

**Special edition of the *Journal of Social Work Practice*  
Seeing with the Mind's Eye: Social work and the visual imagination**

**A 'shorter piece'**

**Accounting for the museum**

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In this essay for the *Journal of Social Work Practice* I bring the practices of writing, reading, visiting, imagining and above all looking, to the forefront of a critical enquiry into museums. It's part of a wider endeavour to use critical and creative writing to account for museums and to clear space for a different kind of writing. I am drawing together some reading and visits to art museums that I made in the summer of 2016, in order to think about the relevance that the work of museums might have for social work. I endeavoured to be in the museums and in the reading with a freely-associative mind and imagination. The essay enacts the form of my fragmentary thinking whilst I was doing this.

§ I am nervous of venturing into this world of social work. Ostensibly because to spend your days looking at art seems incomparable to how I imagine a social worker spends her days. And whilst of course there's plenty of suffering in art and pleasure in social work, perhaps the worlds coalesce around this question of the visual imagination. A rough sleeper on the street is both a representation of suffering, a spur to the imagination, and a real sufferer; as is, say, a self-portrait by Frida Kahlo, they are compelling because they are both real and imagined. But I still feel a need for museums, and those who work in them, to account for themselves. Not because there is a clamouring for this to be done or to indulge a sense of professional unworthiness, more to find some ease from the demands of conscience; especially if that conscience has been formed in thrall to Christian liturgy, as has mine. For this reason I'm drawn to Judith Butler's *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), for the attention it brings to the idea of accountability. There's been a lot of accounting for museums within the academic discipline of Museum Studies, a lot of arguments for their social efficacy, but little that employs a psychodynamic understanding.

§ The philosopher Judith Butler ends a short unpublished lecture called 'Speaking of Rage and Grief' with these words,

With great speed we do sometimes drive away from the unbearable, or drive precisely into its clutches, or do both at once, not knowing how we

move or with what consequence. It seems unbearable to be patient with unbearable loss, and yet that slowness, that impediment can be the condition for *showing what we value*, and even perhaps what steps to take to *preserve what is left* of what we love. (Butler 2014) (my italics)

She suggests that,

Perhaps non-violence is the difficult practice of letting rage collapse into grief, since then we stand the chance of knowing that *we are bound up with others*, such that who I am or who you are is this living relation that we sometimes lose. (Butler 2014) (my italics)

It strikes me that the museum is one of the forms we have for slowly *showing what we value* and for *preserving what is left*. And as public social spaces they can demonstrate some ways in which *we are bound up with others*. And perhaps their very boundaries and bindings keep us from driving away quite so fast from the unbearable. After all, the massive museums of capital cities have great long galleries that prevent a quick exit.

I want to do some special pleading for museums, or for their potential, within the context of this special issue about social work and the visual imagination. Not from a place of uncritical affection or professional loyalty, but because they are simply what we have. I will suggest that museums are places for,

slowing down

showing what we value

preserving what is left

binding up with others.

§ In the last chapter of *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2004), Susan Sontag considers where photographs of war might best be seen in order to fully contemplate their meaning. She first appears to dismiss museums, for there

‘they partake of the fate of all wall-hung or floor-supported art displayed in public spaces. That is, they are stations along a – usually accompanied – stroll. A museum or gallery visit is a social situation, riddled with distractions, in the course of which art is seen and commented on.’ (2004, 108)

Furthermore:

‘Once a repository for conserving and displaying the fine arts of the past, the museum has become a vast educational institution-cum-emporium, one of whose functions is the exhibition of art.’ (2004, 109)

She’s right. To retain their public funding museums need to prove that they are not simply indulged anachronisms but socially, educationally and economically useful. Their efforts to do this risk turning them more and more into places of distraction from the art. Maybe, though, the gallery’s very ‘social situation’ makes it apt for the contemplation of suffering. The modern museum tries to preserve things as they have been *and* to be a lively place of changing sociability. This, paradoxically, could be its power: sociability amidst evocations of suffering.

Sontag is no easy friend of museums but she concludes *Regarding the Pain of Others* with a discussion of a ‘museum photograph’ by the artist Jeff Wall: *Dead Troops Talk (A Vision After an Ambush of a Red Army Patrol near Moqor, Afghanistan, Winter 1986)*,<sup>1</sup> (1992). The work is a digital montage in which troops, apparently just killed, appear to engage with each other. She reckons the work demonstrates how ‘we’ – those who haven’t experienced what the troops have gone through – ‘can’t imagine how dreadful, how terrifying war is; and how normal it becomes.’ (1992, 113). Unlike most of the other work described in the book (Goya’s *Disasters of War* is the exception) this is not news footage or a press photograph but a photograph made for viewing in a museum. The irony then is that this museum piece demonstrates, albeit with the help of Sontag’s interpretation, the unimaginability of war, the limits of the visual imagination. Much of the photographic work that she discusses is made for the press and media, Wall’s work is made for museums and like the Goyas only viewable in a museum, if that.

§ Judith Butler’s *Frames of War* is an account of how war ‘works on the field of the senses’ (2009, ix). It is about the effects of the presentation of suffering on our responsiveness and how it determines ‘what will and will not be a grievable life’ (2009, 64). Like Sontag she is concerned with how regarding the pain of others in photographs (there is a long section about the digital photographs from Abu Ghraib) might reveal ways to transform the affects of viewing such photographs into effective political action (2009, 99). She concludes a chapter on the ethics of photography by briefly picking up Sontag’s discussion of *Dead Troops Talk*. She writes that it is Jeff Wall’s ‘museum piece’ that ‘allows Sontag to formulate the problem of responding to the pain of others’, that is that we can’t ever know how dreadful war is. That Sontag uses the ‘museum piece’ to do this leads Butler to surmise that this

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<sup>1</sup> The irony is that this ‘museum piece’ was sold from a private collection in 2012 for \$3.6M US

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/arts/jeff-wall-photograph-sells-for-record-3-6m-us-1.1205822>

‘involves a certain consolidation of the museum world as the one within which she is most likely to find room for reflection and deliberation.’ (2009, 99)

and that it is

‘the museum exhibition that gives her the time and space for the kind of thinking and writing she treasures.’ (2009, 99)

The question then for advocates of museums is whether they can provide a frame that enables us ‘to see what we see’, whether they can help us see beyond ‘the dehumanising norm, that restricts what is perceivable and, indeed, what can be’ (2009, 100). Or is the familiar, established norm of the museum too normalising? Butler writes that the circulation of the Abu Graib images outside of the immediate place of their production broke up ‘the mechanism of disavowal, scattering grief and outrage in its wake’ (2009, 100). Can the museum be an ethical messenger as well as an objective reporter and recorder?

Museums decide over and over what will be shown and what will not. Unlike other media, they don’t shy away from presenting suffering: remains of the dead figure in many a museum. But the museum’s sense of timelessness and its claimed political neutrality can disguise the grievousness and the political sensitivity of what one sees. The media agrees not to print pictures of the war dead but war dead are shown in museums. Museums decide ‘what will count within the frame’ (Butler, 2009, 67).

§ Jeff Wall has said that ‘art is an independent experience of the world’ (Stallabrass 2010, 13) and that,

‘I don’t like the idea of having extra-aesthetic interest in my subjects, as if I am interested in them socially. When I began, I was under the illusion that I did have those interests. I grew up in the 60s and 70s, amid the counter-culture and the New Left, and I still believe a lot of those things, but they don’t really apply to my work.’ (Stallabrass 2010, 4).

Given Wall’s rejection of an ‘extra-aesthetic’, it’s ironic that both Sontag and Butler consider his work within their analyses of war and photography; admittedly this is at the end of chapters, almost an after-thought, but they come with an invitation to take up their line of thinking.

Julian Stallabrass writes that the usefulness for a museum of Wall’s photographs is obvious, for they provide ‘a form of spectacle that has to be seen as a physical object in a physical space to get the full effect, and as a generator of art-historical discourse’ (2010, 15). And he agrees that ‘they may get us to think about politics or society’ (2010, 15). But he writes that ‘a democratic image culture’ can’t be found in the museum, ‘with its policed and expert discourse’ (2010, 17). Whereas YouTube and Flickr offer a ‘clearer look into the face of our “actually existing democracy” than the photo-paintings of Wall’ (2010, 17).

Here's another way to think about museums from John Berger:

'In art museums we come upon the visible of other periods and it offers us company.' (2001, 21)

This 'we', this speaking on behalf of unknown others is annoying, and surprising when it comes from Berger who habitually reveals the details of individual lives. But he's right when he goes on to say that some things – such as teeth, hands, the sun – continue to look the same across millennia, so that when seeing their representations in an art museum

'We feel less alone in face of what we ourselves see each day appearing and disappearing.' (2001, 21)

It isn't just the art works themselves that create links, but that the work is seen in the public space of the museum; inadvertently the museum offers a sociability, a place to gather with others, albeit often in silence, much as therapeutic social work attempts to help people feel less alone.

When regarding the pain of others, one risks bearing the pain forever. The gallery does the bearing for you and will continue to do it forever. Its vast history, space, rationality and materiality are a bulwark against the pain.

§ In a night-time space between the reading of others' accounts of museums and my actual visits I had a dream.

*I am working in the reading room of an archive which is like a large classical gallery in a national museum. A young woman near me, who I remember from the day before, has two files of documents brought from the store for her to read. I go back to my work and when I next look up she has gone and instead on her table, which is now a plinth as in an exhibition, is a great pile of coins, some unknown old currency. She has left her handbag on the floor by the plinth. Two small children come along and begin to play with the coins and to look in her bag. I take the bag away to keep it safe from them but leave the coins and wonder how long the children will be allowed to play with the coins before the young woman or a member of staff comes to stop them.*

Any idealisation of the museum as a place of free exploration is put paid to in the dream. For here I am, playing amongst all this valuable stuff, whilst I am also on display and acutely aware that the game will end. The contents of the store can be brought out to be unpacked and examined but looking is dangerous and costly. I must take good care and the collections won't release all of their secrets. There are internal and external limits to the visual imagination and to thinking.

§ I went to the exhibition *Conceptual Art in Britain 1964-1979* at Tate Britain.

The first art work you see is by Roelof Louw, *Soul City (Pyramid of Oranges)* (1967). You are invited to take an orange from the pyramid - how novel to be allowed to take something from an exhibition! Rather than openly responding to the invitation I did this furtively. I didn't need an orange, I had food in my bag. Why indulge some artist's fancy that this would be a significant act? But if I leave them they'll only grow mouldy (disaster for a curator) or dry out. Other museums don't allow organic matter into their education rooms let alone in amongst the art works. The caption to the work states 'The full implications of this action are left to the imagination' (Tate Publishing 2016, 29). Quite. As though the imagination is some free-flowing thing unaffected by its context.

The final section of the exhibition, called 'Action Practice', shows work by conceptual artists who in the 1970s overtly used their practice to bring about political and social change. Stephen Willats's *Living with Practical Realities* (1978) shows photographs of an elderly woman, Mrs Moran, who lives alone in a tower block. Willats acted as a kind of artist cum social worker cum sociologist investigating Mrs Moran's circumstances. The photographs are on three boards along with text and diagrams, in the guise of a sociological essay about the alienated state of such people, or even a social worker's report about Mrs Moran. There are supposed quotes from Mrs Moran about her situation:

'For company I usually have to wait until people come to visit me at my place. What do you propose is the way for me to form new relationships within this isolated tower?'

The cold language of assessment and the documentary style of the photographs convey something of Mrs Moran's suffering, this time not the pain of war but of city poverty and isolation. Anne Wagner suggests that Willatts made the work in this way because he knew

'full well that in deploying this cruelly rational apparatus, what is irrational about Mrs Moran's unbearable isolation will be laid bare' (2016, 21).

Transposed to the gallery from an imaginary sociology book or a social worker's report, perhaps it hits one all the harder. The contrasts between the gallery's rich grandeur and the life of Mrs Moran are disturbing, maybe not enough to provoke action, but they provoke sympathy. She's noticed. Or maybe in fact the *impossibility* of knowing her unbearable isolation is laid bear.

§ Earlier in the day I had shown my passport (photo evidence of who I am was required) in order to enter the Prints and Drawings Room where I'd arranged to see another Jeff Wall photograph, *A Sapling Held by a Post* (2000). He was commissioned, along with nine other photographic artists, to make a work to celebrate the opening of Tate Modern in May 2000.

Viewing the work in the Prints and Drawings Room is moons away from Sontag's distracted walk through the gallery. It's laid out for you in advance on a fine wooden stand in a stately room set aside for viewing work; there are murmurings from a few other viewers and staff, but essentially you and the work are in private within this public place. There's a basin for washing your hands. You are there to study the formal work. In this setting it is above all a work of art, its affective powers or any social accounting it might do is diminished by the aura of art history. Oh the reverence of looking in this place!

My eye is drawn not to the sapling or the post but to the strip of heavy fabric, twisted in the middle, the colour of bandage, which wraps the sapling and the post together. A thread hangs from an unravelled edge of the fabric and winds around the sapling like a tendril of a climbing plant, but with not so tight a twist as honeysuckle. A nail through the fabric into the post is rusting. For now the bandage holds the sapling which will soon be free of its support and allowed to grow alone. The post will bear the imprint of support through the stain of rust and the hole made by the nail. Knots on the vulnerable sapling are like straightened-out elbows.

§ Another day I visited Tate Stores in Southwark. This is where the works in the Tate Collection are stored away when they are not displayed, and is not to be confused with Tate Store, the shop. Visitors with an appointment are welcomed at Tate Stores. Here the work of keeping and preserving art – the cataloguing, storing, cleaning, conserving and so on - isn't hidden away as it is in public galleries, here it is evident. The work is evident but the works of art are hidden behind wrappings or in crates.

I have come to see another Jeff Hill work, *Study for 'A Sudden Gust of Wind (After Hokusai)'*, (1993) which is itself a testimony to the work of making art. It is a collage of photocopied paper and photographs that he assembled in the process of making the final piece. This time I crouched down on the floor of the store to look at the work, still with bubble wrap around its frame.

The composition follows that of a woodcut, *Travellers Caught in a Sudden Breeze at Ejiri* (c.1832) by Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849). Both pictures are of a landscape in which a woman's sheaf of papers is blown away from her hands by the wind, some rise high up into the sky. It depicts just what the museum store works to prevent – loss of precious work by accident or climate. It reveals the painstaking work Hill did in order to make the final work. The store also reveals some of the painstaking tasks of preserving a work once it's made and judged worthy of being kept in perpetuity.

The workings of artists, of art handlers, conservators, curators, cleaners, security staff can't normally be seen. It's as though in order to best view the art work itself all trace of how it's made and how it's preserved inside the institution has to be removed. Some kind of purity of form, purity of existence, is sought in order to better view an essence.

In the store, in any museum store, the works are wrapped up within their own melancholy. You can see them lined up along the shelves, but not see them. The store is the heartland of the museum, a functional, out-of-the-way place of work but also a place of silence where little appears to happen. It's waiting for some future when its work will be realised, comprehended.

Or maybe the keeping of it all here, the knowing at some level that it's here, is enough to give the nation and its citizens some sense of value, pride, hope for the future. It's all in the bank: an investment in knowledge, beauty and authenticity. This work is worth preserving.

§ The next day in Tate Modern I saw an exhibition of the work of Mona Hatoum. In this exhibition you are away from the distractions of the modern gallery, you can find a distance from the suffering, and as a result somehow see it all the more. In one work, *Quarters* (1996), institutional metal bunk beds are stripped of any comforting mattress and blanket. They wait for a response. As with anything, you can walk on by, or stop. If you stop you might find an account of the world in a visual and material language that takes you by surprise, you might also find some kind of account of yourself. The work provoked thoughts in me about the preservation of objects and of life, of being prone, lying down for rest or for a restless night. A bed without comfort signals torture; abstractions become metal in the materiality.

Of another of her works in the exhibition, *Undercurrent (red)* (2008), Hatoum has written that it creates a 'breathing pace', thereby suggesting both a space and a slowing down to a rhythmical heart and lung pace. Not an empty space (no such thing exists), but movement, a receptivity to one's own body and maybe then to the bodies of others. I tried to breath in time to the work's breath, to stay in the discomfoting place, not drive myself away. When I did leave I took with me a greater sense of fragility, danger and of how weaponry might be used against me or others. In a museum those of us who don't live in a war zone might get some tiny sense of what it could be like to do so. But as I left I remembered Sontag's contempt for the Imperial War Museum's 'Trench Experience' and 'Blitz Experience' (2003, 109) that also attempt to do this. It could be that it's the latter's overt designs on the visitor that are the problem. The museum's presumption.

§ Back in Tate Britain, it's almost six o'clock and staff heave internal doors closed and guide the remaining visitors towards the exit. If we want more we'll have to come back again to find works that might still be there or might have gone back into the store or on tour around the world. The night-time security will be mounted and the gallery will settle back into a silent space. The space and pace are here every day and can be used, or not. It is no neutral space, it's riven with the museum's purpose. It is as opaque as the human subject, a dense mass of stone, paper, metal, plastic, wood. Pockets can be found where one might sense oneself and the world differently.



Mona Hatoum has said

'I want the work in the first instance to have a strong formal presence, and through the physical experience to activate a psychological and emotional response.' (Tate, 2016)

The museum itself, certainly one like Tate, has a massively strong formal presence that can comfort, awaken, intimidate; you can't escape its institutional might. This might persists despite the lack of consensus on what a museum is for. There is a collective ethos about the value of a museum's work of preserving objects since this speaks to primitive, shared desires for continuity. But the idealisation of the museum as a holder of knowledge no longer holds sway and other roles are sought for it, one of these is as a container of the actual and the imaginary.

§ Read this extract from Berger's *A Fortunate Man* (1967) and in your imagination try replacing the word 'doctor' with 'museum':

'The doctor is the familiar of death. When we call for a doctor, we are asking him to cure us and to relieve our suffering, but, if he cannot cure us, we are also asking him to witness our dying. The value of the witness is that he has seen so many others die ... He is the living intermediary between us and the multitudinous dead.' (62)

The 'multitudinous dead' are housed in the museum, either in the form of 'human remains' or, more imaginatively, in all those millions of objects removed from everyday life to be kept forever in museums. Berger goes on to say that it would be a mistake to conclude from this that the patient wants a *friendly* doctor: 'His hopes and demands ... however undeclared even to himself, are much more profound and precise' (62). Profundity and precision can be found in a museum. The best offer friendliness as well, but never at the expense of a witnessing of something more profound.

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