Beyond Good and Evil? The Taboo in the Contemporary Museum: Strategies for negotiation and representation

'Two days after he was shot dead, Joe Byrne still had style. Strung stiffly against a cell door, his hands burned, his eyes closed forever, he was still handsome enough for close-up photographs to be taken and sold as souvenirs. Police, sightseers and even children posed with the body until, weeping, a young woman threw her arms protectively around it and asked police to give Joe Byrne peace, at last'. (Nun et al. 1969: 158)

'Even in dreams, we do not experience what earlier peoples saw when awake'. (Nietzsche 1994: 146)

Introduction

Picture this: in the foreground a man stands impassively, a little grim perhaps, he has a long pole in his hand, possibly a spear, it is difficult to determine as the image is cropped. Behind him slightly out of focus but still clearly discernible lie two bodies. They have been hacked, chopped and mutilated. Both are beheaded. Streams of blood flow away from them. Not the cover of a particularly nasty and exploitative 'R' rated slasher movie, but that of *Time* magazine (12 March 2001). The headline reads: 'Bloody Borneo. A massacre and cannibalism strike at the heart of Indonesia'. The photograph is in colour and the magazine is prominently displayed on city news-stands. Most people pass it without comment, hardly blinking.

In the vocabulary of science, a 'melting point' is the temperature at which substance melts, or turns from a solid to liquid form as a result of heat, or a shift in atmospheric pressure. Beliefs also have their melting points, particularly where the taboo is concerned. Today, a number of time-honoured taboos are increasingly becoming translucent, soft at the edges, slick and wet to the touch.

Over the last ten years museums have transformed their attitudes toward interpretation and a bracing commitment to risk and experimentation has become an increasingly evident feature of the contemporary museum world. The museum now admits the liberating if also potentially disturbing presence of emotion, offers space to the fraught yet implicitly fascinating power of the body and has allowed death, as well as life, to insert itself under halogen lights inside the glittering plate-glass display case. A new willingness to tackle inherently ambiguous, problematical representations now exists, and with this comes the need not only to describe and critique the contours of this phenomenon, but also to define some of the precipitating conditions that have brought it about. This essay will provide a number of different theoretical models in order to account for the taboo's emergence in the museum at this point in time, will then explore the contemporary museum's capacity to create a welcoming, three-dimensional, philosophical space for challenging and taboo subject matter, and finally will offer a case study that illustrates how a previously taboo subject — the tattoo with its multiple layering of social stigmatisation and criminological inscription — was treated effectively by Sydney's Justice & Police Museum.

Negotiating with Danger: Changing Museological Practices

The potential of the taboo to set new precedents in local museological culture, to provoke exhibition classifications and warnings about content and bring in new, adult kinds of visitation, was significantly demonstrated by two recent exhibitions in Sydney. The Australian museum, formerly renowned for its child-friendly collection of dinosaur skeletons, recently reinvented itself with an 'adult' exhibition on body art. Boldly, the exhibition also offered visitors the chance to watch video documentation of the process of genital piercing (Australian Museum 2000). The museum imposed an 'M' rating on the exhibition to warn visitors about potentially offensive content. The violent disjuncture between what the museum was formerly known for and was now presenting produced no discernible backlash however, and the exhibition was more popular than controversial. Elsewhere, at the Justice and Police Museum, an exhibition on 1950s forensic photography mapped the carnage, haunted space and aura of irreparable loss that hovers over the 'crime-scene' — the sign at its threshold announced: 'Warning. Some of the images in this exhibition may cause distress' (Justice and Police Museum 1999). There were no complaints from visitors about the exhibition; indeed audiences flocked to see it. At the Powerhouse Museum recently, two different exhibitions opened that were innovative and challenging in distinctive ways: one examined the 'camp' aesthetic of the Sydney's gay and lesbian Mardi Gras while the other focused on the history of contraceptive practices. Both again, catered to a more sophisticated, adult visitation sensibility, neither provoked negative reaction. (Powerhouse Museum 1998, 2000). Finally two other sites should be mentioned. The Sydney Jewish Museum's upper floors contain a Holocaust Gallery: a semi-permanent, photographic and text-based exhibition that documents the Nazi genocide. Elderly holocaust survivors can sometimes be found in this space working as volunteer guides. Some roll up their sleeves to permit harrowed visitors the opportunity to inspect fading blue tattooed numerals on forearms jolting the onlooker into a transaction with the fact that he/she now stands before a liberated slave worker from the concentration camps. Encountering these guides is an enormous and unforgettable privilege; their generosity in sharing their extremely fraught personal narratives makes the experience of the exhibition deeply poignant. Other similarly confronting exhibits have also appeared recently: the vagaries of death and madness for example, have been treated in thoughtful exhibitions on the function of the NSW Coroner and the historical role of Sydney's Master of Lunacy (Hyde Park Barracks Museum 1996, 2001). All of these exhibitions share in a contemporary mood of questioning. They interrogate history and attitudes, using objective scrutiny, wit and where appropriate the judicious application of shock. They tell us much about shifts in community standards in terms of what it is now possible to discuss and represent. The taboo exhibition — and to some extent the term is imperfect and contradictory — is worth pursuing. The taboo subject if it must be treated, should arise out of an existing collection or from issues, relationships and histories that the museum has always thematically overarched. As a curator involved in such projects, the need to both support and introspect on this trend seems obvious.

The Curator and The Taboo

We inhabit a phase of museological development in which the traditional role of the curator, with its custodial imperative and scholarly absorption in auratic objects, has been challenged, re-defined and expanded. This role now accommodates a pro-active understanding of the importance of museum agency and a new consciousness of

personal responsibility where the accuracy of the narratives the museum constructs or reinforces is concerned (Lavine and Karp 1991, Walsh 1992).

This new style of curation is flexible. It often supports the understanding of museum as forum rather than temple, as a site of exploratory dialogue rather than of authoritative monologue (Cameron 1971). Such an approach to interpretation and display allows the museum to treat multiple discourses often simultaneously. The new museology, geared toward social inclusiveness, the investigation of community and collective memory, frequently infused with post-modern scepticism about inherited certainties, has effectively challenged the nineteenth century notion of the museum as a receptacle for received traditions, taxonomies, typologies, culturally sanctioned knowledge and hegemonic meta-narratives.

With this broad-scale reassessment of what a museum does and for whom it speaks when it does it, there has also come an opening of possibilities in terms of subject matter. Places that the old, traditional style of museum would not venture are now confidently visited and happily engaged with. Matters once thought too controversial and problematic for museological attention or conversely not serious enough to warrant it, are now almost routinely investigated by Australian museums. Sexuality, prison riots, ecological protest, rock music, gangs, car culture, the Barbie doll, the history of the tattoo, even television shows (such as *Star Trek*) and pulp crime literature — all have made their debut recently. The curator no longer desires the status of remote, knowledgeable autodidact but increasingly wants to be regarded as an imaginative, cluey and approachable communicator: someone who can engage in meaningful and insightful ways with the both the historical *and* contemporary scene. There is also a strong need to delve beneath surfaces, to overturn comfortable mythologies, to supply contextual depth to popular phenomena understood superficially, to decode and trace genealogies of signs to their root, to restore marginalised voices to contemporary debates and with this, to create contemplative environments for the taboo to be inspected at close quarters.

But the taboo does not arrive in the museum simply because curators want to put it there. Some would argue it is as much imposed *on*, as desired *by* curators. Part of the purpose of this essay is to locate the nebulous network of influences, justifications and precipitating conditions that create a favourable microclimate for the taboo in the museum. Indeed, it should be understood that treatment of challenging and taboo subjects by the museum is part of a much broader confluence of practices and theoretical positions that are shaping thought about the present.

The Appearance of Taboos in the Museum: Six Explanatory Models

It is taken for granted here that several different motivations can coincide in the same museum — and same museum project team — when an exhibition on a taboo subject is contemplated. Indeed, the multi-disciplinary basis of the exhibition development process incorporates a variety of viewpoints, and a number of different expectations about the outcome of the exhibition. It is important to think deeply about the radical nature of the current relationship of museums to taboos. Even as the taboo melts beneath the glare of social scrutiny, it becomes slippery to take hold of, eluding easy definitions, glib and reductive accounts. It is necessary to place the phenomenon of the taboo within the museum as fully under the microscope as possible in order to allow the totality and complexity of what can be said about it to emerge. In order to go some way along the path to providing this kind of overview, the survey below works speculatively through different viewpoints on the museological relationship to the taboo, treating each as self-enclosed and contradistinctive. In reality however, it is

admitted each of these museum positions on the taboo will exist in a state of highly competitive interplay modifying, cancelling out, jostling against and enhancing some of the others.

Briefly, six theoretical models are offered here in order to account for the emergence of the taboo within the museum at the present moment. The first of these models takes market pragmatism for its starting point arguing taboos have been appropriated in visitation-driven, 'branding'/marketing exercise that pitches the museum at a potentially lucrative new audience demographic; the second model uses ideas about a perceived post-modern crisis in meaning as articulated by Lyotard and Baudrillard to explain the favouring of fashionably dark and difficult subject matter by the museum; the third model uses the counter-hegemonic/emancipatory conception of the museum as called for by Walsh and others (1992: 22) to contextualise this change in curatorial practice; the fourth model locates the museum in a paradigm of social scrutiny and exposure that is embodied by the 'investigative' and 'inquisitorial' apparatus of the media and legal-juridical process, this privileges all varieties of exposure, including that of the taboo; the fifth model places the museum in a scientistic continuum of rational enlightenment activity that is concerned with dispelling superstition and the challenging of ignorance; while the sixth model proposes museums have assimilated premises of the auto-anthropology movement which treats familiar locales to the same kind of objective analysis and deconstructive scrutiny as spaces considered 'foreign', 'alien' and 'other', possessing certain parallels with the work of those in the semiotics/cultural studies field.

1. In the 1990s a major shift took place in the marketing and advertising industry and a new and far more sophisticated awareness of the power and importance of branding came into being. It was in this decade that 'the brand reinvented itself as a cultural sponge, soaking up and morphing to its surroundings' (Klein 2001: 17), and marketeers began to concern themselves with the fundamentals of consumer identity and psychology. The brand became a 'stylistic badge of courage' (Kalman 1994: 124) and those involved in the task of brand creation found themselves, 'perpetually probing the zeitgeist to ensure that the "essence" selected for one's brand … would resonate karmically with its target market' (Klein 2001: 8). Many of the most successful brands concerned themselves less with gross exhortations to consume and more with the celebration of concepts, experiences, lifestyles, attitudes, and sets of values deemed most seductive and attractive to the sector of the market they were attempting to win over. Consumers were taught to value a branded commodity not so much for its intrinsic usefulness or even the quality and durability of its construction but rather because the brand conveyed a 'feel-good' psychic experience to its buyer, and offered the opportunity to join a certain brand-conscious community.

   The lesson of this shift in approach to selling things — products, activities and experiences — has not been lost on museums. Indeed, it can be argued that taboo subject matter is currently being used to 're-brand' some museums in a highly sophisticated marketing exercise. Here the taboo is deployed strategically to suggest that the museum has transformed itself into a vital, contemporaneous cultural zone and is now a receptacle of 'highly charged' ideas and representations that possess strong appeal to visitation demographics that would not normally choose to spend their leisure time in the museum. The co-opted mystique of the taboo is thus used to renovate the image and reputation of the museum, converting it into a 'hip' destination: a place newly connoted with

intellectual flair, outré playfulness and cutting-edge risk-taking. By exploiting the taboo and its associations with rebellion, excess and danger, the museum re-defines, re-images and to some extent, reinvents itself.

Henceforth, it is hoped that the marketeers and curators who collaborate together on such projects that the museum becomes abidingly identified as a generator of savvy, prestige-conferring (yet also highly commodifiable) insights that can be purchased with the price of admission. Thus the museum's new radicality becomes a talking point, ensures a profile, wins column inches and attracts supporters. Journalists in particular are deemed to be fascinated by the transformation of the formerly austere, safe and dull museum into something more risqué, and duly lavish praise on this shift in direction.

2. Taking a different position to the above, it can be argued that the taboo is currently privileged within the museum as a result of a post-modern crisis of meaning. This crisis is characterised by the failure of meta-narratives, the collapse of cultural hierarchy and the 'end of history' (Leotard 1986, Baudrillard 1989). Plurality, transgressiveness and ambiguity have thus replaced authoritarian certitudes and society teeters on 'the violent edge between ecstasy and decay': (Kroker and Cook 1988: 9-10). Observing this situation, the museum experiences profound doubt about its former position as cultural arbitrator. Confusion spreads about what the museum should interpret and to whom, and a vacuum is created in exhibiting strategies. Nihilistic narratives are appropriated from the media to fill this vacuum which celebrate consumption, eroticism, behavioural extremes, violence and death. Curators abandon 'the modernist project of explaining the world' (Warby 1992: 48) and turn instead to mimesis, pastiche and cultural interplay: 'fetishising the fragmentariness and eclecticism of present humankind' (Overing and Rapport 2000: 229). The museum admits chaos, excess and multiplicity: confronting areas of human behaviour that were formerly tabooed enter exhibition spaces, which now encapsulate and dissect the cultural moment. The apparatus of post-modern critical theory demands interaction with the transformations, quirks and manias of the contemporary scene (or its absence) and the museum provides this. Trapped in a media-generated web of hyper-reality, of simulation and simulacrum, the museum deepens dialogue with and about this pervasive sign system from which it is impossible to escape (Baudrillard 1989). As a marker of the defeat of its former rational enlightenment agenda and a concession to the current notion that 'nothing is forbidden', taboo subject matters become deeply entrenched in the curatorial project.

3. A counter-argument might be made about the post-modern hiatus and its precise impact on the museum in regard to the taboo. In this argument postmodernism brings about a much needed space for reassessment and self-reflexivity that allows an optimistic reconfiguration of energies, outlooks, and interpretive strategies. This reflexivity about purpose and agency moves some museums in an emancipatory direction (Walsh 1992: 22). The emancipatory museum accepts postmodernism's hybridity but rejects much of its pessimism. The emancipatory museums favours the poetic use of shock in order to generate a rupture in audience conditioning and expectation, and to provide a deeper, more critically alert awareness of things-as-they-are (Lavine 1994: 155-60). This kind of museum works deliberately at 'subverting power in order to reveal', and at

creating ‘moments of illumination to bring to light an unseen order’(Marcus 1996). The emancipatory museum also offers a home to feminism, ecology, anti-imperialism, localism, gay and lesbian perspectives as well as the perspectives of other liberationist and social justice movements. Taboo subjects are treated by the emancipatory museum as part of a wider strategy of resistance against the continuum of an ordered, repressive and hegemonic present where ‘counter-stories’ and ‘destabilising narratives’ are generally unwelcome. Edward Said has described the emergence of ‘a new non-coercive culture’ which is part of a ‘genuinely radical effort to start again’ (Said 1994: 289). This is the fundamental aim of the emancipatory museum. One method of starting again is to examine old ideas about taboos — which anthropologists, such as Mary Douglas have shown are foundational elements in the binary structure that coheres society — in the light of new knowledge and new theory (Douglas 1984).

4. The rise of the taboo may again, be related to the democratic right of exposure. In this paradigm, exposure has become a modality of power. Its threat or application disciplines, regulates, and checks human behaviour propelling society forward in an orderly, progressive manner. The interrogation of established institutions — the law, the army, the church, the police, the political establishment and the monarchy — was once forbidden, frowned upon and regarded as a taboo act. Yet this taboo no longer stands. Formerly power was pyramidally shaped and defended the interest of the powerful. Yet within the ‘panoptic schema’ of society that currently has taken hold in the West, ‘power is everywhere’, (Foucault 1983: 93) and our current situation resembles a ‘transparent building in which the exercise of power can be supervised by society as a whole’ (Foucault 1977: 207). We have the right to examine, see and think about what we want to. The privileging of exposure, and of the inevitable surveillance and voyeurism that go with it, allows the journalistic and legal gaze to penetrate wherever it likes … to the Oval Office … Buckingham Palace … elite private schools …

   The museum’s exposure of the taboo may be regarded as one in many gradations of both ‘light’ and ‘serious’ types of exposure occurring all the time. These range from the serious TV documentary on the shocking truth behind Asian sex-slavery in Australian cities, to the Royal Commission finding on the depths of political corruption, to the tabloid magazine’s scoop on a celebrity’s extramarital affair to the midday talk-show’s calculated revelations about incest, perversion, and child-abuse. A negative consequence of this is that the dignity that was once associated with private life and private acts constantly recedes before the new technologies of intrusiveness. More positively speaking, freedom to expose reinforces revisionist interpretation of our selves, our over-arching power structures, and those areas of life we were once afraid of. Taken to an extreme, the logic of the ‘exposing’ society leads to a condition where there are no longer such things as taboos, only shibboleths — superseded prohibitions, to which the majority no longer adhere. The museum does not examine what *is* taboo, but only what was *once*. The accelerating and addictive tendency of exposure leads to the disappearance of mystery: the taboo is increasingly defiled by curiosity, grasped in unclean hands, wilts beneath the glare of 500 watt lamps, is divested of its former magic, sacredness and terror.

Where there was once a solid object we find only meltwater. The trace of something that once terrified us all, but does no longer.

5. A fifth perspective on the emergence of the taboo links this to the museum's capacity for rational inquiry and the need to lend the community at large the benefit of 'enlightening' museological expertise. With Kant, the rational museum would argue that 'enlightenment is the emergence of man from self-imposed infancy' (Honderich 1995). The rational museum thus sets itself the task of removing infantile ideas in regard to the taboo in order to improve man/woman in the ways of reason. Discounting post-modern dubiety in ultimate truth and values, the rational museum maintains 'knowledge beyond culture is possible' (Gelner 1983) and 'has occurred' (Gelner 1995: 8) and looks upon the taboo — and the cluster of fearful, superstitious and stigmatising attitudes that surround it — as a puzzle which learning and correct forms of intellection can solve. This type of museum approach to the taboo is detached, scientific and non-exploitative. Here, the focus on the taboo does nor arise from a crisis in visitation figures (the marketing museum), a political agenda (the emancipatory museum), imitation of popular culture (the postmodern museum), or a random application of the museum's right to scrutinise whatever it wants to (the exposing museum), but from a desire to educate and dispel ignorance using the methodological, interpretative, ratiocinative competence of its highly trained staff. The rational museum's agenda is the disposal of fear, the disposal of what threatens, the disposal of irrationality. If the taboo can be compared to a bomb with a furiously ticking mechanism, the rational museum coolly snips the wires connecting the timer to the high-explosive core, dismantles the whole into component parts, separates and classifies each of them, then spreads everything out afterwards in order of significance, so that it may now be completely understood by the onlooker. Like the combustion engine, or the circulation of blood, or the Gallipoli campaign the taboo within the rational museum, is regarded as infinitely susceptible to technical explanation and scholarly probing.

6. A sixth perspective on the current curatorial fascination with taboos relates the methodology of auto-anthropology to the museum perspective on the taboo. Auto-anthropology operates by subjecting close-by places to the same kind of scrutiny as places that are far-away, believing 'exotica' exists all around us, is locatable beneath our feet (Overing and Rapport 2000: 22). Anthropology traditionally has been only active in sites beyond the west. Here it has confidently sought to report and decipher the customs, practices, social relationships, religion and rituals of primitive cultures, taking a particular interest in sexual roles, food, fertility, taboos and beliefs surrounding death. This kind of scrutiny, mapping, decoding and documenting of the 'other' for the benefit of Western learning was long thought perfectly acceptable, particularly if it happened in the context of elsewhere. Western attitudes to death, sex, bodies, ritual and to taboos — of which there are many — went largely unremarked, unscrutinised, mapped, decoded and reported by anthropologists as if they somehow represented a universal standard of 'normality', and those of so-called primitive cultures, an extremely aberrant version of 'abnormality'. The auto-anthropology movement seeks to reverse this trend, as do modern museums that share its philosophical outlook. The retreat of anthropology from an exclusive concern with the 'exotic' to more localised considerations of ritual,

otherness, violence, communication and taboo has something in common with the work of Roland Barthes. In the hands of Barthes, semiotics — the analysis of signs, has shown that critical exploration of areas once considered 'light' or 'low' in the cultural spectrum — wrestling, striptease, holidays — can disclose underpinning profundity (Barthes 1972). Within the academy, the increasingly popular discipline of Cultural Studies which has absorbed the work of Barthes, also promotes startling ways of reading problematic, ideologically inscribed, hegemonically generated social codes, that are broadly accepted as natural, normal and commonsensical, in the cultural order (Hebdige 1979). These disciplines and the underlying forms of knowledge and theory they embody, like the work of auto-anthropology, direct the museum toward the examination of the taboo in terms of local culture.

Museum Prerogatives in a Time of Accelerating Change

It is probably necessary to point out that museums are currently appropriating some of the openness and freedom accorded to publishers, the news media and other similar organisations dedicated to public debate, and educative encounter. Parallel institutions such as state and national galleries have long entertained provocative relationships with practices that challenge the bounds of communal taste, morality and decency. Explorations of nudity, self-mutilation, eroticism, the body, death and erotogenic imagery in such institutions have, over the years, provoked their fair share of controversy. The avant-garde predilection for *epater la bourgeoisie* (upsetting the middle classes) is well known and has an august genealogy, stretching from the advents of Cubism (1907), Dada (1917) and Surrealism (1924) to more recent, heavily publicised assaults on contemporary taboos by Robert Mapplethorpe, and Andres Serrano. Indeed, yesterday's loathed taboo object frequently turns into today's venerated artistic commodity. The ironic, mocking laughter of Duchamp's ghost continues to echo into the new millennium.

Television and cinema of course, regularly essay realities that are dark, troubling and provocative; from documentaries on paedophile networks to mainstream commercial Hollywood accounts of cannibalism. In terms of literary production, *Ulysses* by James Joyce the quintessential novel of modernity, revolutionised the exploration of uncensored human consciousness as far back as 1922: since then, every sort of sexual, bodily and psychic function, has gradually become acceptable to literary reportage. Other communal boundaries in terms of what is visually acceptable in the documentation of human carnage and suffering, were challenged by the Vietnam war; the first war to be followed episodically on the nightly news. Vietnam also produced one of the twentieth century's most powerful, widely disseminated and incandescently painful photographic images. In it a burning naked girl flees the effects of Napalm explosion running with others up a country road toward the lens of the camera which freezes her features in mid-scream. This horror-inducing photograph, taken by Nick Ut in 1972, is credited by some photographic historians as being the image which 'helped to define the Vietnam War and solidify opposition [to it] in the USA' (Jeffrey 1997: 468).

Since the late 1960s disturbing images of death and violence in the news media have become commonplace and once taboo areas such as sexuality, are regularly subjected to examination in the arts and popular culture, not to mention the worldwide multi-billion dollar porn industry. It is therefore, not so very surprising, that after a century of social and cultural revolution, that a new degree of tolerance has developed for sustained examinations of difficult subjects by museums —

particularly where they impinge on death, the human body and sexuality. What perhaps is remarkable is this development has not come quickly, particularly in the context of the cultural and political events that have shaped the time and consciousness in which we live. As Terence Hawkes remarks:
'It is easy to see that we are living in a time of rapid and radical social change. It is much less easy to grasp the fact that such change will inevitably affect the nature of those disciplines that both reflect our society and help to shape it' (Introduction, Hebdige 1979).

The Taboo and its Impact

Before going further, the term 'taboo' itself, should be explored. Ethnologists tell us that a taboo was a prohibition placed on exposing what was good as well as what was bad. The word is Polynesian in origin, meaning to '… prohibit by authority or social influence'. In *Totem and Taboo* and later on in *Historical and Expository Works on Psychoanalysis* Freud argued that in psychoanalytical terms, taboos are rooted in unconscious guilt and are productive of much neurotic suffering (Freud 1986: 253). G.F. Frazer in his influential ethnographic survey of primitive religions, *The Golden Bough*, observes taboo objects and individuals contain magical, sacred and possibly catastrophic properties. The index of The New Oxford Library *Golden Bough*, gets close to our modern usage of the word, describing the taboo as, 'conceived as a dangerous physical force from which one needs to be insulated' (Frazer 1998: 683).

If we think about the traditional museum, as a place that usually insulates us from all that is shocking and unstable in the outside world, we begin to appreciate metaphorically, some of the uneasiness that could be provoked by the arrival of the taboo inside this sacrosanct temple. The shrine-of-culture, natural history and technology, of art, social and institutional history, now must accommodate, along with the unpleasantness of the taboo subject itself, the possibility that its purity (or reputation) becomes contaminated by the unclean. One way of negotiating this threat of contamination is to ensure that taboo subject is treated respectfully, authoritatively and with scholarly rigour, within the museum. This neutralises the taboo area, deprives it of the power to provoke irrational fear, and allows the museum to bring traditional analytical tools to bear upon it.

Museums as Zones of Intensified Seeing

The museum fulfils a fundamental requirement of its existence by providing a welcoming philosophical space for contemplation and educative encounter. It is in this 'safe congregant space' of the museum, that 'unsafe ideas' may be inspected close up (Heumann Gurian 1996). If museums attempt to deny, censor and deflect difficult realities, they barricade themselves from the age in which they exist. A capacity for rationality, tolerant investigation and unfearful looking is essential in any modern museum. By avoiding the temptation to judge, exonerate or condemn museums perform a delicate act of cultural negotiation. Taboo subjects present challenges for curatorial technique, but just because they are difficult, this does not mean they should not be attempted. Indeed, it is preferable that the museum rather than more shrill, exploitative and cynical outlets should undertake the role of interpreter of the taboo.

The right to scrutinise is sanctified and promoted by museum architecture, internal design and the rational, orderly aesthetic of exhibition installation. Looking at

something within a museum is less contingent, circumstantial or accidental, than in other places. Indeed museums have been dubbed zones of 'intensified seeing' (Lavine 1991). The benign educational purpose of the museum enshrines the right to an unhurried, unembarrassed perusal of objects and images, where choices about where attention is placed can be made, a decision not to look can be taken. Exhibitions are advertised. The boundaries of where they start and stop are usually clearly demarcated. Warnings about thresh-holds are posted. No one forces the paying customer to enter.

To adapt Le Corbusier's remark, exhibitions are machines for viewing in. If appropriate, museums can transform their spaces into laboratories — areas that postpone the conditions of normal reality, where space for thought is created, and time for looking enhanced. Here, the taboo, inserted securely behind the buffer of plate glass, perspex or the picture frame, tamed, classified, and arranged for optical consumption, can be inspected close up, without fear. The taboo or rather its representation is inert, it cannot look back. The power of the museum as a place of sanctified looking has to an extent absorbed, deflected and defused some of the danger of the taboo bringing about a magical suspension of the taboo's capacity to damage those that behold it. The calming, orderly boundaries of the exhibition lend an air of detachment and objectivity to the whole process of viewing the taboo, legitimating and normalising its presence. The visit, and the element of self-preparation and choice-making involved before hand, selecting a time, a method of travelling, queuing to buy a ticket, brings about a necessary shift in consciousness, a readying for the encounter the lies ahead. Once inside the exhibition space, viewing the exhibition has its own ritualised, performative aspect. There is the solemn, sometimes silent, sometimes conversational procession between cases and framed objects, the choreographically inscribed passage through clearly articulated spaces that enforce particular bodily attitudes, pauses, movements and physical responses.

Thus, the act of viewing, borrows stylistic properties of ritual behaviour within primitive societies that permits a taboo that is normally *with*held, to be *be*held, the consecrated and ritualistically endorsed 'right to look' working toward inoculating the beholder. There will always be an element of experiential *frisson* in the encounter with a taboo within an exhibition, but nothing like that produced by 'real' situations that cannot be controlled by the representational strategy of museum: its capacity to frame, edit, isolate, defuse and control. Taboos it must be remembered, even once inside the museum, with the 'thick description' of catalogue or text panel in order to explain them, will retain some of their fundamental strangeness. As with animals in the zoo, the spectator can gaze but will rarely interact on a tactile level with the subject of his/her vision. Taboos in the museum are intimately described and openly contemplated yet still ultimately, and perhaps necessarily elusive — suggesting the ongoing ontological disjunction between knowledge and experience, theoretical representation and empirical reality. And that is the way audiences want them: observable but not overpowering; pinned down for contemplation, but no longer snarling, showing teeth or slashing out claws. Represented, yet also diminished and contained. Thus, the museum provides an increasingly valuable function to society. It creates a threat-free artificially intimate environment for the awesome and irrational taboo subject so that curiosity can be indulged without dire physical or psychic consequence.

The Justice and Police Museum and the Museology of the Taboo

Some museums by the very nature of the subject areas they cover have more potential for examining taboo issues than others. Such is the case of Sydney's Justice and Police Museum. The museum inherited a collection that originally was not intended to be seen by the general public; the core artefacts of this collection centred on a criminal behaviours and technologies. This collection was inaugurated in 1910 to educate both seasoned detectives and new recruits about the *modus operandi* of criminals. The museum performed a function then, which it has continued to fulfil: setting up a safe-zone where dangerous objects and the ideas they inspire can be beheld without threat. The earliest part of the collection was formed from confiscated prohibited weapons, firearms, safe-breaking equipment, skeleton keys, death masks and photographic documentation of famous criminals. Over time it expanded to include key pieces of forensic and physical evidence from crimes that have now assumed an iconic status in popular memory such as the 1934 Pyjama Girl Mystery and the 1960 Graeme Throne Kidnapping. In the 1989 this collection was transferred to the management of Historic Houses Trust (of NSW). The Trust opened the Justice and Police Museum in a former colonial police station courthouse complex in Sydney's Circular Quay in 1991.

From the outset the museum embraced the challenging possibilities of its subject matter, seeking innovative ways to expose areas tangentially linked to crime, social history, policing and the law. The diversity and unpredictability of this curatorial project resulted in exhibitions with the following titles: *Gangs: Subcultures of the Street 1880-1996*; *Tattoo*: *A History of the Decorated Body 1788-1997*; *Protest*: *Environmental Activism in NSW 1968-1998*; *Crime Scene*: *Scientific Investigation Bureau Archives 1945 to 1960* (1999) and *Hard Boiled*: *The Detective in Popular Culture* (2000).

Most of these exhibitions involved potentially confronting encounters with taboo areas or problematised 'unsafe' subject matters; at least as far as museums are ordinarily concerned. The body, blood, sexuality, defilement, and the stigmatising gaze were issues dealt with in *Tattoo*. *Crime Scene* explored death, transgression and violation, the notion of buried, censored and unseen history, and the melancholy impact of haunted photographic spaces. Political difference, the value of oppositionality and the power of the ecological counter-story when applied to commercial and governmental structures were all examined by *Protest*. *Hard Boiled* attempted analysis of among other things, the pulp cultural fascination with stereotypic and objectifying representations of the female body. While *Gangs*, provided an exploration of the attraction of foreign models of deviancy and rebellion for Australian youth and examined the tension between divergent sociological, police, political and media accounts of this phenomenon.

Negotiating Representation of the Taboo: A Short Case Study

In 1997 The Justice and Police Museum presented the first sustained museological examination of the tattoo and its history inside Australia. The exhibition attracted strong visitation from people between the ages of 16 and 30 who would not have normally entered the museum's imposing sandstone facade. The museum consciously determined to present a neutral, yet knowledgeable and historically probing account of the tattoo and to some extent sanitise, demystify and allow comprehension of the complex attitudinal stratification that has built up around tattoo practices since (re)discovery by the West, after eighteenth century explorations of the south seas. The museum presented commissioned works of five different contemporary

photographers, displayed historic prints and traditional 1940s tattoo designs, as well as varieties of confiscated jailhouse tattoo kits, traditional Oceanic tattoo implements, and a number of contemporary western tattoo machines, patterns and inks. The majority of the exhibition however, consisted of photographic images of tattoo details, portraits of those within self-contained tattoo subcultures and images of Japanese-style 'body suits', where the whole back, chest or body is covered with vivid inks.

Importantly, the museum intended to confront the stigmatising gaze that has often been directed at the tattoo and tattooed people. The tattoo and its recipients have been perennially associated with criminality: indeed, this is a persistent feature of psychiatric, medical and criminological literature on the tattoo and part of the tattoo's deeply ingrained taboo character and reputation. Because of these objectives the exhibition became unashamedly, yet not inelegantly, text heavy.

Six text panels, averaging at around 700 words each were placed at the beginning of the various colour-coded sections of the exhibition. Navy blue was used to represent the Pacific, Oceanic and Japanese section, green for the early twentieth century, grey for the prison tattoo and so on. At the entrance to the exhibition one very large panel, containing a provocative graphic of a 1920s 'tattooed lady' provided an introduction to the exhibition and included some discussion of the tattoo's pre-history and religious proscription by early Christianity. Inside the main rooms of the exhibition, the remaining panels explored the following topics: 'the impact of South Seas and Pacific tattooing on the West', 'the spread of tattooing via sailors, circuses and freak shows', 'criminological interpretations of the tattoo', 'the prison tattoo', and 'the contemporary tattoo'. Within the catalogue essay unsuspected, repressed 'golden ages' of the tattoo were also highlighted: the privileging of the tattoo by the European aristocracy and by royalty at the end of the nineteenth century, for example.

The text panels allowed the discursive strategy and 'enlightening' thesis of the exhibition to unfold. It could be argued this methodology permitted an authoritarian and potentially plurality-defeating monologue to prevail. However, within the text panels, the museum self-consciously strove to allow its voice and insights to be 'measured against the best current scholarship' (Lavine 1992) and counterbalanced with data gathered from formal and informal interviews conducted within niches of the tattooed community and with practicing tattooists.

In other exhibitions the museum has employed interactive video and film to bring voices and perspectives other than its own to the fore, but as a strategy for presenting the puzzling, and misconceived tattoo, the 'thick description' approach was deemed to work best. A particular pleasure was the sight of young people often generalised as 'never reading', concentrating very carefully on each text panel and working carefully through the expository narrative the museum presented.

In order to negotiate and present the taboo presence of the tattoo, the museum had to put its belief, in the value of welcoming philosophical space for contemplation and educative encounter, into action. As well as the urban youth demographic mentioned earlier, a great number of other less easily classifiable visitors came to see the exhibition, grandmothers with young children, tourists, backpackers and interested passers-by, middle-aged business people dropping in during lunch hours. The appeal of the exhibition was certainly not limited to one group.

The exhibition convinced those who put it on that judiciously selected interactions with, and interrogations of, difficult subjects and potentially challenging, fraught, and upsetting representations can produce valid, highly stimulating encounters for both the museum and its audience. It also revealed that it is possible to

be topical, entertaining and simultaneously allow spaces for profundity and deep critical thinking.

Conclusion

Our ideas about what is and is not taboo are changing. Despite this, certain taboos seem destined to remain among us. Those behavioural prohibitions that are connected to the ongoing healthy functioning of human society will survive the fading religious, ethical and cultural conditions that originally produced them. Other more mutable types of taboo, unable to withstand the atmospheric heat produced by ongoing radical transformations in our value system hourly melt further, growing more glassy, insubstantial, and liquid to the eye. Museums live in this world of constant and sometimes violent change. They must negotiate, register, and come to terms with its challenges and uncertainties. Museums cannot retreat from wider societal transformations and must, if they want to remain relevant, both reflect and dissect the concerns, interests and obsessions of contemporary audiences. Those things that upset, intrigue and attract us are legitimate, if not always easy, subjects of exploration. This exploration may lead the museum to present encounters with politically disturbing issues, socially stigmatised forms of behaviour, with life in all its haunting strangeness, oddity and vulnerability. Some taboo subject areas, that in earlier times would have been proscribed, can today be used as triggers for profound meditations and provocative new spatial journeys. We have entered an exhilarating new phase of museological development and the possibilities this presents us are both dramatic and vast.