

Beyond the Surface:
The Contemporary Experience of the Italian Renaissance

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Certificate of Authorship / Originality

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 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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Abstract

It is the intention of this Doctor of Creative Arts to convey the complexity of viewing art in museums. Concentrating on both the physical and cultural contexts of art, I focus specifically on Italian museums that house artworks of the Renaissance. I argue that the viewing experience in these museums is formed at the intersection of cultures, histories, the past and the present, art and the subjectivity of the viewer's own gaze. In this project the personal, physical, cerebral, sensorial and temporal experiences of art are central to my concerns.

The structure of this DCA combines my photographic art practice with this written reflection. I work with both the visual and the textual to most appropriately and effectively express my concerns with the Renaissance and Italian museums. In a peculiar act of doubling, I am making art about the experience of viewing it, and through image-making I am able both to explore and to comment more profoundly on the experience of these museums. While my research and writing at times responds to these images, it also inspires them. Here I integrate the past, history and art, with contemporary theories that are relevant in the study of vision and today's art viewing, and rely on numerous writers across the broad fields of visual arts, art history and theory, museology, historiography and cultural tourism. In surveying these extensive interwoven disciplines I engage with the magnitude of the social, historical and theoretical studies that converge in the museum viewer's field of vision.

Beyond the glorious artworks themselves Italian Renaissance museums exhibit a dense visual and historic culture that provides an enriched viewing environment. They paradoxically intersect 'high' art with a phenomenal popularity that appears ever-expanding through endless reproductions and representations via modern technologies. Through examining these museums with their multiple histories and contexts I hope to argue for a slower, more considered engagement with art, that encourages the viewer to experience the sensual as well as the intellectual aspects that this opulent environment offers.

As you wait for a change in the light, or go about the mechanics of setting up a shot, you have the chance to slow down the act of looking... the camera is a prosthesis that helps you to think through what is.

Guido Guidi¹

Paintings still have that effect—they are ways of thinking about something other than what I am.

James Elkins²

¹ Guido Guidi, from the collection of essays, Nicholas Olsberg, (et al.), *Carlo Scarpa Architect: Intervening with History*, New York: Monacelli Press and Montréal, Quebec: Canadian Centre For Architecture, 1999, p. 208.

² James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing*, San Diego: 1st Harvest edition, Harcourt Brace, 1997, p. 23.

1. Introduction: Beyond the Surface

At the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1988, there was a painting by Lorenzo Lotto exhibited as part of the Masterpieces of Western European Art from the Hermitage. Hanging in a side gallery at the back of the room, I found this canvas had an irresistible magnetic quality. I constantly returned to this dark and intriguing picture of half a millennia ago, a 'Family Portrait' depicting a couple sitting at a table, the man in one hand holds a slip of paper with a Latin inscription, and with the other, prominently displaying a ring, points to a squirrel on the table. What I found emanating from this image was a series of diverse and complex questions, questions that related to the period of art and history, the artist, the perplexing symbolism, the painting itself and its provenance, its presence in Australia and myself, both as a viewer and artist. At that moment, in the Art Gallery of New South Wales, this Lotto, through its isolation, became symbolic of all Italian Renaissance art. Beyond this painting's ability to suggest a world and time far removed from the present, it was also a key that unlocked memories of travel and the experience of historic art in Europe. However, this Australian viewing experience was very different to that of European museums.

Ever since this Lotto visited Australia, I have been intrigued by the relationship between Renaissance art and its contextual setting, the museum.¹ From my initial fascination eventually emerged this DCA project which combines a body of artwork with this critical reflection. In this project I focus on Italian museums that house collections of Renaissance artworks – hereafter referred to as Renaissance museums – where the history, the families, the collections, the artworks and the furnishings compose a rich and densely layered viewing experience. I concentrate on both the time and space of viewing in these museums: the time dedicated to visiting museums and viewing artwork, and the layers of historic time which are revealed in these architectural spaces. With this project I wish to convey the complexity of viewing in museums, and draw attention to the material surroundings, the cultural environment and the

¹ More recent exhibitions of Renaissance works in Australia include, *Leonardo da Vinci's Codex* at the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, 2000, and *The Italians* at the National Gallery, Canberra, 2002.

personal, social and historic conditions that converge when viewing Renaissance art. In order to do so my investigation, both creative and scholarly, follows two paths. Firstly, there is the architectural and institutional contexts of the Renaissance as it is encountered today, and secondly, the temporal, spatial and experiential event of present-day museum viewing.

In this introduction I will outline the development of my art practice, since the photographic works that I have made and my photographic research are as significant in their revelations as the theoretical research in this project. I will present my ideas on photography as they underscore the image-making and exhibition practice referred to throughout this thesis. Here I will also discuss why I have chosen the Renaissance as the centre-point of my investigation, why I consider it crucial at this time, and why I have elected a visual and theoretical approach to explore the issues pertinent to both viewing art, and the museum environment.

Creating the Visual

Before discussing the issues and theories implicit in museum viewing that I address in the rest of this thesis, it is important that I first describe the creative/practical aspects of how my art has unfolded in this project, and my relationship with photography. Initially I wanted to explore and photograph evidence of the Renaissance in the most famous museums of Italy, to investigate this historic museum environment from the visitor's point of view, to portray what is actually seen, and under what circumstances. My early investigations led from embassies and cultural institutions, to universities, historians, museum curators and administrators. My first photographic expedition (after having gained authorisation to photograph – normally restricted by the imperatives of security, conservation and copyright) took place in the galleries and museums of Florence and Rome, and for comparative research, in London and Paris. I usually worked outside the museum opening hours, mixing with the curators, restorers and art handlers. During these hours the spectre-like operations – the moving, cleaning, conserving, framing, packing, storing and transport of art – take place away from the public's eyes (fig.1,2). The body of photographs produced at that time resulted in *Before the Museum* (fig.38-47), which first appeared in part in 'Shifting Currents' at the Ivan Dougherty Gallery, in Sydney in 2000, then as a solo show at Tusculum



1. Art handlers at the National Gallery, London.

2. Art handlers at the Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.



Gallery, Royal Australian Institute of Architects, in Sydney 2000, and was subsequently exhibited at Palazzo dei Cartelloni, Studio Arts Centre International, in Florence 2001 and Casa d'Italia, Co.As.It., in Sydney 2002.

Returning to Australia, I wanted to create a visual response to the museum experiences of Italy. I photographed traces of the Renaissance in Sydney, the classical architecture of the museums and the tributary Renaissance frieze and paintings at Art Gallery of New South Wales, comparing the Renaissance allusion in Sydney to its reality in Florence. This eventuated in a body of images titled *Isolation and Profusion* (fig.3,4,5). The photographs shot in Australia were austere by comparison. Bereft of the sublime decoration of Florentine interiors, they were ultimately familiar, as opposed to the visual saturation and liminality that I experienced in Italy. There the concentration of the past, communicated with such visual intensity, created an Otherness that was inspiring to my post-colonial gaze.

Further to this, I wanted to extend the notion of 'viewing' in my photographs beyond the physical architecture to include the phenomenological aspects of seeing in this environment. I wanted to make vision 'seen'. Influenced by Norman Bryson's theories of the gaze and the glance I worked with photography to manifest the allusion of speed and chaos that I perceived in the museum viewer's glance. I manipulated the projected negative, and experimented with different 'during-print' and 'in-camera' techniques, mimicking the viewer's physical movement when viewing. At the same time I tried to instil in the Australian images the same overwhelming intensity that I sensed in Italy. In doing this experimental image-making I found that I was emulating another photographer, Guido Guidi, who also sought to capture movement in association with the gaze.

I have tried to capture the sense of movement in Scarpa's works by focusing on fragments, by moving the lens in the same random, patient, and circular fashion which Scarpa moved his head, by assembling these episodes into sequences or juxtapositions, and by repetition, so as to give a sense of the length of the gaze required to grasp the mutability of the subject.²

Carlo Scarpa, ironically, is an Italian architect who has spent much of his professional life re-designing historic Italian museums. In following his movement, Guidi is searching for a way to express Scarpa's vision; however, I

² Guidi, Carlo Scarpa Architect: Intervening with History, p. 208.



3. *Isolation and Profusion #5*

4. *Isolation and Profusion #7*





5. Isakson and Fralson #21

would suggest that this vision belongs not only Scarpa, but also the 'seeing' of all museum viewers.

I returned to Italy a second time to photograph. This visit was exclusively to Florence, to the hub of Renaissance museums. Equipped with photographic techniques and the theories of vision, I wanted to express the essence of viewing in these museums. Yet this environment, so layered with history, textures, time and humanity demanded a different approach to image-making than I had originally envisaged. This time I worked with obscure camera angles and extreme close-ups, magnifying the details of the museum. The resulting exhibition, *Impossible Gaze* (fig.52-69), has subsequently been shown at UTS Gallery, in Sydney 2002, University of the Sunshine Coast Gallery, Maroochydore 2003, and the Western Australia Museum, Perth 2003. At the time of capturing these images I became acutely aware of the mass of humanity that queued each day to view the world-renown artworks and architecture. I documented these crowds daily in a series titled *The Viewer's Gaze* (fig.6). What struck me was the individuality of the onlookers and how all these personalities seemed to be rarely addressed by the museum.

Traces of Sight

Photographing in the museums of Italy has enabled me to reflect on the details of Renaissance art that no reproduction ever could. My attention has traced the surfaces of paintings, their frames and the supporting walls, as I have moved from room to room, and museum to museum. I have documented the incidental and the peripheral in this environment, and paradoxically, what Roland Barthes describes as the 'punctum'.³ If, as according to Barthes, the punctum is the element of an image which 'pricks' or attracts the viewer, my images then create a kind of doubling effect, or layering of punctums. Firstly, they picture for me the 'sting' in the physical context of the museum, which I photograph, as I would argue that the punctum can be contained spatially for the photographer in the moment of taking the photograph, as well as in their image. And secondly, they provide an image for the viewers of my photographs to experience their own personal attraction. Though in Barthes' view, this is

³ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Richard Howard trans., London: Vintage, 1993(1980), pp. 26-7.



The Viewer's Gaze, series #1 to #10

individual and not in the photographer's control. W.J.T. Mitchell expands on Barthes' punctum as being details that

are accidental, uncoded, nameless features that open the photograph metonymically onto a contingent realm of memory and subjectivity: "it is what I add to the photograph and *what is nonetheless already there*", what is more often remembering about a photograph than what is seen in its actual presence.⁴

Through photography I am able to souvenir, savour and reconstitute the museum experience in another time and place. I rely on photography's documentary ability – I use the term 'documentary' fully cognisant of the breadth of practice that it constitutes – not as an objective representation of the world but invested with my own subjective thoughts, desires and interpretation of it.⁵ What I see, and how I photograph, are an intrinsic reference to myself. Like John Berger's comment that a 'photograph is similar to a footprint or a deathmask', the images in my exhibitions are as much a trace of myself, where I have walked and what I have witnessed, as they are a trace of the Renaissance.⁶

My fascination with recording some parts of the world as opposed to others is not so much the 'desire for possession' as Graham Clarke suggests, but a way of not losing them, a subtle yet significant difference.⁷ In the photographic images that I have produced, I have transformed objects that exist in the world into something other than they were intended, to circulate anew as traces of my vision. I play with the idea of photography – its discontinuous, fragmenting nature which enables new juxtapositions, new contexts and new associations, not only for myself as the author of the images but for a new range of viewers. While my image-making may be a trail of my past, it also gives me a voice to project into the future.

In Jean Baudrillard's recent discussion on photography, *For Illusion isn't the Opposite of Reality*, he comments that in making photographs his own 'gaze and

⁴ W.J.T. Mitchell, 'The Photographic Essay: Four Case Studies', *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, p. 303.

⁵ Peter Hamilton refers to the distinction between objectivity and subjectivity in documentary practices in his essay 'France and Frenchness in Post-War Humanist Photography', *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Stuart Hall ed., London: Sage, in association with The Open University, c1997, p. 81. For more on documentary photography see Abigail Solomon-Godeau, 'Who is Speaking Thus? Some Questions About Documentary Photography', *Photography at The Dock*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.

⁶ John Berger, 'Ways of Remembering', *The Camerawork Essays*, Jessica Evans ed., London: Rivers Oram Press, 1997, p. 42. Other writers like Barthes, Eduardo Cadava and Roger Cardinal also discuss the idea of self-referencing in photography.

⁷ Graham Clarke, *The Photograph*, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 15.

judgement' is revealed.⁸ For me, this elementary observation identifies two fundamental and interrelated 'visions' of photographic practice. Firstly, in identifying the gaze Baudrillard signals photography's optical link with anatomical vision, a concept that I work with in my own image-making. Secondly, the gaze also alludes to sight's wider ability to intuit what is being seen. Judgement, or to use Mary Price's eloquent term, the 'presence of mind', with its elaborate amalgamation of personal proclivities cannot help but reveal itself in the photograph.⁹ Although the technical skill in photography is condensed in the instant of releasing the shutter, it is the photographer's judgement that is exposed whenever and wherever the shutter is released.

As a photo-artist working in museums I look for something beyond the image of the artwork, something to anchor vision in a place that by definition describes the ideas I wish to address; the strangeness of viewing historical images and objects in the present, the activity of looking in this environment, the viewer's movement through both historic and present time and space, and the many personal, physical and institutional contexts of viewing. Looking beyond the surface of my photographic images and beyond the medium of photography these images imply another culture and another era as it exists in the present. A number of pasts are layered here; the historical past represented in the photographic content of my images, as well as a more immediate past involving the time of photographing, and the viewing time of the museum visitors being photographed. Finally, there is also the space and time of viewing the two exhibitions. Displayed in both Australia and Italy these photographs are either thousands of kilometres from their originals or only a few paces away. Dislocated from their origins, these images are no longer a part of the past but a reference to it.

My artwork represents the experience of viewing in the Renaissance museum environment, rather than specific examples of this iconic culture. From the palatial contexts of *Before the Museum* to the peripheral detail evident in *Impossible Gaze*, my photographs examine not only Renaissance imagery but also the experience of it. What the photographs depict creates a particular narrative that is constructed by my own subjectivity. They do not imitate the

⁸ Jean Baudrillard, 'For Illusion isn't the Opposite of Reality', *Fotografien – Photographies – Photographs: 1985-1998*, Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 1999, p. 130.

⁹ Mary Price, *The Photograph: A Strange Confined Space*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1994, pp. 26-35.

Renaissance but present a notion of how we might regard it, what its viewing environment communicates, the sensory and aesthetic experience, reception and understanding of it. I use the word 'represent' with the fullness of its meaning, as my images are both a depiction of Renaissance museums and symbolic of the idea/activity of museum viewing.¹⁰ The duality of representation, Bryson notes, 'is both the depth of the founding perception, and the flatness of the picture plane.'¹¹

Beyond the aesthetics of my photographs history is evident. These images portray not only a physical subject but what lies implicit in that subject. For example; a detailed image of baroque fabric upholstery represents much more than its pattern and colour, it shows the place of the fabric, and alludes to the hands that wove it, the industry that produced it, the aristocracy that commissioned it, the aesthetics and taste that designed it, the history that it has witnessed, the culture (both now and then) that supports it, the people that have taken private and public pleasure in it, and the populace that has gazed at it. Not only do I see the culture that produced this, I am also acutely aware of the industry and institution that currently preserve it, not just the museum but the historiography that has recorded, analysed and compared it, and the more recent popular culture that enlivens it, the tourist industry that monopolises and objectifies it. I want to reach beyond the surface of the photographs, just as I want to reach beyond the actual presence of the hand carved frames. I want to portray a history which I can never be part of, a history which can only be lived through museum visits.

Why Italian Renaissance Museums

The issues that I explore, in this thesis could in essence, be applied to any art/museum/country, however, I have chosen Italy and the Renaissance to explain the museum experience for many compelling reasons beyond its status in popular culture. The rise of the artist, the birth of the museum, the use of the camera obscura, the introduction of perspective, and models of vision were among the many influential ideas of the time that continue to resonate today. Although here I only briefly touch on this huge area of historical scholarship it

¹⁰ For more on representation see Stuart Hall, ed., 'The Work of Representation', *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, p. 61.

¹¹ Norman Bryson, 'The Gaze and the Glance', *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze*, London: Macmillan, 1983, p. 119.

does surface in my art practice. While the minutiae of dates and facts are rarely evident in my images the knowledge of exchanges, influences, changes and developments which have occurred do contribute to the cognitive construction of my exhibition themes and image content.

The Renaissance artist, architect, historian and biographer, Giorgio Vasari, first coined the term 'rinascita', translated as rebirth, as a metaphor for the passing of an age and the birth of another – though 'Rinascimento' in Italian, the French translation 'Renaissance' is more commonly used in English – however, the word Renaissance today is more a concept, liberally used in describing not only a period of time, but a popular term filled with the promise of cultural affiliations and endeavour.¹² As a period in art, it is less contained by the finite boundaries of specific dates as it evolves through the celebrated genius of artists from Giotto to Michelangelo and extending (arguably) as far as Lotto and Caravaggio, accommodating vast developments in the arts and intellectual life. Since its unveiling for the public in the 18th century, Renaissance art has developed an extraordinary universal attraction.¹³ Its immense appeal as Vittorio Sgarbi, Italy's Under-Secretary for Culture, suggests, is due to the Western world's identification with its own ancient roots.¹⁴ Yet beyond the West, the Renaissance has entered the world's psyche as a peerless entity, and has been experienced by masses of humanity through the ages, but never more than now with the present torrent of multicultural cultural tourism and the incalculable number of reproductions ensuring even further widespread recognition.

Although a period of rebirth and learning, the Italian Renaissance was also a time steeped in religious and political turmoil with the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the French invasion of 1494, the ecclesiastical censorship of 1550, and the sack of Rome in 1527.¹⁵ This chaos co-existed with the rapid spread of literacy, knowledge and ideas, all of which had a profound impact on the cultural life of the country. With the beginnings of humanism there came a new way of looking at society, facilitated through the discussion and

¹² David Ekserdijan's introduction to Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, Gaston de Vere trans., London: Everyman's Library, 1996(1568).

¹³ The Renaissance collection of Uffizi gallery, one of Europe's first, was officially opened to the public in 1765. Gloria Fossi, *The Uffizi: The Official Guide*, Florence: Giunti Gruppo Editoriale, 2000, p. 8.

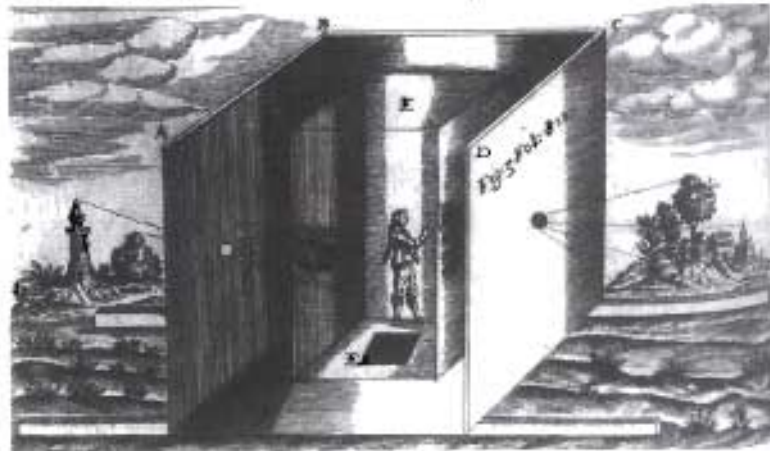
¹⁴ Vittorio Sgarbi from his essay, 'Australia. Titian to Tiepolo', in the exhibition catalogue *Titian to Tiepolo: Three Centuries of Italian Art*, Italy: Artificio Skira, 2002, p. 3.

¹⁵ Peter Burke, *The Italian Renaissance: Culture and Society in Italy*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986, p. 232.



7. Raffaello's Vatican fresco of artists and scholars in the *School of Athens* (detail) is an unequivocal symbol of the humanities.

8. Camera Obscura illustration from Kircher's *Ars magna Lucis et Umbrae*, Rome, 1649.



contemplation of theology, dignity, freedom, truth, morality, virtue and knowledge (fig.7).¹⁶ The humanist ideals of beauty, taste, history and the exploration of 'self' have been central to the development of the West's current perception of the arts, and thus inevitably shaped my own art practice in both conscious and unconscious ways that I am interested in exploring.

Art in the Renaissance became more than devout decoration as sculpture and painting evolved from papal propaganda to include the new politicised themes of the ruling classes. Originally painted directly onto walls, the new secular art was no longer anchored by the location of churches and cathedrals, it became a portable commodity, painted on canvas, wooden panels or furniture. Artists began to experiment with new techniques and new modes of production; their work was innovative and often challenging. Humanism profoundly affected both the creation and reception of art. It was a significant factor not only in the advancement of artists who were being educated – as Peter Burke states the 'social mobility of painters and sculptors is symbolized if not confirmed by the appearance of the term 'artist' in more or less its modern meaning' – but also their immediate audience, their patrons, clients and collectors.¹⁷ Here in Renaissance Italy the obsession with collecting art and curiosities eventually gave rise to the museum as a modern institution, though this inevitably signalled the erasure of Renaissance art's original and often sacred contexts and private audiences.¹⁸

Also in the time of the Renaissance the viewer began to play an instrumental role in art, a key figure in the construction of the newly invented rules of perspective, as well as content.¹⁹ My photographs of contemporary viewers surrounded by Renaissance imagery is a tropic device as the gaze of my camera with its intrinsic perspectival treatment is turned on the art that first explored perspective as a key to 'realistic' representation. In my reworking of the Renaissance, I work with the way Renaissance artists adapted the art of the past, drawing on fragments of classical art and antiquities in order to produce

¹⁶ Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller and John Herman Randall Jr. eds., *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948, p. 15.

¹⁷ Burke, *The Italian Renaissance*, p. 82.

¹⁸ Susan M. Pearce discusses the birth of the museum in *Museums, Objects & Collections: A Cultural Study*, Leicester & London: Leicester University Press, 1992, pp. 1-2.

¹⁹ John Shearman, *Only Connect... Art and the Spectator in the Italian Renaissance*, USA: Princeton University Press, 1992, p. 17.

their own 'new' art.²⁰ As Mieke Bal observes, 'art is inevitably engaged with what came before it', its reworking offers insight into both the past and the time in which it is produced.²¹

Using the camera to explore the Renaissance is somewhat rhetorical as photography's connection with this period is via the camera obscura (fig.8). In their quest to truthfully imitate nature, Renaissance artists used this technical apparatus to enhance their image-making (although the camera obscura was already in use in the 10th century by Arab scholars). My desire to photographically depict seeing, or vision, is yet another reworking of these Renaissance ideals. This model of vision is now reproduced through my own camera lens, a reflexive process describing the vision of the contemporary viewer, looking at the Renaissance.

Representing human vision has been a driving force in art through the centuries preceding and including the developments of Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre and William Henry Fox Talbot's *Pencil of Nature*, in the 1830s, which culminated in the birth of the photographic image.²² Writers like Jonathon Crary and Martin Jay have pursued the link between the camera obscura, perspective, and the development of photography in all its detail. As Crary states,

Conservatives tend to pose an account of ever-increasing progress toward verisimilitude in representation, in which Renaissance perspective and photography are part of the same quest for a fully objective equivalent of a "natural vision".

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the camera obscura was without question the most widely used model for explaining human vision, and for representing the relation of a perceiver and the position of a knowing subject to an external world.²³

The use of the camera obscura, which eventually resulted in the later technical, optical and chemical developments in photography, with its new-found ability

²⁰ Leonard Barkan discusses the Renaissance artists' reuse of classical imagery in *Unearthing The Past: Archaeology and Aesthetics in the Making Of Renaissance Culture*, New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1999, pp. 185-7.

²¹ Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*, Chicago, Ill., University of Chicago Press, 1999, p. 1.

As this is not an art history thesis and given the limits of length I won't engage here in detail, but Bal's approach to the relationship between the art of the past and contemporary work, as well as her assertions of art as a 'visual text' have clearly influenced my direction.

²² Michel Frizot, ed., *A New History of Photography*, Köln: Könemann, 1998.

²³ Jonathon Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: An October Book, MIT Press, 1991, pp. 26-7.

to faithfully reproduce images has subsequently contributed to our way of existence, as Jay suggests, 'producing a human environment saturated with images, a life-world of 'hyper-visual' stimulation', an 'ocularcentric' society that began with the Renaissance.²⁴

Lastly, I should explain why I consider Italian museums as especially important today. The Italian museums I have visited and photographed since 1990 have been metamorphosing before my eyes and camera lens. With each visit to Italy I have witnessed substantial change to the museum environment, not only architectural modifications, the incorporation of contemporary museology and merchandising, and an increasing volume of visitors, but also an alignment with other Western nations' museum standards. Governed by the Ministry of Culture (Soprintendenza ai Beni Artistici e Storici) new laws have been put into effect over the past decade that have meant that the culture of museums once integrated with the local Italian way of life, has become more accessible and accommodating to global tourism. Like the exchange of the Italian lire for the Euro, the osmotic exchange of systems and infrastructures in global economies have caused the nuances of local cultures to disintegrate, creating a sameness amongst different countries. However, even in this promotion of accessibility I still find a divide, or alienation, between the museum and their audience. In this project I address this divide.

As art historian, James Elkins, discusses in his key text *Pictures and Tears*,

I want to know what happens when a painting suddenly means much more than the dry information on the museum label, or the intellectual symbols and stories in books of art history... I am fascinated by that possibility, and by the unnatural vigor with which we have excluded any such experiences from our official textbooks and tours.²⁵

Like Elkins, I am fascinated by the connection that some people feel for art, and the emotions/responses/meaning that it can elicit. The power art has in conjuring not only scholarly disciplines but individual, inarticulable emotions and responses. I want to express, as Ellen Handler Spitz describes, 'the non-verbal, subliminal dialogues that observers and objects conduct over time with

²⁴ Martin Jay, 'Photo-unrealism: The Contribution of the Camera to the Crisis of Ocularcentricism', *Vision & Textuality*, Stephen Melville and Bill Readings, eds., London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1995, pp. 345-6. 'Ocularcentricism' is discussed by Jay in 'Scopic Regimes of Modernity', *Vision and Visuality*, Dia Art Foundation, Discussions in Contemporary Culture Number 2, Hal Foster ed., Bay Press, Seattle, 1988, p. 3.

²⁵ James Elkins, *Pictures and Tears: A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings*, New York and London: Routledge, 2001, p. 38.

one another – and with the subtle shifting of their referents and boundaries’ which I believe is rarely addressed by either the museum that houses art, or the texts that reproduce it.²⁶

Writing with Light

Finally I will account for my visual/textual approach. It is the aim of this DCA to create a body of visual artwork that inflects my philosophical inquiry. In this work I use the photographic image and the act of photographing to initiate, and to advance, the ideas raised in the text. The artworks are not support material but rather a way to visually express my concerns, as the word ‘photography’ implies, in both its name and its nature – ‘writing with light’.²⁷ Here my method of combining images and text is intended to illuminate what Bal refers to as ‘how art thinks’.²⁸

I recognise the contradictory arguments regarding visual images and their possible meanings. For example, Mitchell believes that ‘paintings can tell stories, make arguments, and signify abstract ideas’, while Elkins regards pictures as ‘disorderly, unpredictably irrational, inconsistently incoherent, and ill suited to stories of symbols or visual narratives’.²⁹ Yet, Jacob Burckhardt who presciently wrote about the Italian Renaissance in the 1800s, thought of artworks as objects ‘through which it is possible to read the structures of thought and representation of a given time.’³⁰ These polar views are indicative of the breadth of visual culture studies, involving the image/text relationship and the practice/theory dichotomy. Theories surrounding visual culture and how to define its parameters have been hotly debated in the art, history and cultural studies departments of academic institutions. Here the key question arises of how to reconcile (themselves differing) theoretical modes of investigation of the visual, with visual ones, presenting thought through imagery. There have been many attempts to linguistically bridge theory and practice and to find a visual as well as a textual expression, but few visual

²⁶ Ellen Handler Spitz, *Image and Insight: Essay in Psychoanalysis and the Arts*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1991, p. x.

²⁷ Clarke, *The Photograph*, p. 11.

²⁸ Bal, Quoting Caravaggio, p. 22.

²⁹ Mitchell, ‘Ekphrasis and the Other’, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, pp. 152-60. James Elkins, *On Pictures and the Words that Fail Them*, New York: Cambridge University Press, c1998, p. xviii.

³⁰ Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, c2001, pp. 11-3, 83.

responses have been brought forth to date. Susan Buck-Morss reinforces this in *October's* special issue on visual culture where she states,

that critical theories are needed, theories that are themselves visual, that show rather than argue. Such conceptual constellations convince by their power to illuminate the world, bringing to consciousness what was before only dimly perceived, so that it becomes available for critical reflection...Aesthetic experience (sensory experience) is not reducible to information.³¹

What Buck-Morss writes addresses my own intentions with this DCA project. I want to make art that intelligently encompasses both theory and practice, to integrate the layers of the past, history and art, with contemporary theories that are relevant in the study of vision and today's art viewing. Images that are able to express, communicate and construct meaning about the culture that they picture, as well as the culture in which they are produced.

By offering these elaborate and interwoven multiple contexts and complex theories that are layered with the personal, public, cultural and institutional circumstances, I hope to argue for a slower, more considered viewing of art. I want to encourage viewers to slow down, to resist the fleeting 'consumption' of art and allow time for reflection, particularly in Renaissance museums, where the details of art, history and architecture are too easily overlooked in expeditious tours. I want to contradict the cumulative urges of contemporary museology and tourism that feed visitors through museums at an ever-increasing speed, and argue against an historic visual culture being consumed at the same rate as images flickering on a screen. I want to confront the temptation of speed that underlies contemporary society and use photography to allow us to 'see' time and its continual movement.

I will now briefly describe each of the chapters that follow, though I should signal that there is necessarily much layering and rethreading throughout this thesis. As ideas about time, aura, the gaze, experience, liminality, reproduction and technology are, I would suggest, so interwoven, they are difficult to disentangle and as a consequence though raised in some chapters they inevitably reappear to be more fully explored in others – with a different focus – parallel to the different angle and focus on the 'same' spaces in my two exhibitions.

³¹ Susan Buck-Morss, *October* 77, Rosalind Krauss and Hal Foster, eds., New York: October Magazine Ltd., Summer 1996, p. 30.

In Chapter 2, I describe the diverse nature of photography's relationship with the museum, from the souvenirs and tourist snaps discussed by Susan Stewart and Celeste Olaquaiga, to Barthes' and Walter Benjamin's comments on photography and the reproduction of art, to my own post-colonial image-making propensities. Here I introduce three exhibitions to illustrate the history of museum photography in its many guises. From these exhibitions I will focus on the work of four contemporary artists who photograph within cultural institutions: Sophie Calle, Louise Lawler, Thomas Struth and Karen Knorr. I will concentrate on their images as they speak clearly of the concerns of my own work – the contemporary experience of viewing art. Calle's shrewd documents of art and memory elicit ideas of the viewer's subjectivity which I find argued by Bryson and Peter de Bolla, while Lawler's images focus on the contextual environment of art that both Douglas Crimp and Jacques Derrida reason as important to its interpretation. The lush photographs of Italian museums by Struth call forth the attributes of vision and the activity of looking broadly discussed by Hal Foster, Bryson and Crary among others. Lastly, I refer to the work of Knorr, who draws on ideas of reproduction, taste and beauty, society and the changing habits of viewing, the implications of which are explored by Crary, Victoria Newhouse, Antonella Huber and Susan Pearce.

In Chapter 3, I call attention to the layers of time that are present in the museum. I describe in detail the construction of my exhibition *Before the Museum*, the first key exhibition for this project. This body of work intertwines the contemporary viewer and the historic visual culture and contexts that surround them. The writing of history is one such context. As Alain Corbin explains, the work of historians in various forms through the centuries have ever-expanded and inevitably contributed to the manner in which art is seen and interpreted today. And it is historians like Martin Kemp and Bryson that continue to contribute to the current understanding of the Renaissance.

This chapter is also concerned with the viewer's engagement, experience and interpretation. I will discuss the museum with reference to the breadth of museum literature, from contemporary guides to the authorities of museology, informed by a range of history and theory from Francis Haskell's discussions on early art collecting, through Peter Vergo's essays defining the 'new' museology of the 1980s, and Eilean Hooper-Greenhill's current interpretations of material culture within this environment. Although social and cultural

philosophies, heritage, historiography, politics and education are the institutional viscera of the museum, it is the museum-going public, interweaving their own lived experience with that of the museum's collection, which sustains the museum industry. Yet few writers on museums discuss the agency of the viewer, or the contribution of context to the viewing experience that I address here. Similarly, none have the specificity of the Renaissance, nor do they embrace Italian museums.

Chapter 4 is centred on my second exhibition, *Impossible Gaze*. These photographs are concerned specifically with the physical details of Italian museum interiors. In this chapter I examine the developments in Italian museum history as reported by Huber, as well as the recent changes in museology with its contemporary, didactic technologies. Here I am also concerned with tourism in relation to museum viewing, and refer to Benjamin and Laura Marks to unravel the difficult and complex questions posed by the tourist's quest for the 'original', returning again to explore the ideas of aura.

Throughout this project I have employed different strategies to investigate the contemporary conditions of viewing in Italian Renaissance museums. To illustrate this experience I alternate between the voices of viewer, artist and writer. As a means of raising the questions and concerns relevant to contemporary viewing I begin each chapter by narrating some of my actual encounters in museums, occasionally returning to this voice as the chapters unfold. This mode of telling has provided a conduit between photography, theoretical reflection and writing, and is especially appropriate as stories, I would suggest, are synonymous with the act of photography (often provoked by my camera). For me they are integral to its character as it interacts with the world it documents. The stories that I have included in this thesis are observations of the viewing experience in Italian museums. These stories have been enriched by all manner of scholars, curators, historians, museologists, conservators, art handlers, guides and guards as they expressed their views on topics as diverse as dust, administration and tastes in framing. Each has extended my understanding of the museum industry and brought a human perspective to my theoretical reflections.

Not a conventional approach to history or art, my methodologies of art practice and theoretical research alternately respond to and inspire each other, and ultimately converge to produce this cross-disciplinary study which reflects

on the nature of photographic and artistic practices, visual culture (an interdisciplinary study in itself), art history and theory, museology, Renaissance historiography and tourism. As a reflection on contemporary culture, this multi-disciplinary approach is necessary to locate and discuss the many varied and complex issues that are layered at the intersection of historic artwork and its viewer.

2. Possessing the Unpossessable

The first thing I see after making it past the ranks of restrained visitors queued for their first glimpse of the Galleria degli Uffizi (I had the time and forethought to book) is a mousepad sporting Caravaggio's Bacchus. The vanguard of merchandising creates an unceremonious introduction to Florence's historic art and culture. Beyond that there is an LED display blinking '600 person limit', a literal reminder of the multitudes that have visited that hour, that day, and every other day for countless years. The opportunity to commune with art and history rapidly evaporates as the reality of the '600 persons' comes into view. Concentrated groups of tourists of many nationalities collide in the doorways and corridors, their expectations swell as they approach room 10-14, the Botticelli room. Here the Birth of Venus and Primavera are consigned to the protection of bulletproof plexiglass. On entering this room the visitor's automatic response is to furtively pull out a camera and take a 'snap' of these paintings – images they have already seen countless times in reproductions – knowing that it is forbidden they gladly risk the reprimands of the guards in order to possess the image for themselves.¹

Surrounded by a crowd no less than twenty people deep, these paintings succeed in slowing the visitors so that they may bask in the authentic glow of the Renaissance. Oblivious to the incessant beeping alarms of the infra-red sensors that preserve these works the viewers push closer, hoping to exchange a single breath with Venus before being propelled by the crowd, and by limited time, into the succeeding galleries. Here the confinement of the room known as Tribuna becomes claustrophobic as the visitors file past the paintings and antiquities, and in the salons of Michelangelo, Raffaello and Andrea del Sarto the crowds have become restless and irreverent. On reaching Titian, the numbers have thinned dramatically as few visitors linger in the galleries containing later works. On entering the final corridor of the Uffizi one joins the eternal tide of visitors that drift through the museum.

¹ In the mid 1990s Florentine museums introduced regulations strictly forbidding photography.

I relate this story as a means of introducing the contemporary conditions of museum viewing and thereby raising some of the theoretical issues that I will explore throughout this thesis. What interests me specifically are the aspects that affect the viewer in the Renaissance museums of Italy today. It is well known that modern museology offers the viewer a wealth of information from artists' lives to overarching cultural ideologies, but I would argue that the agency of the viewer must also be considered. What is actually seen by the museum viewer is influenced by a far broader range of complex historical and contemporary conditions, from the heterogeneity of early collections, to the consumption of souvenirs and the bombardment of visual images in today's culture. In this chapter I will explore the viewing experience, how both the senses and intellect are employed mutually or independently, weaving in and out of various layers of engagement and modes of vision. It is what the viewer brings to the encounter and their varying interpretative propensities, that enables art to represent great cultural significance while at the same time speak of something entirely personal.

As I have described above, the experience of visiting Renaissance museums in Italy, especially Florence, has built to an un-dissipating crescendo over the past centuries, and currently resembles hand-to-hand combat. The audience, the majority of which are international visitors coursing through an expeditious cultural pilgrimage, has to confront battalions of tour groups jostling through the historic architecture and art-lined walls all on the same mission – to see the original Michelangelo's *David*, or Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*. The pace of this parade, set by the flag-bearing tour guides, is militant. This ever-increasing tendency to move quickly through museums is endemic of contemporary society's visual engagement in a consumer and mediatised Western world. Now conditioned to the flickering of images and messages across screens and billboards, viewing regimes have become fractured, superficial and diversely juxtaposed in an attempt to digest the vast quantity of visual information that inhabits our world. For me this begs the question, what is gained from viewing art under such circumstances? I believe that this fervent looking often limits, if not negates, the viewer's capacity to 'truly' see – I recognise of course, that if one were to dwell on every visual detail, life would be severely impeded. It is this state of half-seeing, or selective seeing, that I focus on in this thesis, and that I believe defines the contemporary experience of Italian Renaissance art.

It is my intention with this DCA project both to present the contextual elements of viewing in Renaissance museums, and, in contrast to the present velocity of cultural tourism, to hinder and divert the museum viewer's attention from the Renaissance artworks that are so well-recognised, to the lesser-known visual culture that surrounds them. My aim with my photographs is to encourage the viewer to seek more from their museum experience than the reinforcement of what they already know, or what they can predict. I want the viewers to explore the museum in a different way. Using photography as my voice I want to cry out, "slow down and *really* look around!"

Photography plays a complex role in the museum as it traverses both sides of the institution. From inside, it is a tool for promotion, conservation and archival document. From outside it holds testimony not only for innumerable visitors who happily snap their favourite moments, but also enjoys the privilege of being a focus for contemporary art. In this chapter I will concentrate on the works of contemporary photo-artists, Calle, Lawler, Struth and Knorr, who also work in the confines of the museum. I have chosen their photographic practices because for me their images contain, beyond their lustrous photographic surfaces, the issues and theoretical concerns – of both my photographs and this thesis – that I draw upon to elucidate the museum-viewing experience. I read in their images the ideas of identity, context, vision and viewing that I foreground in my own work. While their artworks have not directly influenced my own art practice, the examination of their work and the texts that have been written on them, referencing many contemporary and historic discourses across a broad spectrum of theory, has enabled me to investigate more fully, the genesis of my practice and theoretical inclinations. Through discussing the work of these artists I am able to raise the issues and arguments of photography, as well as the changes in viewing habits – recalling the Caravaggio mousepad – that have been mediated through endless reproductions and challenge the ideals of authenticity, and our highly evolved computer culture with its technological and theoretical developments which continue to pose new ways in which to view and represent the past.

Merchandising the Past

To introduce some of my concerns particular to the museum, I will begin by reflecting on the souvenir. Emblematic of the museum visit, the souvenir draws

on a number of interrelated ideas that underpin both museums and photography. All three, museums, photography and souvenirs, are saturated with the past, memory, experience, identity and reproduction. Each manifests a past that is relative to their 'possessor', and each enables the experience of the past to be rekindled in the present. In *On Longing*, Stewart remarks that 'whereas the souvenir lends authenticity to the past, the past lends authenticity to the collection.'² For me, Stewart's comment identifies the linchpin for museums, photography and souvenirs, 'the past', as it circulates through personal, private, public and historic realms. While souvenirs resonate with the past, in their relocated contexts they signal the impossibility of materialising it in the present.

Through mass reproduction the museum depends on souvenirs and photography to promote its collections to a wider audience, albeit often in spurious forms. Stewart suggests, that 'The souvenir reduces the public, the monumental, and the three-dimensional into the miniature'.³ Reduced in physical size, souvenirs take on new signification through their ownership. Reproduced in multitudinous forms, souvenirs become objects that survive outside their original contexts.⁴ They are a trace of the original object/experience, and are reconstituted through memory in the same way as a photograph. Like the objects in museums, and the photographs one takes, souvenirs biographically map their owners. Associated with travel and tourism, they chart the position of self in relation to the world and signify the cultural Other of their possessor. These ideas of the past, context and identity are recurring and interwoven themes throughout this thesis, inevitably calling attention to my post-colonial eye.

The artworks of the Italian Renaissance have created a viewing and experiential phenomenon well beyond the artworks themselves. In the museums of Italy, the escalating audiences have evolved from the once private engagement of the privileged few, to the millions of international visitors who pay homage each year. The sheer numbers of viewers have helped shape the viewing conditions and enforced museological change. Although Renaissance art has a value far beyond mercantile, the museum experience has become a commercialised

² In this section I borrow Stewart's use of the word 'possessor'. Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993, p. 151.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

encounter. Much more than the cost of the entry ticket, the museums' policies of mass marketing souvenirs (reproductions of their collections) have become intrinsic to the idea of the 'consumption' of art. This is not a modern occurrence, a lucrative trade in relics developed in the time of the ancient Greeks and medieval Christian pilgrimages.⁵ The modern abundance of souvenirs however, while holding little monetary worth continue to be steeped in personal values that signify and conjure intimate memories of time and place.

The Renaissance museum experience, like that of all museums, is not contained exclusively within the boundaries of the museum itself, it is not limited to a finite time and does not end by leaving the premises. Beyond these boundaries memory carries forth the experience, aided by personal mementos, souvenirs and photographs, or is rekindled by the mass circulation of reproductions (fig.9). David Lowenthal writes in his preface to *The Past is a Foreign Country*, that visitors treat the history contained in museums as a 'foreign realm', something to be captured and remembered via its merchandise and souvenirs.⁶ While this may be true, it should also be said that the museum encourages this attitude, with every encounter of authentic artworks flagrantly sandwiched between points-of-sale that offer shelves of reproductions for souvenirs. For the museum, the history that it contains is a marketable commodity to be reproduced in plaster casts, posters, catalogues, postcards, and on T-shirts and refrigerator magnets. Even Italian museums in their historic sites cannot resist the intrusion of marketing, the recently refurbished Villa Borghese, among the many newly restored Italian museums, perfectly illustrates the omnipresence of merchandising.

In defence of merchandising, as recently reported in a US Federal court case (brought against the artist Barbara Kruger, the Whitney Museum and L.A. Museum of Contemporary Art) involving reproductions of art sold as souvenirs, 'the museums said the items brought the message of the...work to a broader class of people than could view the original.' The court concurred, stating

⁵ Roy Malkin, 'The Pioneers (Tourism and Culture: Rethinking the Mix)', *Unesco Courier*, Paris: Dept. of Mass Communications, United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, July-August 1999, p. 24. The most prized of these possessions were no doubt eventually displayed in the earliest museums.

⁶ David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. xix.



9. Lutz Dille, *Three in a Window*, 1959.
Museum visitors viewing reproductions of their favourite paintings



10. Aymard de Barville, *Giza Sphinx and Pyramid of Khephren*, 1863.



11. Souvenir photo of a Florentine church, 2001.

that museums sell goods which generally replicate the art that they display, “thus enabling the museum to distribute art in a common and ordinary form that can be appreciated in everyday life.” The fact that the art might be reproduced in formats and quantities that sell for modest sums “makes the art popular”.⁷

Although the details of this case involve a breach of copyright, it is the argument in support of the reproduction of art that the court puts forth that interests me. I have no dispute with the museum for diversifying its economic base, but I find the assertion that a ‘broader class of people’ get a ‘message’ from, or appreciate art more because of these ‘common and ordinary forms’ unsubstantiated. There is no doubt that the recognition of art is promoted through its reproduction, but what eludes me in this submission, is what ‘message’ is destined to be gained from a tea-towel with Botticelli’s *Venus* on it, or to be more contemporary, a Brancusi toothbrush? Furthermore, these mass produced trinkets have little regard for their origins or the experience of the original, so whatever meaning was intended has been forsaken. I will return to the experience of the original in Chapter 4.

With mass reproduction does the idea of art become more aligned with kitsch domesticity and dispensability, rather than any aggrandisement? How can the ‘meaning’ of an artwork reach a broader class of society through a souvenir? In Celeste Olalquiaga’s essay on souvenirs in *The Artificial Kingdom*, she states ‘that an object is capable of transcending the limits of its own signification to represent, partially or fully, the whole event that gave it birth.’⁸ In the above court summation however, it appears that the ‘event’, the personal experience of art has been neglected. While these objects may ensure a wider recognition of artworks it would only be if the souvenir were purchased after experiencing the original that any ‘real’ trace of the art would remain. Beyond that, these reproduced images/objects simply join the vast number and multiple contexts of contemporary visual culture.

⁷ Martha Lufkin’s article ‘“Appropriation” art may land museums in hot water’, in *The Art Newspaper*, reported that, ‘A Federal court in New York has thrown out a lawsuit against the artist Barbara Kruger, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, and others including the MIT Press. In the lawsuit, two individuals, the photographer Thomas Hoepker and his friend Charlotte Dabney, had sought damages stemming from the use and exhibition of an image of Dabney within a work created by Barbara Kruger.’ <http://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/article.asp?idart=10030>, accessed 23/09/02.

⁸ Celeste Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom: A Treasury of the Kitsch Experience*, London: Bloomsbury, 1999, p. 76.

Transcending Everyday Value

Stewart writes that the 'souvenir distinguishes experiences'.⁹ It points to a moment in the past where its owner was once present, just as a photograph identifies the subject in a past location. The possession of a souvenir autobiographically maps a history, it is a beacon, a reference to an event that marks out time. Once purchased, souvenirs are transported to a personal realm where their meaning becomes twofold. While they continue to represent the artwork/place/experience of their origin they now also reflect their possessor, identifying them with the exotic objects and locations that they symbolise. As Stewart proclaims, 'It is not a narrative of the object; it is a narrative of the possessor.'¹⁰ The souvenirs and trinkets accumulated through travel, a 'rite of passage' in itself, are markers of this passage. Stewart continues,

Removed from its context, the exotic souvenir is a sign of survival—not its own survival, but the survival of the possessor outside his or her own context of familiarity. Its otherness speaks to the possessor's capacity for otherness; it is the possessor, not the souvenir, which is ultimately the curiosity.¹¹

The self is silently constructed, consciously or not, amongst these memorial objects, reflecting personal interests, mirroring sometimes inarticulable desires, and reuniting the possessor with their past. As a trace of the original context and experience, the souvenir that lingers in its materiality helps reinvigorate fading memories and enables the experience to be evoked at will. As Olalquiaga describes, 'the souvenir [is] unable to bring back anything beyond the immediate perception that triggers the process of remembrance'.¹² Reliant on the slippery faculty of memory, the original significance of souvenirs are absorbed into a personal narrative that slowly evolves with each recall and re-telling.¹³ As mementos, souvenirs are functional only for the person that experienced their origin. Bereft of any intrinsic value these objects rely on the narrative of their possessor to regain their significance, without their narration these objects are in a strange way mute, lifeless, and open for re-invention.

⁹ Stewart, *On Longing*, p. 135.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

¹² Olalquiaga reminds us that *souvenir* is the French word for remembering, *The Artificial Kingdom*, p. 78.

¹³ As part of the personal narrative Stewart discusses the arrangement of objects. 'To arrange the objects according to time is to juxtapose personal time with social time, autobiography with history, and thus to create a fiction of the individual life, a time of the individual subject both transcendent to and parallel to historical time.' *On Longing*, p. 154.

I find this reference to chronological arrangement most compelling as it identifies my own compulsion to order my photographs, in particular my tourist snaps, in a sequence that corresponds to the occurrence of events. My time, my history, my life interjected into the histories of others.

In their introduction to *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds*, Ruth Phillips and Christopher Steiner contextualise the souvenir, or indeed any 'exotic object [that] may variously be labelled trophy or talisman, relic or specimen, rarity or trade sample, souvenir or kitsch, art or craft', by noting that its place is part of a wider cross-cultural exchange.

Throughout history, the evidence of objects has been central to the telling of cross-cultural encounters with distant worlds or remote Others. The materiality and physical presence of the object make it a uniquely persuasive witness to the existence of realities outside the compass of an individual's or a community's experience.¹⁴

Phillips and Steiner reiterate that souvenirs act as a testament to travel, places visited, exotic Others and their experience. The purchase of a souvenir, as Stewart declares, 'authenticates the experience of the viewer', a validation that is intrinsic to photographic practice.¹⁵ Stewart continues, stating that souvenirs 'provide an exoticism of the self', put more clinically, I would argue that both souvenirs and photographs form an archive of self, conveyed through objects and images.¹⁶ A record, not only of places experienced, but a precise and intimate catalogue of seeing/viewing. These records provide an umbilical link to an identity that existed in the past, one that experienced the liminality of travel that I consider in Chapter 3. Phillips and Steiner's overview reflects my own encounter with the Other, the historic culture that is beyond my own experience. It conjures my desire to possess an unpossessable past, and an unpossessable Other, signalling a driving force in my image-making.

Although unpossessable as I have said, taking photographs and acquiring souvenirs express the desire to possess ephemeral and transitory experiences that combine personal time, history, the Other, and the past that created them. Although souvenirs and photography are both considered methods of appropriation, I would argue that they have more in common with the gaze. As Susan Best suggests, the gaze 'does not appropriate the things looked at, it leaves them in place', in the same way that the photographer and the souvenir

¹⁴ Ruth Phillips and Christopher Steiner, 'Art, Authenticity, and the Baggage of Cultural Encounter', *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds*, Ruth B. Phillips and Christopher B. Steiner, eds., Berkeley: University of California Press, c1999, p. 3.

¹⁵ Stewart, *On Longing*, p. 134.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

hunter only ever take away traces, leaving the original intact.¹⁷ The materiality of the souvenir/photograph can only ever symbolise the experience of its origin.

Like souvenirs, tourist photography is intrinsic to travel. Since Aymard de Banville photographed the pyramids at Giza in 1863 (fig.10,11), tourist snaps have contributed to the way in which we see the world.¹⁸ They are intimate reminders of sites experienced as they immortalise encounters with other places and times; they are personalised, custom-made souvenirs. As irrefutable evidence, photographs register a sign of having been there. They can verify that the photographer once walked the same corridors as the Medici, or gazed upon the same landscape as Michelangelo, binding the photograph, the subject, the viewer and the past, even if only for the fleeting moment of a glance, as Barthes intimates in his opening lines of *Camera Lucida*.

One day, quite some time ago, I happened on a photograph of Napoleon's youngest brother, Jerome, taken in 1852. And I realised then, with an amazement I have not been able to lessen since: "I am looking at the eyes that looked at the Emperor."¹⁹

In gazing upon the eyes that gazed upon Napoleon, Barthes was conjuring the strange unbroken link between himself and the past. Barthes moves on from his opening epiphany to search for the 'essential feature' that distinguished photography 'from the community of images'. The very thing that amazed him in the photograph of Jerome *is* what sets photography apart, as he elaborates in his book. The recurring gaze that intrigues Barthes signals photography's strange ability to reconstitute what has come before. A peculiar revolution that witnesses and binds the past with the present, however evanescent this may be.

The very act of photographing involves the tourist in the site/sight-seeing event, even to the extent of providing a rationale for being there. The emphasis is not so much on experiencing the scene, as to take a photograph that shows you were there, providing a tangible reference for later and allowing you to forget the present. As Berger suggests, the camera is '*an eye which records in order to forget*.'²⁰ Once 'captured', photographs are no longer bound to the

¹⁷ Susan Best, 'Merleau-Ponty and an Ethics of Vision', *25th Annual International Conference of the Merleau-Ponty Circle*, (conference paper) Washington D.C. USA.: George Washington University, 14-16 September, 2000.

¹⁸ Clarke discusses the cultural impact of travel photography in *The Photograph*, pp. 48-50.

¹⁹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Richard Howard, trans., London: Vintage, 1993(1980), p. 3.

²⁰ Berger, 'Ways of Remembering', *Camera Work Essays*, p. 45.

speed and motion of the original encounter.²¹ As static images consigned to a photo-album or archive they lie dormant, like souvenirs they are dependent on memory to re-animate the places and events. Paradoxically, more time is usually spent looking at the photographs than the original event that they represent. In *Culture of the Copy*, Hillel Schwarz suggests 'In a world of glances, we rely upon the lens for the long study; the snapshot snaps shut on the moment.'²² Here Schwarz reflects on what I consider as photography's most highly valued characteristic – that it freezes time, producing a static image that enables an unending, uninhibited, slow examination, arresting the otherwise elusive details of an ephemeral experience. I revel in photography's ability to record what Benjamin referred to as the 'optical unconscious'. How the photographic image suspends a fragment of time, and enlarges it, holding it for the viewer to examine the completeness of the details present – though truncated by the margins of the print – that they could not have absorbed on their original encounter. Photography, for Benjamin, 'with its devices of slow motion and enlargement, reveals the secret.'²³ In reflecting on the 'optical unconscious', Eduardo Cadava agrees that 'photography reveals what sight cannot see, what makes sight impossible. The photograph tells us that when we see we are unconscious of what our seeing cannot see.'²⁴ It is this intrinsic and uncanny genius of photography that comes to the fore in my exhibition *Impossible Gaze*. This I will more fully explain in Chapter 4.

The museum does not escape the gaze of the tourist's camera. Regardless of the abundance of postcards and reproductions available visitors feel compelled to take their own photographs. Despite the blatant 'no photo' signs inside museums like the Galleria dell'Accademia, in Florence, visitors do not restrain themselves, they rush to covertly photograph before either looking or seeing – a distinction I will return to. Susan Sontag claimed that the act of placing a camera between oneself and an encounter was a way of 'converting experience into an image', indulging the tourist's need for some form of participation in order to make sense of the event, while at the same time expressing their

²¹ The language of photography is immured in the idea of souveniring and appropriation – to take, to capture – these images are bagged for later and trophied at home.

²² Hillel Schwartz, *The Culture of the Copy: Striking Likenesses, Unreasonable Facsimilies*, New York: Zone Books, 1996, p. 199.

²³ Walter Benjamin refers to the 'optical unconscious' in both 'A Small History of Photography', *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, trans., London: NLB, 1979(1970), p. 243, and 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', *Illuminations*, Hannah Arendt, ed., Harry Zohn, trans., New York: Schocken Books, 1969, p. 237.

²⁴ Eduardo Cadava, *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997, p. 97.

'voyeuristic relation to the world'.²⁵ Moreover, I would argue that snaps compensate for, and even attempt to repel the inevitable sense of loss that occurs when adhering to an over-filled tour agenda. This photographic ritual however, marks out a more complicated psychological territory than there is room for in this thesis.

Since Sontag's late 70s treatise on photographic practices there have been significant changes to technology that impact on even the amateur photographer. The increasing popularity of digital cameras has radically changed the act of taking snaps and the manner in which images are regarded and utilised.²⁶ The photographer equipped with digital technology has the ability to costlessly record and electronically share hundreds of images – as opposed to analogue's dozens of prints – that may later be re-composed, reorganized or discarded in seconds. In examining the impact of this technology Susanne Küchler writes about '*memoria*'s displacement by electronic means of reproduction, which', she observes, 'involves...at least [the] figurative burning of the object'.²⁷ This vivid figure of speech signals what I believe will become the dilemma of (amateur) photography. With such a proliferation of personally made images downloaded to personal computers or the internet, replacing the traditional photo-album, it is difficult to assess the future significance of the photographic snap or its relationship to lived experience.

Images Made in the Museum

Not long after photography's invention photographers became intrigued by the museum, by its architecture and the cultural wealth it housed. Roger Fenton (fig.12), Stephen Thompson (fig. 13), and Charles Thurston Thompson were the pioneering photographers who recorded the privileged place of the museum and its collections in the 1850s.²⁸ Since their early images there have been

²⁵ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, New York: Penguin, 1977, p. 9-11. Stewart also writes on the tourist in *On Longing*, pp. 137-8.

²⁶ Head of Kodak, Dan Carp, speaking from the Photokina trade show in Cologne. (No article author cited.) *BBC News Online*, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/2278678.stm>, accessed 25/09/2002.

²⁷ Susanne Küchler, 'The Place of Memory', *The Art Of Forgetting*, Adrian Forty and Susanne Küchler eds., Oxford, New York: Berg, 1999, p. 61.

²⁸ Employed by the British Museum in 1853, Fenton was the first professional photographer to document their collections. Georgina Born, 'Public Museums, Museum Photography and the Limits of Reflexivity', *Journal of Material Culture*, vol. no: 03, 02 July, London, CA and New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 1998, p. 226. There are numerous other luminaries in the history of photography that have documented the collections and cultural precincts of their times, most notable Charles Marville and Eugene Atget, in Paris.



12. Roger Fenton, *Discobola*, c./ 1857.

13. Stephen Thompson, *Scye*, British Museum, c. 1869-72.



innumerable photographic representations of museums; their architecture, collections, their staff and visitors. These images have been produced by every calibre of photographer from professional, commercial and artistic, to amateur and tourist. Photography's diverse character has allowed it to assume many roles within the cultural institution, sometimes simultaneously, from servant to key source of inspiration. All this photographic activity has generated images of artworks and objects that have been transported or transmitted worldwide, reproduced in various forms of publications, consumed as souvenirs, personally memorialised, publicly exhibited or consigned to museum archives. While historically photography has been used for research, conservation and mercantile purposes in the museum, it has since the 1970s inhabited the very space it had been used to documenting.²⁹

In the past decade there have been three key exhibitions that concentrated on the art-photography-museum trinity; *Art Museum*, at the Centre for Creative Photography, Arizona, in 1995, *Camera Obscured: Photographic Documentation and the Public Museum*, at the Photographers' Gallery, London, in 1997, and *The Museum as Muse – Artists Reflect*, at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1999. I refer to these three exhibitions as a way to illuminate the recent history of museum photography and its counter-positions, as well as to introduce the contemporary photo-artists whose work intersects with my own. Between them, the intentions and outcomes of museum photography are represented in a number of diverse ways. *Camera Obscured*, different in its intention from the other exhibitions, featured images drawn from the photographic archives of public museums. Representing the labours of museum photographers, these photographs show museum displays, collections, staff, storage facilities, transportation of exhibits and their installation. I make reference to this exhibition because it reflects the interests of my early photographs for this project, images that focussed on the invisibility of museum staff to the visiting public (fig.14-21).

Photographs taken in museums reflect a division between those employed by museums to record for institutional purposes, and photo-artists working in

²⁹ Photography's change was heralded in the 1977 exhibition curated by John Szarkowski at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Douglas Crimp states that 'From the parochial perspective of the late-1970s art-world, photography appeared as a watershed. Radically reevaluated, photography took up residence in the museum on a par with the visual arts' traditional mediums and according to the very same art-historical tenets.' From 'Photographs at the End of Modernism', *On the Museums Ruins*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: The MIT Press, 1993, p. 2.

museums for their own ends. Although both make images that may be seen for their artistic, representational and aesthetic values, the intent is not the same. This interchangeability of the photograph perceived as document, or photograph perceived as art, depends on the context in which it is positioned and viewed. The museum photographer is limited by the rigour of their profession, necessarily meeting the photographic specifications for documenting and archiving material for the institution.³⁰

The artist however, is not bound by the institution's promotional and commercial objectives and enjoys a liminality like the museum visitor (which I return to in Chapter 3), moving beyond the literal constraints of the institution to incorporate their own ideas and experience.³¹ *Art Museum*, curated by Trudy Wilner Stack, and *The Museum as Muse*, curated by Kynaston McShine, confronted photography in the museum, not as archived information, but as artworks created specifically for exhibition, as do I. *Art Museum*, assembled a number of well-known post-war photographic artists, Sophie Calle (France), Louise Lawler (USA) and Thomas Struth (Germany). These photo-artists appear again in *The Museum as Muse*, along with Andreas Gursky (Germany) and Candida Höfer (Germany) amidst a number of other visual artists. Along with Karen Knorr (German born, currently London based), these artists have all produced bodies of artwork that scrutinise cultural institutions and draw on the framework of the museum as a source for both critical analysis and inspiration. I will reflect on their work throughout the remainder of this chapter, to introduce the theoretical arguments regarding museum viewing, and discuss my own position as photo-artist.

Calle, Lawler, Struth and Knorr in particular express similar interests, and in some cases similar subject matter to my own. Calle's subjectivity of viewing and memory, the images of Lawler that identify the contextual frame, Struth's juxtaposition of audience and Italian museums, combined with the Becher school's exquisite production values, as well as Knorr's advocacy for slower viewing are all elements that my art strongly identifies with, and assist me in addressing the fickle habits of viewing. These artists are, as am I, stirred by the

³⁰ For example, the works of contemporary photographer, Hiroshi Sugimoto, call attention to the paradoxical nature of the document.

³¹ Bom also discusses 'the liminality of the museum photographer within the museum's pronounced hierarchy'. This liminality, Bom believes, 'renders some of their images liable to be read as implicit and tenuous bearers of a socio-cultural critique of the museum.' Bom, 'Public Museums, Museum Photography and the Limits of Reflexivity', *Journal of Material Culture*, p. 243.



14–17. *Invisible Operations*



16-21. Invoile Operations

parallels and incongruities that are to be found in the framework of the museum, often layering the viewers with their surroundings, and the art with museological devices, to depict the interaction of institutions and audiences, and questioning the function of art in museums and galleries. My photographs however, remain intrinsically different to theirs. I embrace the museum architecture and describe it with acute attention to the details as I search for traces of the past, and those that inhabited the gallery spaces long before me.

With the exception of Lawler, these photographers share a European background, one that is saturated with historic cultural institutions. They are artists working from 'inside' a familiar landscape of European education and cultural establishments. Interestingly, these artists were born between 1944 and 1955, a post-war generation that witnessed a significant rebuilding and reassessment of cultural institutions that I will return to in Chapter 4. This, I would argue, reflects a different sensibility in their work, one that expresses an intimate familiarity with the social changes and growth of European museums.

There is a sense of the insider in the art of the photographers working from within their own European-ness. In Michel Foucault's preface to *The Order of Things*, he makes reference to what I find most compelling, and what I search for in my image-making, that is 'the exotic charm of another system of thought'.³² For me, these artists' heritage will forever remain the Other. This Otherness sustains my fascination with an historic European aesthetic, the visual saturation, the opulence and decoration that slid from favour in the modern age. It is the intensity of history in Italy's museums that I find exotic by comparison to my own inherent being, and it is this Otherness that grants me boundless opportunity to re-interpret from 'outside' a European tradition. In *Views of Difference: Different Views of Art*, Catherine King, Gill Perry and Nicola Durbridge discuss the position and artwork of the post-colonial artist, and how they have become 'a shrewd viewer...rather than a passive reflector'. King, Perry and Durbridge, identify this art as

the making of something hybrid...able to translate and transform new ideas so that they are useable in different systems.

If we acknowledge fully the role of transactions in cultural development, individuals or practices placed in the cross-over positions between two or more cultures can be seen as particularly privileged – as located at a vantage point: a

³² Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, London: Tavistock Publications Limited, 1970(1966), p. xv.

viewer standing at the boundaries of several cultures could, it may be argued, see things in a new light...not necessarily understood as an obsequious or submissive act.³³

My vision and perception as a post-colonial artist, far removed from the cultural centres of Europe, working in a time where the idea of the museum is constantly undergoing scrutiny and restructure, places me apart. Through the practice of photography I am able to investigate aspects of Italian culture from outside of their visual traditions. While I explore the physical environment as spectacle, it is my Australian sensibility, especially towards history – the thousands of years of European culture as opposed to the brief non-Aboriginal lineage on Australian soil – that allows my eye to re-present images of historic European culture and portray them with a pervading sense of wonder and curiosity. My images filled with veneration, their photographic framing and angle of view, brand me as an outsider, they are a sign of my own identity, representing my vision, my seeing, and my understanding as different to the Italians who have been exposed for many generations to Italy's idea of beauty and history. Theirs is a habit of vision that can allow, what for me is the extraordinary, to pass unnoticed. For Italians, the ruins of antiquity or the masterpieces of the Renaissance are the 'everyday'. For other European nationalities, the French and Spanish for example, less confronted by distance and the cultural differences it is not so far removed from their own experience, and as Jeremy Boissevain explains, 'fellow Europeans...hold definite views of each other built up over centuries of interaction. In this they differ from travellers who seek out exotic peoples far away'.³⁴

My knowledge of, and access to, Italian museums is now relatively privileged yet there remains a difference between myself as an entranced observer and the critical eye of the insider – the Italian, the museologist, the art historian. A difference created in part by my culture, but also by my profession. As a visual artist, even though educated in Western art-making traditions, in this environment I hover in an in-between space, my intimate knowledge of the historic museums is evident in my images, however, I remain the visitor. I

³³ King, Perry and Durbridge in this passage refer to Homi Bhaba's *Nation and Narration*. From the introduction written by Catherine King, Gill Perry and Nicola Durbridge in *Views of Difference: Different Views of Art*, Catherine King ed., New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999, p. 14.

³⁴ Jeremy Boissevain, ed., *Coping With Tourists: European Reactions to Mass Tourism*, Providence, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1996, p. 2.

perceive the tension between these positions of proximity and distance as liberating, enabling me to work unencumbered by conventions.

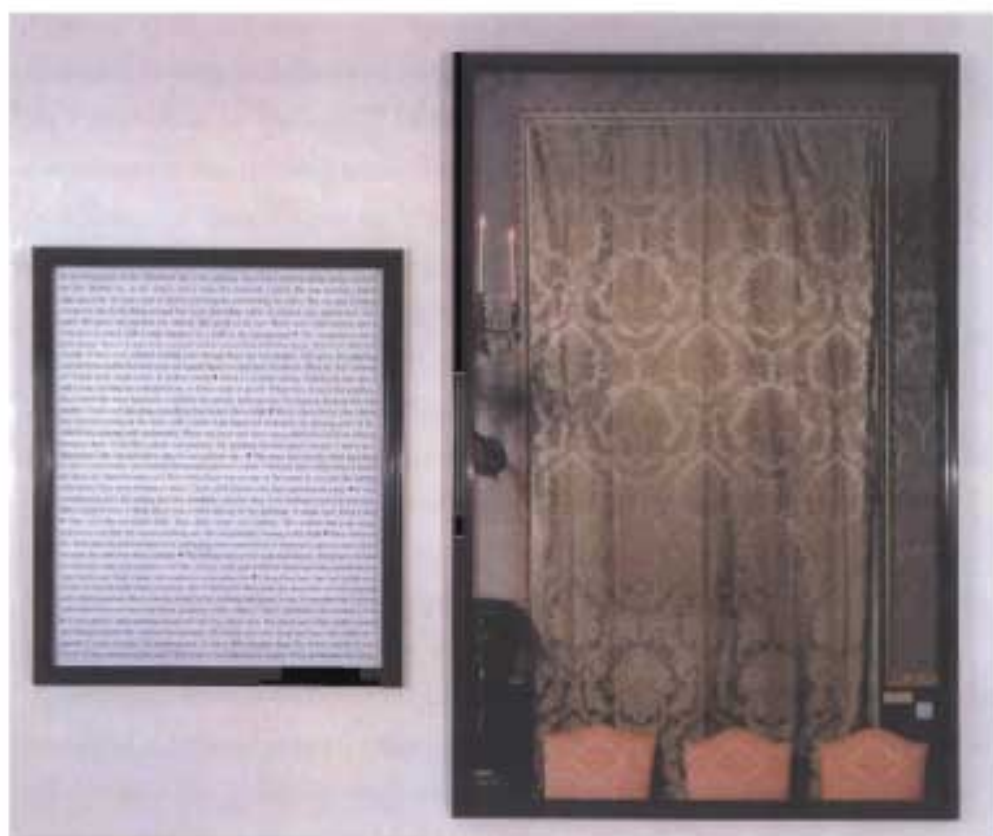
Even though European culture is very familiar in Australia – disseminated through the migration of Europeans to Australia, as well as the circulation of images and information through cinema, television, printed media etc. – the experience of displacement and liminality while travelling in Europe for me, is strong and infinitely enticing. This displacement allows me to explore my art-practice and myself. As much as the culture that surrounds me, my immersion in another country all the while reinforces my (post-colonial) difference. As Lidia Curti insightfully explains in *Between Two Shores*, there is a recognised ‘contradictory impulse present in travelling: the pull between the reinforcement and the loss of identity, clarity and mystery, knowledge and its refusal.’³⁵ Like Stendhal (whom I discuss in the following chapter) visiting an Italian museum, I am spellbound, confronted by the weight of time that is present in the visually dense field before me. Concentrated in the spot where I stand is the intersection of cultures, histories, the past and the present, museums, art and the subjectivity of my own gaze as tourist-viewer-photographer-artist.

The Subjectivity of Viewing

I return now to the contemporary photo-artists to unravel the ideas that I find evident in their work. Firstly, I draw on Calle to broadly introduce some of the key concerns that my images explore before moving to Lawler, Struth and Knorr. I begin with the work of Calle to illustrate the theories of visuality, as distinct from the theories of vision that I locate in Struth’s work.

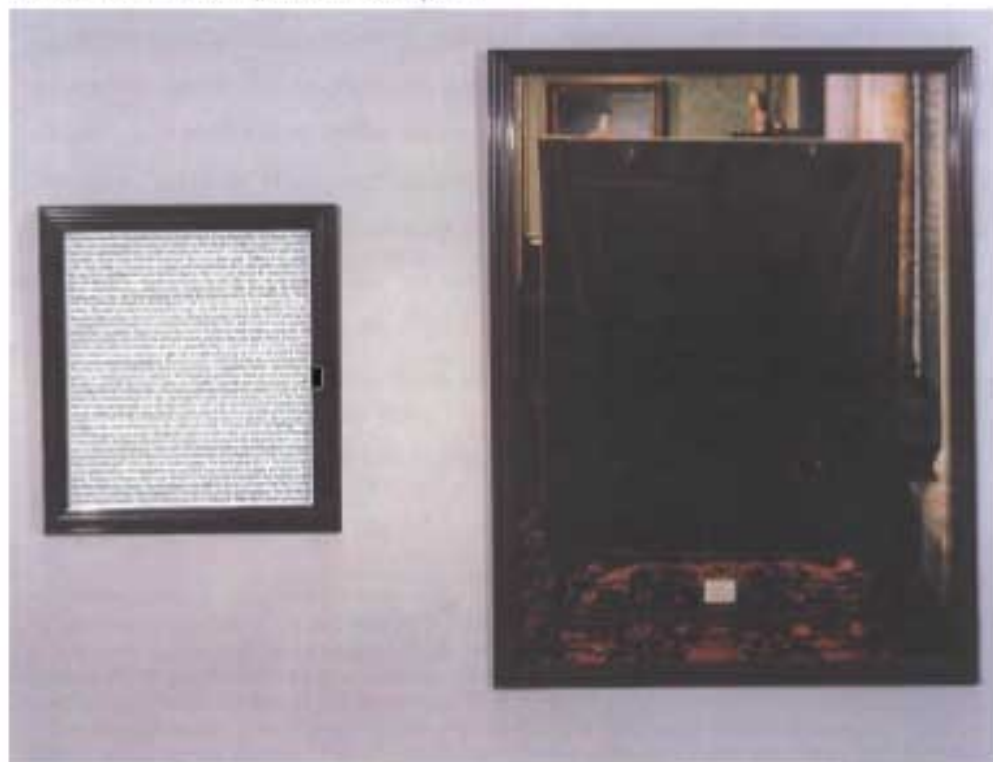
It is Calle’s artwork, *Last Seen...* (fig.22,23), produced in 1991, that I find emblematic of the viewing experience. This work recounts the incident of six paintings that were stolen from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, in Boston, in 1990. Calle transcribes the descriptions of the paintings as told by the museum guards. These texts are then printed, framed and hung as artworks themselves. Alongside the texts Calle hangs her own lustrous colour photographs that document the opulent, Venetian-style décor of the Gardner museum exhibiting the exact places where the stolen paintings once hung.

³⁵ Lidia Curti, ‘Between Two Shores’, *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti, eds., London and New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 130.



22. Sophie Calle, *Last Seen...* (Rembrandt: *A Lady and a Gentleman in Black*), 1991.

23. Sophie Calle, *Last Seen...* (Vermeer: *The Concert*), 1991.



After the theft, the empty wall-spaces were discretely concealed by drapes, in accordance with Isabella Stewart Gardner's legacy forbidding any element in the museum to be changed.³⁶ In this work, the panels of text metonymically comment on the shifting ground of memory and meaning. Calle visually manifests the comparative understanding and interpretation of art in relation to the viewer's (in this case, the guards') knowledge and life experience. It signals the vagaries of memory in relation to viewing art, and how art as a visual stimulus can often evoke unrelated associations in the viewer. *Last Seen...* also critiques the didactic and reductive labelling by the museum (which I discuss later), and comments on the infrastructure of the museum as a private memorial which immortalises its collector through its constitution.³⁷

For me this work valorises the agency of the viewer and subtly conjures the multiple layers of interpretation and experience evoked by the museum. It signals a number of pertinent themes that I identify with in my own work: the power of unrelated mental associations, the prevalence of contemporary visual culture and the changing inclinations of vision that form the subjectivity of viewing, and consequently, how art is seen, received, questioned, interpreted, intuited and remembered is relative to one's own self.

There are numerous theories of vision that have evolved in the past century through wide studies of physical, social and cultural conditions. These ideas on vision come to the fore in the museum, as the viewer, with their increasing diversity, 'takes in' their surroundings. Although seeing *is* an individual act, Bryson remarks, 'we are all human and thereby share a neurological apparatus of vision which we can take, save for cases of obvious malfunction, as behaving in the same way for everyone'.³⁸ Yet, he more consequentially states:

When I look at an image, there may well occur in my mind a set of sensations which I can obtain only when I look at *this* image, and no other; sensations which need not only be, so to say, retinal, but may involve the most private recesses of sensibility...³⁹

³⁶ Calle's work, *Last seen...*, was exhibited in both *Art Museum* and *The Museum as Muse* exhibitions. Essays on her work appear in both catalogues. Trudy Wilner Stack, *Art Museum*, Tuscon, Arizona: Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, 1995, and Kynaston McShine, *The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1999, p. 136.

³⁷ The bequest to not change anything after the death of the collector is further discussed in Carol Duncan's, 'Something Eternal: The Donor Memorial', *Civilizing Rituals*, London and New York: Routledge, 1995, pp. 72-101.

³⁸ Norman Bryson, 'Perceptualism', *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze*, London: Macmillan, 1983, p. 39.

³⁹ Bryson, 'Perceptualism', *ibid.*, p. 41.

Although I would move the emphasis to the 'I', what Bryson is arguing, is that seeing is based not only on the individual embedded within the traditions of their own personal knowledge, past experience, various interests, tastes and cultural beliefs, but also and relatedly on the wider societal and institutional practices of the viewer's time. Further to this, Crary raises the relationship between the individual and cultural, stating that 'Vision and its effects are always inseparable from the possibilities of an observing subject who is both the historical product and the site of certain practices, techniques, institutions, and procedures of subjectification.'⁴⁰ My viewers, in the Renaissance museums of Italy, given their individual backgrounds, will each engage with the art differently based on their own subjectivity, their motivation for visiting and artistic interests. Their viewing is a unique engagement invested with personal meaning, and a reflection of themselves. Peter de Bolla expands this point,

... the very fact of entry into the scopic regime is as much definitional of the viewer (and of the viewing activity) as particular affiliations to rank or class determine what form the activity might take and what kind of viewer one must be in order to participate in such activity.⁴¹

Accordingly, viewing artwork is autobiographical, as Jacques Lacan intimates; it is like looking through a screen coloured by one's own perception.⁴² In turn each viewer with their shifting ideals and ideas of appreciation, scholarship and historical value then give agency to the images they view. The encounter, understanding and reading of art is transformed for each new viewer as the art is imbued with the sum total of *their* experience, encumbered by a myriad of eccentricities that govern, not only their engagement and response to the artworks, but also by extension defines their means of negotiating and evaluating each cultural institution, museum and historical site.

Bryson writes that our thinking on vision has evolved from the 19th century, when it was considered purely retinal, optical and internal, to the 20th century's broader understanding of the social construction of vision.⁴³ Moreover, postmodern theories have separated vision into different types of seeing. Jay describes this division as, 'the physiological vision of the actual eyes in

⁴⁰ Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, p. 5.

⁴¹ Melville and Readings, eds. *Vision & Textuality*, p. 284.

⁴² Jacques Lacan, 'Of the Gaze', *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, England: Penguin Books, 1979, p. 96.

⁴³ Bryson, 'The Gaze in the Expanded Field', *Vision and Visuality*, p. 107.

comparison to the “intellectual visions” of the soul’.⁴⁴ There are many (and differing) theories of ‘intellectual vision’, or visuality, that are dependent upon, or may be read into the varying contexts of seeing, which I can only briefly reference here to contextualise my discussion. More than a cerebral exchange, the experience of vision, as Foster describes ‘involves the body and the psyche’ and may ‘be located in the unconscious...in the past (eg., the baroque) or in the non-West.’⁴⁵ In summary, Jay draws distinctions between what he identifies as ‘scopic regimes’, describing them as culturally, racially or politically specific, founded in gender, class, science or technology, or based in the theories of the “panoptic,” “virtual,” and “mobilized” gazes. The multiplicity of vision necessarily becomes the concern of, and informs, many varied disciplines from surveillance and society, to art history, cultural and postcolonial studies.⁴⁶ In addition to this, feminist theorists like Griselda Pollock and Laura Mulvey, identify vision, with regards to the production, consumption and analysis of art, as having been based on the dominance of the male gaze in the Western world. In a different (feminist) discourse Irit Rogoff proposes ‘the construction of the “other”...the feminine other of sexual difference, and as the Third World of diasporic other mapped through colonialism and displacement—[as] “the ‘new’ subject in history”.’⁴⁷

I would suggest that the diverse directions that studies of vision have taken, both in the past and the present, offer different theories that compete at times to analyse the ‘same’ thing, and that vision in the museum presents an intricate network that intertwines these multiple theories. In the museum the viewer’s ‘intellectual’ vision ceaselessly transits the complex layers of individual, social and cultural experience, each informing, blending and rubbing against the other. In this environment with its continual flow of new viewers, no one ‘scopic regime’ or model of vision can dominate the heterogeneous museum audience. The assimilation of these different ‘angles’ on vision inspires me photographically, and has enriched my own viewing and art-making as I consider the subjectivities through which both my images, and the original Renaissance artworks that they picture, are experienced.

⁴⁴ Martin Jay, ‘Vision in Context: Reflections and Refractions’, *Vision in Context: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Sight*, Teresa Brennan and Martin Jay, eds., New York and London: Routledge, c1996, p. 4.

⁴⁵ Foster, *Vision and Visuality*, pp. ix, xiv.

⁴⁶ Jay, ‘Vision in Context: Reflections and Refractions’, *Vision in Context*, p. 3.

⁴⁷ Irit Rogoff, ‘“Other’s Other”: Spectatorship and Difference’, *Vision in Context*, p. 190.

The complex study of the gaze is well-known and includes many writers. More recently there has been a rich vein of feminist and queer theory that debate the various subject positions of the viewer.

Art in its Place

The work of Lawler foregrounds another important aspect of the art viewing experience that my photography also builds on, context. Her photographs document details of sculptures and fragments of paintings with their framed edges and museum labels, as well as complete artworks in situ, including their institutional framework. Lawler concentrates on the juxtaposition of art in its place, whether it is in private homes, public dining rooms or museums (fig.24,25), surreptitiously exposing not only the value that artworks are assigned, but also the social context in which they are encountered. Johannes Meinhardt defines Lawler's photography,

handmaid to the physiognomic gaze: it does not reveal by representing a work of art, but by showing it in its own revealing situation, where it has been placed by people who have linked it to their own interests and desires...⁴⁸

In this comment, Meinhardt interprets two key aspects of Lawler's images that I find compelling. Firstly, it signals photography's insistence on mimicking human vision, what Jay described as 'the physiological vision of the actual eyes'. This is an idea that I have played with in *Impossible Gaze*, employing the camera's viewfinder to render an image that is precisely what my eyes have seen, registering my personal vision of the world – or in this case the museum. Secondly, he cleverly draws attention to the people involved in either the ownership or display of art, be it the institution or the individual, and the underlying realities of its possession. This, I believe reinforces Crimp's comment, that an 'artwork's meaning is formed in relation to its institutional framing conditions.'⁴⁹ These conditions involve a complex set of circumstances that influence how art is viewed, experienced, interpreted and understood. Derrida includes in these framing conditions 'the surrounds of the work of art, or at most its outskirts: frame, title, signature, museum, archive, reproduction, discourse, market', and beyond this he cites 'its social, historical, economic, political supports' as vital to constructing the viewer's experience.⁵⁰

My photographs fragment the institutionally organized visual culture of today's Renaissance museums, dislocating it from its original mooring and reinserting

⁴⁸ Johannes Meinhardt, 'The Sites of Art: Photographing the In-between', *Louise Lawler: An Arrangement of Pictures*, Fiona Elliott, trans., New York: Assouline, 2000, unpaginated.

⁴⁹ Douglas Crimp cited in *The Photographic Paradigm*, Annette W Balkeme and Henk Slager, eds., The Netherlands: Lier En Boog, Series Of Philosophy Of Art And Art Theory, Vol 12, 1997, p. 41.

⁵⁰ Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 11 and p. 98.



24. Louise Lawlor, *Statue Before Painting*, 1982.

25. Louise Lawlor, *Salon Moller*, 1992.



it in another time and architecture. While not reconstituting the original experience, these photographs archaeologize the artworks and architecture of the museum to remake it with new emphasis. Leonard Barkan explains this archaeology as ‘unearthing of the past via a set of artistic representations’.⁵¹ Using photography, I reconstruct history from the debris of images that have been retained in my mind’s eye and by my camera’s lens. But photography can only ever offer fragments of the past, as it is unable to reconstruct the whole of what once was. Cadava maintains that even if photos are placed end to end they still only ever represent a ‘condensed and immobilised’ image.⁵² No longer able to move within the architecture of the original museum the viewer is now confined by the edge of the photographs, limited by their borders.⁵³ Engaged in a ‘monocular vision’, their eyes can only move across the photographic surface, unable to penetrate the three-dimensional space depicted.⁵⁴

Although my artwork specifically depicts Renaissance museums, it focuses, as Lawler’s does, on the importance of context for interpreting or experiencing an image. This refers to both the institutional framework that appears in my photographs, as well as those conditions that frame my own exhibitions. Even though I am interested in photographing the contextualising elements of art, ironically photography itself is a tool for re-contextualisation, with its ability to separate a subject from its original context through composition, framing, cropping and editing. Further to this, these images are transported to a new location, another gallery context, for new viewers to contemplate. Made for exhibition, my photographs are configured to impress the viewer in a specific way. They are sequenced to create a particular narrative, and dependent on the gallery wall to provide the context. Importantly, Allan Sekula states,

the photograph is an ‘incomplete’ utterance, a message that depends on some external matrix of conditions and presuppositions for its readability. That is, the meaning of any photographic message is necessarily context-determined.⁵⁵

As Sekula suggests, the institutions supporting my work, the same as the Renaissance museums, encourage the viewer to read/experience the images in a

⁵¹ In this text Barkan discusses the Renaissance artists’ aesthetic ambitions in interpreting and transforming the ancient art of Rome. However, I have borrowed his term ‘archaeology’ as a way to clarify my own image-making. Barkan, *Unearthing the Past*, p. xxiii.

⁵² Cadava, *Words of Light*, p. 91.

⁵³ Derrida, discusses borders, frames and their limitations throughout *The Truth in Painting*.

⁵⁴ Victor Burgin describes monocular perspective, where ‘the eye(!) cannot move within the depicted space... it can only move across it to the points where it encounters the frame.’ From ‘Looking at Photographs’, *Thinking Photography*, London: The MacMillan Press Ltd., 1982, p. 152.

⁵⁵ Allan Sekula, ‘On the Invention of Photographic Meaning’, *Thinking Photography*, p. 85.

manner that is signalled not only by the works but by the exhibition space itself, its architecture, signage and its mechanisms of display are among the many contributing factors as outlined by Derrida. Recognising this as a vital component of my art practice, I have scouted for exhibition locations to create my own specific contexts for viewing. The initial exhibitions, in both Sydney and Florence, were held in galleries that existed in revitalised and reused historic architecture. These galleries reflect a shift in my intent, and inevitably the viewer's reception.

Engaging the Senses

The German photographers that graduated from the renowned Becher school at the Düsseldorf academy in the 1970s, are among the most successful, marketable and highly sought after contemporary artists today.⁵⁶ Interested in the indexical and taxonomic value of photographs, Bernd and Hilla Becher's documentary approach heavily influenced their students, notably Gursky, Höfer and Struth, who exhibited in *Museum as Muse*.⁵⁷ Höfer and Gursky both create formal, balanced, wide-angle views of architectural and institutional spaces in the Becher tradition. Höfer's photographed spaces (fig.26), intended to accommodate large numbers of people, remain empty, dormant, whilst Gursky's images of mass culture (fig.27), mass society, mass production and mass consumption often appear devoid of humanity whilst being evidence of it. Although I also use similar wide-angle techniques in portraying museum spaces in *Before the Museum*, their photographs are very different to mine. Their images are precise, austere and ordered, while mine are intimate and opulent, expressed as much through their colour, design and size, as the decadence of their subject matter. My work, by comparison, is animated – either through the presence of the viewers in *Before the Museum*, or the dizzying camera angles of *Impossible Gaze* – and speaks implicitly of the layers of history that are represented.

The Becher school's concern with 'objectivity' rarely represents the individual located in these institutions. Their approach is cool, bordering on clinical, and

⁵⁶ Georgina Adam, 'German Contemporary Art: A Top Ten', *The Art Newspaper*, <http://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/article.asp?idart=7235>, accessed 4/09/01.

⁵⁷ Andy Grundberg recounts that the Bechers saw photographs as 'instruments of cataloguing and classification'. From Andy Grundberg, 'Photography Beside Itself', *Crisis of the Real: Writings of Photography Since 1974*, New Jersey: Aperture, 1999, p. 270.



26. Candida Höfer, *Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Roma*, 1990.

27. Andreas Gursky, *Library*, 1999.



differs from mine through its compositional formality. However, the *Museum* series by Struth (fig.28,29), departs from this tradition by embracing the museum public. It is this work that reveals a visual sensitivity that I also hope to reflect. Struth retains the alleged neutrality of the school through his technical approach and consummate use of photography, rendering his subjects as highly aesthetic artworks, that are beautifully rich in texture, colour and composition. His magnificent, enormous colour photographs show museum displays of monumental paintings overlaid with a diverse range of viewers. In the *Museum* series, his photographs are undeniably concerned with the presence of the audience, their engagement and attitude in relation to the artworks. His portrayal of the private, social, cultural and ethnic differences of the museum audience is an immediate reference to contemporary tourism, as Hans Belting mentions, but also, in essence represents the possibilities of alternate visualities as described by Foster and Jay.⁵⁸

Although Struth photographs in old and new museums around the world, it is his work in Italian museums that are of fundamental interest to me as they raise questions not only about the notion of viewers and viewing, but also the architectural contexts and social conditions of these very distinctive museums. Struth, commenting on the origin of this series, raises enigmatic questions about the viewers.

I wondered why all the people were there; what were they getting out of it; was any change occurring in their personal lives because of it, in their public lives, in their activity, in their family, with their friends? Is any change through the museum visit even possible, or is it an entertainment, like watching music videos or the way one needs visual refreshment to keep from getting bored.⁵⁹

Like Struth, I reflect on the contemporary experience of the museum-going public – questioning not only their motives, but inevitably my own. Struth, commenting on his work, said that his interest in the Renaissance was ‘to make a reproduction of a painted image and at the same time produce a new image in which real persons of today are shown’.⁶⁰ This juxtaposition of time draws attention to the incongruities of the past and present that I also refer to. My work however, has departed from the social contexts of Struth’s audience to

⁵⁸ Hans Belting, *Thomas Struth: Museum Photographs*, Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 1998, unpaginated.

⁵⁹ Thomas Struth quoted in Kynaston McShine’s catalogue essay, *The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1999, p. 116.

⁶⁰ Struth, ‘Interview between Benjamin H.D. Buchloh and Thomas Struth’, *Portraits: Thomas Struth*, Mack., Perkins. and Browning. eds., New York: Marion Goodman Gallery, 1990, pp. 39-40.



28. Thomas Struth, *Stanza di Raffaello II, Rome*, 1990.

29. Thomas Struth, *Galleria dell'Accademia, Venice*, 1992.



focus on the physicality of the Italian museums themselves. My exhibitions emphasise the historic spaces that surround both artworks and viewers, revelling in the 'pastness' that is infused in the very stones of the architecture. These places, once privately inhabited by historic figures of Renaissance times, invoke the transient and poetic qualities of Benjamin's aura, that 'strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close the object may be.'⁶¹ Steeped in their exotic location, the aura of many artworks is, I suggest, constructed by this environment, and augmented by the reaction of the viewers that is itself enhanced by the experience of travel. I will return to this in my discussion of aura in Chapter 4.

As voyeurs of the past, museum viewers are able to scrutinize remnants of earlier lives unfettered by a returning gaze. My own fascination with the spectacle of the viewing public rekindles Sontag's claim, that

photography first comes into its own as an extension of the eye of the middle-class *flâneur*... the photographer is an armed version of the solitary walker, reconnoitring, stalking, cruising the urban inferno, the voyeuristic stroller who discovers the city [or in this case the museum] as a landscape of voluptuous extremes.⁶²

The flâneur, shielded by the mechanics of the camera, personifies the act of voyeurism. As a photographer, I am rarely conscious of being observed and yet always conscious of observing others, watching other viewers engaged in their own voyeuristic activity, lingering on details – toying with photographing them – that reflect personal desires and interests, all the while exposing my scopophilic work to later scrutiny.

Oblivious to both Struth's camera and mine, the viewing subjects are exposed in their intimate communion with art. The myriad of interconnected gazes that relate to viewing in these photographs identifies the separate strands of time that my images symbolise. In *Before the Museum* I picture the exchange between the frozen subjects gazing out from the Renaissance paintings, and the museum visitors looking at them – these visual exchanges are multiplied by the labyrinth of surveillance and security cameras located in the museum – and this in turn is mediated by my own gaze when photographing, as well as the later gaze of the viewers of my photographs. Surveillance is just outside the edge of

⁶¹ Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproductions', p. 250.

⁶² Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 55.

my frame both in the photographs and this thesis – an important issue I allude to but cannot address in depth.

In making images that are founded on the Renaissance, I am conscious that Renaissance art itself is centred on the eye of the beholder, perspectively designed around the most advantageous viewing point to read the depicted space. As part of this ‘rationalization of sight’ the structure of painting heralds the viewer as integral to the artwork.⁶³ I play with this idea in my own images, deliberately acknowledging the presence of the viewer within the photograph, and the viewer of the photograph. The viewer is pictured in each image of *Before the Museum*, and more profoundly their vision is implied through the use of obscure camera angles that mimic the museum-viewing process, recalling what Meinhardt referred to as ‘the physiognomic gaze’. It is this very isolated human activity of viewing – taking the idea of vision beyond Struth – which underpins the *Impossible Gaze*.

By focussing on the museum viewers I am concentrating on their engagement with the visual. Best suggests that ‘vision allows a kind of communion between subjects and objects’.⁶⁴ In discussing the possibilities of vision, it must be signalled that there are different modes of engagement and activities involved in viewing. The viewer makes both conscious and subconscious decisions as to where they direct their sight, and to what capacity they wish to engage with what they see. Vision consists of distinct modes of activity; looking, directing the movement of the eyes, and seeing, which requires concentration as part of a thought and judgement process. Bryson describes that ‘vision is portrayed under two aspects: one vigilant, masterful, ‘spiritual’, and the other subversive, random, disorderly’, and further explains their correlation as an ‘intermittence of vision, a series of peaks traversed by valleys of inattentiveness’.⁶⁵ These patterns of looking and seeing are further codified as the gaze and the glance. The gaze is an intelligible engagement and a contemplative state. It is the focus of attention, like the focus of a camera lens on its subject. The glance however, is the more whimsical attribute of sight, rapidly consuming the veneer of a multitude of objects without engaging in analysis or reflection. The glance’s continuous movement mapping objects and architecture, is subordinated by

⁶³ William Ivins regards the artists solution to the ‘mathematical problem of perspective’ as the ‘rationalization of sight’ and considers it to be one of the most significant events of the time. William M. Ivins, Jr., *On the Rationalization of Sight*, New York: Da Capo Press, 1973, p. 7-8.

⁶⁴ Best, ‘Merleau-Ponty and an Ethics of Vision’.

⁶⁵ Bryson, ‘The Gaze and the Glance’, *Vision and Painting*, p. 93.

space as the viewer moves through it, while the gaze, consciously punctuates this movement (fig.30). I return to Bryson's discussion of the gaze in Chapter 4.

In the museum, the viewer surges through the performance of gazing and glancing. However, de Bolla also proposes a third mode of viewing, what he terms the look. De Bolla describes this activity 'as an oscillation or pulsation between the gaze and the glance as the eye shuttles back and forth between penetration and reflection, depth and surface'.⁶⁶ I would argue, however, that the look is more than a transitional action that ensures the uninterrupted flow of vision, and that it is akin to 'searching', consciously or not.⁶⁷ In the museum, the viewer's sight weaves in and out of focus and attention, superficial interest, detachment and lapses into passive distraction.⁶⁸ Cray argues 'that attention and distraction cannot be thought outside of a continuum in which the two ceaselessly flow into one another, as part of a social field in which the same imperatives and forces incite one and the other.'⁶⁹ It is this notion of continuum that I suggest signifies all viewing. Beyond the attention or distraction of the viewer, the subjectivity of intellectual vision that I have previously discussed, alongside the physical attributes of sight are all in a state of continuous movement. Both the individual and the environment govern the speed of this visual exchange.

As both museum viewer and photographer my physiological vision oscillates between the gaze and the glance. As viewer, I am rapt in a sensory encounter that not only triggers all the regimes of sight, but also involves the aural and the olfactory, as well as the desire for tactile experience. For the viewer *as* photographer, my gaze becomes more intense and more deliberate, a focus of attention that is beyond that of the casual observer, privileging sight above all senses. Once behind the lens, like Roger Cardinal's description of Barthes, I too 'hover in the disembodied realm of pure seeing'.⁷⁰ I consciously re-orient

⁶⁶ De Bolla, 'The Visibility of Visuality', *Vision & Textuality*, pp. 285.

⁶⁷ This is what Bryson refers to as 'scotomise', scanning rather than seeing. Cited by Stuart Hall, ed., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, p. 65.

⁶⁸ Cray further divides the act of looking into another two categories of "observer" and "spectator" to better contend with the nuances of viewing: namely that "observer" signifies something more than merely looking, and that "spectator" could imply a more 'passive onlooker'. Both of these terms appropriately describe the idea of the 'engaged viewer' and that of the 'distracted viewer' within the museum environment. Cray, *Techniques of the Observer*, p. 5.

⁶⁹ Jonathon Cray, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: An October Book, MIT Press, 1999, pp. 50-1.

⁷⁰ Roger Cardinal discussing Barthes' 'The Third Meaning', in 'Pausing Over Peripheral Detail', *Framework*, issue 30, vol. 1, Coventry, England: University of Warwick Arts Federation, 1989, p. 30.



30. The Gaze and the Glance

my sight to direct the lens, the focus of which locates my gaze for later viewers. Preoccupied with the image in the viewfinder, I both critically and intuitively frame the space before me, dissecting the environment into compositions, ordering the layers of time evident in the museum.

Crary evokes William James's "stream of consciousness" to illustrate the viewer's engagement with the activity of looking. He describes 'the fundamentally *transitive* nature of subjective experience – [as] a perpetually changing but continuous flow of images, sensations, thought fragments, bodily awareness, memories, desires'.⁷¹ I use Crary's comment to reinforce the idea that the bodily or lived experience of the museum viewer is involved and extremely complex, based on not only vision, but also an extensive and inclusive sensorial engagement. To 'make-sense', as Sobchack outlines in her paper, *What My Fingers Knew: The Cinesthetic Subject, or Vision in the Flesh*, the overarching mastery and comprehension by our vision of its object, and vision's hierarchical sway over our other senses all tend to occlude our awareness of our body's other ways of taking up and making meaning of the world'.⁷²

Sobchack declares that 'we possess an embodied intelligence that both opens our eyes far beyond their discrete capacity for vision', and explains 'our capacity not only to hear, but also to touch, to smell, to taste, and always to proprioceptively feel our dimension and movement in the world.' Although Sobchack's paper is a discussion of the cinematic experience, I would like to extend her inclusive sense theory to further advance my own discussion of the museum viewer's experience. (Although vision is necessarily given priority as my way of communicating to an audience.) Just as we are 'touched' by the Renaissance images seen in the museum, these feelings are compounded by the experience of the museum itself. The sensorial perception precedes any analytical or reflective thought. As Sobchack describes, 'We see and comprehend and feel...with our entire bodily being, informed by the full history and knowledge of our sensorium', and the senses 'more radically inform each other in a fundamentally non-hierarchical and reversible relationship'.⁷³ Informed by their reflexive responses to the museum environment, the viewers make sense of what they experience in a multi-

⁷¹ Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, p. 60.

⁷² Vivian Sobchack, 'What My Fingers Knew: The Cinesthetic Subject, or Vision in the Flesh', *Special Effects/Special Affects: Technologies of the Screen*, Symposium, (conference paper) Melbourne, March 25, 2000.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

dimensional way. However, with such fleeting viewing periods there is little time for contemplation of the individual artworks, and it is perhaps their total sensorial experience, the *feeling* of the Renaissance that will be most remembered: the visual confusion of artworks, the hushed tones of other visitors combined with the shrill beeping of infrared sensors, the texture, substance and scent of ancient pigment mixed with oil, and the crowds and stifling heat that engender the viewing experience.

The Effects of So Much Reproduction

Lastly, I concentrate on the photo-artist Knorr. Knorr uses the architecture of cultural institutions as the backdrop for her intentions. Born in Germany, Knorr was educated in Europe, studying photography in London in the early 1980s. In surveying Knorr's oeuvre there are a number of themes threading through each project that I strongly identify with. An early work, *Gentlemen*, depicts elements of 'polite social activity' important to the 'conversation piece', a genre of painting particularly popular in 18th century Britain. Knorr uses these elements to draw comparisons between people and their surroundings, and states that she is 'interested in "cultural forms" which break down distinctions between "high art" and "low art", media images and "fine art".'⁷⁴ In *Connoisseurs* and *Academies*, a series from the 80s and 90s, Knorr stiffly, and sometimes comically, poses people in cultural institutions, libraries and galleries. In doing so, Knorr again makes comment on the ideas of taste, history, beauty, viewing and reproduction realised in museum-like environments (fig.31,32). She represents the encounter with 'artistic beauty' in a social/class/intellectual context. Knorr's imagery, I would argue, resonates with Derrida's reflections on taste and beauty – the affect of which he describes as giving 'pleasure or unpleasure'. Derrida identifies these arguments of beauty and taste, and the question of what is knowledge or aesthetic judgment as fundamental to 'all philosophical discourses on art, the meaning of art and meaning as such, from Plato to Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger.'⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Karen Knorr and Antonio Guzmán in *Karen Knorr: Marks of Distinction*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1991, pp. 124-31.

The conversation piece is described in *The Oxford Dictionary of Art*, Ian Chilvers, Harold Osborne and Dennis Farr, eds., Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1994(c1988), p. 117.

⁷⁵ Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, p. 44-5.

Whereas Struth's museum audience represents a wash of cultural tourism, Knorr's institutional inhabitants are anything but the average viewer; they belong to the established 'British High Culture'.⁷⁶ Powerfully putting into question the idea of objectivity, her work is patently staged and theatrical, parodying the aristocracy in its own environment. Knorr's strategy is to understand her subject matter thoroughly so that her images may resemble it. Knorr's approach is described as not 'work looking inside from the outside, but rather work already inside looking further in'.⁷⁷ Knorr's recent work, *Sanctuary*, exhibited at the Wallace Collection, in London in 2001, 'explores the ideas that underpin heritage and patrimony and the role of art in the construction of national identity'.⁷⁸ I will explore these ideas more fully when I discuss museums in the following chapter.

For me, Knorr's work is exciting on a number of levels. Not only because her images are exquisitely photographed, colour works that represent institutional settings, but also because I perceive in her work an evolving engagement with consumption of visual culture and the structure of viewing, with its complicated and multifaceted influences. Knorr's representations of taste, history and beauty, are aligned with my own concerns, and in particular, it is *Connoisseurs* and *Academies* that for me, clearly signals the idea of reproduction, especially the classical examples of Renaissance art. Although reproduction has much to do with arguments about aura it also plays a consequential role in edification.

Reproduction and representation are cemented in 21st century visual culture. Della Pollock writes, 'reality as such is so permeated by representation that all we have left are representations of representations, representations without referent or origin or, for that matter, real consequence'.⁷⁹ Manifest in all forms of media, art, advertisements, cinema, television, internet, photography, etc., Renaissance images – like all images – are disembodied, appearing in a limitless number of locations simultaneously, endlessly configured and mercilessly

⁷⁶ An interview with Karen Knorr, 'Fetishism of Black-and-White and the Vulgarly of Colour' ed., Liz Heron and Val Williams, *Illuminations: Women Writing on Photography from the 1850s to the Present*, London, New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1996, p. 404.

⁷⁷ Antonio Guzman, 'Academies: Photography as Pageant', *Portfolio: The Catalogue of Contemporary Photography in Britain*, Number 25, Edinburgh: Portfolio Gallery, June 1997, p. 56.

⁷⁸ Text from the exhibition 'Sanctuary', Wallace Collection website (no author cited), http://www.the-wallace-collection.org.uk/e_n/e/p_e/k_k/karen_knorr.htm, accessed 7/11/01.

⁷⁹ Della Pollock, ed., *Exceptional Spaces: Essays in Performance and History*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, c1998, p. 14.



31. Karen Knorr, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 1988.

32. Karen Knorr, *Hölzelman's Anatomy*, 1994.



scrutinised. The popularity of the Renaissance today, da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, or Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel with its ubiquitous outstretched fingertip for example, could only have transpired through its mass reproduction, society's consumerism and the multitude of media that enables it to be beamed to any place on the planet.⁸⁰ Representations of Renaissance art are so infinitely reproduced and all pervasive that they have become universal icons detached from their lived reality. In their detachment, these multiple representations, become part of a community of anchorless images, a cloud of reproductions that create a filter through which the viewer must peer in order to see the original.

André Malraux wrote, that once a artwork is reproduced, removed from its original context it becomes 'related to the totality of known works, both originals and reproductions', and is read in the context of all other images – a comment often cited by more recent scholars.⁸¹ They become recycled motifs and fragments that circulate in endless forms, from original paintings to vinyl fly-strip doors. Disassociated from their origins – like the Renaissance altarpieces now installed in museums – they take on new meaning, nourished by new contexts and the viewers' own knowledge and experience. However, in our present age the countless reproductions that ensure widespread familiarity do not appear to lessen the appeal of the 'masterpiece', but instead 'deify' it. They assist in the construction of aura of the work for the contemporary viewer.

Discovering art through its reproduction creates a familiarity with works and artists, and promotes knowledge of art far beyond the reach of the original, however, the limitations of reproduction more often lead the viewer astray. In reproductions true scale and depth is unidentifiable and monumental architectural details that frame wall-size frescoes often appear irrelevant. The photographic reproductions of Raffaello's *School of Athens* in the Vatican for example, merge the fresco with the window alcoves and doors into one new, flat image. Photographed details construct new and fictitious images through close-ups, camera angles, studied lighting and composition – embellished by

⁸⁰ Both Donald Sassoon, *Mona Lisa: The History of the World's Most Famous Painting*, London: Harper and Collins, 2001, and Darian Leader, *Stealing the Mona Lisa: What art stops us from seeing*, London: Faber and Faber, 2002, write extensively on the evolution of the masterpiece in contemporary culture.

⁸¹ André Malraux, *Museum Without Walls*, London: Secker and Warburg, 1967, p. 232. Also Michael Ann Holly states that 'Every image that arises now comes to us already emplotted in the context and history of earlier images.' From 'Past Looking', *Vision & Textuality*, p. 84.

the techniques of photography that Barthes refers to as 'photogeny'.⁸² The absence of scale, presence, palpability, relative frame and architecture create uniformity. As Crimp describes, in a photograph everything is 'reduced...to a single perfect similitude.'⁸³ Their reproduction creates a sameness, an equivalence to all images. Removed from any contextual information and agonisingly reduced in scale, reproductions eliminate any comparative proportions, and diminish any irregularities and finer details, a simulacrum of the works they represent. Reproduced colours become falsely saturated with increasing contrast, they do not emulate the changes of light and atmospheric conditions found at the site of the original, and they eliminate the textures and 'material differences' of artworks.⁸⁴

Historical texts, art publications, tourist guides and museum catalogues perpetually show photographs of discrete artworks isolated on the page, offering the reader little contextual insight. Museum guides occasionally include wide-angle photographs of their salons, floodlit and emptied of furniture and museological clutter, exposing an entirely different ambience from the actual experience. These catalogue pictures distort the architectural space and do not illustrate the galleries or objects from a human perspective. They provide the viewer with a solitary engagement that is contrary to the 'in the flesh' encounter in the museum, where the procession of visitors creates an atmosphere that pendulates from ebullience to irreverence.

In contrast to the catalogue images, my photographs allude to the living, sensorial, human experience of viewing in the museum. They vividly depict details of the interiors of Italian palazzi reinvented as museums, where the architectural decoration borders on the obscene by contemporary aesthetics. I strive with my images to document/evoke the same conditions that are experienced by the viewing public, the ambient lighting, the sumptuous textures, cramped spaces and grand galleries. The large scale of my photographs (averaging 1 metre x 1.5 metres) portrays a human scale. As Derrida comments,

⁸² Roland Barthes, 'The Photographic Message', *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art and Representation*, Richard Howard, trans., New York: Hill and Wang, 1985, p. 12. Malraux also discusses the composition and lighting of artworks in *Museum Without Walls*, p. 82.

⁸³ Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins*, p. 54.

⁸⁴ Barbara Savedoff lists how reproductions lead us astray from the intention of the original artwork, discussing their failings and limitations. *Transforming Images: How Photography Complicates the Picture*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2000, p. 160-9. Coincidentally, Savedoff also mentions Raffaello's *School of Athens* as an example.

This primary (subjective, sensory, immediate, living) measure proceeds from the body... *It is the body which erects itself as a measure.* It provides the measuring and measured unit of measure: of the smallest and the largest possible, of the minimum and the maximum, and likewise of the passage from the one to the other...⁸⁵

Before the Museum pictures the body of the viewer in relation to the architecture that they inhabit. While the dimensions of *Impossible Gaze* clearly show the details and irregularities of each brushstroke, chisel trail and embroidered stitch. Their size makes an oblique comment on photographic reproduction, and how accustomed we are to viewing the world in miniature through reproductions in books and thumbnail images on screens. Equally, these enormous images play with size, as Clarke suggests, 'to establish parallels with the grand tradition of European painting, suggesting the grandiose and the epic.'⁸⁶

Although Sontag referred to photographs as 'miniatures of reality', contemporary photographic practices, in both commercial and artistic fields, often produce images enlarged far beyond the scale of what they represent (fig.33,34).⁸⁷ In my own work I have tried to draw on photography's propensity for enlargement as a way to engage the viewer in the 3-dimensional space of the gallery where they are hung. Their size encourages the viewer to physically move back and forth, between a distance (I will return to this notion of distanciation when discussing *Before the Museum*) that allows them to see the image at a glance – referred to as 'oeillade' – and proximity, where they can closely study the details.⁸⁸ The viewer's 'to and fro' movement involves the body as they move around the images. Dynamically mapping the gallery, the viewer actively negotiates the space, in contrast to viewing smaller images that insist upon a more even distance for viewing. The distance and angle of viewing a bookplate for example, are dictated by the necessity of being hand-held.

⁸⁵ Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, p. 140.

⁸⁶ Clarke, *The Photograph*, p. 21.

⁸⁷ Sontag, *On Longing*, p. 4. However, there are also life-size images of architectural facades (to hide restoration scaffolding) that are almost seamless. Similarly the Olympic athletes of Sydney 2000 were pictured in heroic proportions, their visages enlarged to the size of multi-storey buildings, adorning architecture like temporary frescoes.

⁸⁸ Leader refers to the "'oeillade", the single glance that takes in the whole picture', *Stealing the Mona Lisa*, p. 21.



33-34. Scale of Reproduction: life-size photographic images that cover entire architectural facades, Siena and Venice.

Opposed to the limitations of a bookplate that can diminish the massive to the size of a postage stamp, the enlargement can also distort miniatures, making them appear as gigantic. Stewart's comment on the relationship between the miniature and the gigantic is aptly suited to my discussion of the size of photographs. She states, 'Whereas the miniature represents closure, interiority, the domestic, and the overtly cultural, the gigantic represents infinity, exteriority, the public, and the overtly natural.'⁸⁹ Larger images, large artworks, billboards, life-size sculptures, exhibit a public significance or social function, while miniatures evoke a preciousness, an intimacy, and occupy a personal place.

Part of the Furniture

Vasari's monumental friezes reign above the heroic sculptures of Michelangelo in the Salone dei Cinquecento of Palazzo Vecchio. Dwarfed by these imposing artworks, the visitors ironically are perched on stools facing computer screens (fig.35,36). They are glued to monitors looking at artworks that in reality are right in front of them. Titillated by the computer imagery, the viewer eventually raises their eyes to gaze upon the weight of history that encompasses them. Palazzo Vecchio has incorporated a number of computer terminals where the visitor can experience the museum in cyberspace. The visual and textual information available on their screens has 'planetary accessibility' via the internet.⁹⁰ This website deconstructs the palazzo with thumbnail images of its history, art and architecture detailed room by room. It constructs on screen snapshots of information that the visitor will actually stumble upon in the course of their visit. How strange that the visitor's initial experience of the lives and history of the Renaissance in this overwhelming historic environment is introduced by virtual reality.

Dominated by vision that has been shaped by evolving technologies, Palazzo Vecchio clearly demonstrates their impact on this environment in recent years. Here the modern world has assailed the historic by the gradual inclusion of contemporary technology. These technologies, now incongruously embedded in the historic architecture of the museums of Italy, where history, art and architecture are condensed by the computer, have become devices employed to

⁸⁹ Here Stewart continues, 'both the miniature and the gigantic may be described through metaphors of containment—the miniature as contained, the gigantic as container.' Stewart, *On Longing*, pp. 70-1.

⁹⁰ Antonella Huber, *Il Museo Italiano*, Milan: Edizioni Lybra Immagine, 1997, p. 8.



35. Palazzo Vecchio without computers, 1997.

36. Palazzo Vecchio with computers, 2001.



supplement their collections and further engage, absorb and edify their viewers. Museums now incorporate Micro galleries for visitors to access computers with specialised databases, allowing unending comparisons to any image, anywhere, infinitely extending Malraux's *Museum Without Walls*.⁹¹

The cumulative databases that are now on-line extend art's reproduction for endless viewers. These databases put together by various museums and educational institutions offer a vast number of images without the hierarchy imposed by the printed page – although they retain a sameness on the flat surface of the computer screen. These images fall prey to all the same limitations of reproductions; colour shifts, clarity, scale etc., they are detailed to a prescribed resolution and the speed at which they can be accessed and viewed is reliant on individual computer hardware.⁹² With these collections of digitised images the museum infinitely extends its boundaries by entering domestic and private homes via the internet. No longer restrained by the static image – or encumbered by travel – the web introduces the virtual museum. The advantage of virtual tours is their inclusion of museum architecture, allowing the viewer to imagine, even if only vaguely, where these artworks exist and their relative proportions. In support of new technologies present in the museum Newhouse argues that 'virtual reality provides a strong context for art and a greater possibility of viewer interaction than any other means yet devised.'⁹³

Huber discusses the impact of the internet on the future of the museum.

The possibility of studying and seeing the collections extensively, analytically and in detail with research, retrieval, comparison aids and sophisticated cross references, far better than the already powerful ones now available, will open new research horizons. It will not replace direct viewing of the works, the objects and documents but this is not always possible nor always necessary and, furthermore, is reserved to the few - whereas we must suppose a far wider access basis, with the new aids.⁹⁴

But is more, better? For some specialised viewers, the information, history and interpretations offered on-line might indeed provide an opportunity for a less didactic approach than either the museum or the textbook. However, digital

⁹¹ This technology inevitably introduces multinational sponsors like Sony, Nokia, IBM and McDonalds who gain advertising power and prestige through cultural association, as in the days of the Medici. Another example is Bill Gates' ownership and exhibition of Leonardo da Vinci's Codex.

⁹² Digital reproductions are also discussed by Savedoff, *Transforming Images*, pp. 179-81.

⁹³ Victoria Newhouse, *Towards A New Museum*, New York: The Monacelli Press Inc., 1998, p. 190-7.

⁹⁴ Huber, *Il Museo Italiano*, pp. 9-10.

reproductions and the virtual museum presents no more than a trace of real objects – just as the souvenir and the photograph – so any judgement or conclusions drawn could only ever be hypothetical. Further to this I would argue, that for general viewers the databases, in their vastness, open the way for an even more fleeting consumption of art as viewers/users scan or search in the less than ideal viewing conditions dictated by sedentary computer-viewing. What's more, the images encountered on screen are revealed in segments, not all at once as 'in the flesh', and without a corporeal presence, may be instantaneously dismissed with the click of a mouse. I will return to technology in the following chapter.

The Changing Habits of Viewing

I return to Knorr again now, to conclude this chapter, because of her concern with contemporary viewing habits (fig. 37). She recognises that viewing artwork is not only dependant upon on well-established museum didactics, and intertwined with the viewers' culturally-shaped and predisposed ways of seeing, but also the way vision has been progressively moulded by the development of technology. The fascination with optical devices since the 15th century, like the camera obscura and camera lucida, eventually transformed into the 19th century proliferation of photography and now its contemporary imaging technologies. Crary states that with the 'process of modernization' the observer in the 19th century has been shaped by 'new events, forces, and institutions' and the 'immense reorganization of knowledge, language, networks of spaces and communications, and subjectivity itself'.⁹⁵ Crary recounts what Benjamin 'mapped out' as transforming the 19th century observer.

...shaped by a convergence of new urban spaces, technologies, and new economic and symbolic functions of images and products – forms of artificial lighting, new use of mirrors, glass and steel architecture, railroads, museums, gardens, photography, fashion, crowds. Perception for Benjamin was acutely temporal and kinetic; he makes clear how modernity subverts even the possibility of a contemplative beholder. There is never a pure access to a single object; vision is always multiple, adjacent to and overlapping with other objects, desires, and vectors. Even the congealed space of the museum cannot transcend a world where everything is in circulation.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, pp. 9-10.

⁹⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 19-20.



37. Karen Khorram, *The Analysis of Beauty*, 1988

Crary discusses how the ‘proliferating range of optical and sensory experiences’ impacts on the art-viewer of the 19th century, and how any experience/meaning that could have been gained from art was in direct relation to the ‘many consumable and fleeting elements within an expanding chaos of images, commodities, and stimulation.’ Crary reiterates,

The circulation and reception of *all* visual imagery is so closely interrelated by the middle of the century that any single medium or form of visual representation no longer has a significant autonomous identity. The meanings and effects of any single image are always adjacent to this overloaded and plural sensory environment and to the observer who inhabited it.⁹⁷

I believe Crary’s discussion here of the 19th century viewer identifies the impossibility of viewing art in any ‘pure’ form. It illustrates the already chaotic visual environment prior to the development of trains, motorways, billboards and the revolution in electronic forms of communication and entertainment.⁹⁸ Crary states that vision in the 20th century ‘is embedded in a pattern of adaptability to new technological relations, social configurations, and economic imperatives.’⁹⁹ Laden with the visual culture of all epochs and nations, vision is now saturated by the omnipresence of photographic and computer generated imagery, and its bombardment through video, cinema, advertising, media and the internet, in both public and private lives. The visual habits of today have been forced to keep pace with the proliferation of images, necessarily adapting to faster viewing regimes. Visual literacy has been founded on fragments of information, the quick glance, moving images and flickering screens. Paradoxically, Crary explains, ‘In a culture that is so relentlessly founded on a short attention span’ we manage to maintain attentiveness for computers.¹⁰⁰ The immobilisation of the viewer by computer screens may keep them sedentary, but I would argue they cannot enforce any prolonged concentration. Even though the viewer may be staring at the images/information on the screen, they still control, with a click of the mouse, the speed at which the images with their messages flash by.

As an antidote to this rapid consumption of the visual, Knorr attempts to detain her viewer. Knorr says that she uses text with her images as a way to

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁹⁸ Eco writes that ‘eyes are something to focus, at steady driving speed, on visual-mechanical wonders, signs, constructions that must impress the mind in the space of a few seconds.’ *Faith in Fakes*, p. 26.

⁹⁹ Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, p. 13.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 30-7 and pp. 74-5.

keep her viewers a little longer, ‘In order to slow down the spectator’s pace of consumption, creating a “slow-motion reading” which leaves room for reflection.’¹⁰¹ Knorr’s interest in manipulating her audience to consider her work more thoroughly is in line with my own aspirations. I want to reverse the habits of modern viewing, summoning viewers to resist the whirlwind speed at which artworks and museums are generally consumed – particularly amidst today’s cultural tourism industry. I prefer to rekindle Richard Wollheim’s ideals of viewing, where hours should be spent looking at an artwork, allowing time ‘for stray associations or motivated misperceptions to settle down’.¹⁰²

I don’t want to be limited by the constraints of time, but to be open to the possibilities that the visual image and the museum offer. However, the speed endemic of contemporary life – a notion that often surfaces throughout this thesis – threatens to make slow viewing impossible. Thus, I have hunted for a way to halt the museum-viewer. Although no longer in the original environment, at least by photographing in the museum I have suspended the visit and what has been seen. I have locked the moments away so that I – and the audience of my images – may return for the ‘long study’, a slow and considered examination. Photography as a medium, is the perfect way to render my concern with slow viewing, as in its making it arrests the immediacy of seeing. My photographic images identify with cinema’s techniques of slow motion that insist on the viewer’s attention to details that in real-time would have passed unnoticed.¹⁰³ Like Italy’s recent Slow Food Manifesto that declares ‘we are enslaved to speed’, and expresses the desire to return to a more relaxed, nutritional and enjoyable state of eating as an intrinsic part of life, I too, want to savour the visual nourishment, to explore in depth all that the artworks *and* their environment propose, so that I may indulge in my own experience and judgements.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Knorr interview, ‘Fetishism of Black-and-White and the Vulgarly of Colour’, *Illuminations: Women Writing on Photography from the 1850s to the Present*, p. 407.

¹⁰² Richard Wollheim, *Painting as an Art*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1987, p. 8.

¹⁰³ In discussing film Benjamin returns to the attributes of the ‘optical unconscious’. ‘With the close-up, space expands; with slow-motion, movement is extended. The enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear: it reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject.’

Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, p. 236.

¹⁰⁴ Excerpt from the ‘Slow Food Manifesto’, Helen O’Neil, ‘Easy Does It’, *The Weekend Australian Magazine*, Sydney: 7/12/2002, p. 64.

3. Before the Museum

After I had been photographing the Renaissance artworks held in the collections of the National Gallery, London for sometime, I was invited to attend a curious event. During the course of a decade, each room of the gallery has its walls vacuumed (fig.48). An enormous task that involves the painstaking removal, dusting, packing and relocation of each artwork so that the fabric covered walls may be thoroughly cleaned. All the artworks vanished under the care of museum professionals, only to reappear a few short hours later when all must be re-hung and restored to perfect order before the gallery opens its doors to the public. As I photographed I observed that the colour of the wall brightened in the path of the vacuum cleaner, evidence of just how much dust had swirled its way into the gallery, carried in on the winds through the doors and vents and with the millions of visitors. I was enveloped in clouds of dust, the majority of which, I was informed, were particles of dried human skin, the accumulation of skin of all the nations who have visited the museum over the past decade.

What struck me about this gritty occasion was that the residue layering the walls of museums exemplified the diversity of their audience. Dust was evidence, the tangible trace of the multitude of people of various ages and cultures that have wandered the gallery through the years, the decades, and in the possible event of escape from the vacuum cleaner, even centuries. I shared this dusty experience, the particles of my dried skin, hair and clothing intermingling with the skin of other visitors and museum workers, past and present. In fact, in the museums like the Uffizi, or Palazzo Pitti, it is conceivable that as I roam, I may unwittingly stir the epidermis of the Medici lying neglected in some rarely trodden corner, and in disturbing it I may carry it away with me, outside and into the 21st century. I revel in the idea that my own flaky deposit could combine with theirs, and now left behind, it too will haunt the cracks and crevices of their original abode.

I recount this occasion as the layers of dust signify the two principal concerns of this chapter. Firstly, the layers of time present in the museum, and secondly the continuity of viewers that have witnessed the artworks through the ages.

Particles of dust from different countries and even different centuries combine and alight on the surfaces throughout the museum. Hannah Holmes suggests that the physical presence of dust and its composition carries ‘the secret of our past’, a past that I explore and reveal in my images.¹ Furthermore, Olalquaiga describes dust as ‘the most tangible aspect of...historical time, a thin patina of shattered moments remaining’. Dust, she proposes, ‘makes palpable the elusive passing of time’, but more significantly I believe, it keeps the past present.² Though dust and dirt in the museum have constantly been the enemy, the vestiges of previous eras and their slow disintegration subtly communicate a sense of continuity in the museum where the past and the present intermingle.³

I will begin this chapter by discussing my exhibition *Before the Museum* in more detail, using my photographic images to illuminate two distinct yet intertwined histories: that of the viewer, and the visual culture being observed. Renaissance art has incurred a history of public exposure and admiration that has ensured its continuous place in the discourses of art history and theory. However, today’s Renaissance viewer also finds themselves at the intersection of a number of other diverse discourses and realities that subliminally, intellectually or viscerally affect them. The contexts created by Renaissance historiography and cultural tourism for example, intersect differently for each viewer, and combine with their personal history and perception to shape their experience. In this chapter I will tease out the layers of historic traditions, tourist rituals and liminal experiences encountered in the Italian museum.

Before the Museum, though providing a transitory vision of history, resolutely locates the past in the present. The photographs in this exhibition are inscribed with time: the time of the Renaissance evidenced by the art, the time of architectural construction and redecoration of the spaces, the viewer’s time, as well as the time they were photographed, the time of viewing the exhibition, and now they are fixed in the time of reading this thesis. While emphasizing time’s continual passing, my images essentially belong to the moment of viewing. They condense these pasts into a single instant of seeing.

¹ Hannah Holmes, *The Secret Life of Dust: From the Cosmos to the Kitchen Counter, the Big Consequences of Little Things*, USA: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 2001, pp. 2-13.

² Olalquaiga, *The Artificial Kingdom*, pp. 91-5.

³ Thanks to the London atmosphere and the presence of the masses there has been ‘an obsessive search for the origins of filth and ways of eradicating it’ in the National Gallery, London, since the 1850s. Nick Prior, *Museums and Modernity: Art Galleries and the Making of Modern Culture*, Oxford, New York: Berg Publishers, 2002, p. 88.

3. Before the Museum



38. Before the Museum #1. Origin: Palazzo Pitti, Galleria Palatina.



39. Before the Museum #2. Origin: Museo di San Marco. Detail: Fra Angelico, fresco, ca. 1449.



40. *Before the Museum #3*, Origin: Galleria Doria Pamphilj, Palazzo Doria Pamphilj.



41. Before the Museum #4. Origin: Cappella Medicea, Basilica di San Lorenzo.
Detail: Michelangelo Buonarroti, Tomb of Lorenzo de' Medici, 1521-34.

42. Before the Museum #5. Origin: Palazzo Pitti, Galleria Palatina.





43. Before the Museum #6. Origin: Stanza della Segnatura, Musei Vaticani. Detail: Sanzio Raffaello, *The School of Athens*, fresco 1510-11.

44. Before the Museum #7. Origin: Museo di San Marco. Detail: Fra Angelico, *The Annunciation*, fresco ca. 1449.





45. Before the Museum #8. Origin: Galleria Nazionale di Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini.



46. Before the Museum #9. Origin: Cattedrale di Santa Maria del Fiore. Detail: Andrea del Castagno, Niccolò di Tolentino Memora, fresco transferred to canvas, 1436.



47. Before the Museums #10. Origin: Cortile, Palazzo Vecchio

As the title *Before the Museum* suggests, the images play with the idea that Renaissance art existed ‘before’ our modern notion of the museum. Similarly, the spaces that currently house these artworks had different original uses ‘before’ their present incarnation as public museums. The photographs allude to the contextual evolution of Renaissance art through history, from private collection to public institution, private viewer to public consumption and private palazzo to public museum. Although concerned with this history, these images also illustrate the experience of the contemporary, multicultural audience of the Renaissance, which is embedded in the present architectural and cultural environment and patronage.

Before the Museum depicts some of the historic architecture of Florence and Rome presently inhabited as public museums and galleries of world renown. The photographs are shot in the Museo di San Marco, Palazzo Pitti, Palazzo Vecchio, the Duomo and Cappelle Medicee in Florence, and Palazzo Doria Pamphilj, Palazzo Barberini and Musei i Vaticani in Rome. These spaces resonate with their original uses and appear incongruous with the current viewer dressed in contemporary clothing, and the museological paraphernalia. Once existing as chapels, monasteries, civic buildings and private palazzi, they now provide their contemporary audiences with an extraordinarily rich context in which to view art of the past.

Before the Museum shows the galleries as a whole, the physical context, wide shots of hallways, chapels, painting filled salons and their spectators. While it contextualises the Renaissance artworks, these photographs also focus on the social aspect of viewing. The viewer is a fixture of the museum-scape, intrinsic to the displays *en mass* they set the tone of reverence, curiosity and ritual. Captured amidst this historic visual culture, alongside museum trappings and other visitors, their bodies help identify the scale of the architecture and art that surrounds them. While they conjure the evanescent presence of a continuous stream of viewers, these photographs render the encounter of the present-day viewer, their tranquil gaze – either focussed or distracted – and private contemplations as they wander the galleries that are charged with the presence of history and culture. These images reinforce the overwhelming feeling of the past. Like dust, art objects, as Pearce explains, have ‘the power in

some sense to carry the past into the present by virtue of their 'real' relationship to past events'.⁴

While the presence of the viewer is obvious in *Before the Museum*, their experience remains obscure and mercurial. Here the viewer, as discussed in Chapter 2, is at the centre of many complicated and concurrent concerns: issues relating to subjectivity, context, vision and visibility. Other dynamic forces that mould and influence this ephemeral encounter extend these issues. The numerous histories for example, which are present – art, cultural, museal and touristic – combine with the viewer's motivations, governed by their own predilections and preconceptions, interpretations and impressions. The experience of art is personal, physical, cerebral, sensorial and temporal. In addition to this, how the Renaissance has been studied, written on and reproduced, either academically or popularly, influences the viewer's perception of its art. The convergence of all this information, past, present and personal, informs and shapes the private exchange between artwork and viewer. The confluence of centuries of changing perceptions is subliminally transmitted in the brief moments when the viewer comes 'face to face' with art. Equally, I recognise that the elements affecting the viewer's encounter with the Renaissance in Italy also influence the viewer of my own artwork.

More practically, time and light are inextricably bound both in the museum and in photography. The time of photographing, reduced to the split-second of the film's exposure, is wholly dependent on the available illumination to render an image. Like the viewer, when photographing I must accommodate the museum's lighting which includes colour casts from cool fluorescent and warm incandescent lights fused with subdued daylight. These multiple light sources produce subtle shifts in ambience and cause reflections that glaze the surface of the paintings or their acrylic casings. These glaring reflections create blinding patches of pure light – which I capture in my photographs – causing the viewer to dodge and shift positions to better see the paintings. In making these images I have selected a particular film stock (Kodak Professional 1000 GPZ) and combined it with these mixed light sources to create warm, richly coloured images which are printed with intense colour saturation, portraying an opulence like the subjects they document.

⁴ Pearce, *Museums, Objects & Collections*, p. 24.

The way the scene duplicates itself onto my film is a delicate and immediate process. The camera shutter emulates the blink of an eye as the fast film, pushed to its limits faintly renders the image. The grain structure of these large photographs (achieved through under-exposure and over-development, coupled with extreme enlargement), is used as a technique of distancing, to distance the viewer from the image. The painterly grain structure of these large photographs is most intelligible when viewed at a distance, but as the viewer moves closer the grain at a certain point breaks up the image, making the details abstract and unrecognisable. I use this device to encourage my viewers to step back and consider the exhibition as a whole rather than focus closely on a fragment within the photograph's frame. The size and method in which these photographs are installed, positioned close together and hung high on the walls, are designed to construct a sense of the museum spaces in which the artworks were originally encountered, as well as the monumental icons they picture. The enormity of the photographs, overwhelming in historicity and grandeur, envelop the viewer.

Exhibited in both Sydney and Florence, the gallery venues reflect the re-use and transformation of historic space, mirroring the intent of the photographs themselves. In Sydney, *Before the Museum* was first hung in the Regency villa, 'Tusculum'. Originally designed as a private residence by John Verge in 1831, it has also been a private hospital, hotel, officers' club and a hospice. Having undergone restoration it now resides under the Heritage Act and is the public exhibition space of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects. In Florence, the same show was hung in the recently refurbished Baroque Palazzo dei Cartelloni, once belonging to Galileo. Originally a private gallery holding artworks of the 16th century, it now houses the Studio Arts Centre International. Through discussion with audiences in Australia and Italy I found that their responses reflected a change in perception, each essentially drawing from their different cultural associations and experience. For the Italians, with their intimate 'inside' knowledge of my subject, these were images of their lived reality. However, for the viewers in Australia, like myself, this contextualisation of Renaissance artworks represented history as the Other.

Finally, this exhibition was installed either by suspending the photographs, or attaching them directly to the gallery wall. Trimmed of all extraneous margins and frames, I expose the skin-like surface and organic quality of the photographic paper as it microscopically expands and contracts with shifts in

humidity, revealing its unstable, fugitive nature. Hanging these images of historic Italian culture in a Baroque palace in Florence, when the original artworks were literally around the corner evoked an ‘uncanniness’, a strangeness created by the space itself. Here the viewers and art which are the subject of my work are framed by doorways, constituting a frame within the photographic frame. The doorways are intended to disorient the viewer of my photographs: are they outside looking in, or already inside looking further in? These edges reinforce the limits of monocular vision that I have previously described. In writing on frames, Derrida states, ‘the limit between inside and outside, must, somewhere in the margins, be constituted together.’⁵ As the margins of my photographs meet with the gallery wall, they echo the wider ramifications of framing, beyond the physical and institutional presence of the museum to include, as Wolfgang Ernst comments, ‘art history [which] positions itself literally, as a hyperframe.’⁶

Historiography Lays the Foundation

Here I concentrate on the historic sites of Italy that are alive and inhabited as they have been for centuries. The architecture, civic squares, ornamentation and artworks appear to have changed little. Places of worship, offices, museums and palaces confront the viewer with an expansive vision of the past. Although this historic fabric appears immutable there is an undercurrent of constant renewal, not only architectural renovations and refurbishment but also renewal of historical scholarship, museum policies and tourism charters. The recent cleaning of Sistine Chapel is but one example of evolving attitudes, its resultant luminosity is surrounded by the inevitable debates for and against intervention, restoration and conservation, argued by historians, conservators and museologists alike. These debates are grounded in our current understanding of history. Corbin, *In the Lure of the Sea* illustrates how the writing of history, in myth, literature, poetry or hypothesis can transform a subject. Even the travel diaries and guidebooks that began to proliferate during the time of the grand tour – which I will discuss in a moment – with their anecdotal accounts paved the way for more serious investigations and inevitably generated further historical research. Corbin elucidates that the writing of history, while being

⁵ Derrida. *The Truth in Painting*, p. 55.

⁶ Wolfgang Ernst, ‘Framing the Fragment: Archeology, Art, Museum’, *The Rhetoric of the Frame*, Paul Duro ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 121.

subject to its own fashions, can dictate appreciation, understanding, repulsion or popularity.

History and historiography infiltrate the museum environment and influence not only how museums think, but also what they exhibit and how.

Historiography is the mediator between the past and the viewer. It is the writing of history that lays the foundation for the viewer's expectations, experience and understanding of historic art. Therefore, examining historical scholarship in its polymorphous forms is essential to understand what underpins the experience of Renaissance art as seen by millions of viewers today.

The encounter with art is not about knowledge but rather experience that is framed by knowledge: knowledge of the art being viewed and the surrounding histories of the artist, the painting, the patron, the architecture, society, town or country. Ernst's comment on art history as 'hyperframe' is crucial as the historiography in which Renaissance art is embedded dictates both its presentation in the museum, as well as the viewer's reception. It contextualises not only what is seen in the museum but also what is present in my photographs. Even if never read by the viewer, art historical and theoretical scholarship continues to inform and influence the manner in which art is perceived and exhibited by museum curators – keeping in mind that they too have their idiosyncrasies, taste and discriminations – and to a further extent those of the governing institution. Historiography vastly contributes to the manner in which we engage with art, though its presence in the museum may only be evident in the labelling, the guides and catalogues (fig.49).

What we see today in museums is the cumulative effects of historians since the foundation of art history and theory were laid in the centuries surrounding the Renaissance. Beginning in the mid 1300s with the writings of Petrarca, described as the first art critic, then a century later the Renaissance scholar and architect Leon Battista Alberti, considered the first art theorist, with his treatise *Della Pittura* outlining the laws of perspective and its practice in painting. A century after Alberti, Vasari, publishing his *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, became the first art historian. Also at this time, artists like Leonardo da Vinci, David Summers explains, 'first adapted the language of psychology to

the discussion of what art is and what artists do.⁷ Furthermore, through the literary endeavours of the Renaissance, as Kemp suggests, ‘We can witness... the founding struggles of our modern attempts to bring words to bear in an effectively critical manner on visual images.’⁸ With each successive generation of historians, theorists and critics since these ‘founding struggles’ our knowledge of the art of the past has continued to grow and transform, new knowledge and new perceptions ever-evolving with broader and more profound studies ultimately affecting the reception and experience of art today.

Art is a dialogue that traverses time. Since the Renaissance, historians have investigated the past through exploring the subject of art and its pictorial developments which reflect the social attitudes, beliefs and knowledge of the time. Art provides a reference for reconstructing the past, or a number of hypothetical pasts, as Burckhardt, wrote, ‘the most secret beliefs and ideals are transmitted to posterity perhaps only through the medium of art, and this transmission is all the more trustworthy because it is unintended.’⁹ Having deftly carved and painted the details of their clients’ social and political aspirations, artists have bequeathed significant historical documents that reveal a wealth of information about travel, trade and cultural and scientific developments. Carlo Crivelli’s painting *The Annunciation with St Emidius* (1486), with its display of designs from both the east and west is a wonderful example. Lisa Jardine discusses the excess of Crivelli’s detail as ‘a visual celebration of conspicuous consumption and of trade’, with its exotic carpet, peacock, antique ornamentation, tapestries, embroidery, cushions, books, porcelain and crystal. This detail, Jardine notes, is evidence of ‘Italian access to markets from northern France to the Ottoman Empire.’¹⁰

The existence of art objects and their individual histories are recounted through a variety of sources, surviving collections and historical archives, correspondence and inventories.¹¹ These artworks having outlasted centuries of changing circumstances and cultural attitudes, are transmitted, re-presented, and re-contextualised for the historians of succeeding periods to resolve with

⁷ David Summers, *The Judgement of Sense: Renaissance Naturalism and the Rise of Aesthetics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 9.

⁸ Kemp, *Behind the Picture*, pp. 2-3.

⁹ Haskell refers to Werner Kaegi’s biography of Jacob Burckhardt. Francis Haskell, *History and its Images*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993, p. 332.

¹⁰ Lisa Jardine, *Worldly Goods*, London: Macmillan Publishers Ltd., 1996, pp. 6-9.

¹¹ Kemp comments on these sources in *Behind the Picture*, p. 25.



48. Vacuuming at the National Gallery, London.

49. Elliott Erwitt, Victoria and Albert Museum, 1996.



their own culturally entrenched perceptions. Historiography continually reframes the context in which we see art through a myriad of personal and professional interpretations. New theories evolve from preceding ones, and new undertakings in historical scholarship are subject to the prevailing attitudes and prejudices of the scholar's time, predisposition and their pretext for investigation.¹² Holly reiterates that 'all but a few historians of art have paraded a consistent refusal to recognize the dependency of the criteria and values they employ upon their own gendered, ideological and cultural situatedness as scholars.'¹³

The Renaissance holds a privileged place in art history, a canon by which other art periods have often been measured. Its scholarship has evolved from the writings of Burckhardt and Walter Pater, based on the narrow ideas of nineteenth century aesthetics, to connoisseurship and the Kantian notion of 'genius', to the early twentieth century iconography developed by Aby Warburg and Erwin Panofsky.¹⁴ While towards the end of the century historians like Tom Gretton would argue that these 'aesthetic criteria have no existence outside a specific historical situation, aesthetic values are falsely taken to be timeless.'¹⁵ Although art was, and still is, studied in a scientific manner, dating, authenticating and classifying styles, more recent theories of art history take a much broader approach, including not only patronage and artistic influences and intention, but also complex social, cultural and historical comparisons. The 'new' art theorists of the late 1980s, Bryson, Holly and Keith Moxey discuss the

move away from the history of art as a record of the creation of aesthetic masterpieces, which constitute the canon of artistic excellence in the West, towards a broader understanding of their cultural significance for the historical circumstances in which they were produced, as well as their potential meaning within the context of our own historical situation.¹⁶

These historians contextualise the artwork by introducing the arena of cultural production at the time of its creation, how it fits in with the social and cultural time of the artist, as well as its place in contemporary understanding. The ideas

¹² Ibid., p. 3

¹³ Michael Ann Holly, 'Past Looking', *Vision and Textuality*, p. 68.

¹⁴ Burke, *The Italian Renaissance*, p. 262.

¹⁵ Tom Gretton, 'New Lamps for Old', *New Art History*, A.L. Rees and Frances Borzello, eds., London: Camden Press, 1986, p. 64.

¹⁶ Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly, and Keith Moxey, eds., *Visual Culture: images and Interpretations*, Hanover and London: University Press of New England, c1994, p. xvi. See also Victor Burgin in *The New Art History*, p. 41.

underpinning the 'new' art history have also surfaced in the 'new' museology – which I will expand on in the next chapter – affecting both the museums collections and the manner in which they are displayed.

At the same time critical theory envelops new interpretive disciplines: semiotics, hermeneutics and psychoanalysis, power-knowledge relations, deconstruction, and philosophies concerning the gaze, alongside feminist, Marxist, post-structuralist and postmodern readings of art.¹⁷ Stephen Bann invites a “craft of seeing” to explore art history, ‘a new interdisciplinary synthesis, in which historians, philosophers, literary scholars and anthropologists can also play their part’.¹⁸

Kemp argues that it is ‘difficult to disentangle’ the theoretical baggage and language of art history. He states,

the making and reading of pictures is nowhere made systematically apparent. It is difficult to know how and to what extent the various kinds of ‘reading’ can hope to achieve more than a contemporary ‘reading in’ of implicit narratives and covert motives according to the authors’ personal and institutional concerns in the present.¹⁹

This ‘reading in’ occurs at various levels and is transformed from historian to curator to viewer, manifesting a plurality of meanings and interpretations along the way. What art suggests to the viewer, and the experience that it evokes, is guided by historiography but ultimately complicated by individual discursive subjectivities. Although the viewer and the historian physically see the same object when standing in front of an artwork, they will interpret it differently, with different motives, emphasis and importance.

Aside from these profound studies of history, historical knowledge does not remain exclusively in the realm of academia. As Corbin suggests, histories are also told through many different media. Today, the past is communicated through television documentaries, Hollywood productions, mini-serials and the press, as well as exhibitions, guidebooks, novels, educational programs and DVDs, oral histories and the internet. How history is written, and its various translations, colours the viewer’s reception of art. Like the extent of reproductions that I outlined earlier, the overall effects of this bombardment is

¹⁷ Stephen Melville, ‘Basic Concepts. Of Art History’, *Vision & Textuality*, p. 31.

¹⁸ Stephen Bann, ‘How Revolutionary is the New Art History’, *The New Art History*, p. 27.

¹⁹ Kemp, *Behind the Picture*, p. 283.

two-fold. On one hand, these re-contextualisations chip away at the 'real' past and eventually create hazy, popular versions of events with little regard to historical accuracy. While at the same time these multiple regurgitations forge myths. They revitalise the past and nourish its aura. Whether multi-media can be considered to encourage aura or dissipate it, I would suggest is wholly dependent upon the individual viewer and the ways in which they have encountered history.

Interpretations are Contingent

Beyond historiography, art draws its meaning and interpretations from other factors: the actual content or subject matter of images, and their contextual surroundings. In *Rhetoric of the Image*, Barthes discusses the different type of messages that exist in images and the ways in which they may be read. Images may contain a linguistic message, found either inscribed in the painting or on the museum label; as well they may depict a literal message and a symbolic one. Art's capacity to communicate is relative to the viewer's own beliefs, knowledge and experience, returning once again to the idea of subjectivity. Barthes further explains,

There is a plurality and a coexistence of lexicons in the same person; the number and identity of the lexicons form in a sense each person's *idiolect*. The image, in its connotation, would thus be constituted by an architecture of signs drawn from a variable depth of lexicons...²⁰

The viewer's visual 'literacy' and interpretative ability ultimately lies within themselves. Malraux evocatively describes this sense of individual interpretation as being 'lit by the torch we carry in our own hand.'²¹ Renaissance art, with its altarpieces, sculptured tombs and monuments, trompe l'œil frescoes, tapestries, richly patterned floors and devotional images are filled with symbolism and iconography that today's audience may not comprehend in the same way as the 14th century viewer. While traditional symbols may have been articulated in a vernacular way for the earliest viewers, their original meanings are often lost or transformed with time. Although, the reading of religious symbolism and historical allegory leaves ample room for misinterpretation, understanding

²⁰ Barthes, 'Rhetoric of the Image', *The Responsibility of Forms*, p. 36.

²¹ Mary Ann Caws, *The Eye in the Text: essays on perception, mannerist to modern*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981, p. 169.

Euro-centric traditions or universal gestures might help today's viewer interpret paintings of the Italian Renaissance on at least one level.²²

With historic artworks the artist's intention is more recognisable when they are seen in their original locations, where the viewer is informed by the context in which the work exists. However, with an artwork's relocation new meanings arise and develop with each subsequent context in which the work might appear. To further complicate the reading of art, Hans-Georg Gadamer proposes that since it is impossible to bring back the original meaning of a work, the viewer inevitably constructs their own.²³ Gadamer 'argues that interpretation is always situational and that, therefore, a text's [and art's] meanings are limitless: there can be no objective, transcendent meaning.'²⁴ Thus, the perception of art shifts from viewer to viewer – like Calle's museum guards in *Last Seen...* – and from one encounter to the next, with seemingly limitless possibilities of response and interpretation, given the collision between the individual, the artwork present in their field of vision, and the relative circumstances that place them in the viewing environment. As hermeneutics suggests, interpreting art is not exclusively dependent on the actual subject matter, but the sum total of experience that it evokes. In *The Hermeneutics of Seeing*, Nicholas Davey agrees that there is more to the experience of art than the viewer's subjectivity. He describes that 'our experience of art is no isolated monologue on personal pleasure but a complex dialogical achievement involving the fusion of the horizons surrounding artist, subject-matter and viewer.'²⁵ And I would add here, that the context in which art is encountered is equally significant in contributing to its interpretation and any formulation of meaning.

Art cannot be extracted from the context in which it is viewed, as both *Before the Museum* and Lawler's images imply. The cultural institutions that house art erect the framework for the viewing experience, they are influential and instrumental in the viewer's understanding and interpretation. Charles

²² Kemp more fully discusses this in *Behind the Picture*, p. 19.

²³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, second English edition, London: Sheed and Ward, 1979, pp. 148-9.

²⁴ This comment is on Gadamer's theory is discussed in *The New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*, Alan Bollock & Stephen Trombley, eds., third edition, Harper Collins Publishers, London, 1999, p. 389.

²⁵ Nicholas Davey, 'The Hermeneutics of Seeing', *Interpreting Visual Culture: Explorations in the Hermeneutics of the Visual*, Ian Heywood & Barry Sandywell, eds., London and New York: Routledge, 1999, p. 3.

Saumarez Smith outlines the complexity of the viewing environment. He states, that

artefacts do not exist in a space of their own, transmitting meaning to the spectator, but, on the contrary, are susceptible to a multiform construction of meaning which is dependent on the design, the context of other objects, the visual and historical representation, the whole environment; that artefacts can change their meaning not just over the years as different historiographical and institutional currents pick them out and transform their significance, but from day to day as different people view them and subject them to their own interpretation.²⁶

The convergence of these factors, both the physical presence and institutional framework of the museum, impresses the viewer. Hooper-Greenhill reiterates that 'meanings of objects are contingent, fluid' and change as 'interpretive frameworks change'.²⁷ It is this 'fluidity' that I find so intriguing. The constancy of movement from all aspects within the museum environment, from the new discoveries and revisions of historians that inevitably flow into the work of museologists and conservators, and their investigations subsequently join this tide and reinvigorate historiography. The great wash of visitors that sweep through the museum continue this flow, colliding with all the historiographically produced interpretive material that enriches their experience in a multitude of ways.

Cultivating the Tourist

I now turn my attention to the viewer, to investigate their presence in the museums of Italy. Here I will consider the rise of tourism as it illustrates a number of critical issues that create the basis for viewing Renaissance art today. The works of artists and artisans have been encountered by citizens of every stature in the public squares and churches since the earliest votive images were made. However, as the concept of collecting arose the viewer was then part of a much more privileged group, a courtier or royal visitor who could gain access to the private apartments of the aristocracy and their personal art collections. While the Renaissance audience today continues to include the wealthy and aristocratic, and shares some of the same characteristics of earlier viewers, it

²⁶ Charles Saumarez Smith, 'museums, artefacts, and Meanings', *The New Museology*, Peter Vergo, ed., Reagin Books, London, 1989, p. 19.

²⁷ Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*, London, New York: Routledge, 2000, p. 10.

now draws far more extensive crowds from a much broader cross-section of humanity. Museum visitors today, as well as art viewers of old, vary in nationality, gender, age, politics, education, social status, psychology, religious beliefs and all that makes up the totality of cultural difference. Although today's Renaissance viewer comes from more diverse social and intellectual backgrounds they continue to perform the same physical act, share the same optical exchange, and even the same space in front of the artwork – though separated by centuries – as those who have come before them.

Since a million Catholic pilgrims from the far corners of the world visited Rome in the jubilee year 1600, tourism has continued to escalate through the centuries to its current prevalence.²⁸ Contemporary cultural tourism has resulted in historic cultures like Florence, with a population of 400,000, having to cater for 9 million tourists each year. Drawn by the phenomenon of the past and the renown of the Renaissance, the crowds of multinational visitors themselves become part of the spectacle, their presence reflected everywhere throughout the streets, public squares and museums.

In the 18th century the grand tour of Italy established the notion of the 'journey' and laid the foundation for the development of modern cultural tourism. Arising through a combination of social, economic and industrial developments, the grand tour was undertaken by the upper classes, the majority of whom belonged to the British aristocracy. The young nobility were sent to Italy to acquire an education in Renaissance and classical arts. These early European tourists travelled to Italy for both their pleasure and edification, hoping to enrich their lives 'culturally and morally' by experiencing the country and its culture.²⁹ Corbin explains that

By 1740, a knowledge of painting was a must for every fashionable Englishman. The man of good taste was defined by the pleasure he took in interpreting works of art. The desire to collect, the proliferation of copies, and the popularization of painting techniques all fed the new fashion which instituted the grand tour as an indispensable complement to a young gentleman's education.³⁰

²⁸ Desmond Seward discusses the influx of pilgrims in 1600 in *Caravaggio: A Passionate Life*, New York: William Morrow and Company Inc., 1998, p. 66.

²⁹ Francis Haskell, *Rediscoveries in Art: Some Aspects of Taste, Fashion and Collecting in England and France*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1976, p. 138.

³⁰ Alain Corbin, *The Lure of the Sea: The Discovery of the Seaside in the Western World, 1750-1840*, Cambridge: Polity Press. c1994, pp. 43-4.

Interestingly, this journey was later abandoned because of their ‘pure enjoyment’, rather than education.³¹ Apparently the ‘grand tourists’ also revelled in the liminality of travel, enjoying the art and culture that, though intrinsic to the Italian way of life, was for them an exotic Other. Corbin also comments that a primary aim of the grand tour ‘was to compile visual memories and collect monumental images’, commencing the traditions of collecting souvenirs and painted views – the precursor to the travel snap, discussed earlier.³²

As the tourist industry grew with the introduction of travel agents, package tours, travel guides and hotels, the provision of more reliable, faster and safer rail travel, paid holidays and a developing aviation industry, tourism became more popular with the upper-middle classes.³³ With all this new found speed and convenience the grand tour, which originally consisted of several years, has now shrunk to a few hectic weeks.³⁴ With the changing patterns of leisure activity, the tourist today, as is well known, is no longer confined to the upper classes and easily moves between one nation and another. However, modern-day tourism – especially the ‘package’ variety – has the propensity to only skim the surface of culture. City, or even country tours, which last only a few days tend to cram as much ‘culture’ as possible into these short sojourns. Sporting grand intentions of appreciation – though I would suggest that osmosis is the only conceivable way – the visitors agenda contains an inevitable list of ‘must see’ items which invariably consists of only the most popular historical artworks and architectural sites.

Leaving behind the familiarity of their own homes, the tourist in Italy embarks upon a circuit of rituals, where Medieval and Renaissance towns in their entirety, more than the individual museums, become the extended monument. A sightseeing tour bursting with cultural activity, an itinerary filled with sacred places, museums, Madonnas, crucifixions and gilded frames, where an untrained eye easily blurs the Medieval, Early and High Renaissance with

³¹ This comment is from the exhibition notes of *Photographs of the Grand Tour*, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, March 2001.

³² Corbin, *The Lure of the Sea*, pp. 41-7. See also the exhibition notes for ‘Rome on the Grand Tour’, no author cited. J. Paul Getty Museum, <http://www.getty.edu/news/exhibit/rome.html>, accessed 20/02/2002.

³³ Malkin, *The Pioneers*, p. 24.

³⁴ There are of course, exceptions. It is not uncommon for today’s youth having completed their tertiary education to travel through Europe for extended periods, as a modern-day extension of the grand tour.

Mannerism and the Baroque.³⁵ The heterogeneous audience ranging from enlightened to indiscriminate appear either absorbed by or oblivious to their surrounds. Confined by self-imposed schedules the tourist will have little time for the illustrious dead lining the walls and floors of churches, and be blind to the reconstructions in historic architecture reflecting centuries of alterations and restorations. The visitor overwhelmed by the magnitude of artworks may find only a few brief moments for contemplation in front of a select number of venerated images, objects or spaces. Theodor Adorno writes of Valéry and the Louvre,

Standing among the pictures offered for contemplation, Valéry mockingly observes that 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.³⁶

Through the legacy of the grand tour, Nick Merriman insists that ‘high’ culture leisure activities such as visiting museums and historic sites continues to hold cultural and aristocratic connotations.³⁷ Yet museums in Italy today have become so popular that they demand a strategic plan. The average tourist stay in Florence for example, lasts only two days. In that time it is logistically possible to visit an average of three museums from the sixty in Florence – not counting the city’s seventeen principal churches. With half a day spent queued for the Uffizi and half for Accademia, there is little time left for the other great collections. Museums like Palazzo Giustiniani and Villa Borghese in Rome, draw such extraordinary crowds that they only accept advance bookings and insist that the visitors negotiate the gallery in large groups following the exhaustive monologues of guides, which I will return to in my conclusion. These museums provide a one way trip, and there is no time for wandering.

After having waited in long queues the contemporary visitor has little time to ponder history. Shuffled along with fellow cultural devotees, groups of tourists of different nationalities, wearing brand name gym shoes and holiday destination T-shirts, peer over a sea of heads, necks craning as they search for the universally familiar icons. They are united by the past. Here art is revered

³⁵ Donald Home describes these rituals in detail in *The Great Museum, The Re-presentation of History*, Australia: Pluto Press Ltd, 1984, p. 11.

³⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, *Valéry Proust Museum*, Prisms, Neville Spearman Ltd., Great Britain, 1967, p. 176.

³⁷ Merriman, ‘Museum Visiting as a Cultural Phenomena’, *The New Museology*, p. 166.

for its historic value and its 'age-value', as Alois Reigl remarked. In discussing Reigl's theory of 'age-value' Bann describes,

'age-value' is quite different. It is a perceptible property of the building (or object) which is hardly mediated, for Reigl, by any special knowledge of art history. Consequently it can be registered by those who have no significant experience of high culture... it claims to address one and all and to possess universal validity. It rises above differences in education and in understanding of art.³⁸

I would include alongside 'age-value', the value of familiarity, as it is also the idea of 'recognition' – recognition of artworks through their countless reproductions – that tourists fervently pursue. Although the desire 'to recognise' may be the mainstay of today's tourism, it is as old as tourism itself. There have been many accounts written since the 18th century of this preoccupation. Goethe is one example, writing of the pleasure he experienced in seeing the 'original' of images he had so often seen in reproduction.³⁹ While Corbin writes of the dissolution from the high-minded, 'archetypal' adventure of the grand tour, into 'stereotypical' mass tourism, he also remarks that 'our generation, which is happy to follow the beaten path... returns rather curiously to some features of the classical model, being satisfied simply to recognize sites.'⁴⁰ I would argue that recognition provides the viewer with a sense of security in their own knowledge, and a link to their own past. Recognition represents comfort rather than challenge, and is often expressed with audible sighs as the viewer approaches an artwork, the image of which already resides in their own mind.

In discussing today's mass cultural consumption, David Lowenthal comments that it 'is no longer the presence of the past that speaks to us, but its pastness.'⁴¹ That is, viewers are more interested in the 'age-value' marketed by the culture industry, than the 'reality' symbolised by what that they are looking at, and what it evokes. However, Merriman more intimately describes that 'the specific popularity of museums and historic buildings must lie in a genuine wish to

³⁸ Stephen Bann, 'Views of the Past: Reflections on the Treatment of Historical Objects and Museums of History', *The Inventions of History: Essays on the representation of the past*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1990, p. 125.

³⁹ Goethe wrote in a letter to his mother in 1786 "I cannot tell you how much pleasure it gives me to see so many dreams and desires of my life fulfilled, in finally being able to contemplate the objects which since my youth I have seen in engravings and of which I have heard father tell so many times". Exhibition notes from *Photographs of the Grand Tour*.

⁴⁰ Corbin, *The Lure of the Sea*, p. 327.

⁴¹ Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, p. xvii.

come to terms with the past.⁴² I would suggest that by viewing the past the individual, perhaps subconsciously, senses their position in relation to both it and the world. By encountering the past and the cultural Other, viewers are in essence conceiving themselves through differentiation.⁴³

Viewing 'high' culture, for all its aristocratic pretensions, is now consumed at a formidable pace, with highlight tours that present a few well-known artworks and by-pass the majority of the museum's collection. There are many anecdotal references to the brevity of viewing art by museum visitors. Victor Burgin encapsulates these, writing that 'an official of a national art museum who followed visitors with a stop-watch found that an average of ten seconds was devoted by an individual to any single painting'.⁴⁴ Burgin's description – though it lacks specificity – echoes the general condition of viewing and engagement today. Although the viewer has authority over the time they spend in museums, they remain bound to the speed of consumption endemic in society. A society that, as Stewart suggests, 'locates history outside lived reality at the same time that it locates lived reality within the realm of consumer time'.⁴⁵ The viewer's time in the museum and their engagement with the past is generally reduced to a few moments of contemplation amidst a world of distraction. Furthermore, Stewart cites Guy Debord's remark that 'time for the consumption of images' is in correlation with 'the saving of time constantly sought by modern society...in the form of the speed of transport vehicles or in the use of dried soups'.

This 'instant soup' mentality is, I fear, indicative of the attitude that prevails amongst tourists, placing demands on the museums that inevitably must accommodate the instant gratification sought by their visitors. This express 'consumption' of the cultural past encourages art and history to be experienced on the move, a condition that has evolved with the developed world's desire to marvel at the birth, and re-birth of civilisation in Italy since the grand tour.

⁴² Merriman, 'Museum Visiting as a Cultural Phenomena', *The New Museology*, p. 168.

⁴³ John Frow remarks that tourism 'is closely bound up with the construction of a cultural Other.' John Frow, *Time and Commodity Culture: Essay in Cultural Theory and Postmodernity*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997, pp. 70-100.

⁴⁴ Burgin, 'Looking at Photographs', *Thinking Photography*, p. 152.

⁴⁵ Stewart cites Guy Debord from *The Society of Spectacle*, in *On Longing*, p. 85.

A Moving Experience

An artwork, or artworks, ability to seduce a viewer is reliant on many forms of physical, sensorial and intellectual stimulation. I have already canvassed many of the theories associated with viewing but now I turn to art's capacity to engage on a more intimate level. As I have discussed, art's detail, content, its magnitude, positioning, framing and context can combine to provoke an indefinable, inarticulable, sensual, physical or emotional response. Yet as Hooper-Greenhill suggests, 'The gut response to colour, the physical reaction to mass, the engagement with the visual that is both embodied and cerebral, remains mysterious.'⁴⁶ Other writers however, dismiss this type of response as the viewer's ineptness. Merriman remarks,

For those less well-equipped, misunderstanding and confusion are inevitable. A sense of being 'overwhelmed' is experienced and in their 'functional' habitus they seize on the material qualities of the work, such as size, colour, or subject.⁴⁷

I would argue though, that Merriman's comment reduces the viewing of art to a one-dimensional experience, negating the complexity of art's context and the engagement of the viewer's senses. Here, he dismisses the experiential possibilities that are abundant in the museum environment, and refuses to acknowledge that even the 'well-equipped' can be overwhelmed by a sense of beauty, or contact with history 'in the flesh'. I would suggest, that the response to the materiality of art is not a matter of academic propensity, but more often relies on a genuine involvement. Merriman's inclination here is similar to Adorno, who wrote that 'people become hopelessly lost in the galleries, isolated in the midst of so much art'.⁴⁸ However, I don't see their isolation as being 'hopeless' but rather as part of the euphoric potential that is conjured by the intensity of these spaces.

With this sense of intensity and euphoria I return to the historic centres of Italy, where visual culture has thrived since the Holy Roman Empire. For Italians, as Alberto Ronchey, the recent Italian minister for culture comments, who live amongst the history, it has always been there, and it always will be.⁴⁹ However, for the tourist who has not been eternally surrounded by Italy's

⁴⁶ Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*, p. 4.

⁴⁷ Merriman, 'Museum Visiting as a Cultural Phenomena', *The New Museology*, p. 163.

⁴⁸ Adorno, *Valéry Proust Museum*, p. 177.

⁴⁹ 'Italy's heritage: An embarrassment of riches', no author cited, *The Economist*, USA: Dec 24, vol. 333, no. 7895, 1994, p. 53-5.

extraordinary objects of art and history, it is transitory. The saturation of historic visual imagery, the opulence of the Renaissance age being only one example, creates a stinging awareness of the past. The presence of the historic and exotic Other, coupled with the experiences of tourism – searching for a sense of escape, visiting foreign locations, free from mundane responsibilities and divorced from the everyday – initiates a liminal experience, as Carol Duncan describes, ‘to move beyond the psychic constraints of mundane existence, step out of time, and attain new, larger perspectives’.⁵⁰

The secular and sacred spaces of Renaissance museums and churches offer both a sanctuary, and a saturation of the senses that transcend everyday existence, a contradictory environment of touristic chaos and of private contemplation. Scholars and tourists alike travel inordinate distances to pay homage to famous artworks by artists who have gained ‘celebrity’ status. Despite the crowded galleries the viewer stands in awe, entranced by the past, its art and history. Although the experience of an artwork unfolds in a few fleeting moments it is a seductive pleasure, an instinctual, unarticulable communion. Kenneth Clarke wrote that art has the ability to

produce in us a kind of exalted happiness. For a moment there is a clearing in the jungle: we pass on refreshed, with our capacity for life increased and with some memory of the sky.⁵¹

Both an experience of joy and loss, unable to fully grasp its essence in any tangible way, this experience becomes elusive, filled with thoughts and feelings that are never fully realised. Imagination has much to do with the experience of art as the viewer opens themselves to the past, the journey of the artwork and the time of the artist. Derrida proposes that ‘the imagination, being intermediate between sensibility and understanding’ exists between the limits of ‘comprehension’ and ‘apprehension’.⁵² It is at these vertiginous edges that I suggest the viewer experiences liminality. A sensory experience beyond intellectual bounds, liminality hovers in the moment of transition between the knowledge of the everyday and the overwhelming sensorial appreciation of the extraordinary. Liminality fully resides in the senses, an exciting feeling of lightness, of *almost* understanding, yet not knowing what is being understood.

⁵⁰ Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, p. 12.

⁵¹ Kenneth Clark, ‘The Ideal Museum’, *ArtNews*, vol. 52, New York: ARTnews Associates, January, 1954, p. 29.

⁵² Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, p. 140

Derrida speaks of this 'indeterminacy, the indefiniteness...[when] faced with an essentially sensory experience.'⁵³

The museum facilitates this extreme state. The viewer, in engaging with historic objects is never fully located either in the past or the present, they wander through these 'overlapping temporalities': between the original time of the artwork and the time of viewing.⁵⁴ Unable to fully comprehend the past, the viewer succumbs to experience. Derrida describes Kant's discussion of Savary's *Letters*.

when the imagination attains its maximum and experiences the feeling of its impotence, its inadequacy to present the idea of a whole, it falls back, it sinks, it founders into itself... And this abyssal fall-back does not leave it without a certain positive emotion: a certain transference gives it the wherewithal to feel pleased at this collapse... when "the spectator enters for the first time into the Church of Saint Peter in Rome". He is "lost" or struck with "stupor."⁵⁵

There are other reports of physical and emotional responses to art and architecture. This euphoria, beyond our intellectual grasp, resembles Stendhal's now famous brush with beauty. In 1817, the French novelist experienced an intensity of emotion when visiting the tombs of Michelangelo, Machiavelli, Dante and Galileo, in the church of Santa Croce in Florence that culminated in a trance-like state (fig.50). He described the effects of too much art as a physical bombardment. Stendhal wrote in his travel diary,

The tide of emotion which overwhelmed me flowed so deep that it scarce was to be distinguished from religious awe.
I underwent... the profoundest experience of ecstasy that, as far as I am aware, I ever encountered through the painter's art. My soul, affected by the very notion of being in Florence, and by the proximity of those great men whose tombs I had just beheld, was already in a state of trance. Absorbed in the contemplation of *sublime beauty*, I could perceive its very essence close at hand; I could, as it were, feel the stuff of it beneath my fingertips. I had attained to that supreme degree of sensibility where the *divine imitations* of art merge with the impassioned sensuality of emotion. As I emerged from the porch of *Santa Croce*, I was seized with a fierce palpitation of the heart... the well-spring of life was dried up within me, and I walked in fear of falling to the ground.⁵⁶

⁵³ Ibid., p. 102.

⁵⁴ Here I borrow Corbin's term, *The Lure of the Sea*, p. 144.

⁵⁵ Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, p. 142.

⁵⁶ Stendhal, *Rome, Naples and Florence*, Richard N. Coe, trans., London: Calder, 1959(1817), pp. 301-2. While I acknowledge that the monumental works Stendhal encountered are in fact neoclassical, it is his response that interests me here.

Stendhal has not been alone in his palpitations. The 19th century critic John Ruskin, Elkins reports, 'felt exhilarated, even after he was struck to the floor by the sheer power of the paintings', writing that he 'talks as if the paintings made him drunk.'⁵⁷ Florentine hospitals have documented more than a dozen cases a year of this condition, now commonly referred to as 'Stendhal syndrome', since 1982. According to Professor Graziela Magherini, a leading psychiatrist in Florence, Stendhal syndrome is considered a psychiatric condition. It includes symptoms of disorientation, dizziness, depression, exhaustion and losing one's sense of identity, which are reputedly triggered by an over-exposure to the beauty of Florence and all its art treasures.⁵⁸ The viewer's experience of art combined with the sacrosanct spaces of the churches and the museums is magnified through the experiences associated with travel. Roy Malkin less clinically describes Stendhal syndrome as the effects of 'the stress of travel and the encounter with a city like Florence haunted by ghosts of the great, death and the perspective of history.'⁵⁹ Yet more than a weakness created by travel, viewing art and the past can be a delicate emotional and sensual transaction, as Elkins concludes from Magherini's investigation, even those 'most closely programmed by the tourist industry, are still feeling things that are incited by the works themselves.'⁶⁰

As only a tiny minority of visitors succumb to Stendhal syndrome, Magherini surmises that most tourists are immune to such overpowering responses to the beauty of art, as they are too busy in their sight-seeing to be emotionally susceptible. She proposes that it is only the 'extra-sensitive' that will suffer, as opposed to the intellectual, when faced with the 'one of the most overwhelming cities in the world'. But I would have to ask, must one exclude the other, is it not possible to be both intelligent and sensitive? Surely Stendhal as an author, would have been considered an intellectual, thereby contradicting Magherini's comments, as well as Merriman's.

Viewing Renaissance art can evoke a sense of pleasure, or produce feelings of rapture not unlike those experienced while listening to music, perhaps akin to

⁵⁷ James Elkins, *Pictures and Tears: A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings*, New York and London: Routledge, 2001, p. 172.

⁵⁸ Prof. Graziela Magherini quoted in Malkin's article, *The Pioneers*.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁶⁰ Interestingly, Elkins suggests that the beginnings of Stendhal syndrome 'coincide well with the rise of bourgeois tourism.' Elkins, *Pictures and Tears*, pp. 44-54.



50-51. Michelangelo's tomb, Santa Croce.

what Barthes described as 'jouissance'.⁶¹ Curiously, in a similar vein to Stendhal's syndrome, there is another experiential phenomenon that is reported to occur in front of historical artworks in Italy, 'Rubens syndrome'.⁶² A recent research project undertaken in the museums of Italy has found that twenty percent of the visitors surveyed 'had embarked on an "erotic adventure" in a museum'.⁶³ Although originally named after the Flemish painter's sensual nudes, this interesting response is elicited by other works of the time. Rubens syndrome offers another overwhelming 'emotional arousal'. It is reported by Jonathon Turner to be

a spontaneous response to the beauty of art and that those who are afflicted by it do not enter a museum with sex specifically on their minds. ... [however] a viewer calmly taking in a work of art is particularly predisposed to erotic suggestion.⁶⁴

There are a number of complex issues at stake in the making of these 'syndromes': the contexts of viewing, the historiography and the intensity of the past with its myriad of artists, viewers and writers. Perhaps however, Stendhal was merely responding to the original intentions of the Renaissance artists, as Alberti epitomised in 1435, that 'the painter's task was to "move the soul of the viewer"'.⁶⁵ Even in today's hastier age, where the tourist may be less inclined to linger, to sink into the reverie evoked by the art and history, Elkins maintains that pictures can still 'pull at us, tugging us a little out of this world'.⁶⁶ Although not all succumb to the extreme liminality experienced by Stendhal, some viewers do manage to not just 'see' art, but engage with it, get involved with it, and lose themselves in it. Even today there is a solitary red rose reverently placed on the tomb of Michelangelo (fig.51). Although the cameras flash and whirr, there remains both respect and reverie for the architects of Renaissance beauty.

⁶¹ John Walker and Sarah Chaplin, *Visual Culture: An Introduction*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997, p. 158.

⁶² Though it should be noted that since the 1860s there have been prostitutes working in the Louvre. Sassoon, *Mona Lisa*, p. 51.

⁶³ Jonathan Turner, 'Pickup Artists', *ARTnews Online*,

http://www.artnewsonline.com/currentarticle.cfm?type=department&art_id=1000, accessed 4/10/2001.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ The English translation of Alberti's quote is cited in *Visual Culture: An Introduction*, p. 154.

⁶⁶ Elkins, *Pictures and Tears*, p. 54.

4. Impossible Gaze

Photographing the interiors of the Palazzo Pitti with their delectable textures and archaic walls adorned with red and gold brocade allowed me to see and experience the extraordinarily rich detail of this distinguished residence. The carved and gilded ceilings display coats of arms and family crests, lions, bees, fleur d'Lys and mythical creatures, all symbolic references which provide a sumptuous display of art and decoration that testifies to the illustriousness of past inhabitants. In these rooms the walls are hung with banks of extravagantly ornate gilded frames that overshadow the age darkened paintings they support. There are so many paintings hung one above the other, so high on the walls that viewing with any serious intent is impossible. The guided pathways lead through seemingly endless corridors and rooms. The ever-receding doorways picturesquely frame each other as well as details of the art hung in the succeeding room, ever enticing the viewer forward, leading them through the rooms of the museum like the streets that lure Benjamin's flâneur.¹ Here the Renaissance paintings of Christ and the saints are in the company of a crowd of Madonnas, mercenaries on horseback and scantily clad soldiers, not to mention the myriad of contemporary viewers

The occasional plastic stackable chair, although incongruous in these ancient vaults, is a welcome reprise for the weary and footsore viewer. Their sight and mind fatigued from looking, the details of the patterned wall fabric, intricate inlaid marble floors, fluted half-columns and gilded friezes are too much for the eyes to devour in a passing glance. Overwhelmed by these exorbitant surroundings that whisper of past lives, the viewer succumbs to both the beauty and the weight of it all. After this temporary time-travel into the past they are coaxed back into the present by the souvenir postcards and catalogues on display in the museum shop, and then complete the ritual with an obligatory 'snap' on the front steps testifying to the visit. On leaving the museum the viewer continues their Renaissance experience,

¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Tiedemann ed., Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin trans., Rolf Cambridge, London: Belknap Press, 1999, p. 416.

strolling through the piazzas and past the fountains, choosing fruit at the local market and returning to varying grades of accommodation to contemplate the day.

A visit to Palazzo Pitti, as described here, raises the concerns of this chapter and my exhibition, *Impossible Gaze*. It is my intention here to further illuminate the complexity of the museum experience by discussing the relocation of artworks to new contexts, museum history, and the more recent developments in Italian museums. This chapter also explores the museum as a contemporary tourist destination and looks more specifically at present-day Florence to identify some of the recent trends in public museums in Italy, cultural tourism and the experience of authenticity. However, before proceeding to these issues I will examine *Impossible Gaze* (the final exhibition for this doctorate) in more detail, and outline the ideas specific to these photographs. This work explores the layering of art and architecture with its excessive decoration, as well as the weight of people and their pasts that I find still present in the museum environment today.

The images in *Impossible Gaze* are created in the public galleries of Palazzo Pitti, Museo Nazionale del Bargello and the Galleria degli Uffizi. They follow the gaze of the viewer in these palatial museum environments. Through my images I propose that these spaces and their decoration are as significant in the creation of the viewer's experience as the great artworks they hold, as I shall argue in this chapter. Italian Renaissance museums are spaces with very specific contexts, places where the presence of the past is tangible. These historic buildings now inhabited as public museums have undergone four centuries of reconstructions, renovations and re-decorations. They offer a visually dense culture that undeniably enriches the viewing experience.

This historic architecture with its opulent interiors appears incongruous with recent refurbishment and modern service demands. For example, the contemporary aesthetics of stainless steel and glass designs utilised in the museum cafés are now also part of the visitors' experience, a homogenising décor of current global styles that leaves the viewer in strangely familiar surroundings.² This blended architecture provides the backdrop for the residing collections. Here Renaissance art is hung amongst Medieval and Mannerist

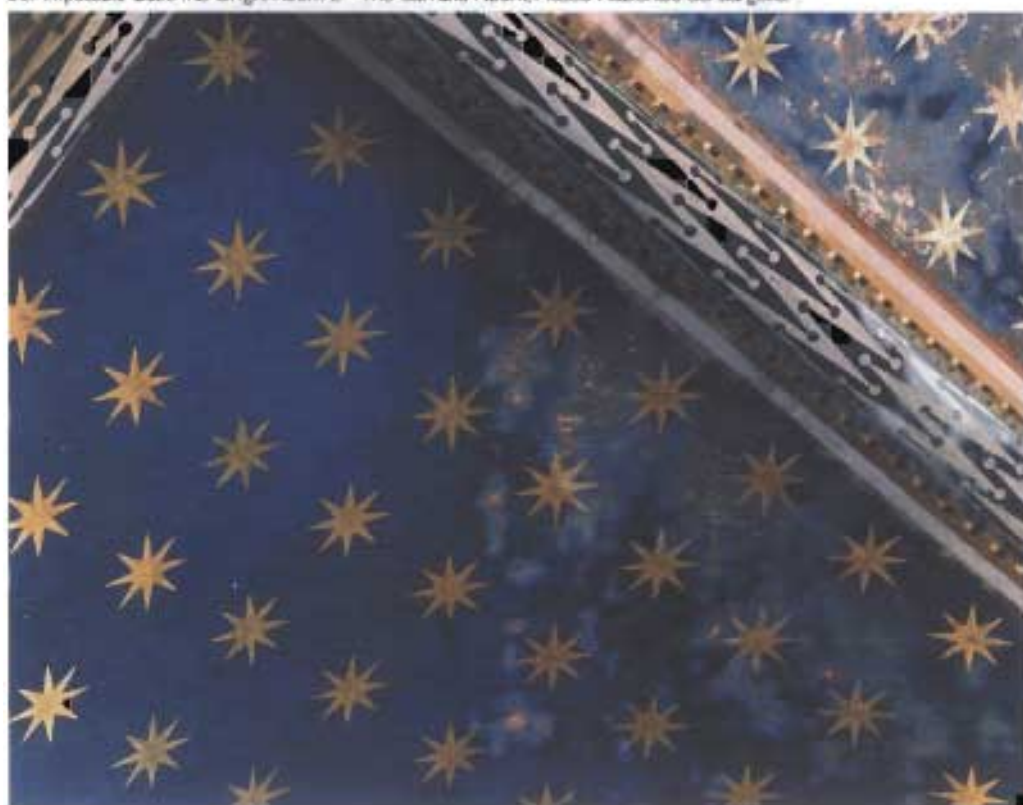
² Florence's Museo dell'Opera is a good example with its chic new interiors built with ultra modern materials.

4. Impossible Gaze



52. Impossible Gaze #1. Origin: Room II – Sala del Trono [Throne Room], Appartamenti Reali, Palazzo Pitti.

53. Impossible Gaze #2. Origin: Room L – The Camand Room, Museo Nazionale del Bargello.





54. Impossible Gaze #3. Origin: Room 5-6 - International Gothic.
Detail: Lorenzo Monaco, Coronation of the Virgin, 1414. Galleria degli Uffizi

55. Impossible Gaze #4. Origin: Room XII - The Red Room, Appartamento del Re, Appartamento Reale, Palazzo Pitti





56. Impossible Gaze #5. Origin: Room 26 – Raphael and Andrea del Sarto. Detail: Andrea del Sarto, *Madonna of the Horpies*, 1517, Galleria degli Uffizi.

57. Impossible Gaze #6. Origin: Room II – Sala del Trono [Throne Room], Appartamenti Reali, Palazzo Pitti.

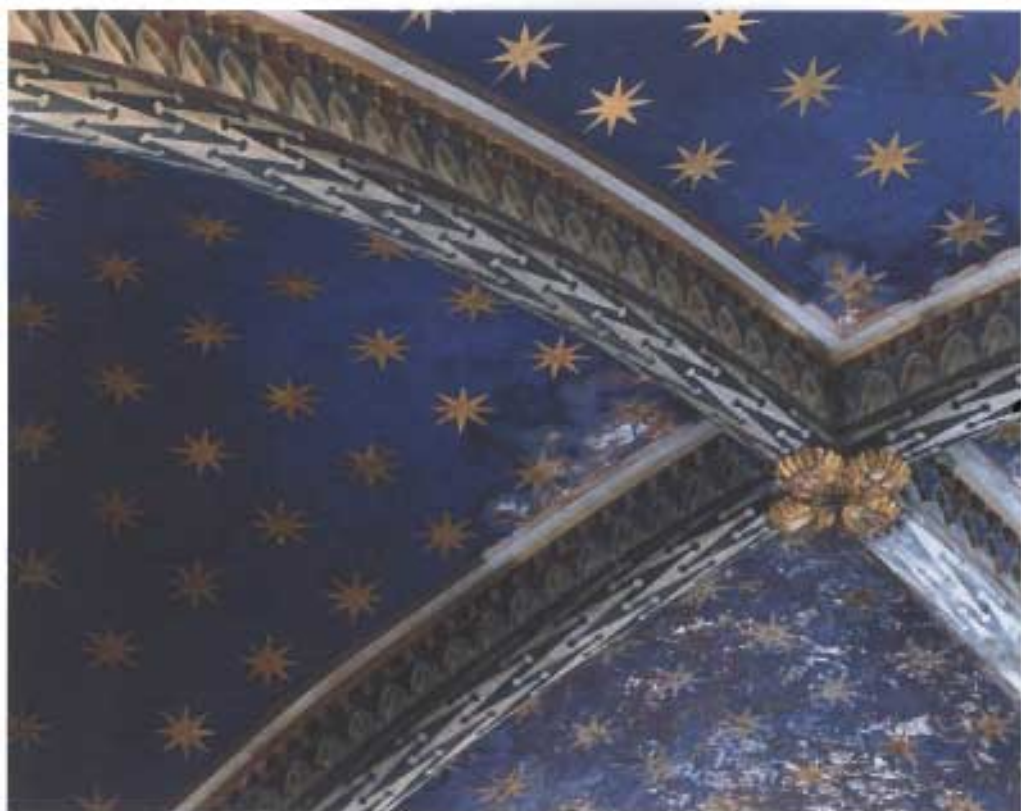




58. Impossible Gaze #7, Origin Room II - Sala del Trono [Throne Room], Appartamenti Reali, Palazzo Pitti.

59. Impossible Gaze #6, Origin Room X - Appartamento del Re [King's Bedroom], Appartamenti Reali, Palazzo Pitti.

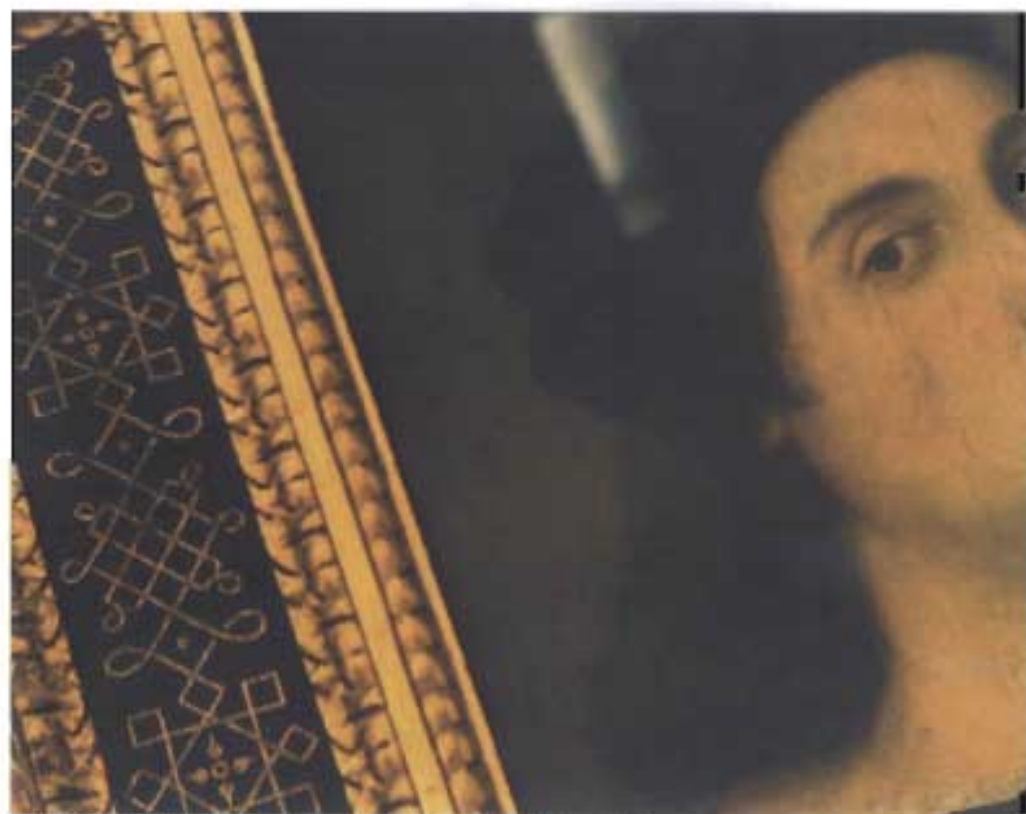




60. Impossible Gaze #9. Origin: Room L – The Carrand Room, Museo Nazionale del Bargello

61. Impossible Gaze #10. Origin: Room XII – The Red Room, Appartamento del Re, Appartamenti Reali, Palazzo Pitti





62. Impossible Gaze #11. Origin: Room 26 – Raphael and Andrea del Sarto. Detail: Raphael, Self-Portrait, (1506, Galleria degli Uffizi).

63. Impossible Gaze #12. Origin: Room 26 – Sala di Marte [Mars Room], Galleria Palatina, Palazzo Pitti.





64. Impossible Gaze #13. Origin: Room 5-6 – international Gothic.
Detail: Lorenzo Monaco, Coronation of the Virgin, 1414, Galleria degli Uffizi.

65. Impossible Gaze #14. Origin: Room II – Sala del Trono [Throne Room], Appartamenti Reali Palazzo Pitti.





66. Impossible Gaze #15. Origin: Room X – Appartamento del Re [King's Bedroom], Appartamenti Reali, Palazzo Pitti

67. Impossible Gaze #16. Origin: Room XII – The Red Room, Appartamento del Re, Appartamenti Reali, Palazzo Pitti.





68 Impossibile Gove #17. Origin: Room 27 – Sala di Apollo [Apollo Room], Galleria Palatina, Palazzo Pitti.

69 Impossibile Gove #18 Origin: Room XVI – Tapestry Room, Appartamento Reale, Palazzo Pitti.



works, and is continuously interwoven with the preceding and succeeding styles of furniture, furnishings and ornamentation. This environment reaffirms that the Renaissance is not a break with the past, or a single entity, but part of a continuum that is contextualised by the surrounding periods. The changes from one artist to another, and one period to the next mark the social and artistic continuity of inseparable pasts. Late Gothic to Early Renaissance, High Renaissance to Baroque and Romantic artworks all reflect the traces of successive generations of art collectors.

Entering the hallways of what were once contemporary cathedrals and private palaces the visitor is surrounded. No cornerstone left unadorned, every inch of wall, floor and ceiling space is crammed with decoration – an assault upon post-modern tastes. Curved and triangular pediments cover the doorways, windows and niches, and console tables interrupt the composition of frescoes, while the vaulted ceilings and architectural elements are barely distinguishable from their *trompe l'œil* replications – here again Raffaello's *Stanza* in the Vatican provides an excellent example. The devotional paintings and portraits with recurring *putti* and flowing robes are in deep gilded frames, surrounded by marble fireplaces and sumptuous tapestries. Heavy drapes once used to conceal warmth now serve as a reminder of former daily habitation. The decorative floral swags, acanthus leaves and shells echo the furniture legs, chair backs and armrests. No longer animated by use, the gilded chairs are covered with polyurethane. Amongst the grandeur, patches of near threadbare wall coverings, and frescoes with areas of water damage and lost pigment explicitly communicate the abrading effects of time.

Presented amongst the Baroque decoration of the Palazzo Pitti, its Galleria Palantina and Royal Apartments, each artwork and object is afforded no separate space for contemplation, but is immersed in the interior decoration. *Impossible Gaze* depicts the palazzo's interiors, which are richly layered with textures and patterns on every surface from the elaborate wall-coverings, carpets and curtains, to the frescoed ceilings. This visually saturated environment I would argue, is an extension of the medieval aesthetic *horror vacui*, the 'fear of empty spaces'. *Horror vacui*, Ernst Gombrich describes is the 'urge which drives the decorator to go on filling any resultant void.' A particular aesthetic style, *horror vacui* leaves no architectural space free of design, decoration or ornament. The painted grotesques of earlier periods are accompanied by Renaissance tapestries, Baroque silk wall coverings and Mannerist paintings in

Palazzo Pitti. In these rooms mirrors are skilfully placed to reflect endless repetitions of symbolic, religious and allegorical motifs. Gombrich adds that with 'This method of successive enrichment or elaboration... Maybe the term *amor infiniti*, the love of the infinite, would be a more fitting description.'³ In discussing this desire for 'richness and splendour' Gombrich remarks,

that inner worth should be acknowledged by an appropriate display of outward show. Not only the splendours of kings and princes, but also the power of the sacred has been universally proclaimed by pomp and circumstance... there can never be too much of love and sacrifice expended on respect and veneration... [here] decoration is seen as a form of celebration...⁴

These elaborate rooms are punctuated by contemporary lighting, museum signage indicating visitors' routes and emergency exits (fig.75). The humidity and temperature monitors and laser-beam security guard against visitors, keeping their curiosity, lumbering bags and body heat at a safe distance from the artworks and furnishings. Even the velvet curtains are protected by silk netting, while the burgundy silk cords foil any desire to caress the luxurious surfaces. My sensuous images rekindle their palpability yet offer no tactile gratification. Although the viewer cannot touch the objects in my photographs they can, as Sobchack proposes, feel their 'texture and weight'.⁵

Impossible Gaze creates an intense visual experience. It concentrates on the sensorial act of viewing. This work constructs much more than the communion between the viewer's eye and the singular artwork by alluding to the other senses that come into play in this environment. Here I am exploring the multi-sensorial experience of visiting Renaissance museums. Ironically, Baudrillard suggests that 'To make an image of an object is to strip the object of all its dimensions one by one: weight, relief, smell, depth, time, continuity and, of course, meaning.'⁶ Yet in my photographs these are the very qualities that I call upon. My images are 'haptic' in that, as Laura Marks explains, they 'engage the viewer tactilely'.⁷ In *The Skin of the Film*, Marks elaborates on the difference between optical and haptic vision.

Haptic looking tends to move over the surface of its object rather than to plunge into illusionistic depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern

³ E.H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1979, p. 80.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁵ For more on the senses refer to Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*.

⁶ Baudrillard, *Fotografien*, pp. 130.

⁷ Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000, p. 22.

texture. It is more inclined to move than to focus, more inclined to graze than to gaze...

While optical perception privileges the representational power of the image, haptic perception privileges the material presence of the image.⁸

This materiality is brought to the fore in *Impossible Gaze* as my lens dwells on the delicate textures belonging to history and re-presents them in the fragile form of photographic paper. Importantly, as Marks notes, that depending on the viewer's 'own sensoria' they will experience these images, both the original interiors, and mine differently.⁹

Generations of past viewers are signalled by the material surfaces represented in my photographs. There are countless people etched into the fabric of these buildings. Their rooms, now animated in a different way from the past, are crowded with visitors clutching guidebooks, city maps and museum catalogues. These galleries witness the secreted life of artworks, an industry that takes place under constant surveillance and monitoring, without the viewer's knowledge and never in their presence. Outside the museum's visiting hours the art handlers are ghostly figures with ladders that dust, pack, move, vacuum and hang, reordering the museum space and displays. In navigating the rooms of the museums it is not uncommon to find traces of their activity; plaques or empty frames in place of paintings, indicating their transferral to conservation departments, where they are assigned a priority status for restoration, or to be packed for loan to another institution (fig.14-21). Censored from the public eye are the scores of conservators busily revealing vibrant pigment under centuries of grime, candle smoke and dust, exposing the layers of previous restorations and mending the damages caused by storage, time and atmospheric conditions.

The layering of time evident in the royal apartments of Palazzo Pitti is less palpable in the more discreet interiors of the Uffizi and Bargello. In the Uffizi, art history unfolds through the museums orderly, chronological hanging arrangement – the skeleton that defines art's evolution and provides a structure and context in which the viewer can engage with each work. This chronology reinforces the continuity of artistic periods with few conspicuous divisions. Given the paths laid out in museums the chronological layout is designed to

⁸ Ibid., pp. 162-3.

⁹ Ibid., p. 23. Interestingly Marks cites Berenson's assertion 'that the quality most essential to painting [for Florentine Renaissance painters] was "the power to stimulate the tactile consciousness".' Ibid., p. 165.

instruct the viewer in the stylistic progression of art and the evolving complexities of both technique and subject matter. Yet it is easy for the viewer to disrupt the Uffizi's intentions by choosing their own path, threading back and forth through the maze of history. Although the museum encourages the viewer to 'make meaning', assisting them with written guides and floor plans designed by the cumulative efforts of historians, curators and conservators, the visitor inevitably constructs their own narrative, as Duncan suggests,

in reality, people continually "misread" or scramble or resist the museum's cues to some extent; or they actively invent, consciously or unconsciously, their own programs according to all the historical and psychological accidents of who they are.¹⁰

Adhering to the sense of time and continuity exposed in *Before the Museum*, *Impossible Gaze* also brings the viewer 'face to face' with the past. Both the artworks and adornment of this environment are the pre-mechanised, unique and the handcrafted, all of which contribute to the aura and authenticity so debated by Benjamin, which I will return to later in this chapter. The colour of pigment and fabric, the textures of lustrous gilding and threadbare seams, the inevitable wear and obvious repairs weave an intricate pattern of individuals, culture, craftsmanship and history. The creators of these interiors, layered with Medieval, Renaissance, Baroque and Rococo details, are immortalised by every carved acanthus leaf and every stitch of brocade. The fabric-covered walls, extravagant frames, and fragments of paintings; their warped panels, over-painting, pentimenti, sgraffito, brushstrokes and gilding, their surface texture and restorations trace the histories of human hands. The chipped furniture with upholstery that is worn and cracked, the stains and frayed edges revealed in the photographs signal that time has helped author their appearance. These decorated surfaces are inscribed with the weight of the past and echo the presence of earlier lives. The entire visual field in the interiors of Renaissance palazzi speaks implicitly of the humanity that created it.

As photographer in this environment, my position changes from the distant observer evidenced in *Before the Museum*, to the active viewer in *Impossible Gaze*. Seizing on fragments of artworks and objects layered with wall, floor and ceiling decoration, this exhibition shifts the viewer's focus to the spaces in-between the historic artworks. In this body of work the in-between becomes

¹⁰ Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, p. 13.

the centrepiece. To explore more fully the experience of viewing in the museum environment *Impossible Gaze* returns to the activity of the gaze and the glance discussed in Chapter 2, and effectively reverses their roles. By focussing on the more ephemeral and ambulatory aspects of the glance in the museum, I have immobilised it for a new viewer's gaze. The intuitive and idiosyncratic experience of museum viewing is made up of incessant ocular movement over walls and objects, through rooms and between artworks. My images express Bryson's observation that the path of the glance 'is irregular, unpredictable, and intermittent'.¹¹ Here again I intimate the notion of human vision (from Chapter 2), approximating the viewer's line of sight as they move through the corridors of the museum. I trace what lies in the path of their glance. My lens directs the attention of new viewers to the peripheral details in this environment.¹²

Impossible Gaze follows the direction and movement of the viewer's eyes as they traverse the museum, occasionally repeating imagery to represent the glance's continual mapping of space. Here the eye uses two types of vision to process information, foveal and peripheral.¹³ Elkins describes peripheral vision as what happens at 'the blurriest margins of the field of vision.' Objects seen 'peripherally are not just blurry but also differently proportioned. They are distorted and hallucinatory, and they need motion in order to exist'.¹⁴ Whilst perceiving objects in motion, vision occurs in a stream of continuity, constantly pulled between proximity and distance, and oscillating through the gaze and the glance. This idea of motion in the museums is important as it intimates both the different activities of vision, as well as expressing the ephemerality of viewing. Bryson suggests the transient, and often sideways, mobile demands of the glance are opposed to the duration of an immobilised gaze, which generally occurs straight ahead, 'prolonged' and 'contemplative'.¹⁵ Ross Harley refers to the idea of visual perception while moving, or 'perception-in-movement', as a 'motion landscape'.¹⁶ Harley also describes this 'mobilised vision' as a 'multi-sensorial experience', where the effects of looking

¹¹ Bryson, 'The Gaze and the Glance', *Vision and Painting*, p. 121.

¹² The idea of tracing the path of the viewer's gaze on paintings has also been undertaken in the exhibition 'Telling Time' at the National Gallery in London, in conjunction with the Applied Vision Research Unit at the University of Derby. <http://ivs.derby.ac.uk/gallery/updates.shtml>, accessed 11/12/2001.

¹³ Professor Margaret Livingstone of Harvard University quoted in, 'Mona Lisa smile secrets revealed', no author cited, *BBC News Online*, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/2775817.stm>, accessed 18/2/2003.

¹⁴ Elkins, *The Object Stares Back*, pp. 99-100.

¹⁵ Bryson, 'The Gaze and the Glance', *Vision and Painting*, pp. 93-6.

¹⁶ Ross Rudesch Harley, *Motion landscapes: a video-essay on panoramic perception*, Sydney: Thesis (DCA), University of Technology, Sydney, 1999, p. 32.

while moving involve ‘the body in panoramic perception’.¹⁷ This engagement of the senses enables the viewer to not only navigate the museum but to viscerally experience the space they inhabit. The viewer can feel for example, the cold, smoothness of the stone floor, and sense the weight of the timber beneath the gilded frames and the softness of the velvet upholstery. They can smell and taste the mixture of scents in the age-laden air, and hear the cooing of other viewers and their shuffling feet.

Impossible Gaze plays not only with the viewer’s eye but also their body movement as they wander through the corridors. Constricted by the confined spaces or guided pathways the viewer is often forced to look at artworks from obscure angles with tilted heads and craning necks. These photographs intimately express the dynamics of vision with its vertiginous and disorienting optical illusions. Through the use of close-ups, which are intended to impress the proximity of subject to the viewer, and acute camera angles these photographs assimilate looking in this environment, and dislocate the frontal viewpoint generally associated with viewing art.¹⁸ My images toy with today’s familiarity with ‘linear perspective vision’, where, as Robert Romanyshyn describes, the size of an object in a flat image ‘represents the distance from the perceiver... Things become smaller as they recede from the viewer.’ Romanyshyn suggests that we have become accustomed to the conventions of looking at the world in this way, as if through a camera lens. Yet more significant than the technical aspects of representation, Romanyshyn states that since the Renaissance and

Alberti’s codification of the laws of linear perspective vision inaugurates a psychology of distance between the eye of mind and the flesh of the world... a geometrization of vision which began as an invention and became a convention, a cultural habit of mind.¹⁹

Alongside this angle-of-view, the image size, grain structure, method of display, labels, and most significantly the exposure times of each photograph are integral to the construction of this exhibition – as they were in *Before the Museum*. The large size (1m x 1.2m) and intense colour of these images again are crucial. They allow the finest details of each photographed subject, each

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 52.

¹⁸ For more on the anamorphic perspective see Leader, *Stealing the Mona Lisa*, p. 136.

¹⁹ Robert Romanyshyn, ‘The Despot Eye’, *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, David Michael Levin, ed., Berkeley: University of California Press, c1993, p. 349.

stitch and stain to be uncompromisingly and clearly seen. They express Benjamin's concept of the optical unconscious,

the enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear: it reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject...

Evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye – if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man.²⁰

The size of my images presents a scale unlike the miniaturised reproductions in books, and rebels against the confinement of the printed page. The fragile skin of the ultra-glossy photographic paper used in *Impossible Gaze*, emulates the delicate surfaces of the objects pictured, and the slow-speed, medium format film minimises the barrier caused by the film's grain structure. Unlike the distancing of *Before the Museum*, its clarity and detail lifts the photographic veil and invites the viewer for a closer inspection. Again (after many tests), I chose a film stock (Fujicolor Professional 160 NPS 120) that enhanced the colour saturation so that it acquired an almost hyper-real luminosity like the pure pigments used by Renaissance artists.

The photographs in *Impossible Gaze* are mounted on the gallery wall with polycarbonate corner-plates, a seamless system that protects the archival quality of the print while creating a flatness like the decoration they portray. Impossible to frame these images that are so contained and defined by their edges recalls Derrida's comment, that the frame 'in its purity...ought to remain colorless, deprived of all empirical sensory materiality.'²¹ This framelessness is a reflexive comment on the spectacular gilded frames that seek the viewer's attention within the photographs. Also in the construction of this exhibition I have chosen to adhere to the standard museum label hierarchy of title, artist, date, place and medium. I use this system not only as a way of attributing the original artists and their works as they appear in my images, but importantly, as a way of mapping the time and place in which they are viewed today. It is a mechanism for interweaving the present exhibition space with the original locations, and the past with the present. Like Knorr, I hope that my labels will draw the viewer in, and hold them before my images a little longer.

²⁰ Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', p. 236.

²¹ Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, p. 64.

The exposure times, used in the *Impossible Gaze* are excessively long, as demanded by the slow film combined with the low, ambient light conditions of the museum (fig.70). In this work, four or five minutes are required to render the detail to my film. It is a deliberate stare in comparison to *Before the Museum's* rapid blink. Since Nièpce, the inventors of photography have striven for instantaneity, as Paul Virilio states to '*reveal movement with a precision and a richness of detail that naturally elude the eye* [his italics].'²² Virilio writes of the 'speed of light' and the photographic speeds in which it is transmitted.

the innovation of photographic instantaneity, for its instantaneous image pretends to scientific accuracy in its details, the snapshot's image-freeze or rather *image-time-freeze* invariably distorts the witness's felt temporality, *that time is the movement of something created.*²³

However, my work deliberately disrupts this desire for 'photographic instantaneity' as this time I refuse the speed encouraged by technology. It is the extended time that passes in front of my camera's open shutter that signifies the time required to actually 'see' the contextual details of these museum environments.

Finally, these photographs reproduce an 'impossible gaze' not only because of the extended time-exposures, but also by virtue of the ever-flowing tide of museum visitors obstructing the viewer's field of vision and making concentration for any duration practically impossible. The viewers' gaze, mediated by the milling crowds, is rarely focused on one thing - not for the length and intensity of my lens - it is constantly interrupted by the activity, the movement and unassociated thoughts and images amongst the proliferation of images, their communication and consumption. A social spectacle, swarming with people engaged in the activity of viewing, albeit in varying degrees. It is paradoxically both a collective encounter and a solitary one, one of curiosity, confusion and contemplation that simultaneously elicit a sense of lightness, rejuvenation, exhaustion and loss.

²² Paul Virilio, *Vision Machine*, London: B. F. I. Pub, 1994, p. 21.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

Authenticating Architecture

Just as the framework of history, discussed above, forms the basis for the viewer's interpretation, engagement and response to artworks, so does the environment in which art is viewed. The location of artworks, either in original sites or re-located, their mode of display and juxtaposition with other works, their state, restored or deteriorating, contribute to the viewer's encounter. Here I will further discuss the changing physical contexts of historic art, with its many pasts and many viewers as they also are crucial in the construction of the encounter and importantly, as Crimp observes, the 'experience of the work is inseparable from the place in which the work resides.'²⁴

The number of Renaissance artworks that exist outside Italy bear witness to the downfall of kingdoms, the exile of dynastic rulers and personal bankruptcies. Once affluent and influential cardinals and private collectors alike had commissioned and bought artworks from their time's most pre-eminent artists. As their patrimony dwindled these treasures often journeyed onto the open market, occasionally finding their way into the hands of foreign aristocracy who in turn left their legacies for later generations. The most renowned example of this exchange are the paintings once belonging to an Italian prince, transported for an English King, Henry VI, then passed to a businessman, to a collector, and then to the French King, Louis XIV, whose royal collection eventually assembled in its palatial surroundings in 1793 became a museum open to the public – the Louvre.²⁵ As intimated here, an artwork's life may be long and varied, travelling from its place of origin and the hands of its creator, to courtly patron or church, to any number of collectors, to the museum and its curators. Not only would it have been gazed upon by countless notables of each era, but it would also have been handled by a team of conservators of varying expertise, applying a range of conservation techniques at various intervals throughout its life. Now the artwork finally rests before a contemporary audience, its convoluted journey and the history that it has witnessed betrayed by its still, mute surface.

Through similar circuitous routes what little Renaissance art has left Italy has found its way into the private and public galleries and museums of other

²⁴ Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins*, p. 167.

²⁵ Francis Haskell, *Past and Present in Art and Taste*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987, p. 142.



70. Ambient museum lighting.

71. Museums built as 'temples of culture'.



72. La Tribuna in the Uffizi housed the early Medici collections.
(Image reproduced from the Silabe Archives.)



nations. Collections of Italian quattrocento and cinquecento paintings are held in wealthy museums throughout the world, from the National Gallery and the Courtauld Institute in London, the Art Gallery and Museum at Kelvingrove, Glasgow, to the Frick collection and the Kimbell Art Museum in the United States, with even a few minor pieces travelling as far as our own Australian shores. Art is contextualised in many ways, not only by the museums that house it but also by the country and company it resides in. Situated in completely dissociated contexts, removed from all traces of the original historic fabric it was once part of, the singular Renaissance artwork becomes the representative of an entire period, and the viewer must rely exclusively on extrinsic material to contextualise its place in history.

In Italy however, it is the country in its entirety, which provides the greater context for viewing the Renaissance. There are numerous sources that cite Italy's possession of the majority of the world's cultural heritage, historical European architecture and visual arts.²⁶ This great wealth of visual culture that has remained in Italy, especially from Renaissance times – thanks to laws passed in 1602 forbidding works to leave Florence – has come to represent a phenomenal art entity, encompassing much more than the lineal presentation of artworks in museums and cultural institutions.²⁷ In Italy, the viewer's experience is not governed by singular objects but encompasses, and is enriched by the intricate and interwoven conditions of place, culture and institution. It is the experience of viewing art in this all-inclusive context that is best described by the critic and theoretician Quatremère de Quincy, in his *Lettres* of 1796. Daniel Sherman and Irit Rogoff discuss de Quincy's view that

only the entirety of the context surrounding the creation of a work of art could perform the educative functions that advocates of museums attributed to them. He calls Rome itself a museum, "immovable in its totality", and consisting of, in addition to actual monuments, "places, sites, mountains, quarries, ancient roads, the respective positions of ruined cities, geographic relationships, the connections between objects, memories, local traditions, still extant uses, parallels and comparisons that can only be carried out in the country itself."²⁸

²⁶ Italy is listed as having 43% of the world's cultural heritage and 4/5's of all historical European architecture and visual arts. This percentage appears in a Qantas Airline's *In Flight* magazine, December 1998. These figures, though they vary, are often quoted in a variety of publications.

²⁷ Since 1602 there have been official sanctions forbidding the removal of great works of art from Florence. Francis Haskell, *The Ephemeral Museum: Old Master Paintings and the Rise of the Art Exhibition*, Yale University Press, New Haven, London, 2000, p. 4. However, a law was introduced in the mid 1990s allowing Italy to send Italian 'masterpieces' around the world, as evidenced in the exhibition 'Firenze in Giappone' in 2001.

²⁸ Daniel J. Sherman and Irit Rogoff, *Museum Culture: Histories, Discourses, Spectacles*, Media & Society 6, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994, p. 127.

Although de Quincy doesn't discuss the temporal layering of architectural construction and reconstruction that viewers witness today, the viewer continues to be affected by this idea of 'totality', that the fabric of place and the less tangible aspects of culture significantly illuminate the artworks. In modern times the dis-assembled collections of Renaissance artworks and their removal and dispersal throughout the world destroys the possibility of retaining a complete picture and the potential meanings that this could generate. However, in Italy, Renaissance art often resides in the original site, specific to its creation. Housed in the ancient cathedrals and chapels, like Giotto's frescos in Assisi, or Donatello's sculptures in the niches of Orsanmichele, their historic backdrop contextualises them. These sites date from Roman to Medieval and Renaissance times, and have been variously left to ruin, rebuilt, restored or conserved. They have been constructed over centuries, like St Peter's basilica, originally consecrated in 326 AD, or the Florence's Duomo, begun in 1296 with its dome not complete until 1426.

Many of the frescoes and sculptures of the Renaissance have remained *in situ*, where they continue to belong to the rituals of everyday life. Kept in circulation through centuries of lived experience in the civic buildings, piazzas, palazzi, cathedrals, churches and monasteries. In their original surroundings works do not always need the qualification of the museum to remain in the eye of the public. Caravaggio's paintings in the chapels of the Roman churches of Santa Maria del Popolo or San Luigi dei Francesca never cease to draw the adulation of an unending stream of visitors. It is more often the case however, that historically important artworks are severed from their intended locations, even within Italy. Relocated to cultural institutions for their own protection as well as the enjoyment of innumerable visitors, artworks are re-contextualised. Even though closer to their origins, the Renaissance artworks displayed in Italian museums are still viewed in altered contexts. Fragmented frescoes chiselled from the walls of refectories, altarpieces removed from the sacred ambience of churches, paintings cut from their original frames, dismembered and reframed in later styles, their original function in everyday life is transformed with their placement in illuminated galleries and museological confines.

However, museums too are authenticating spaces. The museums and cultural institutions of Italy are the sentinels of the country's patrimony, not only providing an enduring architecture for historic art but also creating an

infrastructure and framework for its audiences.²⁹ The museum provides a distinct setting that allocates the artwork a function and status in accordance with its privileged surroundings, rescued from the destruction of time and politics. Wolfgang Ernst concurs, that art's 'relocation into a museum environment produces... a greater sense of presence (and hence interest) than its original location could elicit.'³⁰

The Italian Renaissance museum is a visual extravaganza and a privileged place for viewing. The restored architecture with its exquisite interiors is integrated into the fabric of the museum. The art is hung in spaces that have been judiciously furnished with all the museological devices to encourage the viewer to recognise and ascribe the importance of the works they behold. The architectural spaces occupied by the museums are visually consumed simultaneously with the artworks, contributing to, if not defining the viewer's experience, a physical manifestation of the past that enriches the viewer's visual and visceral perception. Museums, or 'temples of culture' as Newhouse dubs them, now recreate and inspire a sense of reverence once reserved for places of worship (fig.71).

From Private to Public Institution

As I have described, the museum offers both the architectural context in which the majority of works of art are embedded today, as well as the institutional infrastructure. It provides access to, and connections between, artworks and cultural heritage for the viewing public. The development of the museum, from its early private history to its present public institutional status, reflects the social changes and attitudes of each age. As Pearce explains,

the history of museums... plays a vital role in our effort to understand how and why we are as we are. The discussion has started from the assumption that museums and their collections are part of the creation of the philosophy of knowledge, and its history in the humanities and the sciences (if indeed, knowledge can be divided so tidily) and of the ways in which society at large is involved in this creation. We have inherited a complex structure, both theoretical and physical which is essentially social in character and which has therefore done its share towards the construction of social character.³¹

²⁹ In Italy there is a localisation policy that requires Renaissance artwork to be shown in Renaissance surroundings, and furthermore, advocates that local artists be shown in local museums, many of which are derived from donations of private collectors from the nineteenth century.

³⁰ Duro, *The Rhetoric of the Frame*, p. 6.

³¹ Pearce, *Museums, Objects & Collections*, pp. 115-6.

To further elucidate the viewing experience I will now map some of the elements of change and tension that are part of the museum. I consider these details particularly important, as they became concrete in Italy at the time of the Renaissance. Since then museums have played an important role in the development of Western culture. In addition, I find it both relevant and interesting to trace this early development as through the centuries artists, like myself, have explored and examined art in the collections of museums, and have inevitably drawn on this experience for their own practice. Nick Prior explains at length in *Museums and Modernity*, that 'the museum, in short, was the precondition for the development of modern art'.³²

The concept of the museum originated in the palazzi and courts of the Italian aristocracy during the time of the Renaissance.³³ The Medici collection of antique statues, busts and then contemporary paintings in Florence is considered to be the world's first museum (fig.72).³⁴ Although Newhouse notes that the 'historian Nikolaus Pevsner dates the word *museum* in its modern sense to the Italian collector Paolo Giocio in 1539, it did not enter the English language until 1683, in reference to the Ashmolean in Oxford.'³⁵ The depositories and *studiolo* of Italian royalty, housed the initial manifestation of the museum, familiarly known as the 'cabinet of curiosities'. Limited to a few privileged guests who delighted in the amalgamation of art, antiquities and artefacts, along with natural and scientific curios, this mélange of objects were displayed in private apartments while paintings were hung in the long corridors or galleries.³⁶ Their purpose then, as now, was to give pleasure, to entertain and to provide a place of study.³⁷

The earliest galleries were overcrowded and exhibited autonomous and unrelated artworks in an indiscriminate fashion. As the idea of the art-historical

³² Prior, *Museums and Modernity*, p. 10.

³³ The museum's history has been discussed by many, among them Pearce, *Museums, Objects & Collection*, p. 1., Vergo, *The New Museology*, pp. 1-2., and Donald Preziosi, 'Brain of the Earth's Body: Museums and the Framing of Modernity', *The Rhetoric of the Frame*, p. 100.

³⁴ Vincent Cronin, *The Florentine Renaissance*, London: Pimlico, 1992, p. 183.

³⁵ Newhouse, *Towards a New Museum*, p. 46.

Although the first museum, recorded in the 3rd century B.C., was the 'Museion' of Alexander the Great. Valerio Terraroli, ed., *The Great Museums of Italy*, Milan: Skira Editore, 2001, p. 9.

³⁶ 'The gallery (Italian: *Galleria*) developed as a distinct space of representation in tandem with the cabinet, the closet of curiosities which formed the basis to other types of museums.' Prior, *Museums and Modernity*, p. 15.

³⁷ Paula Findlen discusses early Italian museum history and Renaissance museums in depth in *Possessing Nature: museums, collecting, and scientific culture in early modern Italy*, Berkeley: University of California Press, c1994.

museum matured collections introduced chronological sequences to bind the heterogeneous fragments and portray the history of art.³⁸ The Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence was originally commissioned by Cosimo I de' Medici in 1560 as the magistrate's office, and by 1581 it housed the growing granducal collections that were eventually bequeathed by the last princess of the Medici family to the state in 1743. The Uffizi has drawn on this chronological methodology since 1770, when 'Grand Duke Leopold I of Tuscany ordered the modernisation of the Uffizi'.³⁹ I draw attention to the chronological arrangement again as it presents for the viewer not only a framework that reinforces the continuity of history, but also their position in relation to the past, at its zenith. Even today as the Uffizi continues to undergo renewal and renovation (fig.73,74) it chooses this 'guide book display' as the criteria for the arrangement of its collections, illustrating the specific collecting tendencies of the various members of the Medici family and subsequent Lorrain family. The current redevelopment of the Uffizi also makes way for the contemporary services and demands of the modern museum which accommodate 'an extraordinary range of cultural opportunities' for its audiences.⁴⁰

The early Italian collections, while symbolising their owner's humanist interests and erudition also exhibited their wealth, advanced their social standing and promoted their prestige, civic pride and family honour.⁴¹ The *amor infiniti* of their royal galleries, Prior explains, 'articulated...[a] conspicuous display and it is here that the princely gallery functioned as a celebration of the magnificence of the sovereign'.⁴² The contemporary audience's encounter with art in these museum environments continues to signify the prestige of its owner – once personal, now national. These characteristics of power, position and wealth have been variously attributed to the development of public museums up to and including today, where cultural wealth continues to be displayed as a matter of national pride and politics. As Duncan describes, the museum is a 'profoundly symbolic cultural object as well as a social, political, and ideological instrument'.⁴³

³⁸ Ernst, *The Rhetoric of the Frame*, p. 122.

³⁹ These details are discussed by Pearce, *Museums, Objects & Collection*, pp. 99-101., as well as Prior, *Museums and Modernity*, pp. 32-4, and in Caneva, Cecchi and Natali, *The Uffizi Guide to the Collections and Catalogue of all Paintings*, Italy: Scala, 1986.

⁴⁰ This Uffizi project is due for completion in 2004. The information quoted from the display panels at the Uffizi.

⁴¹ Burke, *The Italian Renaissance*, p. 97.

⁴² Prior, *Museums and Modernity*, pp. 16-20

⁴³ Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, p. 5. This is also discussed at length by Pearce, *Museums, Objects & Collections*, p. 100.

However, the history and development of each individual museum is dependent on the 'peculiarities of different national histories'.⁴⁴ For example, France's Louvre has 'appeared fully secular, public and national: a monument to democracy, civilisation and international cultural domination' since 1803, while Italy's lack of national unity proved to be an 'obstacle' in this regard until the end of 19th century.⁴⁵ The museums of Europe, like their Anglo-Saxon counterparts, have displayed their ambitions of national supremacy, ever since the time of the Medici. Moreover, the fundamental principle for Italian museums since the 18th century, has been the conservation of artworks. To preserve art, is necessary to ensure the representation of a venerable past, and keep it ever present.

While Great Britain began with the same aristocratic collections, their museums developed differently from those in Europe. With the execution of King Charles I, and rampant Puritanism in the 1600s devastating much of the countries cultural assets, there was a 'turn towards sobriety and abstinence [which] did not favour the kinds of centralised enactments of visual power that induced national collections in Europe.'⁴⁶ As a turn away from the ostentatious displays of wealth, the British art historian Francis Bacon, in conjunction with the Royal Society of London, declared that the museum should ultimately be for education. However, education in museums only thinly masked the pretensions of the empire, while at the same time cultivated the bourgeoisie. Art and museums became instruments of propaganda for social reform. Prior explains, 'As with education, industry, welfare and leisure, the art world cannot be understood in complete isolation from the patterns of governmental power.' In Great Britain, he states, by '1874, museums were believed to improve the moral health of the subordinate classes by improving their 'inner selves', their habits, manners and beliefs.'⁴⁷

According to J. van der Borg and P. Costa it was Italy's 'economic decline [that] helped to preserve the wealth of built heritage which forms the basis of the Italian cultural tourism product.'⁴⁸ It wasn't until the late 1940s that Italian museums, slower to develop than their British and American counterparts,

⁴⁴ Prior, *Museums and Modernity*, p. 7.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 40-5.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 65-83.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 43-50.

⁴⁸ Van der Borg and Costa, *Cultural Tourism in Europe*, p. 216.



73-74. Galleries of the Uffizi under renovation, 2001.

began developing new criteria and methodologies in museography, and because of the destruction wrought by bombs during World War II it was necessary to rebuild many Italian museums. The major architectural repairs had to be completed before the artworks, which had been held in storage for protection during the war, could be returned to display.⁴⁹ This period of renovation enabled much more than the physical rebuilding, it became a significant time in which to rethink and restructure the museum. Dalai Emiliani declares that it marked the 'the end of a museographical model that had resisted all pressure for change from the time of Umberto I to the end of the fascist regime.'⁵⁰ Huber's account of Italian museography in the 1950s discusses the development and innovation taken up by museums, 'in a way that cannot be repeated this century, the belated but extraordinary contribution made by Italy to museography [was] from immediately after the war to the mid sixties.'⁵¹

Since this post-war period, monumental buildings and historic sites in Italy, both private and public, were adapted and transformed into exhibition venues, locating new spaces for the historic collections. As discussed above, the original convents, hospitals and palazzi have been reconstructed, converted and re-used as museums and public galleries. Huber discusses this relatively recent 'museification' of Italian cities and states that 'although 60% of the museum buildings in Italy date from before the 19th century, 50% of all museums, as institutions were founded after 1945.'⁵² In the late 1960s, no doubt in correlation with the ever-growing tourist industry, Italy endeavoured to make sacred monuments more accessible for the general public and museums more enjoyable for all ages. Since the mid 1970s education departments within Italian museums have slowly begun to manifest and become more active. Interestingly, Italian museums are rarely mentioned in current texts on museology.

Through the centuries there have been many fluid changes in the perception and utilisation of museums, with differing levels of governmental control, new patrons and a wider audience demanding a more responsive institution. Prior discusses this change as a 'gradual erosion of the single-function princely

⁴⁹ The recovery and restoration of thousands of great works of art that were either scattered or hidden during WWII is another important chapter in the history of Italian art.

⁵⁰ Dalai Emiliani quoted in Francesco Dal Co and Giuseppe Mazzariol, *Carlo Scarpa, The Complete Works*, Great Britain, Electa/The Architectural Press, 1986, p. 154.

⁵¹ Huber, *Il Museo Italiano*, p. 7.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14 and p. 24.

model...which later flowered into the more complex space of the national art museum.⁵³ The museum continues to develop as it accommodates the social and political climates that regularly re-evaluate cultural heritage today. These evolving attitudes have inspired a number of theorists and critics in the past century that have written both for and against the institution. As Adorno proclaimed in 1955,

The German word, '*museal*' ['museumlike'], has unpleasant overtones. It describes objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in the process of dying. They owe their preservation more to historical respect than to the needs of the present. Museum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association. Museums are like the family sepulchres of works of art. They testify to the neutralization of culture.⁵⁴

Fortunately, the study and reception of museums has taken new directions since Adorno's comment on the death of art in their care. In the early 1980s the rise of the 'new' museology paralleled the discourses of the 'new' art history: studies of history and philosophies, ideologies, aims and policies, social systems and cultures, audiences, gender, responsibilities and future directions.⁵⁵ Vergo encapsulates these ideas.

Beyond the captions, the information panels, the accompanying catalogue, the press handout, there is a subtext comprising innumerable diverse, often contradictory strands, woven from the wishes and ambitions, the intellectual or political or social or educational aspirations and preconceptions of the museum director, the curator, the scholar, the designer, the sponsor – to say nothing of the society, the political or social or educational system which nurtured all these people and in so doing left its stamp upon them. Such considerations, rather than, say, the administration of museums, their methods and techniques of conservation, their financial well-being, their success or neglect in the eyes of the public, are the subject matter of the new museology.⁵⁶

However, I would argue that there is not a critical delineation of 'old' and 'new' studies of museums and art history. No simple linguistic device can separate the threads of these complex fields of study, as each approach is an extension, an evolution and natural progression of knowledge as new research is undertaken. This comparatively recent shift in scholarship has a symbiotic relationship with traditional studies, where the 'new' grows tangentially from the 'old', just as new art grows from that which preceded it. Furthermore, as

⁵³ Prior, *Museums and Modernity*, pp. 27-32.

⁵⁴ Adorno, 'Valéry Proust Museum', *Prisms*, p. 175.

⁵⁵ Vergo, *The New Museology*, p. 1.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

Prior suggests, 'history is a palimpsest and cultural forms are always open to preceding influences.'⁵⁷

Didacticism and Discovery

In contemporary culture the museum's mission is manifold, necessarily catering for both the audience's needs – for its financial longevity – as well as to provide a sanctuary for the collections that it houses. Museums assert their authority and knowledge through the information they provide, their policies and mechanisms of display, text panels, catalogues, audio commentaries and laconic labels shape the viewers' engagement, understanding and experience. Moreover, Ludmilla Jordanova writes,

*Museum labels offer a plurality of taxonomies pertaining to authorship, authenticity, antiquity, value, originality, significance. It is important to recognise that although labels offer a context within which the item in question can be 'read', this context is limited, selective and manipulative, since it generally invites visitors to perceive in a particular way.*⁵⁸

While Jordanova reinforces the didacticism of the museum through its labels, I would add that the paraphernalia of museum housing and display, the signage, guides, roped areas and bullet-proof casings (fig.75,77) are also didactic mechanisms belonging to what remains a commercialised and politicised entity. Although these devices, employed since the 19th century, are for the most part necessary measures that may even enhance the artwork's ceremonial agenda, ultimately they are in place to govern the viewer's experience of art.

The museum today encourages discovery, understanding and communication for a broad range of viewers, while also providing a platform for individual aesthetic reception. They continually develop strategies to enrich their audience's intellectual, visual and cultural experiences. Hooper-Greenhill reports that, 'Since 1994 the museum field...has moved more firmly from the transmission of information to the enabling of the construction of personal relevance'.⁵⁹ Edification in the museum is linked to ideas of learning that are concurrent with the contemporary focus of education in general. George Hein explains,

⁵⁷ Prior, *Museums and Modernity*, p. 14.

⁵⁸ Jordanova, 'Objects of Knowledge: A Historical Perspective on Museums', *The New Museology*, p. 24.

⁵⁹ Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, ed., *The Educational Role of the Museum*, London, New York: Routledge, 1999, p. x.

the last three decades have witnessed a shift in both the definition of education and its relative importance within museums and within the museum profession. The modern world has changed the social and cultural structure in which this function is taking place...

It is important to recognize that interest in museum education is and has been part of a continuing effort to make all educational institutions relevant for the entire population.⁶⁰

Museum education relies on the idea, as Georgina Warnke discusses, that 'objectivity is associated with observation, and objective knowledge is that knowledge obtained through sight.'⁶¹ Many writers like Jordanova, Vergo and Svetlana Alpers argue that 'looking' is of primary importance when it comes to both enriching personal experience and acquiring knowledge in the museum. (Although Bourdieu suggests this is entirely dependent on the viewer's social and intellectual construct.⁶²) But most importantly, as Jordanova remarks,

The 'knowledge' that museums facilitate has the quality of fantasy because it is only possible via an imaginative process. The ways in which the contents of museums are presented lead to, but do not fully determine, what visitors experience and learn.⁶³

The complexity of the museum experience, with its seemingly endless contexts, makes learning and meaning difficult to pin-down, especially with so many densely coded messages to be subliminally interpreted by each individual viewer. Furthermore, the broad approach now taken by the museum – not only linking museum education with education in general, but also accommodating the highly commercial culture industry – in both striving for 'relevance' as well as negotiating the public funding crisis, in effect makes it the target of much criticism. Greg Richards explains that museums are 'running the risk of sacrificing their standards of scholarship and curatorial integrity for the sake of attracting ever increasing numbers of visitors'.⁶⁴ In summing up what appears to be the eternal and unresolvable predicament of the museum, Prior observes,

the museum grapples with the historical dilemmas of double-coding: whether to be shrines for the few or educators for the many, to appeal to the popular (often attacked as 'dumbing down') or connoisseurial (charged with elitism), to be arenas for secular research or churches for the auratic object. But this never seemed to undermine the efficacy of the museum's social, political and artistic

⁶⁰ George Hein, *Learning in the Museum*, London, New York: Routledge, 1998, pp. 6-7.

⁶¹ Georgina Warnke, 'Ocularcentrism and Social Criticism', *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, p. 287.

⁶² Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel, *The Love of Art: European Art Museums and their Public*, Caroline Beattlie and Nick Merriman trans., Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991 (1969).

⁶³ Jordanova, 'Objects of Knowledge: A Historical Perspective on Museums', *The New Museology*, p. 23.

⁶⁴ Greg Richards, ed., *Cultural Tourism in Europe*, United Kingdom: CAB International, 1996, p. 13.



75-77. The paraphernalia of museum display

aims. In fact it is testament to the museum's resilience that it has dealt with the fabric of ambiguity and paradox which lies behind its history, accommodating these tensions into its very being.⁶⁵

The Process of Intensification

Finally I return again to the museums of Italy. Much of my curiosity regarding Italian museums began in the late 1990s (before this DCA). I couldn't help but question why they appeared so different to other Western museum standards. In the course of this investigation a decade of dramatic change has been revealed, changes that have become increasingly evident, especially in Florence, which I will discuss here. Firstly though, I will briefly contextualise these changes within the broader culture 'industry' of which museums play a significant part, a central role that is also symbiotic with tourism. Pollock describes the museum-viewer relationship:

The museum or gallery is an elaborate orchestration of a viewing body in space and time, invited and constrained to look at objects. These become the mediating signs of a culture experienced as spectacle. The viewer is reduced to a specifically modern combination of tourist and consumer.⁶⁶

Great works of art in famous museums can never be seen in isolation from the industry that supports them. Today they are embedded not only in the contexts of private and public institutions but also in the administrative machinations and commercial incentives of tourism. Adorno writes of this 'parasitic' relationship which thrives on artistic production with little regard for the function of art as a whole. He describes the transition of attitudes to cultural products as 'no longer *also* commodities, they are commodities through and through'.⁶⁷ This response is typical of the Frankfurt School's anti-mass culture approach. Commenting rather scathingly on the conflicting nature of the messages conveyed by the culture industry and the manner in which it has subjugated the engagement and experience of culture itself, Adorno describes the superficiality of this 'omnipresent phenomenon'.

The total effect of the culture industry is one of anti-enlightenment...[it] becomes mass deception and is turned into a means for fettering consciousness.

⁶⁵ Prior, *Museums and Modernity*, p. 58.

⁶⁶ Pollock, 'Beholding Art History: Vision, Place and Power', *Vision & Textuality*, p. 43.

⁶⁷ Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, J.M. Bernstein ed., London: Routledge, 1991, p. 86-8.

It impedes the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves.⁶⁸

Florence, renowned as a Renaissance city, can seem schizophrenic today with its majestic historic architecture now punctuated with flashes of the ultra-modern. A product of a commodifying culture industry where the Renaissance façades conceal a burgeoning consumer paradise. The eager tourist-shoppers who queue outside the Louis Vuitton store are as telling of today's Florentine experience as the queue outside the Uffizi. Here, according to Antonio Paolucci, head of the Fine Arts and Historic Works Commission of Florence, Pistoia and Prato, 'For the Japanese Italy, Florence and Renaissance are the same thing, and Botticelli sounds like Ferragamo, Gucci, Chianti and ribollita'.⁶⁹ Yet amidst this 21st century consumerism lie endless reminders of the power and passing of time. The permanent scars of Florentine history, from marauding armies to natural disasters, remain evident.⁷⁰

The legacy of the Renaissance is most palpable in the cities of Florence, Rome, Venice and Siena. Since the Medici, Florence's artistic inheritance and cultural capital has been a formidable display of the wealth and power. Florence – Italy's capital from 1865 to 1871 – has art and history stitched into the very fabric of the city, pervading its cultural, intellectual and architectural integrity.⁷¹ While living with the Renaissance may be commonplace for the resident Florentines the remarkable concentration of historic art, architecture and material culture located here makes for a profound tourist experience. This experience is now intensified through the modernised network of renovated and restructured museums and refurbished shopping district.

Much of the modernisation that brings 'the Italian museum system much closer to those of other countries' has only taken place in the past decade, and was begun by Alberto Ronchey, Italy's then Minister of Culture and

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 92.

⁶⁹ Antonio Paolucci, quoted in 'la Repubblica', Italy: 13/2/2001. Cited by Maria Letizia Strocchi in, 'I giapponese e la ribollita', *Giornale dell'arte*, Anno. XVIII, No. 197, Turin, Italy: Umberto Allemandi & C. March, 2001, p. 68.

⁷⁰ Most recently the flood of 1966, when the Arno river broke its banks and left a muddy wake through the historic city centre. As a consequence, new schools of restoration were established in order to rescue Florence's art treasures and students from all over the world came to help. In conversation with Mariantonia Rinaldi, Museology lecturer, Studio Arts Centre International, Florence, 2001, and written in 'Italy's heritage: An embarrassment of riches'.

⁷¹ The dates come from Martin Gani, 'The Gems of Florence', *World and I*, vol. 13, no. 9, Washington, D.C.: Washington Times Corp., Sept. 1998, pp. 140-8.

Environment.⁷² For a country so wealthy in cultural heritage and historic attractions there have been many problems that worked against the tourist ever seeing them. Lack of accessibility, van der Borg and Costa state, and ‘Years of mismanagement, at national and local levels, and at the level of the individual institution’ have been blamed for the downturn in attendance figures in the late 1980s to mid 90s.⁷³ Van der Borg and Costa list the major problems inhibiting museums at this time as being the result of the ‘eternal conflict between...conservation and utilization’, as well as the lack of direction and financial control. Even as a tourist these problems were palpable. With limited and irregular hours of access, and too few modern amenities the museums’ treasures remained relatively hidden except from the cognoscenti.

To remedy this situation Ronchey passed a number of laws (the Ronchey Act of 1993) aiming to enhance and promote Italy’s cultural patrimony through greater access to its museums, historic art and architecture.⁷⁴ The implementation of these laws is apparent in the renovations that have, and continue to alter the public face of Florentine museums. Ronchey also called for the upgrade of museum facilities, merchandising and extended and regular opening hours. Most obvious was ‘the “privatization” of peripheral museum services’, the renovated gift shops, modernised ticket/booking offices, ultra-modern cafés and newly cleaned façades. The new attitude and promotion of Renaissance culture are best symbolised by the current museum ticket stubs (fig.78,79), an impressive design feat by *Musei Firenze* (a strategic collective made up of the giants of Italian industry, Ferragamo etc.) which dominates the souvenir market with its standardised series of illustrated museum guides, art reproductions and publications of cultural material in Florence.⁷⁵ These homogenised publications cater for every degree of interest and budget. Interestingly, the highly stylised 2001 edition of the Uffizi catalogue is a revelatory symbol of the promotion of Florentine artworks and it was published only in Italian and Japanese, unlike the usual six languages.

In the late 1990s the city of Florence undertook sixty restoration projects costing \$25million (USD), Palazzo Pitti, Santa Croce and San Lorenzo, and

⁷² J. van der Borg and P. Costa, ‘Cultural Tourism in Italy’, *Cultural Tourism in Europe*, Greg Richards, ed., United Kingdom: CAB International, 1996, p. 230.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 220-30.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, and in conversation with Rinaldi.

⁷⁵ Antonio Paolucci in *The Uffizi: The Official Guide*, p. 7. *Musei Firenze* with its contemporary sophisticated logo, the cuneiform flower, appear on every conceivable item of merchandising.

the façade of the Duomo were among them.⁷⁶ Florence's extensive renovation continued in anticipation of the influx of international dignitaries arriving for the European Union assembly (1998) and the tourist population explosion with the Jubilee in the year 2000. As a consequence of being such a popular historic city, Florence's local council, *Commune di Firenze*, has necessarily been instrumental in delivering vast quantities of cultural information in a convenient and coherent manner across the city. Public display boards are posted outside every notable historic façade with multi-lingual displays and pamphlets inside each church identifying all the significant chapels and artworks. A museification of the city, which has, no doubt, contributed to Florence being voted the world's best city, in 2001 by the tourist industry.⁷⁷ Until today's Italian Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, the development of cultural tourism policy in Italy has been left entirely to the public sector. However Italy today is witnessing, according to Martin Gani, 'the most radical change of policy since before World War II', with the 'collaboration between the private and public sector in the administration of the Italian State patrimony', a move that could be seen as either productive or exploitive.⁷⁸

Regardless of Ronchey's initiatives, viewing art has now become, paradoxically, *more* difficult in Florence. With the intensification of the tourist's experience also comes the impossibility of viewing. Although there is so much historic art, there is less and less chance of actually seeing it thanks to the overwhelming crowds that one must contend with. Most of the art becomes a blur except for a few distinguished pieces. Even with the convenience of all-day museum visiting Florence's museum queues are frequently several hundred people long from the early hours of the morning until late in the evening. These extended hours, from 8.15am to 7pm, no doubt encourage art appreciation but at what price? This commercialisation has infiltrated Italian cultural traditions. For the first tour groups and other early risers that spill into the Botticelli room of the Uffizi haven't even had time to enjoy a cappuccino. Yet art's incredible drawing power grows stronger as demonstrated daily through the crowds at the Uffizi and Accademia, where there is a line of used chewing gum stuck to the

⁷⁶ Gani, 'The Gems of Florence', *World and I*.

⁷⁷ In 2001 *Travel and Leisure* magazine readers voted Florence the world's best city. 'Faded Glory', no author cited, *Sydney Morning Herald*, Weekend Edition, Travel, Sydney, 15-16 September, 2001, p. 2.

⁷⁸ Supporters of this move believe that it will lead to the more efficient administration and better use of cultural institutions. Opponents are afraid that the emphasis will now be put on exploiting them financially and that scholarly values will be sacrificed. 'First museum public/private partnership', no author cited, *The Art Newspaper*, <http://www.theartnewspaper.com.au>, accessed 12/01/2003.



78. Old Uffizi ticket stub.

79. New Uffizi ticket stub

GRM

**FIRENZE
MUSEI**

Galleria degli Uffizi

Date/Date **Mar, 4 Marzo 2001**

Ingresso previsto
13:45 - 14:00

Scheduled Entry Time

Prezzo/Price	L.1. 0.	0.
Prezzi/Prices	L.1. 0	0.

Spazio riservato a Galleria degli Uffizi

Serie **UFF122** N. **0070407**

walls for several blocks, tracing the presence of millions of people that have stood in line waiting to see David. This is the reality for museum visitors in Florence.

Authentic Places and Authentic Pieces

Inside the Galleria dell'Accademia I watch the new visitors come in waves. Ushered into one of the most popular galleries in Florence, these rooms are swept by swelling crowds that are eternally replenished. The concentration of people, while raising levels of anxiety, creates an electric, even euphoric atmosphere. Advancing decisively through the preliminary gallery housing Michelangelo's sculpted slaves – who gain little attention except from the few art students sketching them – the viewers are drawn to Il Gigante, who inhabits the main gallery.⁷⁹ Each new wave of visitors draw to a halt in front of David, excited and awe-struck their gaze at last is arrested. They stare, wide-eyed and slack-jawed before moving to join the other viewers who languish against the walls lost in their own private contemplation. David does command attention from his audience, in a seemingly profound way. There appears to be a moment of transcendence for the vast majority that visit the original David, as if the spirit, if not symptoms of Stendhal is present.

My intention with this 'authentic' encounter is to unravel some of the complexities that surround the ideas of copies, original and aura. I will tease out these difficult strands as they are integral to the viewing experience. The terms 'authenticity' and 'originality' in themselves are problematic, with numerous dimensions involving time, context and creation. These are often contested issues that I raise, debates that offer layers of interpretation, yet no definitive answers.

Firstly, I turn to the concept of reproduction. Not a modern phenomenon, copies and copying have been circulating for centuries. During the Renaissance, the past was being discovered through unearthed fragments of sculpture from early Greek and Roman civilisations. Artists and collectors alike were interested in these antiquities, and private galleries housed originals interspersed with then contemporary artist-made copies. Barkan discusses that

⁷⁹ Michelangelo's sculpture of David, also know in the early 1530s, according to Shearman, as *Gigante* by the locals and occasionally as *Orpheus* by tourists. Shearman, *Only Connect...*, p. 44.

during the Renaissance there was a fashion and desire for copies.⁸⁰ He argues that Renaissance artists embraced the idea of copying as a way of expressing their renewed interest in the past, as mentioned above. An interest that results today in multiple artworks of similar composition and content made by various hands across the ages. For example there is a completed copy of the *Laocoön* housed in the Uffizi gallery, while the 1st century Roman copy of the Hellenistic original is in the Vatican. Of the Uffizi sculpture, the missing limbs of this ancient composition were newly fashioned by the Renaissance artist Baccio Bandinelli in the 1520s. Copying artworks, both within the artist's own school, and by other contemporaries, was an accepted practice during the Renaissance.

Further to this, there are hand-made – as opposed to mechanically reproduced – copies of different periods, in different galleries and in different cities around the world. More than the direct copying of images there is also the replication of identities, gestures and postures. Eleanora of Toledo, or Bacchus for example, appear in numerous artists' works, as do the faces and names of saints, popes and gods. This 'activity of reconstruction' continues through the ages. It is present in painting, sculpture and architectural reconstructions.

By the 19th century, with early engravings and the introduction of photography, the desire and taste for reproductions had grown. The viewing public then had less interest in the originality of a work of art. This is evident through the styles of restoration employed at that time. If original artworks were damaged, as is often the case with frescoes, restorers would unreservedly complete them, re-painting as they believed in the style of the artist. From this point it was only a small step from restoration to forgery, and by the end of the 19th century the market was flooded with fakes. Consequently the desire for the original artist's hand grew, and so restoration and retouching techniques were necessarily adapted. No longer repainting missing sections of artworks, restorers began filling in the spaces with coloured lines to ensure that the viewer could distinguish which areas were original and which were restored, while still allowing the composition to appear whole.⁸¹ To further clarify this, today's restorers now remove all the 19th century 'in-fill' so that conserved frescoes remain partial. As with Giotto's Assisi frescoes, almost destroyed by

⁸⁰ Barkan, *Unearthing the Past*, pp. 201-209.

⁸¹ In conversation with Rinaldi.

earthquake in 1997, the gaps are now 'free of paint in order to keep a sense of the authenticity of the work.'⁸² Likewise, Ambrogio Lorenzetti's allegorical frescoes of *Good and Bad Government* in Siena, also displays the vacant grey patches left by this technique. What I find curious about these particular works, which have been photographically reproduced in books for decades, is that depending on the dates of each reproduction it is still possible to see the different versions of their restorations.

The desire to ascertain the original hand has forged ever-greater degrees of accuracy in identification in the 21st century. The most recent techniques undertaken by museums and conservators have been used on Michelangelo's Florentine *Pietà*. Once mutilated by its creator and later repaired by another, the *Pietà* is 'reconstructed pixel by pixel...[creating] a 3D replica on computer, capturing more than two billion bits of data to show every detail of the original.' In this way it is possible to virtually subtract the repaired sections – not possible in reality without destroying the work – to see precisely what was carved by Michelangelo himself. Further to this, these extremely detailed digital reconstructions also allow art to be shown three dimensionally to the rest of the world via the internet.⁸³ Michelangelo's *David* is also currently undergoing conservation and digital construction. This particular technological endeavour is to celebrate the statue's 500th birthday in 2004, and the newly created virtual *David* is to be displayed on a large screen in the gallery alongside the original.⁸⁴ The digital medium inevitably reinforces the difference between original and copy – its indestructibility. Baudrillard explains that with this 'lethal illusion of perfection: ...wear-and-tear, death or ageing have been eradicated by technology.'⁸⁵ In addition to these digital developments new imaging technologies can now construct a three-dimensional representation of a painting which allows the viewer to move within the picture itself, as Antonio Criminisi describes, 'to virtually explore every aspect of a painting such as *The Flagellation of Christ* by Renaissance master Piero della Francesca.' Instead of

⁸² David Willey, 'Quake-damaged Giotto frescoes restored', *BBC News Online*, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/2284161.stm>, accessed, 26/9/2002.

⁸³ 'Flawed Michelangelo gets digital makeover', no author cited, *BBC News Online*, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/124236.stm>, accessed 1/7/1998.

⁸⁴ Laura Lombardi, 'Test those ankles' *The Art Newspaper*, <http://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/article.asp?idart=10173>, accessed 28/10/02.

⁸⁵ Jean Baudrillard, 'How can you jump over your own shadow when you no longer have one', *The Illusion of the End*, Chris Turner trans., Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994, p. 101.

virtual museums the viewer is now able 'to walk alongside the apostles or Christ himself.'⁸⁶

Though these technologies are evermore sophisticated, are these methods of reproduction and appropriation simply art imitating art, just as Renaissance artists have done in the past? All the digital projects that re-present and generate new views of artworks beg the question: how is digital culture affecting the viewer's engagement with the original? Will digital technology, for a new generation of viewers, supersede the talent of the hand that created the original? These extraordinary technological accomplishments which explore art in such minute detail appear to me somewhat ironic. For most viewers there is already so little time to examine the artwork that these representations, while providing new forms of engagement, inevitably create yet another form of reproduction for comparison or distraction.

Although today's standards of high-tech, high-definition, realistic digital image-making renders individual Renaissance artworks as relatively primitive 'imitations of nature', the original works do continue to hold an endless fascination and open-armed engagement for millions of casual and scholarly viewers alike. Today it is the intangible quality of originality and authenticity that creates the euphoria of viewing that has been so desired by Western society in the late 20th century. This is for me another irreconcilable paradox, where contemporary viewing adheres rigorously to the idea of the 'original', yet tries so hard to replicate it. Schwartz addresses those concerns.

What are we about, who take so easily to ditto marks yet look so hard for signs of "individual touch"?...

...from the handcopying of manuscripts to the digitizing of art...we look to copies themselves for assurance of continuity, value, and authenticity...The more adept the West has become at the making of copies, the more we have exalted uniqueness. It is within an exuberant world of copies that we arrive at our experience of originality.⁸⁷

I submit that there are many varying degrees of copies and copying (fig.80), from the virtual *David* mentioned above to the popular *David* replicas found the world over, that further confuse how the viewer might respond to the

⁸⁶ Jane Wakefield, 'Classic artworks turn 3D', *BBC News Online*, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/2946453.stm>, accessed 18/4/03.

⁸⁷ Schwartz, *The Culture of the Copy*, p. 212.

original work. In Los Angeles alone, according to Umberto Eco, there are at least ten life-size replicas of David.⁸⁸ After encountering so many facsimiles the viewer develops a heightened awareness of the object reproduced, and I would suggest that the copies themselves idolise the original. Furthermore, in discussing the endless copies of Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, Darian Leader writes, 'The painting's reproductive success gives the original a peculiar status. As the 'real thing', the final referent of the innumerable copies and versions, it takes on the character of a mythic, lost object.'⁸⁹

Leader's remark draws attention to the relationship between the idea of myth and the worldwide proliferation of images that create a fascination with iconic works. Firstly, the fetishistic viewing tendency towards 'masterpieces' is generally limited to a small number of works, resulting in artists like Botticelli and Michelangelo commonly representing the entire period in popular culture today. More than their sign, these few Renaissance works become a symbol or a myth as Barthes describes, where the deeper signification of the image/message connotes, in this case, a particular era, culture, history and the development of Western civilisation. Yet Barthes alerts us to the way that 'the knowledge contained in a mythical concept is confused, made of yielding, shapeless association.'⁹⁰

From the making of copies, I now turn my attention to the profound concepts of aura and authenticity, as they are, I would argue, the principal drawcards in the Renaissance museum today. Authenticity, as Derrida suggests, is much 'more than a simple attribution of origin'.⁹¹ The worship of the 'authentic' is not based on its shape or form, after all copies that are recast in plaster or bronze are technically the same as the original sculptures, and as Eco claims, 'once the fetishistic desire for the original is forgotten, these copies are perfect.'⁹² Yet there remains an irrational adoration of the 'original'. Originality is the only quality that cannot be explained through reproduction – neither analogue nor digital. The fingerprint implanted on the original work traces, as

⁸⁸ Eco explains this phenomena of copying as America's 'unrequited love for the European past' in *Faith in Fakes*, p. 28.

⁸⁹ Leader, *Stealing the Mona Lisa*, p. 4.

⁹⁰ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Annette Lavers trans., London: Paladin, 1973(1957), p. 119.

⁹¹ Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, p. 177.

⁹² Eco, *Faith in Fakes*, p. 39.



00 The Louvre copyist

Marks describes, 'the human presences and material practices that constructed them.'⁹³ In writing on this fetish Marks explains,

Fetishes...condense cryptic histories within themselves and gather their peculiar power by virtue of a prior contact with some originary object. Fetishes...are nodes, or knots, in which historical, cultural, and spiritual forces gather with a particular intensity. They translate experience through space and time in a material medium, encoding the histories produced in intercultural traffic.⁹⁴

Benjamin welcomed the way that the aura of original artwork was decayed through reproduction, by bringing things "closer" spatially and humanly thereby eliminating the distance and mystery. Mechanical reproduction, Benjamin suggests, allows art to be experienced in the viewer's own space, no longer confined by time and travel, it 'emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual.'⁹⁵ Contemporary writers who have experienced the entire gamut of reproductive possibilities, like Stewart and Olaquaiga, however, argue that reproductions effectively advance, if not create the aura of artworks. Without copies we could not understand the significance of the original, of the 'first'. Olaquaiga is drawn to the conclusion, that 'the proliferation of copies unintentionally enhances the value of immediacy and originality. Constituted by a singularity in time and space, authenticity is rare and consequently antithetical to the process of modernization'.⁹⁶

The desire for the 'original', I would argue again is bound to the viewer's longing to understand, or reaffirm their place in the world, perhaps more easily located amongst the recognisable material evidence of the past. The museum experience, Leader describes, is 'a vast congregation of people searching for a tiny object that offers some unspoken, enigmatic promise.'⁹⁷ This is a quest that Stewart more fully explains:

Within the development of culture under an exchange economy, the search for authentic experience and, correlatively, the search for the authentic object become critical. As experience is increasingly mediated and abstracted, the lived relation of the body to the phenomenological world is replaced by a nostalgic myth of contact and presence. "Authentic" experience becomes both elusive and allusive as it is placed beyond the horizon of present lived experience, the

⁹³ Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, pp. 80-1.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 86-9

⁹⁵ Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', pp. 221-4.

⁹⁶ Stewart, *On Longing*, p. 91., and Olaquaiga, *The Artificial Kingdom*, p. 16.

⁹⁷ Leader, *Stealing the Mona Lisa*, p. 5.

beyond in which the antique, the pastoral, the exotic, and other fictive domains are articulated.⁹⁸

Though Benjamin is in favour of the disintegration of aura associated with original artworks, he commented that 'Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.'⁹⁹ Here Benjamin stirs my interest in the idea of 'location', and it is this notion of a contextualising space that brings me back to *Impossible Gaze*. Museums like Palazzo Pitti, impregnated with their own history, intensify the viewer's experience and foster the *sense* of original spaces – though in fact the works may not have been originally intended for Pitti, nor are the interiors completely original as the palazzo has lived through several renovations. However, there does remain a 'unique existence': the relationship between the artwork and its physical location. A palpable, and in Pitti's case for me, an 'authenticating' and 'auratic' context which I have photographed. The images in *Impossible Gaze* constitute another uncanny act of doubling, where the strangeness of making a photographic reproduction, which by its very nature according to Benjamin, strips away the notion of aura, also somehow represents it.

To further complicate the viewing experience one must pit original creation against authenticity of place, and these are not straightforward issues. Many historic artworks in Florence have been removed from their vulnerable original locations, safeguarded from vandalism, theft and erosion, relocated to museums where they are preserved from misadventure, and more cynically, for their revenue generating capacity. For example, Ghiberti's baptistery doors, in the middle of Florence's Piazza del'Duomo are no longer truly Ghiberti's doors. Although replicas of his design, they were crafted much later. In fact, Ghiberti's doors are no longer even doors, but a series of single panels that have been dismembered and mounted individually on the walls of the newly renovated Opera del'Duomo museum. Unguided tourists benignly photograph the baptistery doors assuming them to be original, while others, aware that they are copies, photograph the doors for their original site and contextual environment.

⁹⁸ Stewart, *On Longing*, p. 133.

⁹⁹ Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', p. 220.

A better-known example of original place versus original piece, are Florence's two *Davids* . Once again Michelangelo's famous statue illustrates my concerns. The Galleria dell'Accademia with its endless line of tourists houses the original Renaissance artwork, while a 19th century copy occupies its original location in the Piazza della Signoria, at the entrance to Palazzo Vecchio. Once an emblem of civic liberty, the 'new' David (fig.81) continues to be contextualised by the authentic surroundings. This copy is framed by the historic architecture and resonates with the public life of Florence. It exists in what I would argue as its 'auratic' place, and is consequently viewed with some confusion. It engages audiences differently from the original that has been relocated. The 'original' David (fig.82) is now housed in a specially designed gallery. Consigned to a more controlled environment indoors, it is centred in an enormous sky-like, illuminated dome. Something is both lost and gained by this work's relocation. It has lost its original context; the architecture of the piazza, the milling crowds, the social activity, the noise of everyday life and the connection to Palazzo Vecchio where it once stood. However, this singular artwork does elicit a far greater and more exclusive presence located in the gallery. Its adulation is marked by the length of time that visitors spend viewing. In contradiction to the norm, they actually stop and look – which is astounding given the regular speed of viewing. They come to see one work of art, they then briefly survey the rest of the gallery or by-pass it altogether on their way out. Those with audio-guides tend to linger, held captive by the voice that instructs them to a selection of other works. (I will return to audio-guides in my Conclusion.)

For the hordes of visitors to that flock to see David, the most important element is this sculpture's originality, and its age gives it its authenticity. Will the same artworks be even more popular as they become further removed from our present time, and could their popularity bring about their own demise? This is an important issue for museums and their management. As artworks become more vulnerable with age, and require more protective measures, it is possible that visitors could eventually become dissatisfied with the impossibility of viewing conditions and the saturated tourist market, and turn the tide of fascination with originals into a passing fashion.¹⁰⁰ Are the viewers already being conditioned by the museum to accept virtual recreations? With the potential of virtual *David* now a reality, Huber foresees that with the

¹⁰⁰ In conversation with Rinaldi.

disappearance of "originals" it is possible to think of far more articulated and sophisticated exhibition forms. With all due caution, both permanent exhibitions and temporary museum ones will adopt very different, more flexible solutions, both in the sense of diffused knowledge and of critical investigation.¹⁰¹

However, what the present number of visitors to *David* reinforce, is that even though we can explore the work infinitesimally through its reproduction, at our own leisure, even in our own home, this does not replace the sensual experience of the 'real' object. As the technological and theoretical developments of the 21st century continue to pose new ways in which to view and re-present the past, the future fashions in viewing remain unknown. If, however, viewing develops in ways that are devoid of the physical and architectural type of contextualisation exhibited in *Impossible Gaze*, relinquishing it for other forms of engagement – in endless forms 2d, 3d and VR – the pleasure associated with viewing in a real space could become an idiosyncrasy of the past.

Yet even through these remote permutations there is still the possibility of experiencing the pleasure of viewing. My photographs for example, which are exhibited in various locations, articulate the idea that the pleasure of the viewing environment may be represented in other ways. Though my images suggest the sensuality of the environment that they document, they are not just (intellectual) reminders of the original contexts, they also furnish their own pleasure, in their own (reproduced/reproducible) right.

¹⁰¹ Huber, *Il Museo Italiano*, pp. 10-11.



81. The 'new' David in Piazza della Signoria.

82. The 'original' David in Galleria dell'Accademia.



5. Conclusion: The Contemporary Experience

After buying a ticket for the Caravaggio e i Giustiniani exhibition at Palazzo Giustiniani – where the extraordinary crowds mean that the museum can only accept advance bookings – I had just enough time to squeeze in the Velasquez exhibition at Palazzo Ruspoli before returning to take up my place for Caravaggio. Palazzo Ruspoli, in the central shopping district of Rome, houses temporary blockbuster exhibitions. From its entrance a steep staircase ascends directly from the chaos of Rome's streets and ends abruptly at the ticket office. From there the visitor threads their way along a narrow corridor where there is a desk offering audio-guides, included in the price of admission. Too preoccupied with time to queue for the guide I strode past into the gallery. On entering the dimly lit room, painted deep red for the occasion, I realised at once the consequence of neglecting the audio-guide. A room brimming with viewers confronted me, yet there was complete silence. Every single visitor was wearing an audio-headset. They were engrossed by the glowing paintings and their accompanying commentaries, all reciting the same sequence of words at different intervals and in different languages. This eerie silence was disturbing at first, as the viewers shuffled along, taking their cues as commanded by the voice in their earphones. Difficult to disrupt the flow of the commentary that dictated the time and sequence of viewing, they were aurally isolated from their companions for the duration of the visit. There were no murmurs of adulation, no critiquing the subject, no intimate tête-à-tête. Their engagement with Velasquez was imbued with historical and biographical details and the curators and historians that collaborated on the production of the audio-guide directed their gaze.

Even more disconcerting were the surveillance monitors that were displayed at eye level at the entrance to each room of the gallery. Although positioned for security the viewer was both instantaneously caught and viewed on CCTV, a strange 'separation' unlike staring in a mirror, you could see yourself looking at other things.¹ Here you could observe yourself entering the rooms, and see yourself in the

¹ Leader comments, 'when we see our selves on CCTV... There is a separation of the look, the emergence of our look as an object, outside us...' Leader, *Stealing the Mona Lisa*, p. 142.

context of all the other viewers. How peculiar this felt to be pictured in front of Velasquez, caught in a web of gazes just as Foucault had described of the Velasquez painting, Las Meninas.²

After this curious and somewhat disturbing visit I rushed back to Palazzo Giustiniani where I was thrust again into an experience dictated by the museum. Negotiating the gallery in groups, viewers must file past the works as prescribed by the museum guides while being bombarded by their extensive monologues. Urged forward by the crowd, I swayed between awe and anguish as the route through the gallery provided no opportunity for the visitor to retrace their steps for a second glimpse.

I recite this tale of rushing from one museum to another and back again for two reasons. Firstly, it is indicative of the type of cultural consumption in most major Italian museums today. And secondly, because it encapsulates many of the ideas that have been brought forth throughout this project: that studies in history, museology, art and cultural history, cultural tourism and technology all intersect with the viewer and their own complicated subjectivity, vision, interpretation and experience. It evokes the crowds, booking systems and rapid tours that are part of cultural tourism, the re-used historic spaces that create an enriched context for viewing, the blockbusters and audio-guides that have become synonymous with current museology, and the voiced texts that are the culmination of generations of historians. In addition to this, the CCTV monitors that are intended to enforce appropriate behavior in the museum, are a constant reminder not only of the exchange of glances between viewers, artworks and museum staff, and the theories of vision that lie behind all this looking, but more significantly that the viewer is not seen as an individual but as part of a crowd, a small cog in this great visual culture machine.

Though Velasquez is neither a Renaissance artist, nor Italian, Palazzo Ruspoli, like Palazzo Giustiniani, is an historic Italian residence now converted to a present-day public gallery. Moreover, it is this particular type of encounter that so intrigues me. Both the Velasquez and Caravaggio exhibitions call attention to the contemporary experience of viewing, and how our engagement with art is directed by museums. They also demonstrate that the guiding voice, be it live or recorded, does remedy in part my concerns with the speed of viewing. I

² Foucault, *The Order of the Things*, pp. 3-16.

will begin this conclusion by briefly discussing the 'audio' guide and its potential, as it in essence sums up the complexities and paradoxes that I wish to convey about the museum experience.

In this project, both visually and theoretically, I have examined not only the surface of things – paintings, furniture, architecture – but also what lies beyond their surface, the abstract and ephemeral notions such as looking, seeing, learning, understanding, knowledge, information, authentic, aura, fetish, the Other, experience, liminality, myth, history and time, all ideas without physical form, invisible concepts that come together in the museum to create an ever varying, transitory and often inexplicable encounter. This being so, what could be more appropriate than the voice, another intangible and fugitive medium to account for the objects present in the museum. Spoken texts that can either productively occupy or overload another of the viewer's senses. The eyes, ears, mind, skin and nostrils are bombarded in each Italian museum encounter.

Audio and museum guides are potentially edifying, enriching and visionary. However, like fast food they can be superficially satisfying, but profoundly inadequate. For me they represent an ongoing paradox that reflects the predicament of the museum as a whole. Too much information or not enough, too broad or too narrow it is impossible to appease the collective audiences, as well as cater for the individual. As museums hasten to accommodate a wider range of viewers, they risk 'watering down' not only the information they deliver but also, I would argue, the audience's reception, engagement, interpretation and experience.

While listening to audio-guides can be both positive and productive, delivering relevant historical and biographical information, they can also have the reverse effect, depending on the individual and what they desire from their museum visit. They advantageously measure the pace of the viewer and enforce a slower than usual consumption of art. They insulate the viewer from other visitors and demand a focus on artworks and objects – for these things I am truly grateful. By encouraging slowness audio-guides *could* provide an opportunity for the viewer to see, or respond, appreciate, or re-think some of their preconceptions. This slowness could indeed create an opening where viewers could shrug off their everyday preoccupations and engage more fully with the objects they behold. But, more often unfortunately, audio fills up what little space exists for

the viewer to randomly encounter art, negating any sense of self-exploration and limiting personal reflection.

The contemporary experience of museums has become more prescribed through the ubiquity of official guides and the monotone of headsets. Donald Preziosi quips that ‘Acoustiguides’ are ‘the droll commentaries of some museum curator, some anonymous and underpaid art historian, or perhaps an actor with a posh accent mumbling woolly inanities in your ear.’³ While audio delivery and aural reception is potentially illuminating, immediate, and an effective way to navigate the museum, its content is often problematic due to its limited, and ultimately selective nature. Guides are a form of regulation that insist the viewers march forward – albeit at a slower pace – through an edited version of history. A march that conforms to the commercial imperatives of the culture industry, as Adorno describes:

the categorical imperative of the culture industry no longer has anything in common with freedom. It proclaims: you shall conform, without instruction as to what; conform to that which exists anyway, and to that which everyone thinks anyway as a reflex of its power and omnipresence. The power of the culture industry’s ideology is such that conformity has replaced consciousness.⁴

Adorno’s anti mass culture stance in this case is still relevant to my postmodern sensibilities, and I would suggest nonetheless, still hits the mark. Paradoxically, what Adorno calls for, is a truly edifying experience from culture, and that is precisely what the museum strives to offer. Although museums advocate an edifying experience through accessible and informative displays, edification in this context is always going to be problematic. While different levels of information can be useful, educational, or intellectually enriching, the museum audience is so broad that it is impossible to cater for every taste and need. More importantly, for me the information and its method of display should not detract, or distract from the challenge and engagement the objects themselves present. I would rather that museology left ample space for the viewer to experience in their own way, in their own time, a visit less about explanations and more about the ‘pleasure principle’ that the first Renaissance museums were founded on.⁵ The museum should always encourage viewers to make their own choice – headset or no headset. Giulio Paolini implores the museum not to ‘abandon its primary role, which is to encourage an innocent, spontaneous

³ Preziosi, *The Art of Art History*, p. 99.

⁴ Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, p. 90.

⁵ Newhouse, *Towards a New Museum*, p. 11

taste for discovery, in favour of haranguing visitors about their duty to learn'.⁶ Moreover, Elkins suggests that 'historical understanding undermines passion. It smothers strong emotion and puts calm understanding in its place. It puts words to experiences that are powerful because they are *felt* rather than thought'.⁷

Complex Encounters

The Italian museum details that I have photographed expose the past lives of the myriad of hands that have toiled for this opulent environment. Similarly they call forth the numerous minds that have been engaged with writing on the history of the times and collections of these museums. Like historiography, museology has also furnished the viewer with a rich tradition that underpins both what is seen today and the contemporary experience of viewing. The development of museums being closely linked, as Pearce, Duncan and Prior explain, to the social and political structures of each age. More specifically however, the development of Italian museums, though resistant to change for the first half of the 20th century, have witnessed vast transformations in the past few decades. Such transformations have forced me to ponder the direction of contemporary viewing and the experience of the museum in the 21st century.

In this thesis the viewer has played an integral role. Their presences in the museums of Italy have their own historical precedence. Museum visiting being dominated by tourists extends back through centuries, the grand tour was the initiator of a tourist industry that has grown with speed and ferocity conquering the country's cultural capital. Regardless of culture's usurpation for commercial incentives the individual's engagement with Renaissance art continues to lead to ecstatic and liminal experiences made famous by the likes of Stendhal.

My focus in this project, on the extraordinary visual culture of the Italian Renaissance, is to encourage today's museum viewer to consider the rich and profoundly varied histories and theories that draw together at the moment of viewing. An enormous exchange that takes place in the tiny gap between

⁶ Giulio Paolini, 'Too many museums, trying far too hard', *The Art Newspaper*, <http://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/article.asp?idart=7030>, accessed 9/8/2001.

⁷ Elkins, *Pictures and Tears*, p. 88.

artwork and viewer, as Prior describes, it is 'a space of tension between the realms of the visible...and the invisible'.⁸ In the midst of these historic artworks this encounter is much more than relating to a painting's colour or subject matter. The Sistine Chapel for example, can epitomise art, the artist, history, architecture, religiosity, Catholicism, pontiff, tourism, the museum, restoration, corporate sponsorship, time, culture and/or civilisation, depending upon the proclivities of the viewer. Often though, the audience has little choice but to devour these multiple messages, instantly sifting through the mass of data in an immediate and osmotic exchange.

The history, the collection, the families, the furnishings and the artworks become a labyrinthine event composed not only of material objects but also the multiple viewpoints of owners, collectors, historians, artists, museologists and a variety of viewers throughout the centuries. All viewing is movement, caught in the vortex of changes in perception and understanding, continually evolving as new studies come to light, and new ways of representing cultures take place in the social and political spheres of museums and nations. The museum is an enigmatic vessel that channels all these subjectivities to a single point in time and space, located in the presence of art.

As I have discussed throughout this thesis there exists an incongruity between the contemporary viewing experience and the historic environment of Italian museums. The guides, tour groups, audio-tours, cd roms and virtual tours propel the viewer towards sensory overload. The *horror vacui* of medieval aesthetics has moved through the visually dense Baroque decoration exhibited in *Impossible Gaze*, to the present bombardment of the senses by modern technologies. Now there is no longer the fear of empty decorative spaces but the temptation to smother every experiential possibility, to overwhelm the senses with evermore and newer technologies of display. Though these technologies open the possibility of other forms of encounters, they are at present designed to occupy the mind in a 'meaningful' way. Spoon-feeding the viewer risks neutralising their experience, making it predictable rather than wonder-ful. In the age of 'retail therapy', museums offer a form of 'cultural therapy' that can too easily appease the viewer's appetite. The museum saturates the viewer with information like the shopping arcade that feeds and entertains the masses with more choices for distraction. And like the shopping

⁸ Prior. *Museums and Modernity*, p. 74.

arcade it is easy to become sidetracked, overwhelmed, exhausted, and ultimately de-sensitised and detached.

Texts Created with Light

Thus far, I have focussed on the contemporary encounter in museums, calling attention to the experience they offer. I have suggested that the current tendency to overwhelm the viewer with information could lead to distractions that will ultimately change the course of viewing art. Now however, in conclusion I will return to the discussion of my practice and how it has manifest throughout this doctorate.

The images that I have created in this project, from the context-driven images of *Before the Museum* to the peripheral details of *Impossible Gaze* render the 'optical unconscious' of the viewer. They dis-assemble the visual information, fragmenting the museum, just as the viewers' memory will continue to do, signalling an ever-changing relationship to history and its objects. In these exhibitions my image-making grows from, and is informed by the Renaissance. The images concentrate elements of the past, and recirculate them anew. My work here is in accord with Bal's contention that, 'By recycling forms taken from earlier works, an artist takes along the text from which the borrowed element has broken away, while at the same time constructing a new text with the debris'.⁹ Ultimately this project is about visual art: making it – both the practice of the Renaissance artists of the past, as well as my own in the present – writing about it, presenting it, viewing it and thinking about it.

As I sit down to write these last few pages *Impossible Gaze* is being installed at the Western Australian Museum, in conjunction with 'The Europeans' symposia at the University of Western Australia. In this location my work embraces the final act of doubling. The exhibition space inside the Western Australian Museum is a contemporary renovation inside an old architectural site, echoing the 'schizophrenia' of Florence's museums that triggered this investigation. My images of historic museum interiors hung inside this austere refurbishment not only play on the relation between the old and the new materiality of both the objects I picture and the environment in which they are

⁹ Bal, Quoting Caravaggio, p. 9.

located, but once again create this strange weave of time and space – the past in the present, the distance of Italy’s museums, their history and presence enlivened far from her shores.

The idea that my artwork is being hung while I write reflects the dual nature of this project, interweaving photography, the production of images and the construction of the exhibitions, with research, reflection and writing. Here I have separated photography from image production, as for me they are different modes of operating and draw on very different resources. In order to photograph for this DCA I have met with experts from the diverse areas that I have explored throughout this thesis. I have travelled (with cameras) internationally, breached the hurdles of access to high security museums and negotiated clearance to photograph. I have frequently visited these museums, mapped in minute detail the wall and floor plans and subsequently returned with photographic equipment. The following stage of image production is a more solitary one, without the same physical and temporal demands. More akin to writing, producing images that work towards an exhibition is an introspective process – editing and selecting works (like words) that precisely reflect my intentions. However, there is a great deal of tension between writing and art practice. For me, they occupy two very different mind-sets. While both demand intellectual consideration, swapping between the visual and textual has often been problematic. Each command a distinct way of thinking and intuiting that cannot be easily be explained, and though beyond the scope of this work, I believe worthy of further investigation.

In this thesis I have used my own experiences as a point of departure for each chapter. The less conventional structure of the DCA has permitted me to speak with different voices. Positioned alternately as viewer, photographer and writer I have also performed as storyteller, and frequently moved between image-making and writing – two types of ‘graphics’, one made with light and lens, the other with text. By combining these practices I have been able to both explore more profoundly and comment more decisively on Italian Renaissance museums and the ideas that surround viewing. The visual component has enabled me to focus my concerns and more lucidly follow lines of enquiry that had previously left me tongue-tied. The photographs have clawed at the essence of what stirs me about the museum experience and allowed me to portray my fascination in a rich and explicit way. The images have stimulated and inspired the theoretical, historical and cultural reflections in this thesis,

and, I would argue, contribute a sensorial experience to the intellectual one, enabling the viewer/reader to *sense* the issues as well as read them.

In turn, writing this thesis has enabled me to understand more clearly the breadth, depth, direction and relevance of my artwork. Not only to contemplate the images themselves and articulate their concerns, but also to examine the drive behind making them. At the same time the broad fields of enquiry that I have pursued have allowed me to see my own work within the context of other artists and scholars, and to better understand the scope and positioning of their work. Both the research and writing have helped focus my intention for each exhibition – choosing amongst hundreds of photographs, each with their own potential trajectory, and disregarding those, however interesting, that didn't fit with the final thrust of this project.

While exploring Renaissance art my research has taken me much further afield than I had anticipated. I could have followed any number of paths with all the politics and history of space, place and culture that are implicit in the museum environment. If however, I were to unpick all of the individual histories present in the museums I would still be pawing through historical archives and demanding DNA tests and dating techniques on the dust samples. I would be searching for particles of skin that may have been shed through the centuries to ascertain who remained present, even if only in an infinitesimal part. And aside from the viewers of the past, the viewers of today are also worthy of more extensive study, though again it is beyond the range of this thesis. What has become evident as I explored museums is that there are endless possibilities for engagement and experience. As many perhaps as there are objects housed and individual viewers. As a consequence museum viewing is eternally shifting. The best we can do is tackle bits of it, break it up into manageable sections and theories to explain particular aspects one at a time. These 'graphies' – historiography, museography – may appear to matter little to the museum audience in the moment of viewing, but they do, sometimes subliminally, sometimes obviously, enrich the experience of innumerable viewers, connecting the work, its time, its creator and themselves. But as a whole the museum experience remains just that, an experience, reliant on the moment, the mood, the timing of each individual viewer – elements that no curator, museologist or historian can dictate or predetermine.

The recent contributions in literature from art historians and writers like Elkins, Leader, Sasson and John Armstrong, to name only a few, indicate that there is a very real need to rethink our engagement with art. Their work encourages a new intimacy and understanding of art and viewing that embraces a far broader audience than before. When it comes to new approaches to viewing art I hope that my endeavour here both contributes to the understanding of the complexity of the art experience, as well as to the debates on the textual and visual, so that the visual image can be recognised for its capacity to intelligently comment, as well as respond to text and elicit it.

These images and this thesis are but one journey amongst many. I would suggest there are innumerable ways in which to visually interpret the viewing experience in museums. As an artist I think it is crucial to explore new ways of representing the viewing environment, to unravel the museum experience in a more nuanced way than has been done in the past, and to use the visual to explore the visual. In consideration of all the new technologies which represent artworks (even inside the museum) there needs to be continued artistic and scholarly engagement to identify their impact, and to what extent they are changing the experience of and engagement with art. I would suggest that there is a distinct need to consider how contemporary society experiences art, and that we need to re-learn how to slowly savour the visual image, and to allow the plurality of contexts, histories and meanings to unfold in their own time. In the Renaissance museums of Italy, time is the most important, and yet often most neglected ingredient today. It is a necessary element for the viewer to revel in the breadth of experiences that original artworks can evoke, and to search for traces of the vanished lives that created and inhabited these spectacular ancient residences.

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Documentation

Enclosed with this thesis is a CD containing images from the exhibitions *Before the Museum* and *Impossible Gaze*.

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