

Vanishing Acts

Do museums still need objects?
Discuss in relation to the Hyde Park Barracks.



Source: (Museums & Galleries NSW, “Hyde Park Barracks Reopens with a New Immersive Digital Experience - MGNSW,” MGNSW, March 5, 2020, <https://mgnsw.org.au/articles/hyde-park-barracks-reopens-with-new-immersive-digital-experience/>.)

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*'If museums keep open the space that lies between artefacts being either carriers of information or objects of detached contemplation, they keep open the possibility that visitors can reflect creatively, sometimes even transformatively, on things and themselves.'*¹

Museums are spaces that enjoy civic and cultural authority immortalising human experience through the display of objects. In 1980, Australia's first major publicly funded archaeological excavation recovered 95,000 objects from the rubble of Sydney's deteriorating Hyde Park Barracks, where for 160 years wall cavities and floorboards enshrined the detritus of colonial life.² Despite the wealth of artifactual evidence, curatorial choices have seen objects vanishing from display replaced by interpretive absence, reconstructions and immersive experiences. Within these vanishing acts lies a tension between the role of museums as disseminators of a factual past and their evolution into social forums.³ The embrace of postmodernist theory by museum curators has shaped institutional obsession over self-conscious construction, conceptually rendering objects pawns of a fallible truth. Whilst this reevaluation of museum epistemology has seen curators acknowledge the limits of historical knowledge, the complete removal of objects creates a vacuum where only interpretation remains. To prevent audience alienation, objects are still required as democratic anchor points for the public to interpret the emerging concept-oriented displays of colonial experience. Technological innovation has

¹ Sandra Dudley, "Materiality Matters: Experiencing the Displayed Object," *Working Papers in Museum Studies* Number 8 (2012), https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/102520/8_dudley_2012.pdf?sequence=1.

² "Hyde Park Barracks: A Keeper of Lost Things," Museums of History NSW, 2023, <https://mhnsw.au/stories/general/hyde-park-barracks-a-keeper-of-lost-things/>.

³ Steven Conn, *Do Museums Still Need Objects?*. (University Of Pennsylvania Pre, 2010).

subsequently forged alternative antidotes to the univocality of rigid object classification, where immersive displays have seemingly supplanted artefacts by providing experiential pathways to historical knowledge. However, the efficacy of these immersive experiences is contingent on its object-based epistemological foundations, where the artefacts authenticity creates institutional authority to provide the historical narrative. These debates over display have neglected the profound populist significance of the material trace, where at the most fundamental level objects are vessels of memory that satisfy public desire for Sydney's historical origins. The potency of objects does not lie in what are as synecdoches of knowledge, but rather what they can do as storytellers within an institution beholden to its audience. In historical construction the tangible evidence ultimately cannot be rendered obsolete, leaving objects to endure as the quintessential facilitators of public historical consciousness.

Museum curators in the 1990s were challenged by the academic paradigm of postmodernism, which questioned the conceptual significance of the Hyde Park Barracks' vast reservoir of artefacts, where the subsequent attempt to circumvent a fallible single truth in construction manifested in the complete removal of objects. In the nineteenth century institutions origins, traditional museological practices were defined by the classification of anthropological and archaeological evidence to create an inflexible 'factual' narrative of human development.⁴ The stoic nature of objects' as 'fact' became increasingly malleable throughout the twentieth century, as deconstructionist discourse within the academy placed pressures on curators 'to confront and address the changes in our cultures, which allow us to look at history outside of the solidified

⁴ The, "The Museum's Early Days," The Australian Museum, 2023, <https://australian.museum/about/history/the-museums-early-days/>.

narratives.⁵ The cultural change in academia is outlined by British historian Alun Munslow, as history in this postmodern paradigm was put on trial, ‘no longer about domesticating or controlling the past without acknowledging why you are doing it’.⁶ This renegotiation of evidence, objectivity and purpose, that had formed the fundamental mythos of the historical discipline manifested in the objects as arbiters of fallible truth that was not reflective of the diverse interpretations and experiences of the past.⁷ New relationships between museums and communities were encouraged by art historian Peter Vergos’ *New Museology* to transcend didactic educators by actively engaging in the self-conscious political dimensions of construction.⁸ These new museological practices included curatorial prompts of absence, exposing the constructed nature of historical knowledge to the public which leaves gaps and silences to be filled by contemporary audience imagination. Despite the wealth of artifactual evidence, in 1991 Senior Curator at Historic Houses Trust NSW, Peter Emmett, embraced the postmodern challenge by curating the Hyde Park Barracks into a ‘contrived ruin’.⁹ Emmett reflected Vergo’s new museological concerns for the self-conscious dimensions of construction as his exhibitions highlighted the limitations of objects to holistically embody the diverse experiences of those banished to occupy the antipodean gulag. Emmett considered traditional museological practice as ‘crowbar history’ smashing the ‘mirror of the past into a thousand unrecognisable fragments...to be catalogued and displayed as historical objects devoid of soul’.¹⁰ Emmett’s belief that objects’ traditional display crafted ‘a fragmented creature of the bureaucratic

⁵ Donatien Grau, *Living Museums : Conversations with Leading Museum Directors* (Berlin Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2020).

⁶ Alun Munslow, *The Routledge Companion to Historical Studies* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2006).

⁷ Annette B Fromm, Viv Golding, and Per B Rekdal, *Museums and Truth* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014).

⁸ Peter Vergo, *The New Museology* (London: Reaktion Books, 1989).

⁹ Peter Emmett, “‘Convictism: Hyde Park Barracks and the Antipodean Gulag,’” *Historic Environment* 10, no. 2 & 3 (January 1, 1993): 26.

¹⁰ Emmett, “‘Convictism: Hyde Park Barracks and the Antipodean Gulag,’”

imagination' manifested as the only material trace left on display were silhouette cut-outs placed in the window to cast shadows across the vacuous room (refer to Appendix 1).¹¹ The removal of objects allegedly liberated the visitor to engage in the multiple possibilities of the past and interpret history in its purest unadulterated form away from claims of objective 'fact' that stifle the complex experiences of the past. As historians obsessed over providing the audience with the most transparent picture of the past these objects were relegated as arbiters of a fallible truth, and their incorporation as 'fact' became a point of acrimony.

Objects embody the most democratic form of historical communication preventing public alienation from the emerging concept based displays, as the material trace provides the public with a tangible lens to view the past regardless of how malleable our understanding of it is. The postmodern criticism of object-based epistemology has enabled historians to acknowledge the limits of what we can know with certainty, where Emmett's 'contrived ruin' marked a shift towards concept-oriented displays that engaged the public in the complexities of historical construction. Whilst a history through objects may never be able to reflect a holistic picture of the past, Emmett's devotion to semiotic ambivalence in evocative displays of absence left a vacuum of interpretation that alienated various community groups. Objects have subsequently been reincorporated and embedded into the foundations of the Hyde Park Barracks and Emmett has bowed out as Senior Curator under criticisms that the displays presented a "benign and slippery language which camouflages its facts in the process of presenting them".¹² The Hyde Park Barracks was forced to recognise the alienating implications when the audience is left to assume the role of the historian and erect a historical interpretation with conceptual themes and

¹¹ Emmett, "'Convictism: Hyde Park Barracks and the Antipodean Gulag,'"

¹² Julie Marcus, "Erotics and the Museum of Sydney" 8, no. 2 (January 1, 1996): 4.

artistic prompts. Fundamentally, museums rely on the ‘materialistic nature of trace, the immediacy of the recording, and the visibility of the image’ to communicate with their diverse audience.¹³ Objects are powerful democratic storytellers, giving definition to the concept-oriented displays of colonial experiences such as ‘Control’, ‘Fear’ and ‘Hope’, fundamentally enabling the site to disseminate historical consciousness. The current displays within the Hyde Park Barracks juxtapose the immersive experiences, reconstruction and absence with reverence of the wealth of artifactual evidence to attentively address the needs of the audience.¹⁴ Emmett’s legacy of absence continues to manifest in conceptual displays, where painted lines on the floor of the room ‘Control’ demonstrate the extremes of solitary confinement and the convict’s punitive existence (refer to Appendix 2). However, this evocative absence is given definition through the instruments of torture displayed in translucent cases (refer to Appendix 3). The material trace transcends language and semiotic ambivalence, democratising public access to understanding of the hostile colonial penal system in the antipodean gulag.¹⁵ Professor Andrea Witcomb in *Re-Imagining the Museum Beyond the Mausoleum* argues that the ‘not to abstract, not to provide an explanatory framework’ would be turning away from the nature of the museums as key mediators between the cultural pressures of the academy and the public.¹⁶ Rendering historical evidence obsolete fundamentally dissolves the past, rather, leaving an interpretative void that fails the museums function to facilitate historical consciousness. The authentic artefacts provide a tangible link to the past, and ultimately endure as ‘a history of the world told through objects should therefore, with sufficient imagination, be more equitable than

¹³ Graham Black, “Museums, Memory and History,” *Cultural and Social History* 8, no. 3 (September 2011): 415–27, <https://doi.org/10.2752/147800411x13026260433275>.

¹⁴ Fiona Cameron and Sarah Kenderdine, *Theorizing Digital Cultural Heritage* (MIT Press (MA), 2007).

¹⁵ Emmett, “Convictism: Hyde Park Barracks and the Antipodean Gulag”

¹⁶ Andrea Witcomb, *Re-Imagining the Museum : Beyond the Mausoleum* (London ; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, Dr, 2007).

one based solely on texts.’¹⁷

Despite the failures of the absence of objects, the museum's continued self-conscious attentiveness to the needs of the contemporary audience has seen digital innovation seemingly supplant the epistemological foundations of objects as storytellers. Historian Klas Grinnell describes how society has entered a postnormal period in which perceptions of the ‘multiplicity’ of human experience has seen truth become malleable, and museum’s are increasingly wary of speaking for others.¹⁸ Though objects in traditional museological practice ‘stood as a synecdoche for a larger body of knowledge’ where their correspondence with the public would be ‘seamless’, experimental practice continued.¹⁹ The current curators were tasked with negotiating the failures of Emmett whilst circumventing rigid classification that repressed the polyvocality of past experience. The 2020 renovation of the Hyde Park Barracks saw \$18 million spent on state of the art experiential displays which trigger historical vignettes as the visitor moves around the museum.²⁰ Exhibits such as ‘*Named in the Margin*’ offer in-situ displays where the ambient audio of coughing, mumbling and rats rustling transform the reconstructed hammocks into a pre-existing ‘slice of life’ in the convict sleeping quarters (refer to Appendix 4).²¹ The advent of immersive displays attempts to create a living history inviting the public to ostensibly participate in the experiences of the past that can not be embodied in objects, as opposed to passively receiving the historical narrative. Experimentation with technological innovation in digital media, sensory recreations and audio exhibitions intended to ‘boost visitation’ by revolutionising

¹⁷ Neil Macgregor, *A History of the World in 100 Objects* (New York: Viking, 2011).

¹⁸ Annette B Fromm, Viv Golding, and Per B Rekdal, *Museums and Truth* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014).

¹⁹ Conn, “*Do Museums Still Need Objects?*”

²⁰ “Sydney’s 200-Year-Old Hyde Park Barracks Has Reopened after Its Multimillion-Dollar Transformation,” Concrete Playground, March 5, 2020, <https://concreteplayground.com/sydney/design-style/hyde-park-barracks-museum-reopen>.

²¹ Kate Gregory, “Art and Artifice: Peter Emmett’s Curatorial Practice in the Hyde Park Barracks and Museum of Sydney,” *Fabrications* 16, no. 1 (June 2006): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10331867.2006.10539577>.

the manner in which the Hyde Park Barracks communicated the site's historical narrative with the public, seemingly supplanting the object as a 'seamless' storyteller.²²

Though experientially led exhibitions may provide an antidote to the univocality of the traditional museological practice, the museum's epistemological foundation endures as objects provide a potent role in reinforcing institutional authority. As a public facing institution the Hyde Park Barracks learnt from its own past of audience alienation by not rendering objects obsolete but rather overlaying experimental displays to imbue the artefacts with contemporary relevance. The public expectation of the authoritative recording and retelling of history through the material world is testament to objects' significance within the museum, as 'assuming that our memories are fallible, we rely on museums as well as historians to get the past right for us.'²³ The deployment of historical evidence in displays fundamentally creates a contract of trust between the historical representation and the public, to ensure the audience is receptive to the institutional narrative of the past. At the core of the Hyde Park Barracks 2020 renovation lies the display of 4000 objects, many for the first time, ultimately providing the framework that enables the experimental practice to effectively communicate the historical narrative.²⁴ Philosopher Walter Benjamin outlines in his seminal text *'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'* that 'authenticity contributes to the authority of an object', and any mechanical reproduction subsequently dissolves this authority.²⁵ The public's perception of these experiential and digital displays as reconstructions does not formulate the same contract of trust in the institution. The

²² Julie Power, "Blue Sky to Fund 200th Anniversary Renos of Hyde Park Barracks," *The Sydney Morning Herald* (The Sydney Morning Herald, April 30, 2019), <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/blue-sky-to-fund-200th-anniversary-renos-of-hyde-park-barracks-20190429-p51icz.html>.

²³ Susan A. Crane, "Memory, Distortion, and History in the Museum," *History and Theory* 36, no. 4 (December 1997): 44–63, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0018-2656.00030>.

²⁴ MGNSW, "Hyde Park Barracks Reopens with a New Immersive Digital Experience"

²⁵ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (London: Penguin Books, 1935).

implementation of objects as storytellers allows the public to connect with the material traces of the site as it developed from the shackles of convict incarceration to the bonnet of a girl held in an immigration processing centre. Though immersive experiences represent the polyvocality of past human experience, the Hyde Park Barracks reconciles with the need to maintain a level of institutional authority for the audience to understand that the story being told is not merely a fictional narrative. Within this synthetic and readily reproduced twenty-first century, the public continues to rely on object authenticity to create institutional authority and enable the dissemination of knowledge.

The acrimonious debates around object-based epistemology in the Hyde Park Barracks fundamentally neglects the populist significance of the wealth of the material trace in the initial 1980 excavation, which saw the subsequent collation of objects as vessels of memory fulfilling public desire for a historical ontological ground. Within Australia, the public's increasing interest and engagement in historical construction throughout the twentieth century ultimately pressured museums to evolve from the nineteenth century institutions' of rigid didacticism to social mausoleums obligated to preserve memory. In 1974, the Australian Government established a Committee of Inquiry on Museums and National Collections to investigate the burgeoning grass roots museum movement. The committee's 1975 Piggott Report demonstrated the intimate relationship between the public and the museum institution, as the public actively engaged in the immortalisation of past human experience to conceptualise their existence within the fabric of society.²⁶ This manifested in the swift halting of the Hyde Park Barracks' 1979 renovation as objects of populist significance were unveiled within the debris - scraps of fabric and personal

²⁶ P.H. Piggott et al., "Museums in Australia 1975 - the Piggott Report," 1975, https://www.nma.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0004/558508/Museums_in_Australia_1975_Piggott_Report.pdf.

treasures uncovered from cavities in the stairs and walls, hoarded by rats over 160 years before.²⁷ The 250 volunteers involved in the excavation demonstrate the extent of the desire for connection to Sydney's colonial origins and the profoundly meaningful nature of the material traces to the public.²⁸ These objects were recognised as having a unique ability to provide historical continuity as they 'occurred in the past but survive in the present' reflecting the cultures that produced them rather than mirroring the society which consumes them.²⁹ The classification and display of seemingly menial domestic objects provides a tangible link to the reality of the past, where the memory of Sydney's origins satisfies the public desire for historical ontological ground identified in the Piggott Report.³⁰ In a world where 'experience is transitory, uprooting and unstable', the Hyde Park Barracks collection immortalises human existence as objects guarantee 'origin and stability as well as depth of time and space.'³¹ Therefore objects are vessels of memory with profound public meaning, where the collation and curation of humanities detritus primarily functions to immortalise experiences of the past that conceptualise Sydney's origins.

The modernist literary figure Gertrude Stein's assertion that 'you can be modern, or you can be a museum, but you can't be both' foreshadowed the expansion of the role of the museum and

²⁷ "Rats Were the 'First Curators' at Sydney Museum Hyde Park Barracks - ABC News," *ABC News*, February 19, 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-02-20/rats-were-this-sydney-museums-first-curators/11980680>.

²⁸ Catherine M. Cameron and John B. Gatewood, "Seeking Numinous Experiences in the Unremembered Past," *Ethnology* 42, no. 1 (January 1, 2003): 55, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3773809>.

²⁹ Susan A. Crane, "Memory, Distortion, and History in the Museum," *History and Theory* 36, no. 4 (December 1997): 44–63, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0018-2656.00030>.

³⁰ "Objects and Museums: Biographies, Narratives and Identity Bonds (2017)," *Openedition.org*, March 2017, <http://journals.openedition.org/midas/1142>.

³¹ Mehmet Tayanç and Hasan Yeniçirak, "Museums as Spaces Carrying Social Memory Toplumsal Hafızanın Taşıyıcı Mekânı Olarak Müzeler," accessed June 23, 2023, <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/2457251>.

subsequently catalysed acrimony over its object-based epistemological origins.³² The curatorial embrace of the postmodern challenge within the academy attempted to render objects as arbiters of truth obsolete. This renegotiation saw the advent of experimentation with digital technology and experiential display techniques liberating the polyvocality of human experience from the perceived repressive classification of objects. The subsequent vanishing of objects was experimentally supplanted by interpretative absence, reconstructions and immersive experiences enabling the museum to evolve from disseminators of a factual past to a social forum, immortalising human experience. The presence of objects rather than their absence provides the foundations for the successful conceptual and experimental displays of the ‘modern’ museum where they function as democratic anchor points, authoritative storytellers and vessels of memory. Lying at the crossroads of ideas, objects and people, the museum as an institution is a culmination of its own past beholden to audience engagement. The potency of objects resides in their role as historical storytellers with profound populist significance, reflecting the human tendency to collect and immortalise human experience in the material world. For museums to fulfil their institutional purpose as a conduit to historical consciousness they still need objects that fundamentally ‘offer people the simple pleasure of looking and the thrill of being in the presence of real things made by human hands through time and across space.’³³

Word Count: 2496

³² Hal Foster, “London Review of Books,” London Review of Books, December 16, 2004, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v26/n24/hal-foster/it-s-modern-but-is-it-contemporary>.

³³ Conn, “*Do Museums Still Need Objects?*”

Appendix 1

Curator Peter Emmet's exhibition of absence in convict silhouettes



Source: "Hyde Park Barracks Museum | Tonkin Zulaikha Greer Architects," Tonkin Zulaikha Greer Architects | Tonkin Zulaikha Greer Architects is a Sydney based award winning architectural firm. For enquiries phone +61 2 9215 4900, April 18, 2008, <https://www.tzg.com.au/project/hyde-park-barracks/>.

Appendix 2

Outline of Solitary Confinement Cell



Photograph taken by student on the 18th of December 2022

Appendix 3

Cat of Nine Tails displayed in Translucent Case



Source: Matt Mitchel, *Hyde Park Barracks*, June 2022, *Google Photos*, June 2022,
https://www.google.com/maps/contrib/108918058763168348548/photos/@-33.8696036,151.212585,3a,75y,90t/data=!3m7!1e2!3m5!1sAF1QipPgiU_xNDbwPe7_aaUccpZ6Lr8IIkrNXivqa_Mm!2e10!6shhttps:%2F%2Flh5.googleusercontent.com%2Fp%2FAF1QipPgiU_xNDbwPe7_aaUccpZ6Lr8IIkrNXivqa_Mm%3Dw365-h273-k-no!7i4624!8i3468!4m3!8m2!3m1!1e1?entry=ttu.

Appendix 4

Reconstruction of Convict Sleeping Quarters in the Hyde Park Barracks



Photograph taken by student on the 18th of December 2022

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