

Museums, material culture and performance in Southeast Asia

- Fiona Kerlogue, ed. 2004. *Performing objects: museums, material culture and performance in Southeast Asia*. London: The Horniman Museum. xiv + 187pp. ISBN 1 903 33801 8

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Recently, an increasing number of books have dealt with museum-related issues and with material culture. From the perspective of many working in the *intersection* of these areas, however, the number of books on material culture in museums is still relatively small – despite Kerlogue’s suggestion to the contrary in her introduction. True, there are now classic volumes (such as Karp and Lavine 1991), together with works on museums and material culture in terms of cultural property or colonialism or both (e.g. Peers and Brown 2003, Bennett 2004). A growing number of volumes also deal with collection histories and practices (e.g. Shelton 2001a and 2001b; Gosden and Knowles 2001). Yet overall, there are still relatively few works addressing the huge and important subject of material culture in and of museums.

New books in this area are thus usually welcome, and this one is no exception. The result of a 2001 conference of the Association of Southeast Asian Studies in the UK, its regional focus also makes it of significant interest to area specialists.

Kerlogue, who does not have a paper of her own in the book, applies recent theoretical approaches to the lives of objects by comparing museum objects with stage actors. The objects’ ‘performance’, she argues, emerges when they are utilised in exhibitions; curators provide their ‘lines’ in the form of labels and text panels. When they are back in the museum store, they are ‘resting’, like actors between jobs. We may, she suggests, question these objects’ roles, their relationships to the stories they tell during a ‘performance’, and how their role in a museum can be reconciled with their previous role in ‘real life’ as opposed to ‘stage life’.

While interesting, this object/stage actor analogy is problematic. I am not sure, for example, that objects ‘rest’ when not on display. They may still be experienced and interacted with by museum staff and others, and their traces – material, textual, imaginary – may linger in places other than their current one. Similarly, I am not sure the museum lives of objects are less ‘real’ than their pre-museum lives: rather than being synchronously juxtaposed to reality as actors’ stage performances are to their real lives, objects’ lives in museums come *after* their lives in their original ethnographic setting.

On one level, this is really just nit-picking over Kerlogue’s otherwise effective introduction. On another level, it relates to another quibble – over the book’s title. *Performing objects* implies, especially given the early thrust of the introduction, that the book will examine the lives and performances of specific items of



In the bowels of the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leiden

museum material culture. Some chapters do indeed do this, but others take a different approach. The prospective reader could also be forgiven for expecting from the title that the book concentrates on museums, performance and material culture located *in* Southeast Asia. Again some of the chapters do this, but others interrogate museum and material culture issues that today are either physically outside Southeast Asia or thematically general enough to pertain to areas other than or in addition to Southeast Asia. Some Southeast Asianists may thus initially be disappointed, while many museum and material culture specialists with no interest in Southeast Asia may never pick up the book at all. Yet to potentially disappoint or lose readers because of its title would be a shame, for this is a fascinating, wide-ranging and well-edited book, of interest to Southeast Asianists and museum and material culture specialists alike.

Preservation, posterity and pusaka

The opening chapter questions the very notion of museums and what they do, and challenges the conventional view that preserving objects for posterity in museums is largely a Western idea. Christina Kreps explores the Indonesian concept of *pusaka* both ‘as a non-Western form of cultural heritage preservation’ and in terms of ‘how practices surrounding the care and treatment of *pusaka* constitute forms of museological behaviour’ (p.1). By problematising the idea that only in the West is there a concern for the care and preservation of cultural heritage, Kreps seeks – and to a large extent succeeds – both to undermine arguments used to legitimise keeping others’ cultural property in Western museums and to question the ‘imposition of Western-style systems of cultural heritage management’ (p.2).

The book then considers the sociopolitical uses and history of museums in Southeast Asia. Katherine McGregor’s case study of the colonial-era Batavia Museum’s transformation into the Indonesian National Museum draws on Anderson’s ideas about national identities (1991), and Nicole Tarulevicz’s examination of the Singapore National Museum’s presentation of history draws largely on Foucauldian approaches. Both are well-written and useful case studies, but without new theoretical contributions to analysis of nationhood and the representation of history.

Laurens Bakker, in the book’s only chapter dealing solely with representations examines the differences between representations of the island of Nias in ethnographic museums in the Netherlands and in Indonesia (including on Nias itself). Dutch museum representations and their focus on religious belief and practice are at odds with changes in recent decades in the importance of these issues on Nias itself. Bakker uses this to discuss the problems museums face in keeping up with socio-cultural shifts within the continually changing communities they represent in their essentially fixed, static displays. This well-written chapter is one of the most valuable in the book, although its conclusion would have been enhanced had Bakker presented a more detailed description of how museums might begin to tackle these problems.

The fabric and performance of life

The book then moves to collections and collecting. Genevieve Duggan’s chapter is a richly detailed, though uncritical account of textile traditions on Savu and the contemporary process of documenting and collecting textiles and related materials for the Horniman Museum.

Two chapters on colonial-era collections in European museums – Antonio Guerreiro on the cartographer Jacques de Morgan’s late 19th century journey across mainland Malaya and his collection of Orang Asli material (Musée de l’Homme), and Sudeshna Guha on Ivor Evans’ photographs taken on the Malaya peninsula and in northern Borneo (Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology) – are both interesting excursions into aspects of the imperial endeavour. It is also pleasing to find a chapter on photographs in a book about museums and material culture; ignored for too long, photographs are only now being seen as material culture in their own right (see Edwards and Hart 2004).

Three chapters examine material objects intended for use in public performance. Two contributions on puppets (Poh Sim Plowright and Matthew Cohen) emphasise in different ways the multiple contexts of material culture and the intersections of these contexts across time and space. As an analysis of a ‘new tradition’ in transformation, Laura Noszlopy’s paper on *ogoh-ogoh* effigies in Bali then raises important questions about the nature of tradition and cultural authenticity. It is a well-written ethnographic account, and the author is keenly aware of the wider questions, but it would have been nice to see more theoretical underpinning and location of these issues within the literature on ‘tradition’.

The closing chapter by Andy West on contemporary material culture and urbanisation in southern China asks if and how museums should reflect rapid socio-cultural change. In some ways this goes back to the relationship between collections and representations of cultures raised in previous chapters. It also returns to the wider questions on the

very nature of museums, what they do, and how and why they do it.

In general, this is an ethnographically rich and thematically wide-ranging book. It is also, as with other books in this Horniman Contributions in Critical Museology and Material Culture series, nicely produced with black and white illustrations, and is a pleasure to read. The reader will not find in-depth theoretical analysis, but hopefully they will come away feeling they have gained new insight into the ethnographic contexts and themes raised. I regret that the book has so little on mainland Southeast Asia, and I would also have liked an index. <

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