

**MUSEUM LITERACY:  
A SOCIOMATERIAL STUDY OF  
FAMILIES, LITERACIES AND  
MUSEUM OBJECTS**

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# CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as part of the collaborative doctoral degree and/or fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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# PREFACE

Museums matter to the public. The investment in museums, expenditure and visitation is considerable and continues to grow with around 2,500 museums and galleries in Australia and 3.5 million people visiting national cultural institutions in 2013<sup>1</sup>. Museums matter to me. I worked in a Sydney museum of international standing for over 20 years. During this period I cherished my twin passions of creating public programs and making connections between the collection and its public owners. The germination for this study was in my questioning in the 1990s of the best ways to encourage young visitors to engage with objects. Children were observed rallying between screen-based interactives with scant attention to collection objects or their stories. Now related to 'zigging and zooming' (Hackett 2012, p.13), as a form of literacy this behaviour worried me as I believed it to be the seduction by electronic interactives predicated on answers which were either correct or incorrect. Although electronic interactives were then an innovative feature, I saw them not as part of a multimodal assemblage, but powerful actors distracting visitors from the core museum experience – the stories and wonder on offer from the collection. As initiator and coordinator of the 'Kids, Customs and Culture Education Kit' project (Schaffer & Vytrhlik 1995), I led a team working with children to document their favourite home artifact and place using a disposal camera and a diary as well as sourcing museum objects relating to their culture. As later theorised within *Artifactual Critical Literacy* (Pahl & Rowsell 2003; Pahl & Rowsell 2010; Walsh 2011) the artifacts proved an excellent stimulus to the children writing and illuminating connections between their homes, their histories and the museum itself.

After my role in preparing the Educational Kit, I authored 30 museum publications for children and a suite of public programs and exhibitions for families.

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<sup>1</sup> The peak representative body representing the industry collated national figures from credible sources (pers. communication with Alex Marsden, 5 July 2016) to prepare 'Raise your voice' (Museums Galleries Australia 2016) an advocacy document for the sector.

Wherever possible my work was characterised by the tracing of links to objects back through to the creators and makers; association with authentic experiences; opportunities for creative self-expression and reflection by the visitor; and enjoyment by the family audience. The projects most aligned with this research were the series of collaborations with Australian children's authors who wrote fictional narratives as labels for collection objects.<sup>2</sup> Visitors were also invited to write their own labels to be temporarily in the exhibition. So many labels were written that staff had to retire labels to make room for more. These exhibitions did not, and I would argue could not, arise from curatorial practices which by nature are specialised and disciplined based. The selection of objects was based on the criteria that they were affectively compelling and had an interesting 'back story', which did not have to conform to the larger display narrative. It was simply interesting. The projects were grounded in partnerships with artists and the audience. They utilised interpretive techniques that were from the educator's toolbox. As an example, I briefly describe one of the projects called *The Odditorem* as it here my interest in the spaces between families, objects and literacy commenced.

### ***The Odditorem***

Exhibited in 2009 and 2010, *The Odditorem* was a small exhibition (book, program, website and travelling show) developed in collaboration with children's author-illustrator Shaun Tan<sup>3</sup>. His response to my brief was not simply to write the fantastical but to ornament the possible in a kind of bricolage, where materials are combined to create new ideas (Turkle 2011). The label entitled 'Guide Dog testing device 6' (Figure 1) is an example of this bricolage which combines factual information with fanciful descriptions.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Odditorem* project (exhibition, book and website) paved the way for *The Tinytorem* exhibition and book (with Jackie French and Bruce Whately); *reveal trail* (with Morris Gleitzman) and *The Oopstoreum* with Shaun Tan.

<sup>3</sup> Shaun Tan is an author, illustrator and animator. Receiving an Academy Award in 2011 for Best Short animated films for his novel *The Lost Thing*, Tan also received the prestigious Astrid Lingren Literary Award. See <http://www.shauntan.net/>

#### **Guide Dog testing device number 6<sup>4</sup>**

This enormous liquorice all-sorts shoe is one of several outlandish objects used to test young guide dogs for their susceptibility to distraction while on duty. A tricycle inside the shoe allows a rider to manoeuvre this colourful vehicle while prospective guide dogs are put through their paces. The shoe appears at the moment an important task needs to be performed, such as crossing a road, laying quietly in a restaurant, or entering a lift. Dogs are then assessed on their ability to maintain composure and focus, thus preparing them for the challenges of the real world. Other 'canine distracters' commonly used by training staff include a Volkswagen covered in sausages, an ice-cream van that spills colourful rubber balls, and a litter of kittens riding on a miniature steam train.

*Figure 1: Label authored by Shaun Tan for The Oopsatoreum exhibition*

Seven labels were written by young children from a local school as part of my practice of visitor collaboration and I treated these with the same production values as those written by Shaun Tan. I invited visitors to write and publish their labels in the exhibition space. Visitors produced work they were satisfied with, frequently recording their pride on cameras and smartphones. The constantly changing display became one of the most popular aspects of the exhibition. A selection of the writings was scanned and posted to be viewed online<sup>5</sup>. Below are samples taken from visitors' writing inspired by a museum object, a ball of puree<sup>6</sup>.

A ball of hippogriff ear wax. (Abby, aged 18 yrs)

They would use this to dye clothes yellow. (Emily 6–7 years)

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<sup>4</sup> High-heeled shoe on a tricycle called *Liquorice Allsorts*, designed by Ross Wallace for the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games closing ceremony.

<sup>5</sup> See

[http://www.flickr.com/photos/powerhouse\\_museum\\_photography/sets/72157621891871473/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/powerhouse_museum_photography/sets/72157621891871473/)

<sup>6</sup> The ball of puree is museum object 17431-1. Puree is yellow pigment used to dye fabrics and is recorded to have been made in India about 1887. The original file record stating that 'the puree was made from the wee of an elephant (or a cow) fed only on mango leaves', makes the fictitious label as plausible as museum documentation.



This potato is the oldest one in the modern days of the plant. (Kathrine, 9 years)

This is a fairy's house disguised as a rock. (Samantha, 10 years)

This rocks helps you if you are hot, its smooth surface cools the skin. (Izzy, 13 years)

The object information was posted nearby so that curious visitors could seek it out. Visitors' responses often referred to the information provided on these text panels. The exhibition proved that adults and children were equally engaged by the unconventional approach of invented narratives and stories. Visitors were as much inspired by a well-known author as they were by much lesser known child authors with visitor labels sometimes including variations of both the child's and adult's authored museum labels. Visitors would also write variations of other visitor labels. I was alerted to the interplay of objects, text, adults and children within the exhibition space with Nina Simon, museum commentator best known for her influential blog entitled *Museum 2.0*,<sup>7</sup> who maintained:

While many Museums have experimented with "write your own label" campaigns, the *Odditorem* was unique in its request that visitors write imaginative, not descriptive, labels. While many visitors may feel intimidated by the challenge to properly describe an object, everyone can imagine what it might be. The speculative nature of the exhibition let visitors at all knowledge levels into the game of making meaning out of the objects. And yet the imaginative activity still required visitors to focus on the artifacts. Every visitor who wrote a label had to engage with the objects deeply to look for details that might support various ideas and develop a story that reasonably fit the object at hand. (Simon 2010, p.162)

*The Odditorem* appealed to all ages, despite the long and conceptually challenging object labels. The labels provoked interest and I questioned whether this interest arose because the author had not reframed curatorial research into a simpler form but re-created it into a fictional mini-narrative. Did the appeal come from

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<sup>7</sup> <http://museumtwo.blogspot.com.au/>

discarding the anonymous curatorial voice? Was it the use of humour? Was it the objects, or as Tan suggested, a new hybrid form for text and object? The hybrid novel is described as the combination of word and image to create a new text (Sadokierski 2010), and I wondered whether *The Odditoreum* was an exhibition of new texts made up of hybridised object-texts.

This exhibition turned objects from purely mnemonics or memory tokens into 'thinking' devices. And this thinking was powerfully manifested in conversation, drawing and writing. How could museums drill into those moments? Literacy had begun to surface as a linking motif across these queries. My interest in the concept had been to forge another avenue for visitor engagement with objects and in doing so a series of observations were made about museum practices. These observations became the impetus for the study.

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# ABSTRACT

This research explores a new museum space which connects literacy, museum objects and families. I argue that this space presents opportunity for transformative encounters for visitors when literacy can encompass affect and is amplified through literacy mediators and the resources different generations visiting together bring to each museum visit. The study uncovers ways that cultural institutions can recognise the potential for literacy within their collections when they look beyond the achievement of the meanings they would like acquired to an appreciation of literacy practices by family groups. Museums through their collections are strongholds of the material and semiotic realm yet the relationship between literacy, objects and visitors remains largely unexamined, limiting literacy to visitor comprehension of museum content generally conveyed in print. I introduce theoretical tools, including concepts of materiality, spatiality, affect and mediation to help understand key dimensions in the literacy interactions between families and museum objects.

Adults with dependent children are a large visitor group to museums. Their representation in museum studies has had little impact on mainstream exhibition programming beyond exhibitions for children. Non-mainstream visitors from less well-resourced demographics can be streamed into the museum via worthy and justifiable access programs, but to date these visitors have had few opportunities to influence the accessibility of the museum's core offering.

In this study nine families were recruited from community agencies that assist marginalised or vulnerable groups to visit the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery and the Museum of Old and New. Through positioning the literacies of these families as a benefit, rather than liability, and literacy as socially and materially assembled, the study expands the number of actors within the museum research assemblage. A mosaic of methods was used to identify literacy practices, including observation, guided discussion, photography, onsite recorded conversations, and participation in programs such as drawing, writing and other documentary or creative activities that did not privilege age, ability or background. Literacy became a set of theories, methods, products and actors within a material semiotic framing. Experimental writing

of tiny fictional vignettes by the researcher gives life to things in the research and opens up different patterns of thinking. These writings are study motifs, being emblematic of the theoretical approach taken.

Collections of objects are the essence of a museum and pivotal to its public face. Each object is a significant currency of its institution, yet the economy between families, objects and other previously unrecognised actors is little understood. By specifically interrogating the intersection between families and objects, this study argues that museums can develop new partnerships and practice directions. Overall, the findings of this research extend the opportunity for museums to reshape their interpretative relationships and see their collections and visitors in new ways.