a fundamentally discursive and non-visual practice, within the context of a museum, which is rooted in material culture and in the understanding of the physical world (i.e. science), was the central problem (Albano 2010: 12). The cabinet (of curiosities) – as an array of artefacts that is at the origin of the museum and a metaphor of the mind – constituted the galvanizing image for an exploration of the unconscious in everyday life through the themes of play, object relations and the uncanny. Four cabinets punctuated the exhibition and framed it through audio recordings by analysts who explored various psychoanalytical ideas related to the unconscious focusing on the objects on display.

These included 'Freud's Cabinet' which displayed antiquities from Freud's collection that featured in his consulting room and that were a referent of his theories; the 'Cabinet of Fantasy', for which we used toys from the collection of the child-psychiatrist Margaret Lowenfeld, on display for the first time, to create fantasy scenes drawing from recurring visual features in dreams (this was a cabinet without audio for the visitor to 'interpret'); the 'Cabinet of the Everyday' that consisted of an array of everyday objects – old and new – that could trigger unconscious associations; and the 'Cabinet of Wish-fulfilment' that showed ancient votives and nineteenth-century tattoos on human skin from the Wellcome Collection at the Science Museum to address unconscious relations to the body. Other material included drawings from the Melanie Klein archive and the Winnicott archive, also on display for the first time, and toys used by the child analyst Betty Joseph. This material was presented alongside artworks by leading artists, including Joseph Kosuth, Tim Noble and Sue Webster, Grayson Perry, Mona Hatoum and Carlo Zanni, and three commissioned works, two on the uncanny and a double-screen video animation that dealt with the connections between the psychoanalytical unconscious and the neuro-scientific non-conscious in early attachment.

The artworks were an essential component of the exhibition and in dialogue with the other artefacts on display – whether everyday objects or material related to psychoanalysis –



Fig. 3 Psychoanalysis: The Unconscious in Everyday Life, Gallery installation shot (Science Museum, London): 'Fantasy's Cabinet', Grayson Perry, In Praise of Shadows (2005); Mona Hatoum, Hair Necklace (1995). Courtesy of the Science Museum

layering meanings and forms of representability congruous to psychoanalytical ideas of the unconscious through an exploration of form and materiality. This was not, however, without curatorial concerns because of the context in which the artworks were shown, namely the Science Museum and the psychoanalytical frame of the exhibition. Although all the artworks referenced psychoanalytical ideas more or less overtly, it was critical not to impose a restricting reading on them, and retain the frisson that they created with the rest of the exhibition. The space produced this resistance. The artworks stood out, changed the feeling of the space; their being art-objects conditioned the exhibition through their unexpected presence, which destabilized the science context, and almost pre-empted the question of why psychoanalysis should be exhibited at the Science Museum. They introduced different moods and cultural associations. They also brought different display and museum practices that were at odds with the larger shell of the museum. An implicit dialogue thus formed between the artefacts in the exhibition and the exhibits on display elsewhere inviting the visitor to look afresh – with the unconscious in mind, so to speak – at the rest of the museum (Fig 3.).

As in the case of *Crossing Over*, the exhibition did not have a specific narrative trajectory. The landing where it took place felt both exposed and self-contained as a conceptual and experiential frame of the exhibition. A mezzanine or landing is, in fact, a place of rest: 'It is a space that alludes to a turning, to a moment of disorientation and puzzlement or of reflection' (Albano 2010: 10). It functioned as a transitional space that could be envisaged as marking off the external world to create the temporary creative illusion of the exhibition. This transitional space with multiple entries was for the visitor to meander and wander around. Joseph Kosuth's '*O. & A. / FID! (To I.K. and G.F.)*' (1987), a *trompe l'oeil* installation originally created for the Freud Museum in Vienna, which could be seen from far afield, set the scene for the 'in-between' space of the exhibition. The work quotes a page from Freud's English translation of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, partly obscured by a picture of the empty entrance hall of the analyst's house in Vienna. The frame of the photograph leans against the text, adding to the effect of the image that in the original display mirrors the surroundings. By using different kind of texts (visual and verbal), the work created a figurative threshold for the exhibition as it alluded to a space of substitution and inner associations, a space in which 'concrete pictorial' objects were 'slotted into' and replaced by what could be thought of as 'the abstract expression' of the dream thoughts (Albano 2010: 10-13).

The orchestration of the exhibition was consonant with an idea of the unconscious, which in psychoanalytical terms manifests itself in disconcerting and unexpected ways. Objects of different sizes were displayed in ways that made the visitor lean down, walk around, move close or look in-between and up the showcases. The small scenes made of minute toys in the 'Cabinet of Fantasy' were lit to produce shadows across the glass shelves and through a hole a little boat floated in the void between the shelves. The cabinet was juxtaposed to Grayson Perry's large vase, *In Praise of Shadows* (2005), a response to a commission to celebrate the writer Hans Christian Andersen, and based on one of Andersen's tales, *The Shadow*, which tells the story of a man whose shadow initially leaves him and then returns to haunt him, slowly taking up his life. For Perry, this 'sinister story about our dark side' resonates with Andersen's troubled sexuality and the artist's own exploration of his emotional landscape (Klein 2009: 122 quoted in Albano 2010: 14). Densely layered with images – combining photographs and drawings – and finely pearl glazed with dark crimson, grey-blue, black and gold, the vase was in itself a 'fantasy object' that evoked through the reflecting surface of the ceramic the immaterial yet potently psychic realms of unsolved conflicts, and unexpressed desires, a mayhem of feelings and of the innermost reality of the individual's experience (Albano 2010: 14).

Throughout the exhibition, the objects in the showcases mirrored the artworks and vice-versa, inviting associations and an imaginative approach that privileged feeling over knowing. The ordinary objects in the 'Cabinet of the Everyday', including an iPhone, gloves, stiletto shoes, syringes, medications, an empty picture frame, postcards and the like, resonated with Mona Hatoum's *Hair Necklace* (1995) – a necklace made with the artist's hair – and Carlo Zanni's *The Impossible Ties between Illness and Success* (2006-10), an offline video of man consumed by the signs of success shown on iPod. Both artworks reference ordinary objects to conjure internal projections of the mind. Hatoum's necklace draws on the nineteenth-century tradition of sentimental jewellery that used the hair of loved ones in pendants and lockets, as a memento

and a tangible sign of an affective bond. Hair evoked religious reliquaries for which the bodily parts are both metaphor and metonymy of an inner emotional landscape. The subtle allusiveness of the work built a complex web of references at the boundaries of illusion and reality, of mourning and longing, of the self and the other, of individual and collective meanings (Albano 2010: 14-15). Zanni's artwork explores obsession and the depressive state of a character consumed by success. Originally developed for the web and presented off-line through an iPod, *The Possible Ties between Illness and Success* consists of a short film in which the skin of the main character shows an increasing number of blemishes that are a direct consequence of the original logging on of visitors to the site (this version includes three different stages). The film creates an inner scenario of loneliness and pain echoed in the words from John Haskell's *American Purgatorio* (2005) that add to the work's ephemeral and surreal quality. As a result, the currency of new communication technology and of contemporary culture is haunted by the conflicting experience that shapes the original interface of the artwork and that rendered palpable the contradicting feelings that underpin its unfolding (Albano 2010: 15).

In this context, seeing was conceived as unstable, in movement, affective and deeply subjective. Indeed, seeing was coupled with listening, and with the slightly unnerving sensation of hearing a disembodied voice characteristic of the psychoanalytical setting, in which the analyst is heard but not seen by the analysand. Visitors were invited to relate to the exhibits emotionally, to 'free associate', as one of the audios stated, perhaps winning resistances as they moved around the space and 'saw' the exhibition. The audios integrated the discursive interpretation of the exhibits within the fabric of the exhibition, punctuating the space like the display cabinets. This layered the interpretative levels of the material, though it also maintained a seamless flow between direct psychoanalytical content and the visitor's own perspective. Ultimately, the encounter could only happen through visiting as a process that equally involved seeing and hearing, and the visitor's intellectual and emotional engagement with the physical and affective environment of the exhibition – the imaginative room of its narrative.

Narrating place

Crossing Over and *Psychoanalysis* exemplify two ways of visiting that, following Serres, implicate the articulation of exhibition narrative in terms of movement and place but also of seeing at the interface of sensing and knowing. *Crossing Over* enacted visiting by using a loose and malleable narrative structure that was shaped by the dialogical relations between the exhibits and the Royal Institution as a site that constructed views for the visitor to discover and interpret. This was articulated through narrative expansion and elision as visitors moved at their leisure in the space, following their own route through the building, including rooms that were not part of the exhibition. These rooms of transit acted as elision and digression to trajectories of visiting, as alternative sites of the meandering that visiting implied. The encounter with the artworks was yet also expanded by the context of the display, the rich architectonic environment of the Royal Institution. Hence the prints, paintings, and scientific instruments shown in close vicinity to the contemporary artworks rendered seeing inevitably digressive and situated. As suggested, the exhibition explicitly called upon the Royal Institution and used it to create views that, as in the case of Bunn's *Quadrid* or *Material Beliefs*' prototypes, created a frisson with the surroundings, while von Held's *Chrysalis* resonated with the eighteenth-century surroundings suggesting analogies and associations. Since the artworks in *Crossing Over* both merged and stood out from the context in which they were presented they invited the visitor to question their presence and in so doing to engage with the discursive relation of time-space-subject, rendering the exhibition a place of enquiry open to interpretation: a place of encounter and dialogue, of exchange and perhaps surprises, a place of pluralities, of multiple perspectives and ways of knowing. Continuity was, in Certeau's terms (Certeau 1984: 101), 'undone': asyndeton, as the figure of speech that privileges fragmentation, characterized the narrative space of *Crossing Over* whereby resonances enlarged the critical space of the exhibition.

Psychoanalysis broadened the narrative of visiting by stressing its sensorial and affective potential as it exploited the materiality of the objects on display and their power to evoke. Unlike other kind of exhibitions in which the role of the material artefacts is primarily related to their historical, aesthetic or contextual relevance, in this case the objects on display



Fig. 4 Psychoanalysis: The Unconscious in Everyday Life, 'Cabinet of the Everyday', detail, installation shot (Science Museum, London. Courtesy of the Science Museum)

were selected for their associative and affective potency. Hence, the objects in the cabinets were placed in ways that disrupted common practices and facilitated visiting and its vectorial vision. This was intended to make the exhibition a place of sensing and feeling as well as knowing, to produce, in Serres's phrase, a 'knot of the sensible'. Although touch and smell were not directly used, the exhibition as a whole, and in particular the 'Cabinet of Everyday Objects', brought to the fore the tactility of objects, whether as the sensual and seductive feeling of a silk glove and a velvety red lipstick, or the unpleasant and frightening one of a scalpel or of a syringe. Dirt similarly conveyed unpleasant smell and disgust (Fig 4). This sensory and affective landscape also resonated with the materiality of the artworks, their sensual plasticity, frailty, or mesmerizing presence. The exhibition used the dynamic modulation of visiting to unravel a personal film of inner associations that the exhibits and the display as a whole evoked. Freud suggests that a 'dream-thought' is translated into manifest visual images, a compressed and composite blending process through which the unconscious abstract thought is replaced by a concrete graphic one through strategies of condensation, displacement and substitution (Albano 2010: 12). The exhibition referenced this translation by inscribing the unconscious into the materiality of its narrative structure. It anchored ideas of the unconscious in parallel idioms of materiality and affect, of understanding and experience, of sensing, emoting and knowing, and figuratively 'tied' them 'in a knot' through the visit. In Certeau's terms, details were amplified through the associative webs that the visit spun, rendering the space 'more dense' (Certeau 1984: 101). Synecdoche, as a figure of speech, defined the narrative space of *Psychoanalysis* as the condensation and substitution that the visitor enacted through visiting.

Both *Crossing Over* and *Psychoanalysis* were characterized by loose and free-flowing narrative structures constructed around the visitor as a 'body in movement' within the experiential and figurative knot of knowing and feeling of the exhibitions. More generally, exhibition narrative can be envisaged as a place where knowledge, emotion and imagination merge, and it is ideally unravelled through visiting; it is a place that visiting expands and in which it opens elisions: '[t]hrough these swellings, shrinkings, and fragmentations, that is, through

these rhetorical operations a spatial phrasing of an analogical (composed of juxtaposed citations) and elliptical (made of gaps, lapses, and allusions) type is created' (Certeau 1984: 101). Through this 'pedestrian' appropriation visitors become the protagonists of an exhibition narrative, in the 'time-space-subject' of views that they do not only see but instead visit, in which they, the bodies that visit, are the enactors of a journey that do not only follow the implicit modulation of walking inscribed in the display, but also the meandering of a subjective experience. Narrative thus is, in becoming, unstable and yet situated at the interface of static seeing and of its vectorial counterpart; visiting and place interweave and mutually redefine each other.

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Notes

¹ The author was curator of both these exhibitions.

² This is the main though not the only public entrance to the Royal Institution.

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***Dr. Caterina Albano**

Dr. Caterina Albano is a senior research fellow and curator at Central Saint Martin's College, University of the Arts London. Albano curates, lectures and publishes in the fields of art, cultural history and theory, in particular emotion and affect, memory and consciousness; and on the theory of curating.

Email address: c.albano@csm.arts.ac.uk

Dr. Caterina Albano
Research Fellow/Curator
Artakt
Central Saint Martins College of Arts and Design
1 Granary Square
London, N1C 4AA

Email: c.albano@csm.arts.ac.uk; caterina@artakt.co.uk

www.artakt.co.uk