

**DR. SOANES' ODDITORIUM OF WONDERS: THE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY DIME  
MUSEUM IN A CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT**

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## ABSTRACT

19<sup>th</sup> century dime museums were a North American phenomenon that flourished in urban centres from the mid- to late-1800s. Named thusly due to their low admission cost, dime museums provided democratic entertainment that was promoted to all classes as affordable and respectable. The resulting facilities were crammed with art, artifacts, rarities, living human curiosities, theatre performances, menageries, and technological marvels. The exhibition *Dr. Soanes' Odditorium of Wonders* strives to recapture the spirit and aesthetic of the dime museum to invoke wonder in the viewer and to combine art, artifacts, and oddities to provoke questions about the boundary between education and amusement. Both the academic and curatorial texts utilize a mix of methodological approaches appropriate to museology, art history and cultural history: theoretical research into historiographical issues concerning theories of display and spectacle; archival research and discourse analysis of historical documents, and material culture analysis (including the semiotics of display).

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**Simulation, Spectacle, and the Construction of Meaning:  
The 19th Century Dime Museum in a Contemporary Context**

*Standing among the pictures offered for contemplation...  
one is seized by a sacred awe; conversation is louder than  
in a church, softer than in real life. One does not know why  
one has come in search of culture or enjoyment, in  
fulfilment of an obligation, in obedience to a convention.  
Fatigue and barbarism converge. Neither a hedonistic nor  
a rationalistic civilization could have constructed a house  
of such disparities.  
Dead visions are entombed here.*

Theodor Adorno, "Valery Proust Museum"

*The spectacle presents itself as a vast inaccessible reality  
that can never be questioned. Its sole message is: "What  
appears is good; what is good appears." The passive  
acceptance it demands is already effectively imposed by its  
monopoly of appearances, its manner of appearing without  
allowing any reply.*

Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*

The following essay is a comparative examination of populist, privately owned dime museums of the 19th century and contemporary, publicly funded museums. It will be argued that museological spaces are constructed environments that utilize designed display methods, carefully selected objects, and crafted informational texts to communicate selected historical and ideological narratives to visitors; comparisons will be made between the viewer's interaction with displayed objects in dime museums and



contemporary institutions. It will also be argued that the critique leveled by some contemporary museum scholars against the incorporation of popular entertainment into public museums is rooted in elitist and exclusionary cultural commentary that was already being applied to dime museums over a century ago. Areas of focus include the simulation of selected external environments or histories that are (re)presented in museological space; construction of meaning in the museum, and how (in)visible authorship influences this process; the “museum effect” - a theorized transformative exchange between the viewer and displayed objects, strengthened by the cultural legitimacy granted to museums; shifts in museological display ideology, standards, and methods; viewer agency and inquisition in the ritual of museum-going; and the changing goals of museum professionals to balance viewers’ amusement with opportunities for educational engagement. Theories of hyperreality, simulation, and institutional historicity by Jean Baudrillard, Umberto Eco, and Michel Foucault are used selectively as prompts to encourage critical inquiry into how shifts in the conception, mission, and execution of museum displays act upon (and are, in turn, influenced by) museum visitors. Given the limited scope of this essay, a variety of relevant topics are not examined here in depth. These include: pointed investigation of changing political influences on museum operation and policies in North America, from the mid-19th century onward; intensive focus on race, sex, and class politics and the colonial project at play in American dime museums, and most specifically, in the display of living human curiosities in these institutions; statistical analyses of operational budgets of and funding bodies to museums; examination of the interdepartmental politics at work in museums, or relations between

owners or executive boards and museum staff; and investigation of data collected directly from visitors about their experience within the museum space.

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For a brief time in American history, it was not uncommon to encounter mermaids, magic shows, elephants, bearded ladies, dwarves, fine Neo-Classical paintings, automatons, Shakespearean theatre, and taxidermied two-headed calves displayed side by side in museums. These facilities were quite unlike the museums of today; rather than displaying classified artifacts and art objects deemed significant by professional scholars and curators, 19th century dime museums (named thusly due to their low, single-rate admission cost) were hybrid cultural spaces, amalgamations of the wunderkammern of 17th century Europe, high art galleries, natural history museums, theatres and amusement parks. These hubs of popular, immersive entertainment flourished in densely populated, urban centres from the mid-1800s to the pre-World War I era. Dime museums were owned and operated by entrepreneurs in the capitalist pursuit of economic profit, but promoted under the guise of egalitarian edification for all men, women and children regardless of social stature or wealth. Visitors consumed exhibitions of art, artifacts, rarities, menageries, technological marvels, live theatrical performances, and displays of living human curiosities (Kunhardt 39; Nickell 84; Saxon 101-102).

Dime museums were calculated and constructed spaces; their entrepreneurial proprietors knew that to turn a profit, the museums needed to be marketed as educational, while containing exciting, fresh, and sometimes risqué displays that would appeal to

crowds ranging across the socio-economic class spectrum. Because these facilities were promoted as respectable, dime museums functioned as simulated, sanctioned spaces where strict social codes of interpersonal contact and conduct could be temporarily subverted, allowing visitors to voyeuristically consume exhibited objects and each other. This consumption took place at both literal and figurative levels: souvenirs, mementos and treats were available for purchase throughout many dime museums, while uninhibited gazing was encouraged by maze-like display halls, allowing viewers to feast their eyes on the multitude of stimuli surrounding them without fearing social repercussions (as their fellow viewers were also preoccupied with consumptive viewing) (Duncan 12; Bogdan 7; Pearce 367). The objects displayed in dime museums were legitimized, to a degree, by residing under the decorous title of “Museum”; things that would have normally been categorized as spurious or unwholesome during the Victorian era could be placed in a new context inside the museum walls, often in proximity to other works already afforded with high cultural status. The museumification of more dubious objects was also spurred by the narratives that were constructed for them by museum owners; displays were often accompanied by bombastic and fantastical texts, boasting of the legitimacy of their lineage. The construction of the museum environment, display of recontextualized objects and systematized narratives, and museum space embodying the concurrent inversion and reinforcement of social codes are all components of the dime museum which are still present in contemporary public museums. The neutrality that is often propagated by the design and organization of current institutions, however, furthers the reach of the simulation, to reinforce and reify the narratives displayed within as infallible truths. A comparison of the aesthetics, classificatory techniques, and intents of

the dime museum with those of contemporary public museums makes clear that while dime museums were spaces openly constructed to inspire wonder, excitement, and amusement, the cultural institutions of today, in all their seriousness and promoted edification, are equally simulated environments that are also moderated by the ideologies of their operating staff, funding bodies, and current prevailing scholarship on the objects that are chosen for display.

A brief synopsis of the history of dime museums is necessary before a comparison between them and their contemporary counterparts can be explored. The explosive growth of dime museums in urban centres across the United States during the mid- to late-19th century can be contextualized through an examination of the American socio-cultural environment and political shifts during this time. Following the Revolution, there were increasing public proclamations that all authority – social, moral, aesthetic, and religious – should rest in the hands of the ordinary citizen (Ames 14). This promotion of individualism coincided with President Andrew Jackson’s democratic platform and a burgeoning capitalist system that afforded many entrepreneurs with great wealth and shook up economic class structures (Harris 33; Dennett 2). The core tenets of Jacksonian democracy were equality of opportunity, the importance of self-interest, and decreased government intervention in banking and private business (Ashworth 408). Jacksonians promoted laissez-faire economic policy, reasoning that if responsibility rested on “real people” rather than big government, the average person would have a greater say in their own economic actions and subsequent prosperity (Wulf 649; Ashworth 411). Practically speaking, this leveling of opportunity did not mean all 19th century citizens would obtain

the same degree of wealth; rather, Jacksonian egalitarianism led to the rising of the “self-made man” – the entrepreneur – and an increase in both private commercial enterprises and commodity-driven consumerism (Ashworth 408).

Amid the socio-political climate of self-driven opportunity and entrepreneurialism, the development of large-scale industrial and financial enterprises, along with economic centralization around commercial hubs, saw America’s urban centres swell with rural migration and international immigration. The population influx caused thousands of new urbanites to take up residence in boarding houses, as owning or renting detached homes was prohibitively expensive (Harris 37). Many of these new city dwellers worked in the ever-larger factories that sprang up in the wake of the Industrial Revolution to meet the growing consumer needs of the populace. Unlike agricultural or specialized craft occupations, factory workers spent fewer hours each day on the job, increasing their free time and desire to find leisure activities that might remove them from cramped boarding quarters (Belk 55; Dennett 3). There was also a thirst for social interaction to stave off the urban alienation many residents felt after moving to cities from smaller, familiar communities. The social vacuum faced by thousands of workers with spare time and a little pocket change was soon filled by bars and theatres, both of which were said to condone generally unrespectable and lascivious acts:

American theatres were frequently rowdy and sometimes violent, patronized by gamblers, prostitutes, drifters, and rambunctious youngsters ... good Christians were warned, on peril of their eternal lives, to avoid its contamination. (Harris 36)

Rampant urban alcoholism led to the growing popularity of the Temperance movement among wives and the significant number of single women who had moved to cities in search of economic opportunity (Dennett 3). As their voices converged on the topic of teetotalism, it became apparent that the recreational needs of families and single women were not being met, and the field of “respectable entertainment” was ripe for harvest.

P.T. Barnum’s American Museum, operating in New York City from 1841 to 1868, serves as an illustrative example of the type of facility that emerged to meet the demand for respectable, populist entertainment. While most dime museums did not reach the scope or operational budget of Barnum’s immense institution, his exhibitions and marketing techniques exemplify the loftiest goals aspired to by most museum operators of the day. Barnum’s Museum consisted of six main exhibition spaces, called “saloons”, as well as the Lecture Room, a bowling alley, and a rooftop camera obscura (Kunhardt 71-72). The saloons housed cosmoramas, taxidermy, fine art paintings, cultural artifacts of American history and foreign anthropology, crystals and gems, reptiles, insects, waxworks, daguerreotypes, a skeleton chamber, mummies, models, and automatons (Kunhardt 140-141; Nickell 45-46; Saxon 93-94). The rooftop garden was home to a fountain, fireworks display area, and a menagerie including orangutans, elephants, giraffes, rhinos, lions, tigers, leopards, llamas, a grizzly bear and Ned the Learned Seal (Kunhardt 110; Harris 165). Barnum displayed the first hippopotamus in America, and piped in salt water from the New York harbour for an aquarium which housed tropical fish and two white whales from Labrador (Kunhardt 158; Harris 165; Nickell 302). One of Barnum’s most popular exhibits was the Happy Family, “a collection of monkeys,

dogs, rats, cats, pigeons, owls, porcupines, guinea pigs, cocks and hounds, all of whom lived in amicable peace together” (Harris 166). The Lecture Room housed concerts, speeches and theatrical performances, and was regularly renovated and expanded; by 1850 it could seat 3,000 people, and staged multiple performances daily by New York’s first full-time theatre company (Saxon 106). The rotating cast of hundreds of living human curiosities on Barnum’s employment roster included giants, dwarves, bearded ladies, an albino family, conjoined twins, “wild children”, Circassian girls, Native American chiefs, the fat, the thin, the tattooed, the limbless and the “missing link” (Kunhardt 39, 112, 209; Nickell 84; Saxon 101-102). The Museum also contained vendors of souvenir pamphlets and carte-de-visites, on-demand taxidermy, glass blowing, fortune telling and food concessions (Dennett 35).

The magnitude of Barnum’s collections and attractions may be staggering, but the highly diverse, exploding population of 19th century urban America was able to support a wide variety of for-profit entertainments that catered to all social and economic classes (Dennett xii). Museums such as Barnum’s were not the only option for affordable, accessible amusement; common leisure activities included fairs, circuses, touring artists, magic shows, lectures, and freak and prodigy performances (Harris 35). Dime museum entrepreneurs actively competed for clientele by strategic, populist marketing, promoting their museums as “chaste” entertainment for the whole family, even while they housed objects and performances similar to their less respectable competitors (Dennett 36). The previously untapped market of wives, children and single women flocked to dime museums, and through the sheer quantity and diversity of the objects and wonders on

display, there was indeed something for everyone. Visitors ranged from farmers, tradesmen, businessmen and families to esteemed scientists, authors, religious leaders and cultural ambassadors; even Edward VII, Prince of Wales, visited Barnum's Museum on his first trip to America in 1860 (Saxon 108). The scope of the dime museum policy of cultural democratization is demonstrated in one instance by Barnum's ticket sales: in the 23 years of his museum's operation, 38 million admissions were sold, and the entire population of the United States at the time was only 35 million (Saxon 107). Even taking into account repeat visitors (whom Barnum and most other dime museum operators catered to by routinely rotating exhibits), these attendance statistics demonstrate that proprietors understood that by making displays accessible, egalitarian and dynamic, a greater number of viewers could be reached more effectively, and profit would follow (Belk 124).

In conjunction with the rise in popularity of scientific categorization systems and amid scholarly critique of their lack of educational focus, most dime museums and populist institutions displaying spurious objects and freak shows were closed down or subsumed into marginalized traveling circuses by the late 19th century, replaced by classified and professionalized institutions that promoted scholarship over amusement (Belk 107). By the early 20th century, many American museums shifted toward becoming publicly funded "temples of authenticity" (Belk 108), steeped in ritual that constructed and confirmed the high class identities and tastes of scholars, curators, donors, and members of funding bodies (Duncan 8). The irony is that the scholarly replacements for dime museums which had championed theatricality and consumerism were equally



(and arguably, are even more so today) constructed around spectacle and both literal and figurative consumption. Though the commoditization of the museum system is often met with disdain among directors, curators, and collectors themselves (Belk 42), contemporary museums, especially after late 20th century declines in state funding, continue to cater to the entertainment desires of the greater public to remain economically viable, in a cycle Russell Belk decries (in an arguably alarmist and elitist tone) as “education sacrificed for superficiality” (Belk 123).

While the constructed spectacle, theatricality and profiteering intent of dime museums were relatively transparent given the trumpeting marketing campaigns, labyrinthian display layouts, and effusive narratives employed by museum proprietors, today’s public cultural institutions, while also formulated as simulated environments, solidify different myth and meaning promoted from positions of power. It is arguable that present day museums tend to neutralize, rather than promote, the designed and mediated nature of the information they share with visitors. The contemporary conception of the museum space is an environment to encourage the edification of the visitor and the dissemination of knowledge. Because these spaces are constructed and carefully organized according to academic classificatory schemata, they extract objects and information from the world beyond the museum doors and present them in a new context. This new context, however, often aims to simulate the objects’ origins, referring back to a selected history that legitimizes its elevation into the museum space. The hermetic nature of museological standards, including the structure of displays, norms of presentation, environmental controls, security procedures and the use of archival materials, tends to

present the knowledge the museum imparts as infallible fact or absolute truth, while in actuality these meanings are, arguably, as fabricated and manipulated (albeit in different ways) as those found in the dime museum.

If both the dime museums of the 19th century and contemporary museums can be theorized as constructed environments of simulation that are set apart from the everyday, it can be argued that they both house dynamic power relations that act upon (and in turn, are re-enacted by) both the objects on display and the visitors that arrive to view them. This transformative exchange has been termed the “museum effect”, where “not only do ordinary things become special when placed in museum settings, but also the museum experience itself becomes a model for experiencing life outside its walls.” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 410; Alpers 25; Bonetti 171-172) The museum effect is propagated by the cultural legitimacy afforded to public institutions, and authorizes and sanctions the displays visitors encounter in all formalized, museological spaces, which allows accepting the “truths” of displayed objects or informational texts, simulations though they may be, to become habitual. The studied and deliberate recontextualization of objects within the museum environment (thereby removed from their origins) takes place as part of this system of legitimation. Roberta Bonetti describes the reframing project of the museum effect, writing

In the museum, it is the reference to a presumed original context that places the artifact behind glass, whereas the present context (the environment inhabited by the object) is removed and made invisible to the public... There arises a paradoxical situation: In the museum, the artifact materializes within an original

context, which, through a series of expedients, appears remote from the visitor's context, but actually belongs to the very society that exhibits it (and contributes to its creation). In so doing, the artifact does not appear for what it is - that is, a process set in motion by the encounter between people and institutions within a social milieu, its habitus - but as something with a univocal, universal status. (Bonetti 169)

Imbued with new context via the various organizational tools of the museum (labels, charts, audioguides, audiovisual presentations, guided tours, catalogues, educational programs, and ordering systems and typologies), displayed objects are elevated as significant and valuable (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 390). In the process of being made momentous, however, the object is separated from the nuanced, multi-faceted contexts that surrounded it in its life outside the museum walls. This reduction facilitates a singular, authenticated history presented by the museum's systems of classification. Theodor Adorno's conception of the museum as a mausoleum, containing "objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in the process of dying" (Adorno 175), illustrates an outcome of the enactment of the museum effect upon collected and displayed objects.

Given the contrast in display methods and systematic selection and categorization of objects between 19th century dime museums and today's public cultural institutions, the museum effect, though acting in both environments, precipitates different outcomes depending on the structures of ideas and practices that are supporting displayed objects. Exhibitions of objects in dime museums were often sparsely labelled, idiosyncratically

organized, and full to overflowing (Kundhardt 138; Harris 57; Ames 38). Due to the sheer volume of displays to navigate through, visitors may have been able to grasp the nature of only a fraction of the objects presented, and in cases where clear labelling was not employed, were left to determine for themselves the objects' significance. These casual, multiplicitous, and likely somewhat confusing exchanges of meaning are contrasted by the authoritative and often singular history presented by the extensive labels and organizational tools that are used to animate objects in most contemporary museums. This shift in modes of presentation gained momentum throughout 19th century, when, under the authority of newly-powerful professionals in publicly funded institutions, new systems of classification stratified objects into more clearly defined categories, and museum collections that did not conform to this sorting were both scorned and sensationalized; many scholars have pointed to this trend as also contributing to the decrease in wunderkammer collections in Europe after the 18th century (Pearce 127; Belk 34, 107; Daston and Park 276). Though dime museum visitors seemed content to view objects and their accompanying information in a perhaps less studious, more wondrous way, scientists, curatorial professionals, and their journalistic allies were critical of what they viewed as the squandered potential to inform the masses about recent advancements in anthropology, zoology, geology and technical innovation. A newspaper editorial from 1865 reads

The more one truly loves a good collection well arranged, the more he will be offended by a chaotic, dusty, dishonored collection... Without scientific arrangement, without a catalogue, without attendants, without even labels, in very many instances, the heterogeneous heap of 'curiosities' valuable and worthless

mixed up together, could not attract our students very often or detain them long...  
(Barnum 215)

Though dime museums across the United States housed countless important artifacts (many of which ended up in the halls of reputable scholarly institutions like the Smithsonian and the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard, as in the case of Barnum's collection), it was often argued that these jewels were lost amid the chaos and devalued due to their proximity to humbugs and forgeries (Harris 173; Caillois 27). While it may be difficult for contemporary museum professionals to justify the presentation of inauthentic objects or multi-faceted (and potentially conflicting) informational texts, the entrepreneurial proprietors of dime museums proposed that visitors were challenged by the questionable content of their displays. P.T. Barnum maintained that the audiences at his American Museum gained greater joy out of wondering at the authenticity of his attractions than they would had all objects been above reproach, stating "Everyone is open to deception; people like to be led in the region of mystery" (Dennett 30). Barnum's exhibits, filled with objects both authentic and faked, arguably trained his customers to be active and critical in their viewing, rather than passive and deferring. Unlike the contemporary institutional framework that values authenticity above much else (Pearce 191), the reputation of the American Museum was strengthened by the public's knowledge that Barnum inserted forgeries like his infamous Feejee Mermaid alongside legitimate collection pieces. However, it has been suggested by current museum scholars that contemporary museological spaces are just as spectacularly charged and theatrical as the exhibits of dime museums, despite their

outward reputation as repositories of authenticity and truth (Rice 15; Branham 38; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 389; Debord 6). Danielle Rice asserts:

... while often presented as neutral backdrops for art [and objects], museum spaces are in fact often carefully conceived for maximum theatricality, and inevitably privilege some objects over others. Likewise, the layout of a sequence of galleries can further enforce a particular narrative of "mainstream," canonical art, marginalizing or eliminating works that do not neatly fit the story...

Individual objects, instead of being seen as pleasing combinations of formal elements, came to be regarded as "elements of discourse" existing within a variety of belief systems, historical periods, and socioeconomic forces. (Rice 15-16)

In the dime museum, the museum effect served to legitimize objects of debated cultural value and to sanction and enhance theatricality in their display. After the mid-to-late 19th century shift that moved museums toward the publicly funded model of "temples of authenticity" (Belk 108) that prevail today, the museum effect downplayed theatricality, but nonetheless canonized objects and ritualized the act of museum-going in new ways. Whereas the dime museum had confirmed visitors' "respectable" identities while sanctioning elements of the risqué, the modern museum reconfirmed the elevated cultural identities and tastes, whether actual or aspirational, of museum visitors (Duncan 8).

Though modern museums purport to present an organized, classified, and often beautified version of reality through the objects selected and displayed, this project is troubled when viewed through the theoretical lens of Jean Baudrillard's assertion that reality has been replaced completely by simulation. While objects in most museological

displays are clearly placed in constructed environments (with plinths, vitrines, mounts, specialized lighting, environmental controls, painted backdrops, and extended explanatory texts), Baudrillard maintains that these representations have taken the place of any possible points of origin, writing

It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real... pretending, or dissimulating, leaves the principle of reality intact: the difference is always clear, it is simply masked, whereas simulation threatens the difference between the 'true' and the 'false', the 'real' and the 'imaginary'. (Baudrillard 2-3)

It can be argued that the hyperreality created by unlimited simulations of the real reduces the museum to re-presenting representations of itself, rather than an ultimate truth or reality that lies outside its doors. Displays are often co-ordinated to refer to each other; indeed, many contemporary institutions have branded continuity between rooms so that, though they may house very different objects, each display shares common materials, colours, finishes, fonts, and logos. Amidst this presumed "neutral" backdrop, the re-presentation of objects separates them from the contexts of their existence outside the museum, and formulates them as signs that point back to what they are deemed to represent. Baudrillard maintains that this process of simulation causes the death of the object, wherein the object "takes its revenge for being 'discovered' and with its death defies the science that wants to grasp it." (Baudrillard 7)

If Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality is applied to the modern museum, the removal of an object from its outside context and the staging of a new, simulated

objecthood inside the museum environment would thereby initiate the death of the object, and the museological displays that seek to present authenticity and infallibility would instead proffer signs which can only refer back to a reality which no longer exists. During his travels through American sites of amusement in the 1960s, Umberto Eco theorized that the proliferation of signs in sites of cultural production does not merely refer to the real, but aspires to replace it completely:

The 'completely real' becomes identified with the 'completely fake'. Absolute unreality is offered as real presence... The sign aims to be the thing, to abolish the distinction of the reference, the mechanism of replacement. Not the image of the thing, but its plaster cast. Its double, in other words... the American imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake... (Eco 7-8)

Eco argues that the simulation serves to reinforce the perception of reality while concurrently nullifying the real. While modern museum spaces are not completely analogous to sites of popular amusement, given their mandate to serve the educational advancement of their viewers, Eco's observations about the constructed, immersive environments of amusement parks and presented objects that function as referents to existence outside their walls share commonalities with some contemporary museum critique (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 408-409; Berelowitz 73; MacCannell 93; Mitchell 299). Museological displays present information and meaning by utilizing objects as examples, as placeholders for reality beyond the institution's walls. How is this instructional exchange between object and viewer changed by the veritude of the object itself, especially if, as Baudrillard argues, reality has ceased to exist even outside the simulated



space of the museum? Some contemporary museum studies scholars have suggested that the mystification and distortion of meaning that occurs in the museum does not necessarily render it beyond transparency, but instead creates opportunities for discourse about classification, representation and simulation (Berelowitz 73; MacCannell 93; Mitchell 299; Debord 7). The museum space, as it “collects itself both as the fantasy and fiction of reconstruction” (Furjan 69), can demonstrate its constructed (hyper)reality in a more transparent way than is readily visible in the world outside its doors; displays in dime museums were regularly described as wondrous, fantastical, and magical, while exhibitions in contemporary museums are often marketed as “must-see”, momentous events (Nasaw 16; Ames 14; Bogdan 32; Belk 110-112; Duncan 12; Lim 2010). Because visiting the museum is viewed as a removal from the everyday, a spectacle to assist the visitor in escaping the mundane, the viewer may more readily identify the museum space as structured and extensively planned, which could also open the viewer to examination of the structures at play in their exterior lives, where theoretically, if Baudrillard is to be considered, simulation has subsumed reality.

The ritual of museum-going shapes the interaction and exchange of information between the visitor and the objects on display. The museum effect acts upon the physical bodies and minds of visitors, altering perceptions and the mechanics of viewing. The act of gazing is not one-sided; while the visitor consumes exhibited objects and information, the ritualized customs of acceptable museum behaviour surveille the visitor, and both the objects on display and other museum patrons are actors in the structured interaction of

seeing and being seen (Bonetti 173). Joan Branham describes the physicality of the museum effect on the bodies of visitors as reminiscent of rituals at sacralized sites:

Hushed tones, reverent observation, and processional gaits in the museum imitate behaviour in liturgical settings. In essence, ancient rules and taboos associated with sacred space, objects, personage, and time give way to museum policy, membership privileges, and operating hours. (Branham 42)

As places of silent looking without touching, both 19th century dime museums and contemporary museums actively promote scopophilic voyeurism and fetishism, as objects are elevated both figuratively and literally out of the reach of visitors (Berelowitz 77). By acting out the conventions of museum-going, visitors can also voyeuristically consume one another while travelling between display cases and text panels. Much in the same way that objects on display are removed from utility and encased behind glass to contain their tactility, visitors in museum spaces are often acutely aware of the boundaries of their physical bodies in relation to one another (Stewart 104-105).

Though many of the objects on display in dime museums would be considered by today's museological standards to be of limited cultural value, the ritualized actions performed in those spaces have similarities with those enacted in contemporary museums. While dime museums catered to the desire for escapism and amusement in their visitors (and the profiteering of their operators), proprietors were acutely aware that by labelling their institutions as museums, the associated edification of attendees would justify the voyeurism and subversion of Victorian codes of conduct that occurred inside the museum exhibits. Public social interactions in the 19th century were highly structured and

moralized; physical contact with strangers was strictly limited, as was socializing outside of the family unit (especially for single women and mothers) (Dennett 83; Nasaw 16). The prevailing belief at the time was that leisure should not be spent in idleness, but edification, and “under enlightened municipal auspices, recreation could serve as a powerfully constructive force in social integration and moral development” (Dennett 6). Because dime museums were promoted as respectable and educational, the subversion of social codes was sanctioned within their walls, allowing visitors to voyeuristically consume objects of both high and low cultural distinction and the bodies of freak show performers, as well as the physicality of their fellow museum-goers. This ritualistic consumption, predicated by directed gazing that would have been considered improper outside the museum, is still present in contemporary museums that are designed to manage and focus the gaze throughout exhibition spaces. While dime museums provided a dazzling, if often disorganized, plethora of objects and actors to engage the viewer’s eye, however, the trend of professionalization in museums that gained momentum through the 19th century focused on the power of classificatory systems of arrangement to direct the gaze in a methodical manner meant to promote edification. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett suggests that this shift furthered the project of dime museum proprietors attempting to legitimize their more spurious displays by promoting them as educational:

For instruction to redeem amusement, viewers need principles for looking. They require a context, or framework, for transforming otherwise grotesque, rude, strange, and vulgar artifacts into object lessons. Having been saved from oblivion, the [object] needs also to be rescued from triviality. (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 390)

The museum effect, at work in the contemporary museum environment, extends authenticity to the constructed environment of the exhibition space, the objects displayed within, and the act of museum-going, where the visitor is justified in the voyeuristic and consumeristic acts of uninhibited gazing and spending money on marketed souvenirs, by acting under the mantle of the educational mandate of the institution.

While the museum effect acts to entrench the authority of the museum and the behaviour of the visitors inside its exhibitions, the process of the systematic production of meaning rests with curators, scholars, and museum professionals who generally work outside the view of the public. The selection of specific objects for display, construction of architectural frameworks and writing of explanatory labels formulate the context into which the visitor enters, and the singularity of this constructed narrative arguably cultivates a form of cultural hegemony. Michel Foucault problematizes the ideal of institutional truth, labelling the idea of singular, authoritative truth as an “error”; a privileged narrative that is produced to appear irrefutable by discursive practices which cut out dissension or alternate histories (Foucault 142, 144). He argues that an unlimited multiplicity of experiences makes it impossible for any one person (or an institution such as a museum) to fully understand another or to create a universalised narrative that applies to everyone. From a Foucaultian perspective, the historical narratives, object selections, and explanatory texts presented in museums as fact for the purpose of the edification of viewers produce a singular representation that is dependant on the constructed museological space to exist. To combat universalist narratives, Foucault calls

for the practice of “effective history”, where there are no constants and multiplicity is crucial (Foucault 153). This alternate type of history

introduces discontinuity into our very being - as it divides our emotions, dramatizes our instincts, multiplies our body and sets it against itself. ‘Effective’ history deprives the self of the reassuring stability of life and nature... It will uproot its traditional foundations and relentlessly disrupt its pretended continuity. (Foucault, 154)

Foucault’s effective history troubles the position of the modern museum, which has traditionally engaged in the production of authoritative truths about the past in its objects and texts. It could be argued that the disorganized, unsystematic arrangement of objects and displays in dime museums upset the notion of singular, institutional truth by leaving visitors to formulate their own opinions about the objects presented to them. The lack of focus directing visitors through the exhibition environment allowed for a multiplicity of experiences to be had in the dime museum, in a manner that seems analogous to the discontinuity which Foucault claimed could shake the power of institutional authority. The move toward classified stratification and ordering within public museums throughout the mid-to-late 19th century, an ideological shift that still resonates in contemporary museums, arguably homogenized the museum-going experience by singularizing the narratives presented and more strictly directing the way in which visitors encounter and move through exhibits. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes the changing system of meaning-making in the museum by illustrating the ideological policies of George Brown Goode, an influential museum administrator at the Smithsonian Institute in the late 19th century:

[Goode maintained that] the most important thing about an exhibition was the label [and that] an efficient educational museum may be described as a collection of instructive labels, each illustrated by a well-selected specimen... Reacting to the apparent lack of logical arrangement in displays of art collections in many European museums and the low status to which so many private museums in America had descended, Goode had long insisted that the museum of the past was to be transformed from 'a cemetery of bric-a-brac into a nursery of living thoughts' and serve, in its way, as a library of objects. Curators were to objectify texts and textualize objects; hence the importance of an organizational scheme for arranging objects and labels to explain them, and the willing acceptance of copies, casts, impressions, photographs, diagrams, and other surrogates for primary artifacts. (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 394-395)

When encountering selected objects on display alongside classificatory labels and explanatory texts inside contemporary cultural institutions, it is rare that the visitor is directly presented with the name of the author, or curator, that produced the exhibition. Many large public museums have a plethora of curators, specialists and technicians, any of whom could be directly responsible for the conception and construction of a specific display. The modern museum environment is produced with assumptions of rationality, truth, and singularity, which are embodied in its systems of classification and display. The visitor is often confronted with an impersonal structure that makes inquiry difficult and elides multiplicity of meaning; this effect is heightened by the inability to connect the information presented with any single, imperfect person:

When we enter the hallowed halls of museums, how much are we influenced by the aura of authority which surrounds the glass cases? What artifacts and stories do we accept because they are accompanied by scholarly descriptions and Latin names? What ancient or foreign cultures are we convinced of purely on the strength of relics and writings identified for us by unseen ‘professors.’ (Wertheim 35)

Within the contemporary museum space, the presentation of displays and texts without the attachment of an author serves to strengthen the museum effect, reinforcing the information contained as objective truth, or meaning that is beyond question; knowledge that is a given, as it is not credited to a singular mind. The museum’s authority as purveyor of such knowledge is reinforced by the generally accepted standards of display, which render the fallible humanity behind the displays and texts anonymous and invisible by design. Conversely, the publicity campaigns that marketed dime museums almost always linked the institution (and thus, its displays) to its proprietor; many 19th century museums also bore the name of their owners, and in the cases of Charles Willson Peale’s Museum in Baltimore and P.T. Barnum’s American Museum in New York, the facilities became almost indistinguishable from the men in the eyes of the public. Barnum especially came to personify the trickery and play at work in the narratives presented in his museum; often derided in the press for shady advertising methods and inauthentic attractions, he embraced the nickname “Prince of Humbugs”, and euphemized the term as not a “criminal swindling but as a series of ‘novel expedients’ devised by an honest impresario who delivers a quota of fun more than equal to the admission price” (Barnum 86). Because visitors of the dime museum could generally attach a name and a

personality to the exhibits they were paying to see (and said personalities were often publicly known to be inclined to hucksterism), they were also afforded the capacity to recognize the potential for invention, exaggeration and artifice. Much in the same way that a lack of organization and direction in dime museum displays arguably allowed for a multiplicity of experiences throughout the display halls, the association of the information provided with the reputations of museum entrepreneurs facilitated the critical consumption of objects and narratives; visitors expected to be duped, and thus felt empowered to question the veracity of what was presented to them (Kunhardt 138; Harris 57). The anonymity of authorship in the meanings presented in contemporary museum spaces obstructs the subjective viewing of displays by many visitors who feel intimidated by or undereducated about unfamiliar objects or concepts, which further solidifies the information presented as authoritative and singularly true. While authorship as a concept itself is constructed, it could be argued that the act of “naming” an author opens up a discursive space by anchoring the information to an individual person, who could then be questioned or held accountable for the ideas they have put forth to museum visitors.

It is crucial to note that while dime museums functioned as hybrid environments that promoted cultural fluidity, a completely nostalgic idealization of these spaces as truly democratic is strained under the application of post-colonial discourse. The commodification of appropriated cultural objects and the display of living human marvels in dime museums spectacularized visitors’ encounters with both objects and objectified persons, as the museum effect transformed them into things to be purchased, exhibited, and consumed as the exotic and abnormal. The structures of dominance at play between



an object, its owner, and its consumer cannot be wholly ignored in favour of nostalgia-driven juxtaposition between 19th century dime museums and contemporary cultural institutions. Colonialist politics have framed much of the museological project in general: the collecting process has been compared to a hunt, with the collected items as “prey” which, when captured, become “trophies” (Belk 93). This narrative finds traction in the examination of the public collections of the globe’s most imperialist societies; the British Museum’s unequalled collection, as a highly publicized example, contains countless objects that were originally seized as part of colonial conquests, including Egyptian mummies, spiritual objects of North American indigenous peoples, artifacts from the African continent, thousands of stuffed animal specimens and preserved human remains, and the Elgin Marbles. In recent years, many post-colonized societies have demanded the repatriation of these objects, protesting the colonial conditions under which they were collected.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, colonialist exploits fueled the collecting policies and display presentations of dime museums, where appropriated objects were often haphazardly presented without researched description or attribution, and freak shows drew voyeuristic crowds looking for a cheap thrill.

In the specific case of the dime museum freak show, explorations of race, colonial dominance and the social enactment of power relations are not as clear as may be presumed. The often highly visible anatomical anomalies of human curiosities, viewed

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<sup>1</sup> Calls for repatriation are becoming so common that the British Museum has an entire section of its website devoted to the coverage of the return of contentious objects, primarily those containing human remains:

[http://www.britishmuseum.org/the\\_museum/news\\_and\\_debate/debate/human\\_remains.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/the_museum/news_and_debate/debate/human_remains.aspx) (retrieved February 4, 2012)

through the lens of racialized exoticism, helped to establish a quick and definitive binary; the spectacle of abnormal bodies “distances the viewer, and thereby it ‘normalizes’ the viewer as much as it marks the freak as an aberration.” (Stewart 107) The freak’s “freakishness” served to further solidify the viewer’s internal belief (and relief) that they themselves were normal. With the classification of “normal” comes a sense of rationality and power - Russell Belk states that this “tendency to define the other as completely different from ourselves in order to reinforce our presumed superiority is the essence of Orientalism” (Belk 154). The experience of entering a museum and viewing people who were marketed as highly different from most urban Americans (whether by their origins, capabilities, race, stature, or physical deformities), then, would have had a unifying effect on all the “normal”, proper Victorians in the audience who were otherwise alienated from each other by strict social codes that moderating interacting with strangers outside one’s own familiar relationships. The binary of normal/abnormal was not lost on the owners of dime museums, nor on the human curiosities themselves. This divide was sometimes heightened during performances for effect, and at other times breached to scandalize and amuse the viewer. There are many documented cases of a performer’s personal background or physical traits being exaggerated; freaks born in the U.S. were marketed as coming from distant lands, those fluent in English were encouraged to speak gibberish, and many wore exotic costumes imagined as “authentic” by museum owners (Kunhardt 36, 149; Harris 56; Bogdan 11). Such hyperbolic displays were used to escalate the viewer’s shock and awe, and make plain the extreme disparity between normal and strange. However, it was also common for freaks to perform in proper Victorian attire, a fact attested to by the many surviving souvenir photographs of human curiosities dressed

in stylish gowns and tailored suits (Kunhardt 147; Bogdan 42). This seeming contradiction illustrates the possibility of a subversive role played by the dime museum as a space to encounter the unexpected; though the Othering of the freaks was enacted by their physical differences and the fact that they were standing on display, when dressed as Victorian ladies and gentlemen their presence may have shaken accepted representations of normalcy, if only for a short time (Dennett 83).

The microcosmic example of the dime museum freak show demonstrates the complexity of a retrospective application of contemporary post-colonial critique to these institutions, and a full examination of the systems of power at work in 19th century dime museums lies outside the scope of this essay. However, much as contemporary museum studies scholars are calling for greater accountability in the procurement, display, and historical framing of cultural objects in public institutions (Pearce 112; Karp & Levine 27; Belk 93; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 395), a troubling of the nostalgic narrative of the dime museum as completely egalitarian and idealistic is a necessary element of a critical examination of how the museum effect worked in the populist museums of the 19th century.

The parallels and contrasts between 19th century dime museums and contemporary cultural institutions demonstrate that while shifts in the mandates and modes of presentation of public museums have altered the ways in which visitors engage with objects in the simulated exhibition space and indeed, with the concept of museological authority itself, the combination of amusement and edification that dime

museum proprietors sought is still striven for today, in different ways and under varying degrees of acknowledgement. In his examination of the changing perceptions of high and low culture, Lawrence Levine describes mid-19th century America as a fluid space of cultural sharing, where the greater populace had access to a wide range of art, theatre, music, and technology (Levine 233). The late-19th century shift towards hierarchical classification elevated high culture beyond much of populist consumption:

When Shakespeare, opera, art and music were subject to free exchange, as they had been for much of the 19th century, they became the property of many groups, the companion of a wide spectrum of other cultural genres, and thus their power to bestow distinction was diminished, as was their power to please those who insisted on enjoying them in privileged circumstances, free from the interference of other cultural groups and the dilution of other cultural forms. [By imposed stratification, these deemed ‘high cultural forms’] were in effect ‘rescued’ from the marketplace, and therefore from the mixed audience... they were removed from the pressures of everyday economic and social life, and placed [in institutions] that often resembled temples, to be perused, enjoyed and protected by the initiated - those who had the inclination, the leisure, and the knowledge to appreciate them. (Levine 230)

As mentioned previously, this shift logically coincided with the disappearance of most dime museums across America and a proliferation of specialized, publicly funded cultural institutions that reinforced scholarly mandates (Belk 107; Bogdan 32). For much of the 20th century, the modern museum stood as a temple to academic knowledge and the cultivation of authoritative history. Starting in the 1970s, however, there was a shift

toward blockbuster exhibitions, sophisticatedly designed and marketed to maximize institutional attendance and revenues (“Art History and the ‘Blockbuster’ Exhibition” 358). These museum “events”, including the extensively-travelled and exceedingly profitable King Tut and Vatican collection exhibitions of the 1980s, were crafted to include the full visitor-as-consumer experience by offering miniature replicas, catalogues, themed jewelry, and children’s souvenirs for purchase (“Art History and the ‘Blockbuster’ Exhibition” 385). The move toward crowd-pleasing programming gained momentum through the economic constraints that plagued the funding of cultural programs in North America during the 1990s, and the worldwide market collapse of 2008. Amidst critical calls for contemporary museums to be separated from the realm of commodity (Pearce 260), museum and gallery administrators point to record attendance at exhibitions that cater to pop cultural tastes. Danielle Rice describes the task of museum professionals to navigate the spectrum between education and entertainment, writing

As today's museum administrators respond to economic constraints and opportunities by marketing their institutions through crowd-pleasing blockbuster exhibitions and expanding attractions to include shops, restaurants, and catering services, they participate in blurring the very boundaries between high and popular culture that their predecessors, however inadvertently, helped construct... some critics have complained that museums have abandoned serious educational efforts and remade themselves as theme parks... (Rice 18)

In October 2010, the premiere screening of ‘Jackass 3D’ at the Museum of Modern Art in New York horrified many art critics while delighting a diverse audience of mainstream movie fans and subversive, counter-culture theorists, and garnered comparisons to the

work of seminal performance artist Vito Acconci and transgressive filmmaker Luis Bunuel (Lim 2010). Alongside critiques of lowbrow, populist content, modern museums have also come under fire for norms in their architecture and spatial layout that solidify the “museum as temple” metaphor; Carol Duncan cites these structures as examples of “aesthetics over education” (Duncan 17). Much as early wunderkammern and dime museums were deemed as overly theatrical and lacking in educational value, comparisons have been drawn between contemporary cultural institutions and theatres, where museum-going becomes more concerned with performative, dramatic ritual than edification (Duncan 12).

When viewed through the lens of 20th century theoretical museological criticism, it can be argued that both the dime museum and contemporary museum environments are constructed spaces, where meaning is enacted by the recontextualized interactions between objects and visitors. The ideological didacticism of the museum effect directs the visitor’s consumptive gaze and physical presence in the museum, while museum professionals (whether anonymous, as in the case of large, contemporary institutions, or prominently publicized, in the instance of dime museum owners) seek to balance the dualistic experiences of amusement and edification to legitimize their cultural status and spur attendance. It is precisely due to their fabrication as spheres of simulation, however, that museums, both populist and professionalized, are capable of invoking wonder, nostalgia, and a sense of escape from the mundanity of the world outside their walls. The museum space is set apart, a sanctioned area of rupture. While for much of the 20th century museums reinforced cultural hierarchies, recent egalitarian turns towards the

reification of popular culture and the shrinking of the gap between high and low classifications point towards another era of cultural fluidity, similar to that which produced the phenomena of the urban dime museum. Much like their 19th century counterparts, today's museum administrators are seeking to combine the draw of immersive amusement with the legitimacy of an educational mission. Is there an ideal balance to be struck between education and amusement in museological space? Given the complexity of institutional specialities, changing mandates, shifting funding bodies, and the desires of museum audiences, it is likely that museums will continue to move back and forth along the spectrum of possibilities between edification and entertainment. The cultivation of the visitor's amusement in the constructed environment of contemporary museum spaces, to varying degrees, has the capacity to alter the singular authority of museological truth, and will likely continue to disrupt the cultural stratification that terminated the democratic project of the dime museum.

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## Barnum, Gurney, and *Dr. Soanes*

*When we enter the hallowed halls of museums, how much are we influenced by the aura of authority which surrounds the glass cases? What artifacts and stories do we accept because they are accompanied by scholarly descriptions and Latin names? What ancient or foreign cultures are we convinced of purely on the strength of relics and writings identified for us by unseen 'professors.'*

Margaret Wertheim, "The Museum of Jurassic Technology; See The Unbelievable On Display", 1994

*"Could it not be that the female chimera, like the females of several insect species, is of an entirely different bodily make-up from the male and, so far, has not been identified as such by science?" asked the old-like party in the golf pants. "Science does not even recognize the existence of the male chimera, let alone search for its mate," said Doctor Lao. "What is science, anyway?" asked the country lass. "Science?" said the doctor. "Why, science is nothing but classification. Science is just tagging a name to everything."*

Charles G. Finney, *The Circus of Dr. Lao*, 1935

*The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science. Whoever does not know it can no longer wonder, no longer marvel, is as good as dead, and his eyes are dimmed.*

Albert Einstein, *The World as I See It*, 1949

The village of Strome, Alberta, is an unlikely site for a pilgrimage. Though once a bustling hub for the surrounding farming community, boasting two hotels, a car dealership, three general stores, and at its peak in the early 20th century, four passenger train stops each day, Strome is currently home to less than 300 people. But I wasn't

driving across seemingly endless fields of canola in search of city lights or cosmopolitan crowds. I was seeking out a spectacle of the more elusive kind: a two-headed calf.

This specific marvel of nature is among the few foggy recollections my Dad has of visiting Lethbridge's original odditorium, the Gurney Museum, when he was a child. The museum was established in 1944 by Walter Gurney, a lifelong collector of taxidermy and other wondrous objects. Gurney struck a deal with the city council to occupy the former downtown site of Lethbridge's Board of Trade, a bandstand in Galt Gardens park, provided he be open to the public on Saturdays and Sundays. Within the first five years of opening, over 80,000 visitors crossed his threshold to view mounted birds, furniture built of animal hides and antlers, fossils and geological samples, foreign currency, and Native American artifacts. My Dad remembers being taken to the museum by my grandmother in the late 1950s, where he would wander freely while she ran errands in downtown shops. He recalls dimly lit rooms with walls and display cases filled to almost overflowing with spectacular things, but the sole curio he can still conjure is the freakish mirrored face of the two-headed calf, mounted on a wall plaque. It is telling that of all the impressive specimens held in Gurney's collection, well documented in newspaper articles of the day and the odd nostalgic feature in local publications after the Museum's closure in 1961, only the most bizarre and theatrical of the bunch wrote indelibly on the mind of a 10-year-old boy.

I became fascinated with the Gurney Museum, some sixty years after my father's experience there, not only because I had never before heard of its existence in my nearly

three decades of living in Lethbridge, but due to its seeming parallels with the spectacular, populist, and sensational dime museums of 19th century urban America. *Dr. Soanes' Odditorium of Wonders* was inspired by these sites that bridged the divide between amusement and education, where it was not uncommon to encounter mermaids, magic shows, elephants, bearded ladies, dwarves, fine Neo-Classical paintings, automatons, Shakespearean theatre, and freak taxidermy displayed side by side. These facilities were unlike the more delineated and specialized public museums of today; rather than displaying classified artifacts and art objects deemed significant by professional scholars and curators, 19th century dime museums (named thusly due to their low, single-rate admission cost) were hybrid cultural spaces, amalgamations of the wunderkammern of 17th century Europe, high art galleries, natural history museums, theatres and amusement parks. These hubs of popular, immersive entertainment flourished in densely populated, urban centres from the mid-1800s to the pre-World War I era, where the swelling populace was seeking out ways to spend their leisure time (and pocket money). Dime museums were owned and operated by entrepreneurs in the capitalist pursuit of economic profit, but promoted under the guise of egalitarian education for all men, women and children regardless of social stature or wealth. Visitors consumed exhibitions of art, artifacts, rarities, menageries, technological marvels, live theatrical performances, and displays of living human curiosities.<sup>1</sup>

Dime museums were calculated and constructed spaces; their entrepreneurial proprietors knew that to turn a profit, the museums needed to be marketed as educational, while containing exciting, fresh, and sometimes risqué displays that would appeal to

crowds ranging across the socio-economic class spectrum. Because these facilities were promoted as respectable, dime museums functioned as simulated, sanctioned spaces where strict social codes of interpersonal contact and conduct could be temporarily subverted, allowing visitors to voyeuristically consume exhibited objects and each other. This consumption took place at both literal and figurative levels: souvenirs, mementos and treats were available for purchase throughout many dime museums, while uninhibited gazing was encouraged by maze-like display halls, allowing viewers to feast their eyes on the multitude of stimuli surrounding them without fearing social repercussions (as their fellow viewers were also preoccupied with consumptive viewing).<sup>2</sup> Much like Gurney's two-headed calf, the objects displayed in dime museums were legitimized, to a degree, by residing under the decorous title of "Museum"; things that would have normally been categorized as spurious or unwholesome during the Victorian era could be placed in a new context inside the museum walls, often in proximity to other works already afforded with high cultural status. The museumification of more dubious objects was also spurred by the narratives that were constructed for them by museum owners; displays were often accompanied by bombastic and fantastical texts, boasting of the legitimacy of their lineage.

Perhaps the most iconic and extensive dime museum was P.T. Barnum's American Museum in New York City. Though Barnum became a household name through his association with the pervasively successful Barnum and Bailey Circus, he had acquired an international reputation as a showman, entrepreneur and producer of American culture some 30 years earlier with the museum. Barnum's museum was open

from 1841 to 1865, and he was directly responsible for the selection and acquisition of objects for the Museum's collection of oddities and artifacts, employment of a wide variety of freak and theatre performers, aesthetic layout of displays, and advertising of the Museum's exhibitions. Barnum structured the museum space to be both entertaining and moralistic, to entice customers while justifying its existence in relation to strict Victorian modes of conduct. The museum's commercial success was directly correlated to Barnum's populist marketing, studied manipulation of social codes and ritual, and innovative pairing of cultural production with consumerism. In 1841 Barnum purchased the floundering Scudder's American Museum, re-branding it as his own while actively acquiring other collections to house under the same roof.<sup>3</sup> With his first profits, Barnum installed New York City's first outdoor spotlight on the roof to attract attention at night, had large coloured paintings of animals inserted between each of the street-facing windows, and advertised with large banners and illuminated transparencies on the outside of the building and bulletin wagons that drove around town with signs.<sup>4</sup> In 1843 Barnum bought the veritable Peale collection (which was founded in Philadelphia in 1786 as the United States' first museum but later bankrupted) and began rotating his exhibits weekly to encourage repeat patronage.<sup>5</sup> Barnum voraciously acquired whole collections and attractions over the next 20 years - in promotional material in 1844, he boasted 30,000 exhibits; by 1849, 600,000 curiosities; and in 1864, 850,000 items.<sup>6</sup> While these numbers may have been inflated by Barnum's infamous puffery, both Museum promotional material and press coverage from the period outlines a staggering array of displays, attractions and performances at the American Museum.

Barnum's Museum consisted of six main exhibition spaces, called "saloons", as well as the Lecture Room, a bowling alley, and a camera obscura.<sup>7</sup> The saloons housed cosmoramas, taxidermy, fine art paintings, cultural artifacts of American history and foreign anthropology, crystals and gems, reptiles, insects, waxworks, daguerreotypes, a skeleton chamber, mummies, models, and automatons.<sup>8</sup> The rooftop garden was home to a fountain, fireworks display area, and a menagerie including orangutans, elephants, giraffes, rhinos, lions, tigers, leopards, llamas, a grizzly bear and Ned the Learned Seal.<sup>9</sup> Barnum displayed the first hippopotamus in America, and piped in salt water from the New York harbour for an aquarium which housed tropical fish and two white whales from Labrador.<sup>10</sup> One of Barnum's most popular exhibits was the Happy Family, "a collection of monkeys, dogs, rats, cats, pigeons, owls, porcupines, guinea pigs, cocks and hounds, all of whom lived in amicable peace together"<sup>11</sup>. The Lecture Room housed concerts, speeches and theatrical plays, and was regularly renovated and expanded; by 1850 it could seat 3,000 people, and staged multiple performances daily by New York's first full-time theatre company.<sup>12</sup> The rotating cast of hundreds of living human curiosities on Barnum's employment roster included giants, dwarves, bearded ladies, an albino family, conjoined twins, "wild children", Circassian girls, Native American chiefs, the fat, the thin, the tattooed, the limbless and the "missing link".<sup>13</sup> The Museum also contained vendors of souvenir pamphlets and cartes-de-visite, on-demand taxidermy, glass blowing, fortune telling and food concessions.<sup>14</sup>

The magnitude of Barnum's collections and attractions may be staggering, but the highly diverse, exploding population of 19<sup>th</sup> century New York City was able to support a



wide variety of for-profit entertainments that catered to all social and economic classes.<sup>15</sup> Museums such as Barnum's were not the only option for affordable, accessible amusement; common leisure activities included fairs, circuses, touring artists, magic shows, lectures, and freak and prodigy shows.<sup>16</sup> Barnum actively competed for his clientele by strategic, populist marketing, promoting his museum as "chaste" entertainment for the whole family, even while his Museum housed objects and performances similar to his competitors.<sup>17</sup> The previously untapped market of wives, children and single women soon flocked to the Museum, and through the sheer quantity and diversity of the objects and wonders on display, there was indeed something for everyone. Museum visitors included farmers, tradesmen, businessmen and families, esteemed scientists and authors, religious leaders, cultural ambassadors, and even Edward VII, Prince of Wales on his first trip to America in 1860.<sup>18</sup> The scope of Barnum's policy of cultural democratization is revealed in his ticket sales: in the 23 years of the Museum's operation, 38 million admissions were sold, and the entire population of the United States at the time was only 35 million.<sup>19</sup> Even taking into account repeat visitors (whom Barnum catered to by routinely rotating his exhibits), these records demonstrate Barnum understood that by making displays accessible, egalitarian and dynamic, a greater number of viewers can be reached more effectively.<sup>20</sup>

Contemporary museums (and, by extension, art galleries) are still seeking the balance between exciting exhibitions that will boost attendance by promoting entertainment and displays that focus on the presentation of scholarly knowledge to educate and instruct visitors. While the constructed spectacle, theatricality and

profiteering intent of dime museums were relatively transparent given the trumpeting marketing campaigns, labyrinthian display layouts, and grandiose narratives employed by museum proprietors, today's public cultural institutions solidify different myths and meanings promoted from positions of power. It is arguable that contemporary museums tend to neutralize, rather than promote, the designed and mediated nature of the information they share with visitors. Because these spaces are constructed and carefully organized according to academic classifications, they extract objects and information from the world beyond the museum doors and present them in a new context. This new context, however, often aims to simulate the objects' origins, referring back to a selected history that legitimizes its elevation into the museum space. The static nature of museological standards, including the structure of displays, norms of presentation, environmental controls, security procedures and the use of archival materials, tends to present the knowledge the museum imparts as fact above questioning, while in actuality these meanings are, arguably, as fabricated and manipulated (albeit in different ways) as those found in the dime museum.

Though many of the objects on display in dime museums would be considered by today's museological standards to be of limited cultural value, the ritualized actions performed in those spaces have similarities with those enacted in contemporary museums. While dime museums catered to the desire for escapism and amusement in their visitors (and the profiteering of their operators), proprietors were acutely aware that by labeling their institutions as museums, the associated enlightening of attendees would justify the voyeurism and subversion of Victorian codes of conduct that occurred inside the museum

exhibits. Public social interactions in the 19th century were highly structured and moralized; physical contact with strangers was strictly limited, as was socializing outside of the family unit (especially for single women and mothers).<sup>21</sup> The prevailing belief at the time was that leisure should not be spent in idleness, but self-improvement, and “under enlightened municipal auspices, recreation could serve as a powerfully constructive force in social integration and moral development”.<sup>22</sup> Because dime museums were promoted as respectable and educational, the subversion of social codes was sanctioned within their walls, allowing visitors to voyeuristically consume objects of both high and low cultural distinction and the bodies of freak show performers, as well as the physicality of their fellow museum-goers. This ritualistic consumption, predicated by directed gazing that would have been considered improper outside the museum, is still present in contemporary museums that are designed to manage and focus the gaze throughout exhibition spaces. While dime museums provided a dazzling, if often disorganized, plethora of objects and actors to engage the viewer’s eye, however, the trend of professionalization in museums that gained momentum through the 19th century focused on the power of classificatory systems of arrangement to direct the viewer’s gaze in a methodical manner meant to promote edification. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett suggests that this shift furthered the project of dime museum proprietors attempting to legitimize their more spurious displays by promoting them as educational:

For instruction to redeem amusement, viewers need principles for looking. They require a context, or framework, for transforming otherwise grotesque, rude, strange, and vulgar artifacts into object lessons. Having been saved from oblivion, the [object] needs also to be rescued from triviality.<sup>23</sup>

The creation of a framework of meaning that supports the objects presented in contemporary museum spaces rests with curators, scholars, and museum professionals who generally work outside the view of the public. The selection of specific objects for display, arranging of exhibition layouts, and writing of explanatory labels formulate the context into which the visitor enters, and the singularity of this constructed narrative reinforces the information contained as objective truth, or meaning that is beyond question. The visitor is often confronted with an impersonal structure that makes inquiry difficult and elides multiplicity of meaning; this effect is heightened by the inability to connect the information presented with any single, imperfect person. Conversely, it could be argued that the disorganized, unsystematic arrangement of objects and displays in dime museums upset the notion of singular, institutional truth by leaving visitors to formulate their own opinions about the objects presented to them. Additionally, the publicity campaigns that marketed dime museums almost always linked the institution (and thus, its displays) to its proprietor, and, as we see in the case of P.T. Barnum and Walter Gurney (and ideally, *Dr. Soanes*) the facilities became almost indistinguishable from the men in the eyes of the public. Barnum especially came to personify the trickery and play at work in the narratives presented in his museum; often criticized in the press for shady advertising methods and inauthentic attractions, he embraced the nickname “Prince of Humbugs”, and euphemized the term as not a “criminal swindling but as a series of ‘novel expedients’ devised by an honest impresario who delivers a quota of fun more than equal to the admission price”.<sup>24</sup> Because visitors of the dime museum could generally attach a name and a personality to the exhibits they were paying to see, they

were also afforded the capacity to recognize the potential for invention, exaggeration and artifice. Much in the same way that a lack of organization and direction in dime museum displays arguably allowed for a multiplicity of experiences throughout the display halls, the association of the information provided with the reputations of museum entrepreneurs facilitated the critical consumption of objects and narratives; visitors expected to be duped, and thus felt empowered to question the veracity of what was presented to them.<sup>25</sup> The anonymity of authorship in the meanings presented in contemporary museum spaces obstructs the subjective viewing of displays by many visitors who feel intimidated by or undereducated about unfamiliar objects or concepts, and further solidifies the information presented as authoritative and singularly true. When an author is named, the information presented can be anchored to an individual person; a Barnum, a Gurney, a *Soanes*, who could then be questioned or held accountable for the ideas they have put forth to museum visitors.

By employing the aesthetic of museums like Barnum's (and Gurney's), *Dr. Soanes' Odditorium of Wonders* attempts to challenge the visual and experiential expectations of regular contemporary museum- and gallery-goers. The stark, sterile, white cube is upset by rickety wooden walls and dusty carpets, cluttered with a proliferation of objects ranging vastly across the high/low cultural spectrum. Some of the items on display fall squarely into "fine art" category: beautiful, sweeping landscape paintings by William Brymner, Frederick Verner, Otto Jacobi, David Bierk, and unknown 19th and 20th century artists; classical still-lives and genre works by John Forbes, Laura Muntz Lyall, Frederick Challener, George Reid, and Reginald Marsh;

graceful Devonian and Japanese ceramics; figurative bronze sculptures crafted in the Roman style. Other objects are of more historical or biological significance: wooden masks and figurines, originally crafted as tourist trade souvenirs, from Nigeria and Papua New Guinea; a plaster cast made from a statue of the Greek goddess Nike that adorns the Acropolis; taxidermied, bottled, and mounted specimens from the University of Lethbridge's Biology department; Galt Museum artifacts from early local histories, including objects crafted by German prisoners of war housed in Lethbridge's internment camp, remnants from the "Last Indian Battle" along the Belly River, and a fire alarm system dating to 1909. Still more occupy a less definable category, where curiosities found in the darkest corners of collection storage, constructed humbugs, stage props borrowed from the University of Lethbridge's Drama department, and objects lacking an accompanying narrative trouble the contemporary visitor's expectation of having extensive identifying labels to frame their viewing experience. Though the exhibition is bound to its location, a recognizably contemporary gallery that is promoted as such, the deliberately constructed spectacle of the exhibition, red velvet curtains and all, strives to make plain and exaggerate the theatricality inherent in all museological displays, from dime museums through to today's publicly funded institutions. As these spaces are set apart from our daily lives, the museum-going experience is heightened and performative, with both objects and viewers as actors, and acting upon each other. The quantity and variety of objects presented in the *Odditorium of Wonders* may overwhelm or confound the viewer, feelings which hopefully initiate the processes of critical (rather than passive) viewership and multiplicity of experiences within the space.

The works by contemporary artists selected for *Dr. Soanes' Odditorium of Wonders* playfully strain against the divisions between fact and fiction, modernity and antiquation, progress and obsolescence, art and theatre. Chris Flanagan's works, *Art Bwoy Burial* and *The Devil's Trumpet*, both employ rudimentary mechanics and musical soundtracks to jump to life upon close scrutiny by the viewer. *Art Bwoy Burial* illustrates Flanagan's passion for reggae music and Jamaican sound system culture - he commissioned the legendary musician and producer Linval Thompson to record a hype song that literally sings the artist's praises. The swaggering lyrics are made absurd by their delivery system, however: a ragged and sickly baby vulture, who rattles around amidst molting feathers in a shabby nest. The little creature is at once cute and pathetic, and the printed lines accompanying him - "No man can test Flanagan / Him a the best artist Inna the nation" - are rendered laughable in the shadow of the bird's gimpy dance. The delicate paper flowers of *The Devil's Trumpet* are also caricatures of their natural model, *Datura stramonium*. Flanagan plays on the plant's history of acting as a hallucinogenic agent employed in Haitian religious ceremonies that have been described by some Western anthropologists as "zombification" rites; its motion is triggered by the viewer but not in a continuous or predictable pattern. The blooming flowers grow along with the jazz soundtrack of Ornette Coleman's trumpet, but then quickly shrink back to their dormant state. The transformation is over as quickly as it began, and the viewer is left with only a mirage, the phantom of towering flowers pushing through the cracked concrete.

Denton Fredrickson's *Phonocrystallograph* also presents the viewer with ghostly apparitions, though these are manifest through spinning crystals, dusty panes of glass,

and the low tinkling notes of a glass armonica. Wooden spirit horns mediate otherwise silent entities and the rotating quartzes reflect spiritual energy, as the contraption promises to give viewers “brief glimpses into séances of the future”. It is unclear at first encounter whether one’s physical presence affects the flickering of the projected candles, or the haunting countenances that occasionally fade into view. Perhaps we can hear whispered messages from another realm if we don the offered stethoscopes, the otherworldly signal strengthened when each side of the hexagon is flanked by a believer. The expressions of the foggy, fleeting faces (crafted from stills extracted from YouTube reaction videos and hand-tinted by the artist) would almost be decipherable, if only a thick coat of centuries-old dust was not enveloping the machine. It slowly becomes clear that the *Phonocrystallograph*, for all its timeworn stature and kinetic complexity, is an amalgam of obsolescence and contemporary technology. The peering specters dissolve in and out as the device continues to conjure the spirits indefinitely, audience or no, its whirring crystals replicating continuous candlelight long after the viewer departs.

Mary-Anne McTrowe’s contributions to the odditorium are carefully hidden in plain sight alongside museological artifacts in glass cases and prop objects accompanied by exaggerated narratives. A mound of spoons cast from brown wax rests next to a lamp that was once found in the Gurney Museum, a Canadian souvenir tchotchke made of an animal horn, and a folk art ceramic lion. The spoons’ explanatory label is similar in length and format to that of the Gurney lamp (on loan from the Galt Museum and Archives), and it weaves a convincing tale of east coast whaling communities, lucky charms, superstition, and colloquialisms. Two doilies, pinned to a wood-paneled wall that also hosts a noose and bearskin rug, are described as “Hidden Symbols of the Occult”,



used to ward off evil spells associated with black magic while innocuously hiding in plain sight in the average home. Propped open beside a crocodile skull and taxidermied baby caiman, a sketchbook contains delicate drawings of trees sprouting lambs among the leaves on their branches, and the accompanying poem details the medieval belief in an exotic plant that grew sheep as its fruit. These histories are no less plausible than that of a German POW building a functioning shortwave radio from trash found around his workcamp, or artifacts of unknown origin being pulled from a cave on a farm in Illinois, or Black Bart being shackled upon arrest after his last dramatic stagecoach robbery. What occurs if the viewer catches a glimpse of fabrication, or a stretching of some particular truth in these narratives? Does illegitimacy, inauthenticity, move from artifact to artifact, infecting every specimen with the seed of doubt at its veracity? Perhaps part of the fun is believing everything at once, or conversely, nothing at all; the museum-going experience transformed from one preoccupied with grasping factual knowledge to that of inspiring questions, escape, and good-natured skepticism.

M.E.D.I.U.M. (acronym for “Metaphysical Explorations, Divinations and Investigations Utilizing Magic”) is a quartet of artist-mystics comprised of magician Frater Tham, “trailer park psychic” Char Latan, Eastern European psychic Madame Symona, and pseudoscientist Dr. I.M. Auftenhauzie, who mark the closing of the *Odditorium* with the erection of three circus tents in the large public space adjacent to the gallery. Their performances are a collision of shyster carnival and contemporary art practice, complete with séances, sin eating, captured faeries in bell jars, prophetic readings of Turkish coffee grounds, and demonstrations of quack medical technologies.

While seeking out futures determined by ancient numerology, or peering deeply into a scrying mirror, visitors may hear the distant ringing of a spirit bell, announcing the arrival of presences unseen. Brainwaves can be enhanced by Auftenhauzie's "Zenco Electropasmic Neuroactivity Stimulator". Amidst this presentation of superstition, spiritualism, junk science, and the paranormal, visitors are left to debate the veracity of what they're being shown; is this a sly, art-insider joke? Are M.E.D.I.U.M.'s resident mystics pulling one over on the visitor, and if so, would that make it any less fun? How seriously are participants meant to receive a fortune that is delivered via country-western ballad? Each spooky interaction with whispered clairvoyance or otherworldly ectoplasm is countered by sleight of hand tricks and framed portraits of the Sacred Heart of Elvis Presley. In the brief moment of initial encounter, where excitement, inquisition, amusement, and goosebumps meet, M.E.D.I.U.M. holds sway over the visitor – the spectacle contains indulgent play and surprises that are not often found in "serious" contemporary art spaces. Whether the experience is held as genuine or faked, M.E.D.I.U.M.'s careful navigation of the line between legitimacy and hoax gifts the visitor with the agency to arrive at their own conclusions.

As spaces set apart from everyday life, museums are capable of invoking reverence and wonder in their visitors, while also providing a site of temporary escape. Upon entering museum spaces, in both the cases of 19th century and contemporary institutions, the viewer is transported to a sphere where contemplating, consuming stares are encouraged in the project of gleaning knowledge. The theatricality of the museum-going performance was highlighted in dime museums by encounters with spectacular

performances by living human curiosities, bombastic marketing techniques, and displays of mysterious, unknown creatures and marvelous technologies; in contemporary institutions drama can be found in the hushed lighting, glittering glass display cases, reverent whispered conversation, and cathedral-esque architecture. While dime museums perhaps cultivated the spirit of spectacle more openly than today's museums do, both types of cultural spaces exist on a continuum between education and amusement, and actively seek to produce wonder and amazement in the visitor. Because contemporary institutions are often under pressure to justify their expenditure of public funds, however, their mandates tend to lean toward the side of intellectual stimulation rather than frivolity. *Dr. Soanes' Odditorium of Wonders* seeks to reinstate an atmosphere of amusement, bewilderment, and mystery in an institutional space, as a temporary juxtaposition against the intellectualized exhibitions generally displayed in that environment. In our current age of information, where catalogued, digitized knowledge is immediately at hand, can a jumbled collection of objects, high and low, identified and unlabeled, fantastical and mundane, beautiful and morbid, temporarily envelop the viewer in a mysterious cloud, where wondering is deemed equally valuable as knowing?

It was the quest for wonderment and mystery, as much as the desire to rediscover my Dad's favourite Gurney Museum artifact, that led me to the Strome Museum, where the friendly volunteer working that day was quite surprised to learn I'd driven five hours through the vast prairie with that sole purpose. I walked slowly through the crowded cases and reconstructed scenes of rural life, taking in countless taxidermy specimens, military uniforms, relics from the town's former general store, and a room filled with

mannequins wearing a hundred years' worth of wedding dresses. The staggering quantity and variety of objects on display (over 10,000 items spread across three buildings on the town's main street) left me feeling transported, as though I had stepped through the doors of Barnum's museum, or maybe Gurney's, where my eyes constantly jumped from curio to curio, wondering about the origin and narrative of each, but finding answers only occasionally in the provided texts. When I finally stumbled across the two-headed calf, on display with all sorts of other anomalous animals with spare limbs and doubled faces that Gurney had referenced in the promotional poem printed on the back of his museum's admission tickets, I stood, mouth agape, marveling both at its weirdness and my own gut-churning, oppositional reaction to it. I felt compelled at once to pat its two furry heads while also shrink back in revulsion at its abnormality. I couldn't look away, and instinctually understood how my father's childhood experience of meeting this mysterious thing had left such a lasting mark. Encounters of this sort are complicated, multiplicitous, and powerful; when we are not explicitly told how to regard an object, or if it defies simple explanation, we are left to do the deciphering ourselves, with all the confusion and thrill that process entails. The museum space can be constructed to provide easily digestible answers, or to inspire more questions. Both scholarship and spectacle have the capacity to share knowledge; Barnum, Gurney, and, by extension, *Dr. Soanes*, chose to employ theatre, amusement, and excitement in the process of cultural exchange, to produce inquisitive viewers and fantastical, immersive museum environments.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Philip B. Kunhardt Jr, Philip B. Kunhardt III and Peter W. Kunhardt, *P.T. Barnum: America's Greatest Showman* (New York, NY: Random House, 1995), 39.

<sup>2</sup> Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London: Routledge, 1995), 12.

<sup>3</sup> Andrea Stulman Dennett, *Weird & Wonderful: the Dime Museum in America* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1997), 14.

<sup>4</sup> Kunhardt et al., 36, 39.

<sup>5</sup> Dennett, 14, 8.

<sup>6</sup> Dennett, 26-27.

<sup>7</sup> Kunhardt et al., 71-72.

<sup>8</sup> Kunhardt et al., 140-141.

Joe Nickell, *Secrets of the Sideshows* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 45-46.

A.H. Saxon, *P.T. Barnum: The Legend and the Man* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1989), 93-94)

<sup>9</sup> Kunhardt et al., 110.

Neil Harris, *Humbug: the Art of P.T. Barnum* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1973), 165.

<sup>10</sup> Kunhardt et al., 158; Harris, 165; Nickell, 302.

<sup>11</sup> Harris, 166.

<sup>12</sup> Saxon, 106.

<sup>13</sup> Kunhardt et al., 39, 112, 209; Nickell, 84; Saxon, 101-102.

<sup>14</sup> Dennett, 35.

<sup>15</sup> Dennett, xii.

<sup>16</sup> Harris, 35.

<sup>17</sup> Dennett, 36.

<sup>18</sup> Saxon, 108.

<sup>19</sup> Saxon, 107.

<sup>20</sup> Russell W. Belk, *Collecting in a Consumer Society* (London: Routledge, 1995), 124.

<sup>21</sup> Dennett, 83.

<sup>22</sup> Dennett 6.

<sup>23</sup> Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press), 390.

<sup>24</sup> Phineas T. Barnum, *The Colossal P.T. Barnum Reader*, Ed. James W. Cook (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 86.

<sup>25</sup> Kunhardt et al., 138; Harris, 57.

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Documentation of Exhibition *Dr. Soanes' Odditorium of Wonders*  
University of Lethbridge Art Gallery, September 12 – October 24, 2013



Figure 1: South-facing view of the entrance of the exhibition, featuring works by unknown Papua New Guinean artists from the University of Lethbridge Art Collection.



Figure 2: North-facing view of the exhibition's main room, featuring artworks from the University of Lethbridge Art Collection, artifacts from the Galt Museum and Archives, objects from the University of Lethbridge departments of Biology and Drama, and contemporary artworks by Chris Flanagan and Mary-Anne McTrowe.



Figure 3: South-facing view of the exhibition's main room, featuring artworks from the University of Lethbridge Art Collection, artifacts from the Galt Museum and Archives, objects from the University of Lethbridge departments of Biology and Drama, and Denton Fredrickson's *Phonocrystallograph*.





Figure 4: North-facing view of the entrance to the exhibition, featuring artworks from the University of Lethbridge Art Collection and artifacts from the Galt Museum and Archives.



Figure 5: Detail of the exhibition, featuring objects from the University of Lethbridge departments of Biology and Drama, and the Galt Museum and Archives.



Figure 6: Detail of Chris Flanagan's *Art Bwoy Burial*.

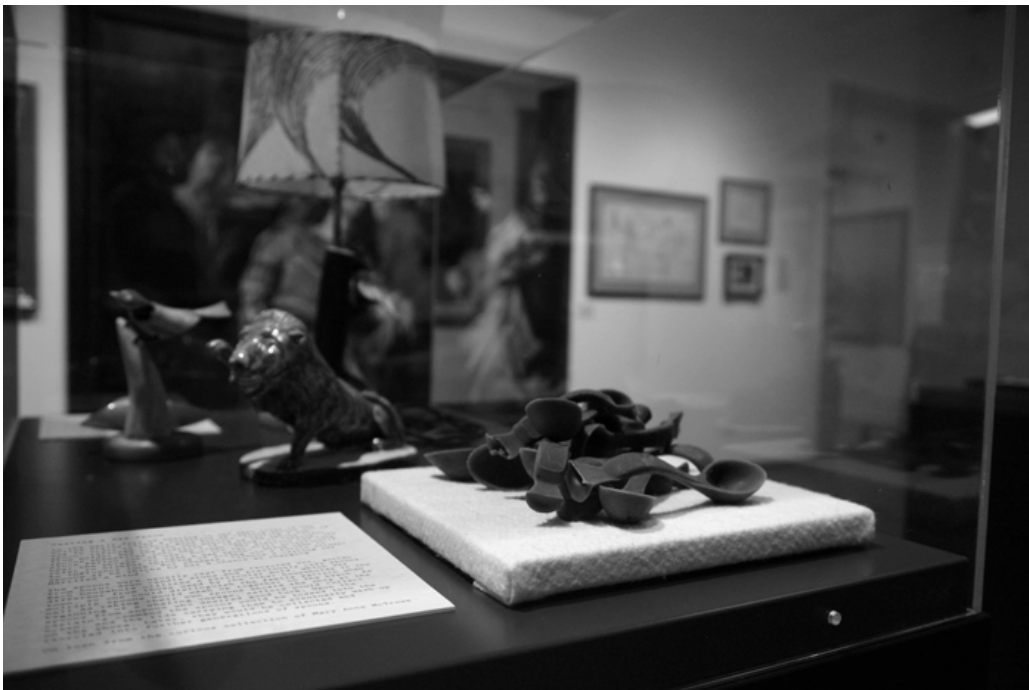


Figure 7: Detail of Mary-Anne McTrowe's *Casting A Wax Spoon*.



Figure 8: Detail of a Barnum-esque prompt to the exhibition exit, featuring taxidermy from the University of Lethbridge Department of Biology.