

RISD, Department of Teaching + Learning in Art + Design
Brown University, Public Humanities

Practices in Museum Interpretation

<http://museuminterpretation.blogspot.com/>

Thursdays, 1-4pm

The RISD Museum of Art

Instructor: Sarah Ganz Blythe, Director of Education, RISD Museum

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Ian Russell, Fellow, Public Humanities, Brown

Office Hours by appointment, please contact

Sarah Ganz Blythe, sganz@risd.edu or

Ian Russell, ian_russell@brown.edu

PRACTICES IN MUSEUM INTERPRETATION

Course Description

The course examines current interpretive practices and offers students the opportunity to participate in creating gallery interpretation for the museum context. Questions of material and form; models of attention and perception, the relationship between language and vision; the role of description in interpretation; and what constitutes learning through visual experience will be considered. Throughout the semester students will develop an interpretive practice through a series of workshops, exercises, site visits and critical discussions.

Rationale

Works of art and design accrue meaning from the moment they are conceived and created. Within cultural institutions they participate in the construction of narratives, hierarchies, and ideologies. This course will help students understand the many different stories and meanings that are communicated with objects. It will also offer critical reflection upon the methodologies that participate in the construction of meaning through objects. Students will develop a critical understanding of the history of interpretation practices and establish methods of reading and articulating the many different interpretations these objects have had over time depending differing cultural and historical contexts. Students will then hone their own interpretive practice by developing their own curatorial thesis and interpretative plan for an exhibition. They will conceive, realize and test an interpretive element within this framework.

Course Objectives

Students will develop:

- An intellectual and critical background to the study of objects, material culture, and museum interpretation
- Critical thinking skills in relation to the interpretation and conceptualization of material things and museum exhibitions
- Practical interpretation and curatorial skills relating to the handling of material objects in museum and art scenarios
- Public speaking and writing skills in order to effectively present, communicate and defend their insights and opinions
- An appreciation for the creative role curators and educators play in forming and framing meanings of things
- An understanding of audiences, learning styles, and motivations to visit and learn from objects
- Public relations and communication skills in developing effective ways of disseminating information

Class Structure

- Each class will consist of a main lecture/discussion of the reading and associated topics.
- The discussions will be led both by the instructors and students. Each week a different student will be asked to lead a discussion.
- Site visits and projects associated with assignments may require group collaboration.
- An online component to the course utilizing blogs and other social networking and file-sharing services which will be administered by the instructor and to which all are expected to contribute.
- A studio component to the course where students will collaborate with RISD students enrolled in the Interior Architecture course for museum exhibition design.

Resources and Readings

- A list of reading and locations will be distributed.
- Readings will be made available by the instructors over the class website.
- Additional copies of some readings are available on reserve in Brown's and RISD's Libraries

Expectations and assessment measures

Students will be assigned regular weekly readings that will be discussed in each seminar class to contextualize their research and inspire their own projects. The course will be assessed based on class participation (including reading and discussion and participation in the course weblog), in-class projects and assignments, a series of short assignments and papers to be completed outside of class time, and practical museum interpretation projects. These will document the development of their thinking, writing, experiences and visual communication skills while encouraging them to think about the longer term legacy and documentary archive of their work on the course. All students will participate in a collaborative reimagining of the display of American art and design at The RISD Museum articulated through a shared curatorial thesis and interpretive plan. Each student will then select a component of the plan to be conceptualized in terms of content, interpretive strategy and platform with a nuanced consideration of visitor learning and experience.

Cross-listed Students

Students cross-listed in Practices in Museum Interpretation (seminar) and the Narrative Museum (studio) are expected to serve as a conduit between the two courses. They will leave the Narrative Museum on Thursday afternoons to attend Practices in Museum Interpretation from 1-4pm. They will then return to the studio which concludes at 6pm. Cross-listed students are expected to serve as a conduit between the two courses, reporting back to their colleagues and informing discussion based on their studio and seminar experiences.

Assessment scale

Assignments and presentations	40%
Class participation	30%
Projects	30%

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Discussions

Each week, two students (one from Brown and one from RISD) will lead discussion and be responsible for preparing a response to the assigned reading for one week of the class. The two students will be expected to prepare their discussion in collaboration with each other. Discussion is not simply a matter summarizing the texts and sharing your opinion about them. You must allow yourself enough time to be clear about what each text says and how the texts relate to one another. In other words, you should synthesize the intellectual work of others—that is, bring it together into an integrated whole. In preparing to lead discussion, therefore, it is crucial that you allow yourself not just enough time to do the readings but enough to digest what you have read and to put the results together to think critically about them and pose next questions.

Mapping

As part of the led discussions, the two students will be required to conduct two audience meaning maps. These maps are a tool that we will use to understand what concepts and ideas people associate with a starting term (America, American, Americas, etc.). The aim of this formative evaluation exercise is to compile data on what audiences think about our central subject. Each student will produce two maps, one from an encounter with

visitors within the RISD Museum, and the other will be produced from an encounter outside of the RISD Museum. Students will bring these maps to class, add them to the growing wall display of mind maps and incorporate their research and insights into their presentation.

Weekly blogging

Each week students are required to make at least one contribution to the course weblog. These contributions can come in any form (newspaper articles, reflection, weblinks, or other items of interest) so long as they are accompanied by critical engagement written by the student. All posts should relate to the course's themes, and ideally matters pertaining to the interpretation of 'America', 'Americas', 'American Art', etc.

Papers

Students will be assigned short papers as part of their course work. These should be completed as formal papers with references and bibliographies and reflect a sophisticated and earnest engagement both with the themes and issues of the course and course project as well as the theoretical issues presented in the course discussions. As a final output for the course, each student will produce an **interpretative plan** for the RISD Museum's display of American art and design. The interpretive plan will be based on a curatorial/interpretive thesis written collaboratively by the class. The final delivery of the interpretative plan will be done in two components:

- 1) A formal oral presentation to the class in a studio critique format.
- 2) A formal written interpretive plan supported by research, evidence and argumentation.

Group Project

Students will collaboratively conceptualize, develop and implement a program component for the RISD Museum related to the current display of American art and design for Gallery Night. All students will be required to participate in the development, execution, reflection and evaluation of the program in both written and oral forms.

COURSE SCHEDULE

01 The lives of objects	Reading for Discussion	Module	Group Project Work
Date: 2/24 Course Introduction The Lives of Objects/Ways of Looking	C. Holtorf. "Notes on the Life History of a Pot Sherd", <i>Journal of Material Culture</i>, Vol. 7, No. 1, 2002, 49-71. T. Ingold, "Materials against materiality" in <i>Archaeological Dialogues</i>, 14: 1-16 Cambridge University Press, 2007 S. Turkle, ed. <i>Evocative Objects: Things we think with</i>, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA. 2007 (Introduction, and Turkle from page 307)	RISD Museum Ways of Looking Exercise	Interpretive plans – best practice Tate Modern; Victoria and Albert Museum; RISD Museum
Assignment 1 Due: 3/1	The lives of objects: Write a reconstruction of the life history of the object you interpreted today from its fabrication to display at the RISD Museum. (2-3 pages)		
02 Constructing Meaning	Reading for Discussion	Module	Group Project Work
Date: 3/3 Meet at the Haffenreffer, Manning Hall, Brown Constructing Cultures/Communicating Narrative	Susan Pearce, "Thinking about Things," in <i>Museums, objects, and collections: A cultural study</i>. Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1992, 125-136 Gary Edson, <i>Museum Ethics</i>, London: Routledge, 1997. Mieke Bal, "The Talking Museum," in <i>Double Exposures: The Subject of Cultural Analysis</i>, London: Routledge, 1996, 87-134 Svetlana Alpers, "The museum as a way of seeing." In, I. Karp & S.D. Lavine (Eds.). <i>Exhibiting cultures: The poetics and politics of museum display</i>. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1991	Haffenreffer Ethical display Public trust	How is America and the Americas presented in museums?

03 Words and things	Reading for Discussion	Module	Group Project Work
Date: 3/10 Meet at Faunce Arch, Brown University Constructing narratives through objects, space, sequence and text.	Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, "Learning in Art Museums: Strategies for Interpretation" in <i>Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture</i>, London: Routledge, 2007, 44-52. Robert Storr, "Show and Tell" in <i>What Makes a Great Exhibition?</i>, Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative, 2006, 154-167 Beverly Serrell, "Part 1" in <i>Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach</i>, New York: Altamira, 1996, 1-19 Weil, S.E. "The proper business of the museum: Ideas or things?" In <i>Rethinking the museum and other mediations</i>. Washington DC: Smithsonian. 1990, 43-56	Haffenreffer Exquisite Things workshop Label writing workshop	Presentation of American Painting and Sculpture in the RISD Museum: Maureen O'Brien Brainstorming of possible narratives/structures.
Assignment 2 Due: 3/15	Text Critique: Rewrite a label for a selected object from the Haffenreffer or RISD Museum (100-150 words. Include original label text)		
Film night Date: 3/16	Russian Ark (2002) by Alexander Sokurov JNBC Library – 7pm		
04 Meaning through display	Reading for Discussion	Module	Group Project Work
Date: 3/17 How are narratives and meaning constructed through display? What is impact of the environment on an object's interpretation and meaning? How do different placements within a museum affect interpretation and narrative?	Selma Holo and Mari-Tere Alvarez, eds. "Communication" in <i>Beyond the Turnstile: Making the Case for Museums and Sustainable Values</i>, University of Southern California, 2009, 171-185 Steve Dobbs and Eliot Eisner, "Silent pedagogy in art museums." <i>Curator</i> 33, 1990, 217-235. Hoffenberg, P., <i>An Empire on Display: English, Indian, and Australian Exhibitions from the Crystal Palace to the Great War</i>, Berkeley : California University Press, 2001 (Preface and Chapter 1) Wilk, C. & N. Humphrey 2004 <i>Creating the British Galleries at the V&A: A study in museology</i>, V&A, London. (Chapter 2 The Concept of the New British Galleries, pp. 19-28)	RISD American Art and Design	Discussion with Dr Andrew Cochrane, Exhibition Director for 'Unearthed', Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts & University of East Anglia Tom Mickey, Curator of Decorative Arts, MFA or Rob Emlen, American Civilization, Brown University on American Decorative Arts in the RISD Museum Writing of initial curatorial thesis.

Trip 3/19	Visit MFA Americas Wing – discussion with Benn Weiss (Leonard Lauder Curator of Visual Culture – head of interpretation for the new wing)		
Assignment 4 Due: 3/22	Interpretive Plans: Select a component of the interpretive plan, devise a strategy for execution and articulate how it addresses the curatorial thesis (2-3 pages).		
05 Audiences – Identity + Experience	Reading for Discussion	Module	Group Project work
Date: 3/24 Communicating with, and learning from your audience.	William H. Truettner, "A Case for Active Viewing," in <i>The Two Art Histories: The Museum and the University</i> , New Haven: Yale, 2002, 102-111 Jay Rounds, "Doing Identity Work in Museums," <i>Curator</i> 2 April 2006, 133-50 Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, "Communication in theory and practice," and "Learning in art museum: strategies of interpretation," in <i>The Educational Role of the Museum</i> , London: Routledge, 1994, pp. 28-51 Silverman, L. 2004 "Making meaning together: Lessons from the Field of American History" in G. Anderson (ed.) <i>Reinventing the Museum</i> , Alta Mira, Oxford, pp. 233-242.	RISD American	Discussion with Juliette Fritsch, Director of Interpretation, Victoria & Albert Museum Heritage interpretation and period rooms. Crafting an interpretive approach to Pendleton House.
Spring Break - 3/31	No Class		
06 Participation	Reading for Discussion	Module	Group Project Work
Date: 4/7 How can museums cultivate creative participation? What how can interpretation reflect creativity and artistic processes?	Stanley Fish. "Introduction, or Why I Stopped Worrying and Started to Love Interpretation," in <i>Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities</i> , Cambridge, 1980, 1-16 Claire Bishop. "Viewers as Producers," in <i>Participation</i> , MIT Press, 2006, 10-17 Carol Becker. "Museums and the Neutralization of Culture: A Response to Adorno" in <i>Thinking in Place</i> , London: Paradigm, 2009, 29-52 Nicholas Bourriaud. "Relational Form" in <i>Relational Aesthetics</i> , Le Presses du Reel, Paris, 2002	RISD American	Teaching contemporary art and design from the past: John Dunnigan and Chris Rose, RISD Faculty American Art and Design in Pendleton House with Ann Woolsey, Interim Director, RISD Museum

07 Communication Platforms	Reading for Discussion	Module	Group Project Work
Date 4/14 How do analog and digital platforms activate/obfuscate meaning and obfuscate interpretation? Balancing communication and experience.	Nancy Proctor, "Outside in the Agora: Mobile Interpretation and Socratic Dialogue in the Networked Museum", presentation at the DEN Conference, Rotterdam, Dec 9, 2008 (video). http://www.digitaalallemaal.nl/?p=115 Peter Samis. "New Technologies as Part of a Comprehensive Interpretive Plan" and Robin Dowden and Scott Saye, "The Whole World in Their Hands: The Promise and Peril of Visitor-Provided Mobile Devices, in <i>The Digital Museum: A Think Guide</i>, AAM, 2007, 19-34 Josie Appleton, "Interactivity in Context", Interactive Learning in Museums of Art and Design, V&A Conference Paper, 17–18 May 2002	RISD American	Conceive and plan pilot program related to works in the RISD Museum American collection for Gallery Night
Assignment 4 Due: 4/19	Prepare Gallery Night Program		
08 Active Interpretation	Reading for Discussion	Module	Group Project Work
Date: 4/21	Run Pilot Program for Gallery Night	RISD American	Discussion with Allegra Burnette, Creative Director of Digital Media, Museum of Modern Art Costume + Textile Collection, Kate Irvin and Laurie Brewer
Assignment 5 Due: 4/26	Reflection/Evaluation of pilot program		

09 Interpretation as medium	Reading for Discussion	Module	Group Project Work
Date: 4/28 Is interpretation a medium in its own right?	Jan Verwoert, "Control I'm here: A call for the free use of the means of producing communication in curating and in general." in <i>Curating and the Educational Turn</i>, Open Editions/de Appel, 2010, 23-31 J. Ranciere 1991 <i>The Ignorant Schoolmaster</i>, Stanford University Press, Stanford. Irit Rogoff, "Academy as Potentiality," <i>ACADEMY</i>, 2008	New spaces, new models Imagining the future of the RISD Museum	Refine interpretive plan, strategies and platforms to meet curatorial thesis, intention and goals.
5/5, 5/12, 5/19 Final presentations			
Final paper due	26 May 2011		