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3 Title: 'Veil' and the politics of community exhibiting: some thoughts from Glasgow.
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5 Running title: 'Veil' and the politics of community exhibiting.
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7 Ealasaid Munro
8 Rm 1.06
9 University of Edinburgh Institute of Geography
10 Drummond Street
11 Edinburgh
12 EH8 9XP
13
14 Email: elsa.munro@gmail.com
15

16 I arrive at St Mungo’s Museum of Religious Life and Art on a particularly wet and
17 wintry December day, even by Glasgow’s standards. As I struggle through the door, I’m
18 greeted by the museum welcome staff, who take my umbrella, hang up my coat and fret
19 about the state of my wet feet. I say I’m here to see the *Curious* exhibition, and they’re
20 thrilled: apparently it has not been well-attended in the weeks following its launch. I’m
21 directed upstairs to a warm, airy and colourful gallery space, where I take off my shoes
22 – I’ve got the place to myself, after all.

23

24 St Mungo’s is a museum devoted to religious life and art. It is not a religious museum,
25 but a museum devoted to the phenomenon of religion and its material expression.
26 Opened in 1993, it occupies a prime spot in the very oldest part of Glasgow, nestled
27 between the medieval cathedral and the Necropolis, a 37-acre graveyard that houses
28 50,000 erstwhile residents of the city. The 13th century gothic cathedral is the final
29 resting place of St Mungo, the city’s founder. Glasgow’s cathedral was one of the few
30 Catholic churches to survive the Reformation intact, and has, since then, housed the
31 High Kirk of Glasgow. An 18 metre-high statue of the father of Presbyterianism himself
32 – John Knox – occupies the highest point of the adjacent Necropolis.

33

34 As part of my doctoral research, I volunteered with Glasgow Museums – the municipal
35 authority that runs St Mungo’s – on the *Curious* project. A major strand of *Curious* is a
36 community engagement (hereafter, CE) project that addresses the cultural diversity of
37 Glasgow, and forms part of the Cultural Olympiad. In conjunction with St Mungo’s
38 staff, the *Curious* participants have curated an exhibition from Glasgow Museums’
39 reserve collections. The objects selected by participants include a typewriter, a Clarice
40 Cliff tea-set, a Warri board game from Sierra Leone, a butter churn from Shetland, and
41 a sculpture by Austrian artist Sibylle von Halem, entitled ‘Veil’.

42

43 In what follows, I present a reading of the *Curious* exhibition, although I focus on what
44 is arguably the exhibition's centrepiece, 'Veil'ⁱ. From my position as a researcher-come-
45 museum-volunteer, I outline some of the tensions inherent in the practice of CE. CE is
46 often mooted as a way for museums to ameliorate iniquities in representation by
47 including voices typically excluded from museum exhibitions; in recent years however,
48 it has come under criticism due to its tendency to conceptualize communities as
49 homogenous, fixed and staticⁱⁱ. There are also questions to be asked about the extent to
50 which traditional curatorial practice is disrupted by the involvement of communities,
51 and to what extent community exhibitions represent a 'different' experience for
52 museum visitors.

53

54 **A tour of *Curious*** So with notebook in hand, I begin my tour of *Curious* by
55 approaching the butter churn from Shetland. The churn is interpreted through the oral
56 testimony of CE participants, and participants' thoughts are displayed on interpretative
57 labels, or in video and audio clips; this mode of interpretation is reproduced throughout
58 the exhibition (see Figure 2). In an accompanying video, one of the CE participants
59 recalls making butter in a goatskin as a child in Kurdistan. There's an accompanying
60 audio clip of a group of children singing in Gaelic – a rhythmic song, not unlike the
61 *waulking*ⁱⁱⁱ songs I learned at primary school on the Isle of Skye. I'm not sure I've ever
62 seen a butter churn before, yet instantly the Gaelic word for butter – *im* – springs to
63 mind. A second later, the word for churn, or milk-pail – *cuinneag* – follows. I scribble
64 furiously in my notebook, knowing somehow that this is important, and that I want to
65 remember this strange mix of surprise and nostalgia.

66

67 I move on to a case housing a Clarice Cliff tea-set, and a necklace crafted in the Punjab.
68 The interpretative panels explain why *Curious* participants felt an affinity with these
69 objects. I scrutinize them, trying to identify with them, to see the links between them

70 (they are in the same case, after all), but I draw a blank. I finally settle on the theme of
71 inheritance – these are two things that would be passed from mother to daughter, and
72 kept in the family. The objects are beautiful and the theme of inheritance strikes a
73 chord, but the gulf in meaning between these two objects is overwhelming to me, and so
74 I move on.

75

76 Next is a case housing a Sudanese kissar, a twig broom from Myanmar, and an Indian
77 wedding chest – all of these are from the 19th century, but that’s the only link I
78 immediately make between them. The kissar looks a bit like my dad’s prized banjo; the
79 twig broom reminds me of a trip I made to Korce, in Albania, where I watched women
80 in the marketplace making brooms, quickly and skillfully binding together bundles of
81 twigs with twine. Again, I feel at sea – what do these objects mean in the context of this
82 exhibition? Their mundane nature is touching however – who, or what, did they remind
83 the *Curious* participants of?

84

85 I move on to a case housing a radiogram, a board game and some unusual figurines. The
86 figurines are Santeria figures from Cuba, and represent the amalgamation of the
87 traditional Orisha religion practiced by the Yoruba of West Africa with Catholicism –
88 the religion that many slaves were forced into upon landfall in the Caribbean. Around
89 the corner are two Hindu avatars, and I am fascinated by their similarity to, and
90 difference from, the Cuban figures. I think about the statue of the Virgin that sits on my
91 mantelpiece at home, a half-ironic gesture on the part of my Irish Catholic boyfriend.
92 Not for the first time, I marvel at how quickly my mind races to compare and contrast,
93 to draw links between these objects and objects I have seen elsewhere.

94

95 In the corner, far from the rest of the cases, is a video display. The video collates
96 participants’ interpretations of an artwork entitled ‘Veil’, by Sibylle von Halem. Von

97 Halem’s piece is a veil made of small brass plates, held together with metal links. But
98 where is it? Why is it not with the rest of the objects? The individuals on-screen talk
99 through their interpretations of ‘Veil’. One woman suggests it looks feminine; another,
100 that it looks masculine. One woman suggests it looks like it might be worn for
101 protection; another, like it would incarcerate the wearer. One woman states that it does
102 not, for her, represent the veil in Islam. A common theme throughout the statements
103 onscreen is that ‘Veil’ is extremely beautiful: one teenage girl is awestruck, “There’s
104 nae word to describe it”.

105

106 [Figure 1]

107

108 In front of me is a ledge, and to the side, a set of steps leading to the lower gallery. I
109 lean on the ledge to take notes, and catch sight of ‘Veil’ downstairs. I remove the
110 headphones and make my way towards ‘Veil’. Up close, the piece is uncanny. To me, it
111 looks more like a shroud than anything, and it seems to absorb religiosity from its
112 surroundings – an icon of Mary, a statue of the Buddha, the museum’s collection of
113 stained glass. The label makes me laugh aloud, and the reverential atmosphere is
114 shattered; it attributes the piece to von Halem, but it also gives a quote from one of the
115 CE participants, who says: “It looks like something Cheryl Cole would wear on her
116 wedding day”.

117

118 [Figure 2]

119 The variety embodied in the participants’ interpretations of ‘Veil’ is staggering. Perhaps
120 more than any other object in the exhibition, ‘Veil’ seems to bring to light the radical
121 potential of CE. Even as a critical geographer wise to the perils of cultural
122 reductionism, I expected ‘Veil’ to be used as a springboard into debates about cultural
123 and religious difference because of its loaded title, and its resemblance to a shroud or a

124 burkha, and yet I was proved wrong. The interpretations offered by participants were
125 wildly diverse, and made reference to both the aesthetic quality of the object, and its
126 symbolic potential.

127

128 **Representing community**

129 What comes across strongly is the lack of consensus on what ‘Veil’ represents, and this
130 is one of the key points I want to make here. CE often attracts criticism for portraying
131 communities as homogenous, coherent, and bound together by a shared cultural
132 identity; often, communities are expected to behave *like communities*^{iv}. *Curious* avoids
133 this lazy pigeonholing, rather, it presents a series of objects, chosen and interpreted by
134 an extremely diverse cross-section of the city’s population, including ethnic minorities,
135 religious groups, native Glaswegians, students, and so on. *Curious* dispels some of the
136 myths associated with the term community insofar as it is commonly used within
137 museums by emphasizing that communities do not always have a coherent cultural
138 identity: they are collections of individuals with similarities, and differences. They
139 overlap with other communities, and come into conflict with them too. *Curious* does not
140 function solely to bring alternative voices into the museum, thereby correcting some
141 kind of imbalance in representation, rather, it forces the visitor to identify those themes
142 that cut across putative cultural differences^v.

143

144 **Supplementing or reconfiguring museum practice?**

145 *Curious* offers an unsettling yet highly personal experience for the visitor, and I have
146 tried to give a sense here of what it is like to walk around the exhibition. I suggested
147 that the butter churn was the ‘first’ object in the exhibition, due to its placement directly
148 opposite the entrance. Yet after that, there is no prescribed way of moving around the
149 exhibition space. In the absence of taxonomy, or an overarching narrative to ‘see
150 through’ to the end, movement around the exhibition is entirely at the visitor’s

151 discretion^{vi}. This encourages the visitor to do as I did – to search for similarities and
152 differences between the objects, and to make comparisons with things that are known^{vii}.
153 It also encourages visitors to be attentive to the stories told by CE participants; I found
154 myself being drawn by their descriptions, and recounting similar events and
155 experiences^{viii}.

156

157 It is worth noting, however, that the arrangement of objects in the *Curious* exhibition
158 was at the discretion of the curatorial team^{ix}. In this case, the community groups
159 selected the objects, and it was left to the curatorial team to arrange the objects
160 thematically, and emplace them within the exhibition space. In this way, CE appears
161 more about supplementing traditional museum practice than reconfiguring it. In this
162 respect the segregation of ‘Veil’ from the rest of the exhibition is telling: why is it not
163 ‘in’ the exhibition? One gallery assistant told me when I visited: “It’s special. More
164 people will see it in the main gallery”. I remember thinking: “But that’s not the point –
165 is it?” The spatial segregation of *Curious* from the rest of the museum implies in many
166 ways that CE still regarded as a poor relation to traditionally curated displays.

167

168 Despite my admiration for *Curious*, perhaps these inconsistencies in approach point to a
169 more general problem associated with CE – arguably, museums tend towards doing
170 things *for* communities, or putting on exhibitions *about* them, rather than creating things
171 *with* them^x. Museum professionals are often guilty of speaking for communities,
172 reserving the right to interpret them and their material culture^{xi}. Within museums, this
173 means that the status quo frequently remains unchanged – it is still the job of museums
174 and museum professionals to collect, display and interpret material culture. In this way,
175 community exhibitions might work to correct iniquities in representation, but often
176 within the confines of a form of museum practice that is simply unsuited to representing
177 communities in all their dynamism and complexity^{xii}.

ⁱ Whilst my doctoral research brought me into close contact with the Curious project, I did not work day-to-day on the selection of objects for the exhibition and so I approached the finished product as someone with a working knowledge of community exhibiting, but with little prior knowledge of this particular exhibition.

ⁱⁱ See E. Waterton and L. Smith, 'The recognition and mis-recognition of community heritage', *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 16 (1/2), (2010), pp.4-15

ⁱⁱⁱ *Waulking* songs are Scottish folk songs, traditionally sung in Gaelic while waulking cloth. This practice involves a group of people beating newly woven tweed rhythmically against a table or similar surface to soften it.

^{iv} E. Crooke, 'Museums and community', in Sharon Macdonald, ed., *A Companion to Museum Studies* (Oxford, Blackwell, 2006) pp. 170-185

^v See Crooke, 'Museums', p.174-178

^{vi} The absence of a taxonomy or narrative is one of the key disjunctures between traditionally-curated displays and community exhibitions. For an examination of the meaning and place of the taxon in museum theory, see Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, 'Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge' (London, Routledge, 1992).

^{vii} Authors concerned with the relational nature of museum collections are increasingly drawing on a relational materialities perspective, heavily influenced by developments in the sociology of science. This approach focuses on how museum objects take form as a result of their relationships with humans and other objects. This body of work emphasizes that museums make sense of unfamiliar objects by displaying them alongside those objects likely to be 'known' to visitors. See A. Maurstad, 'Cod, curtains, planes and experts: Relational materialities in the museum', *Journal of Material Culture* 17 (2), 2012, pp.174-189.

^{viii} Oral history is often used within museums to emphasize the importance of objects in their lived, everyday context, making them accessible to museum visitors who may possess no specialist knowledge. See R. Chew, 'The rise of oral history in museums', *Museum News* 81 (6), 2002, pp.30-37

^{ix} In many accounts, both historical and contemporary, the curator is understood as utterly central to the creation of meaning in the museum. Whilst insights from the so-called New Museology have challenged the idea of the curator as all-powerful, some authors argue that a continuing focus on the role of the curator precludes meaningful engagement with the work of other cohorts of museum staff, and the work of collaborators – visitors, project participants and so on – in creating museum meanings. See B. Trofanenko, 'Interrupting the gaze: on reconsidering authority in the museum', *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 38 (1), 2006, pp.49-65

^x The widely-discussed eco-museum model seeks to challenge this ontological distinction between expert and so-called 'lay' knowledge. See Peter Davis, *Eco-Museums; A Sense of Place* (London, Continuum, 2011).

^{xi} Nina Simon offers an excellent examination of the tensions between so-called traditional museum practice and participatory museology (what I call here 'community engagement'), see Nina Simon, *Participatory Museums* (Santa Cruz, CA., museum 2.0, 2010).

^{xii} For an examination of the practicalities of engaging with communities and community heritage, and the limits to conventional museum practice see P.A. dos Santos, 'Museu de Mare: a museum full of soul', *Curator* 55 (1) (2012), pp. 21-34