4

Presenting the past: towards a redemptive aesthetic for the museum

> 'The task to be accomplished is not the conservation of the past, but the redemption of the hopes of the past. Today, however, the past is preserved as the destruction of the past.' (Adorno and Horkheimer 1979, p. xv)

Introduction

Chapter 3 argued for a critically reflexive archaeology which of necessity includes an assessment of the relation of the archaeologist and his or her work to contemporary capitalism, while Chapter 1 argued the necessity of taking archaeology's presentation to an audience into account, that archaeology is a rhetoric. Archaeologists present themselves and their work to a non-archaeological public through the media, publishing media, actual physical confrontation (archaeological sites, education), and the museum. This chapter considers the presentation of archaeological work, the interpreted artifact, in the museum which is probably the main institutional connection between archaeology as a profession and discipline, and wider society.

This chapter is intended as an ideology critique, a critique of the museum as an ideological institution. The museum may directly misrepresent the past, distorting it through selection and classification, creating a particular historical narrative. The museum may also restructure the past through its code of historical representation, the way it tells its 'story', the way the artifact is presented *(cf.* Berger *et al.* 1972; Bann 1978).

There are several effective critiques of the way museums directly distort the past as a means of legitimating present sectional interests (Leone 1981b, 1984; Wallace 1981; see also Horne 1984). We shall concentrate more on the museum's aesthetic. In presenting artifacts to be viewed by a visiting public, museums make a statement about the relation of the viewing visitor to the object world. The artifacts are assembled and presented, ordered to make a particular sense to the viewing visitor. Artifacts are mobilized in an aesthetic system (a system of presentation and viewing) to create meanings. We shall be considering this statement, this aesthetic system.

The main part of the chapter is a presentation of a series of interpretations of particular museums and displays. They are not interpretations of a random sample, but neither were the particular museums chosen to make criticism easier. We simply visited a few museums we knew. The series of interpretations builds up a critique of the presentation of the artifact in various forms of museum display. Drawing on the discussion of time in Chapter 1 we argue that the artifact is turned into a commodity and in effect removed from history. This confirms the present's relation with the object world. It is the present which is preserved, not the past.

We then move on to consider further aspects of the relation between past and present

in the museum the relationship between professional study of the artifact and its subsequent 'public presentation Continuing the argument of chapter 1, we argue against the possibility of a neutral presentation of an objective past by professional archaeologist or curator All presentation of the artifactual past is rhetorical performance, an active project of persuasion, an active mobilization of particular modes of presentation which, in the museums we considered, argue for the world as it immediately appears to us, con coaling the underlying realm of past and present

We end by drawing out ideas for a more fertile relation between past artifact and presentation, one which recognizes and assumes that the study of the past artifact and its presentation are inseparable We reassert that a non-ideological and critically reflexive archaeology cannot be separated from its presentation to a wider social world of people who are not archaeologists

PART ONE THE MUSEUM

The artifact transformed into an object in commodified time

The Museum of Antiquities of the University and Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne a small museum with two galleries The first contains a selection of Roman inscribed and sculptured stones, mainly altars and tombstones, from the North-East There are also models of a Roman milccastlc, fort, turret, vallum, and the wall itself Some cases are used for temporary displays The second gallery consists of a sequence of cases presenting artifacts from the North Fast in chronological order the artifacts are sometimes juxtaposed with no implied connection other than chronological, are sometimes placed together according to similar type or site of discovery

The format of the guidebook, a series of photographed exhibits with accompanying notes and references, clearly expresses the organizing metaphor of the museum the artifact as chronological object, object of academic study, the artifact as specimen In a mechanical relation of metonymy the artifacts stand for archaeological system

In the second gallery the cases locate a collection of local artifacts in their archaeological period prehistoric to medieval The logical principle uniting the sequence of cases is abstract time, time as a flow divided into conventional lengths - early, middle and late Bronze Age, Iron Age, Roman, Anglo-Saxon The only appreciable narrative behind the sequence of eases is a story of technological change This is change abstracted from the social, it is a story of the production of variety

The artifacts arc conceptually packaged with labels indicating provenance, type and museum accession number Any further packaging is limited to the descriptive background some text and some small models The artifacts stand in the cases with their academic price-tags Price indicated by price-tag is the abstracted exchange-value of goods in a shop window, the abstract exchange value of the artifacts is their being objects for academic study , their antiquarian interest, their academic objectivity

The objects stand solitarily The people who made them are irretrievable out of sight and out of mind (There are figures of Roman soldiers in cases offset from the main sequence, but significantly their armour is replica armour) The historical subjectivity

which constituted the objects is denied in their formal identity proclaimed by the labels uniting the objects according to academic exchange-principle Tht objects are formally equivalent, like commodities in a supermarket their ultimate meaning lies in their formal identity, commodities to be bought 'historical' objectivity to be decoded by the initiate, manipulated by detached academic subjectivity The objects arc before the visitor in certainty and presence, subjected to archaeological analysis

The objects form a spatial figure rather than a temporal process, they are cartographicaly located according to an ontologically and temporally depthless system of archaeo logical referents The past is seen, the visitor is distanced, dis interested, 'observer of the ultimately familiar or autonomous picture in which temporality its threats and its possibilities - has been annulled' (Spanos 1977, p 427)

the objects are familiar the immediate significance of the exhibited objects lies in their relation to contemporary objects, an unremarkable relation of resemblance and difference usually focussing on recognition of function (they had axes in the bronze age'), and appreciation of technical and artistic skill But in the absence of their deter minate social context the meaning of the artifacts lies in their abstract objectivity The artifacts are objects Archaeological history stands before the visitor as fetishized objectivity, a detached objectivity mysterious to the visitor, truly fetishistic A typical label reads

BFLI - DERIVATIVE BEAKER
BORFWELL FARM, SCREMERSION, N'D
Clarke 706 Class W M R -
N MR Hybrid 1948 7

As a coded set the objects are raw data, objective substance, ready to be worked up into descriptive archaeological narrative This narrative is implied but almost totally absent from the exhibition Only the models attest to its possibility

As we have said, in the second gallery the objects are located by the cases in time in their archaeological period The cases themselves represent empty time, time as a con tamer, formal and devoid of social content, but nevertheless filled with the content of archeology - objects, objects in cases, objects in time The cases are the content-less temporal form in which the objects are brought to exist

But time is not a non relational container of the reality of the past The reduction of temporality to measured duration separated from the 'content' of the past is an objectifi cation, a commodification of time So History becomes rooted in empty measured duration, a rigid continuum of ephemerality, a sequence of empty instants The past exists only in these moments, only in its present It is over and done with, complete, an 'autonomous picture' The past thus appears fleeting and distant from the present

And commodified time is capitalism's factory time (Thompson 1963, 1967, Giddens 1981, Lowe 1982) As John Berger puts it 'the factory which works all night is a sign of the victory of a ceaseless, uniform and remorseless time The factory continues even during the time of dreams' (Berger and Mohr 1982, p 107)

Remorseless commodified time is the mythical time of the always the same, empty, homogeneous time (Wolin 1982, p 48, Benjamin 1973e, esp Theses XI11 and XIV)

The visitor is presented with mythical Fate incessantly piling ruin upon shattered ruin, object upon object in an inescapable and rigid continuum of empty moments. Beakers and axe-heads appear in rows; tombstones and altars stand lined up, worn with time. Commodification brings a vision of mythical compulsion to repeat, a failure of memory, a Great Myth, 'the reproduction of the always-the-same under the semblance of the perpetually new' - commodity production (Wolin 1982, p. 174). History appears as commodity production; the objects in the cases are ultimately familiar because things have always been the same. Commodified lime denies remembrance, memory of difference. In this sense the reification which the objectification of the artifact represents is a forgetting (Adorno and Horkheimer 1979, p. 230;. 'History no longer pays its respects to the dead; the dead are simply what it has passed through' (Berger and Mohr 1982, p. 107). People are the objects, the debris of such a history, forgotten. This is the injustice of the empty cases of objects.

'The factory continues even during the time of dreams': commodified time marginalizes subjective experience of time - individual memory and other forms of experience which have the capacity to undo, unify and deny the ceaseless passing of empty moments (see Berger and Mohr 1982, pp. 105-6). In proclaiming chronometric history's monopoly of lime the museum bypasses the question of other forms of objective as well as subjective temporality (see Chapter 1) and the historical roots of commodified time.

The objects have been 'discovered'. The labels indicate provenance and information is given about circumstances of discovery of hoards and valuable objects, but not as a means of adding a geographical dimension to the understanding of the visitor -no maps are provided which indicate either distribution of exhibits or of artifacts of similar type and date. The reference to provenance communicates the idea of space as a non-relational container, an abstract existent analogous to the representation of time within which the substantive object is located. The inclusion of provenance on the labels communicates mere abstract 'discovery'. Subjectivity stands coolly apart from the objectiviiy of the artifact, seemingly passive yet with an instrumental relation to History, an empty screen of chronometric time onto which it projects the empirical.

But 'discovery' is fascinating. It is part of the romance of archaeology. 'Discovery' links past and present, reaching out from incessant passing of the momentary present, bridging the chasm between past and present opened up by the conception of time as an empty spatial dimension filled with artifacts locked into their respective presents, their archaeological periods.

But this resolution of the tension between past and present is a spurious harmony. The past is not *merely* discovered. 'Discovery' is not an abstract instant of capturing the past. The shock of the moment of discovery shatters the continuity of abstract, commodified time; it is a shock of discontinuity which reveals the present's practical relation to the past object.

The aesthetic artifact

The British Museum: (greek antiquities: we refer in this section to the typical form of presentation found in the great international museums - free-standing sculpture,

ceramics in cases, presented with minimum supporting information, e.g. the Parthenon sculptures.

> In the Russian ikon neither space nor time exists. It addresses the eye, but the eye which then shuts in prayer so that the image - now in the mind's eye - is isolated and entirely spiritualised. Yet the images are not introspective - that would already make them too personal; nor are they . . . mystical; their calm expressions suggest no exceptional experience. They are images of holy figures seen in the light of a heaven in which the people believe so as to make the visible world around them *credible.* (Berger 1969, pp. 20—1)

Parallel to the homogeneous spatial figure of the past found in the Museum of Antiquities, Newcastle, is the encapsulation of the past in the self-bounded, sealed-off, inclusive image- the artifact as ikon (Spanos 1977, p. 427). This aestheticization of the artifact is a romantic reaction to the commodification of the past. The lifeless, inert objectivity of analytical study is replaced (or supplemented) by the aesthetic productivity of *Homo Artifex.*

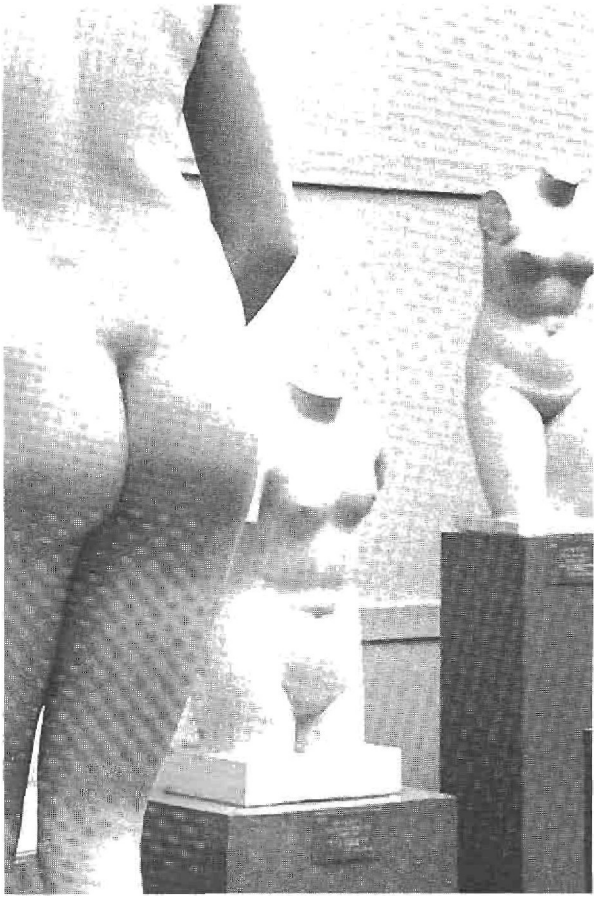


Fig. 4.1 The aesthetic artifact.

The artifact is displayed in splendid remoteness from the prosaic, from the exigencies of day-to-day life. The concrete and historically variable practice of production and consumption is collapsed into the 'aesthetic', an isolatable and universal human experience Instead of abstract objectivity the abstract experience of the aesthetic becomes the exchange-value of the artifact which is again raised to the status of a solitary fetish, a fetish of immanent 'humanity' Now the formal identity of artifacts in terms of objectivity becomes a formal identity according to spiritual truth, universal values expressed in the exceptional artifact History is again unified History freezes in the ideological light of the aesthetic artifact, celebrated and exalted, elevated above every,-day life

Display of the artifact conveys the timeless ability of Man (sic) as toolmaker-artist. As such the visitor need only approach the artifact with finely tuned sensibilities, the artifact's universal truth is communicated via direct intuition But whose sensibilities, whose intuition, whose 'humanity'? As the aesthetic qualities of the artifact are supposedly immediately perceptible, context and crucial analysis become relegated to optional supplements

History is differentiated only according to the unifying principle of the technical and artistic triumph of Man. It is divested of the 'trivia' of oppression of conflict (other than inwardly spiritual), of everything social. The aesthetic artifact is an escape from the nightmare of history But all culture shares the guilt of society The aesthetic artifact 'ekes out its existence only by virtue of injustice already perpetrated in the sphere of production' (Adorno 1967, p. 26)

A constituting subjectivity is now recognized, Man as Homo Artifex is recognized as mastering objectivity, objective substance investing it with a universal message But where does he belong, where did he come from? Of course *Homo Artifex* is an abstract conception, detached from history concealing its origins in the cultural values of particular social groups within history

Bringing the past alive

The anti-rationalism of aestheticized objectivity is related to the secret worrying antinomies at the heart of bourgeois rationality, the success of the analytics of scientific, instrumental rationality, bringing nature and the past to order under a concealed subjectivity, foregrounds the problem of subjectivity If science, instrumental analytics (exclusive of subjectivity), is the only firm (objective) basis for archaeological reconstruction, then what about human experience, emotion, imagination'

One answer, as we have shown, is to canonize the 'aesthetic' artifact as Art, as repository of the 'human , detached now from the analytics of archaeology, transcend ing history

Another answer to this chasm in conventional approaches to the past is the humaniz ing narrative - setting the artifacts into their concrete 'human' context. In the museum this is represented by the narrative display which provides contextual information (usually text diagrams, maps) and the situational display which sets the artifact in a con text of contemporary artifacts and features (e g the period room)

From another point of view, it has been widely recognized that every visit to a

museum is a hermeneutic venture and if museums are to cater for a clientele wider than an initiated elite, the artifacts cannot stand on their own The visitor faces a slippery indeterminacy in the museum - what do the objects mean? The two forms of display which have so far been discussed implicitly propose their own answers to this question - the meaning of the object lies in its objectivity or in the aesthetic. Narrative and situational types of display approach the semiotic indeterminacy of the artifact more directly through contextual information for the visitor.

Narrative display and the artifact as information

The Museum of London case displays, free standing artifacts, room interiors, shop reconstructions, paintings, photographs and much written material are skilfully and efficiently combined to tell the story of London from prehistoric times to the present.

In the Museum of London artifacts are essentially used to authenticate the social description written around them 'written', because the museum is in many ways a book around which the visitor may wander. This makes the ultimate message of the past as descriptive information encoded in objects all the more palatable.

The narrative which was implied but absent from the sequence of cases in the Museum of Antiquities is foregrounded in the Museum of London, but again an authentic transcendence of the superficial fact is missed

The displays convey factual information about the past of London The Museum of London condenses past social practice and experience into information, information tied to the chronological narrative Information the fact - is presented as the dominant form in which social practice is stored news. But as news belongs to a precise point in time, 'the value of information does not survive the moment it was new. It lives only in that moment, it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time' (Benjamin 1973c, p 90) Information lives only in the moment of its novelty 'In the form of information, experience no longer has anything to teach us, it has simply become another fungible aspect of modern life, an item of momentary interest which will soon cease to be topical and then be promptly discarded' (Wolin 1982, p 222) The visitor passes from display to display presumably absorbing 'information' and nothing more

Indeed, 'you have to be buried alive in order to survive' (Dorfman and Mattelart 1975, p 85) Archaeology is precisely the means to a 'living' past The past has to be buried alive, experience killed off, stultified, pinned down to the moment of its novelty in order to be meaningful in the present as information, a permanent commodity property, heritage, all preserved, pickled for the future.

Presence, absence, and the authenticating quote

> ὑπαρχουν, ἡ κινηση του προσωπου το σχημα της στοργης
> ἐκείνων που λιγοστεψαν τοσο παραξενα μες στη ζωη μας
>
> η μηπως ὄχι δεν ἀπομενει τιποτε παρα μονο το βαρος
> ἡ νοσταλγια του βαρους μιας υπαρξης ζωντανης

> does there exist the movement of the face, shape of the tenderness
> of those who've shrunk so strangely in our lives . . .
> or perhaps no, nothing is left but the weight
> the nostalgia for the weight of a living existence
>
> (from George Seferis 'The King of Asine',
> translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard)

The Museum of London quotes with objects. It draws on a quality of aura found in the artifact of the past, its authenticity, genuineness, authority, its unique phenomenon of romantic distance however close it might be physically, a distance located in its testimony to the past it has witnessed (Benjamin 1973d, p. 223). The aura of the artifacts, their three-dimensional reality, their facticity, all authenticate the narrative of the Museum of London. This is their purpose.

There is a subtle play of difference at work here:

Presence	Absence
Present	Past
Here now	Distant
Signifier	Signified
Trace	Substance

The objects are immediate and real before us, present to our consciousness and sight. As the concrete past, they confirm the meaning of the presentation. But the objects only represent or indicate the past. The past is the referent signified by the object. The object signifies an absent presence: of course the past is not present here and now, but absent, distant. So the objects are signs in our present. They are not the past immediately present before us but signifiers of the past (the signified), traces of the past (the absent referent). 'When we use signs, the being present of the referent and signified, incarnated in the self-present signifier, appears to us immediately, but it is delusion, misperception, dream. There is neither substance nor presence in the sign, but only the play of differences' - difference between signifier and signified, between signified and referent, between presence and absence (Leitch 1983, p. 44). The objects embody this play of difference which is tied down by the rhetorical agency of interpretation - the Museum of London producing a substantial past before us in the present, presenting a past. And it is by means of the reduction of difference that the Museum of London confirms its message.

The notion of presence is at the heart of the 'romance' of archaeology. It forms the basis of much of archaeology's appeal and popularity. The objects on view in the museum bring us face to face with the past. The objects have presence, human presence - the features of the burial mask, the thumb-print on the pot. This presence constitutes the object's authority, its authenticity. The presence of the past - the past endures and reaches out to touch us.

The authenticating, romantic presence of the museum object is a restricted, one-dimensional notion of presence which reduces the dialectic of presence and absence. It suggests that the time of the artifact can be localized, that the artifact *belongs* to the past,

to a moment in time w hen someone made and used it This is the romance of the object Time is thus ultimately abstracted and reduced to a derivative of space, time comes to be composed of ultimately timeless moments on a continuum its essence King in the measurable 'distance' between moments The ambiguity of the artifact the play of semiotic difference encompassing past and present, Us nature as sign in the present to and for a past - is stabilized in the name of a fixed and closed-down History

George Seferis expresses the disturbing tension between presence and absence, the void behind the burial mask, the presence in the human features, the past is both present and absent We must grasp the full implications of the opposition presence-absence The makers of the artifact are absent It is our rhetorical insistence which requires their presence

The absent creator of the artifact is longed for - if only it were possible to meet and talk with the people of the past, have *them* present before us But they are absent and what is left According to some, the archaeologist is confined to describing the tangible *(cf* C Hawkes 1954), doomed to discover only the trivial (Leach 1973) But for the pub-hc there is the inspired popularizer, a Michael Wood (1985), a John Romer (1984), who can invoke absent humanity, bring the past alive, make it live make the people of the past present The presence of this past *is* our present

As Eagleton has pointed out (1983, pp 120-1), structuralism has exposed this humanist fallacy - for archeology the notion that the artifactual past is a kind of transcript of the living presence of real people who are disturbingly absent Such a notion actually dematerializes the artifact, reducing it to a mediating element in the present's spiritual encounter with the humanity of the past Rather, meaning arises through the chronic reciprocity of presence and absence, being and non-being Meaning is not simply present in the artifact but is in a sense also absent Meaning is not identical with itself, the artifactual past exhibits a surplus over exact meaning Meaning is produced in the material practice of reasoning in the present, which is, of course, in no way identical with the past

The exhibited past

A period room in the Castle Museum, York moorland collage

> Typical of the North-Last of Yorkshire home-spun and spartan The hearth was the centre of family life, providing not only warmth and comfort but a place for the old cooking pot to simmer above the glowing peat Bread was baked here the dough was mixed in the wooden trough beneath the window In front of the fire is a home made rag or 'clip' rug The country made furniture reflects a tradition of unsophisticated craftsmanship, which was about to pass away Already, on the mantelpiece, there are factory -made trinkets and ornaments the pair of Staffordshire pottery dogs, the fancy glass rolling pin and walking sticks, and a cheap but cheerful German clock In the window hangs a 'witch-ball' Its glass surface was popularly supposed to reflect from the room the stare of any witch or evil eye (Official Guidebook)

In situational display artifacts are brought together in an association which will

supposedly enable the visitor to decode a meaning through experience of context Such associations commonly take the form of period rooms Figures may inhabit the rooms they may be the intended focus of attention (e g costume) Situational display involves lesser or greater degrees of reconstruction to provide a window to the past

In traditional case display the artifact demands concentrated attention according to the ritual analyties of archaeology What matters is not so much the artifact being on view as the significance of its existence, its authenticity, Its exhibition to the public is a concession (the Museum of Antiquities, Newcastle is a university museum Hence the need for the visitor to be sufficiently initiated to be able to decode the objects

The aesthetic artifact of the British Museum requires contemplation Labelling is hardly needed When exhibited, the aesthetic artifact is to communicate the ritual values of the cult of *Homo Artifex* Hallowed and venerable achievement, it is the cult-image of *Homo Artifex* ultimately unapproachable 'The closeness which one may gain from its subject matter does not impair the distance which it retains in its appearance' (Benjamin 1973d, p 245) It is, alter all, the product of Man

the period room focusses on the communicative-value, the exhibition value of the artifact as opposed to cult-value (Benjamin 1973d, pp 226-7) Situational display attempts to overcome the distance of the past Artifacts arc reassembled into 'realistic' association and no longer stand on their own The distance between past and present is suspended in an arrested synchronism Time is suspended and the objects are viewed through the spatial relations of the display through their present codification (almost always in terms of function;

The visitor is drawn into the space created by the artifacts to discover their'meaning' The visitor herself fills the absence within the period room, the absence of a living constituting agent The visitor merges with the other because of her absence, but this absence means that the absent living agent of the past artifact is all the more like the visitor The visitor becomes the figure in a mirror of her present (sec Williamson 1978, pp 77ff) But it is not so much the past individual who is absent as the present author

In the period room cult-value is replaced by exhibition-value the artifact *requires* display, it necessarily includes a communicative function The artifacts in the period room do not of necessity require concentrated attention or contemplation The visitor may examine the past, but absent mindedly

The semiotic character of artifacts is recognized They are used as vehicles to a story of the past, as signs in the present carrying information to the visitor They are given an explicit communicative function They are a translucent window onto the past 'as it was', immediate, un-mediated vehicles to a 'realistic' picture of the past, a photograph of the past (of McLuhan et *al* 1969, on the pictorial visual form of museum display)

The model of reality behind this notion of the 'realistic' is that of the photograph The period loom is set before the gate of the omnipresent camera the clock for making images, for capturing and fixing instants The period room is 'reality' ready to be photographed, a still life, tableau But the period room is not so much a 'realist' as a 'naturalist' re presentation of the past (Berger 1969, pp 50ff , *cf* Lukacs 1963,1980a) The naturalistic display aims to present the immediacy of the past with maximum credibility It aims at preserving an exact copy of 'the way things were', a replica There

is no other basis for the selection of artifacts to be included in the period room. In this sense naturalism is unselective. The period room shows what there was; it presents an inventory to the visitor and the more complete the inventory the better (Sontag 1979, p. 22). Nor is inventory a simple listing: 'inventory is never a neutral idea; to catalogue is not merely to ascertain but also to appropriate' (Barthes 1982, p. 222). Inventory fragments, lists the items the present owns. Naturalist display diverts attention away from the meaning of its inventory, from its constructed nature, from the practical *use* of artifacts as a medium to a past, a historical medium, by emphasizing immediate appearance, by appearing immediately understandable. Indeed attention is diverted from the artifacts to the empty space between them.

Knowledge of the past is presented as being informational, bureaucratic. In such a conception selection is feared. Recovery and preservation must be as complete and unselective as is inhumanly possible. The past becomes a target for surveillance. Artifacts are preserved and exhibited for scrutiny. The visitor is given the privilege of being in on the act of surveillance. The empirical detail of the past is fed into an interminable dossier (Sontag 1979, p. 156). The past is atomized, pinned down, defined, controlled.

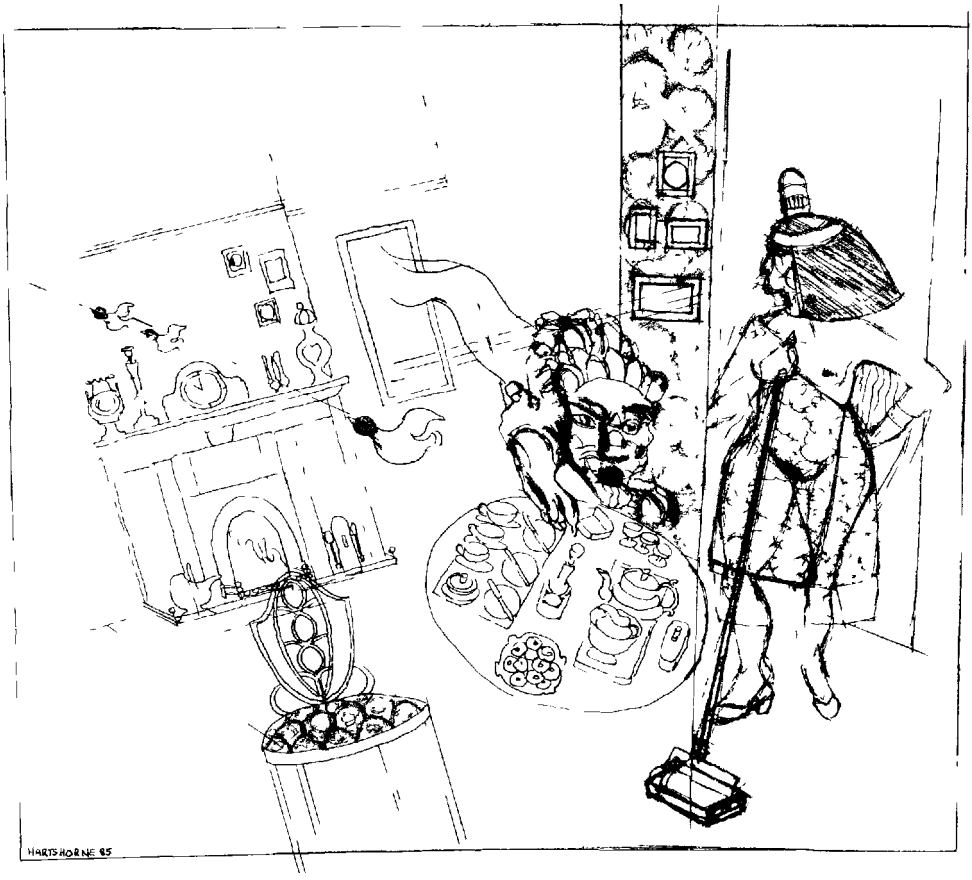


Fig 4 2 The period room rediscovered

The visitor is drawn into the period room to fill the human absence and in this aesthetic awareness of and proximity to the artifacts the visitor discovers the familiar. So the past seems closer, understandable, manageable. But this is a tautology. Through the period room's transparent window we recognize the familiar - the fire to relax around, old cooking pot simmering away, china dogs on the mantelpiece. In seeking such a past we must have already discovered it, hence the recognition of the familiar. The past is not explained but acknowledged.

At the same time the period room is attractively mysterious (the 'witch ball' in the window). It invites speculation about its narrative; it begs the question of the link between the artifacts other than their juxtaposition. The more complete the inventory of the period room, the more the period room tells the visitors, the less they know. The period room is a static instant, a disconnected moment. This disconnected temporality and discontinuity with the present creates the mystery. The transparency of the period room is an illusion. Atomistic, manageable, manipulated 'reality' is opaque.

In this world of commodities there is no space for experience, no space for the social constitutive function of subjectivity. There is no space for subjective experience. This also creates a problem of meaning - where is the human narrative? It must be supplied by contemporary experience of the commodity. The visitor lends the objects an experiential context. In the museum department store, the only form of subjective experience allowed is the consumer dream of acquisition and consumption, of alternative lifestyles. The visitor sees, is attracted, desires. The visitor becomes a customer of the past, a tourist of the 'reality' of the past. The past is displayed. Exhibition-value has replaced cult-value.

The arrested temporality of the period room proposes that meaning is instantaneous, located in the disconnected moment, that visible facts convey the truth. The certainty of the existence, the facticity, the 'reality' of the artifacts, the 'look' of the period room confirm this proposal. But it is precisely 'certainty' which is instantaneous. Understanding is temporal and must involve the possibility of denying immediate appearance. (See Berger and Mohr 1982, p. 89; Sontag 1979, p. 23.) This is denied in the period room. The significance of the period room is its naturalism, its pretension to immediacy. The period room is not a replica but a *simulacrum,* an exact copy of an original which never existed. The past is transformed into its own image (Jameson 1984, p. 66).

The erotics of the museum

The relation with the past based on the look of objects is an amorous one (Sontag 1979, pp. 23-4). It is a voyeuristic appreciation and celebration and a simultaneous violation of the body of the past. It is a pornography. Artifacts are promoted to virginal purity (the aesthetic artifact) or prostituted as objects for possession and consumption (the past is subject to immediate consumption in voyeuristic detail).

So the past is revealed to the visitor, exposed and uncovered to be appreciated. In this sense discovery, revelation, includes 'an idea of appropriative enjoyment' (see above). Aktaion discovers Artemis, surprises her at her bath and as voyeur enjoys her nudity, her purity and virginity, just as the visitor views the aesthetic artifact. But the sight of Artemis is her violation. What is seen is possessed; to view is to rape (Sartre 1958,

pp 578-9) So the period room invites violation It invokes subjective emotional detachment and consumption The visitor stands back detached (no matter how close and familiar the past may seem) and views there is no space or time, past or present, for drawing close, for subjective experience, for finding out what lies beneath the surface There is only the pleasure of immediate voyeuristic consumption 'Knowledge becomes located in appearance, in instantaneous appropriation instantaneous con sumption, rape

Artifacts are defined as objects for scrutiny, for display, for exhibition The past is displayed Like the pornographic photograph, detail and clarity of reproduction bring fascination, a sense of being in on the act The desire tor certainty of being in on the act rather than understanding leads to the emphasis on explicitness, on empirical mechanical immediacy. The certainty of the 'medium , photography or artifact, con firms the 'realm' of the displayed sexual act, of the displayed past The pornographic model is displayed, 'available, asking to be taken, to be consumed, a sexual com modity, emotionally detached

Just as in pornography women are all equivalent as sexual commodities - reduced to sameness in relation to their display and possession in stylized, sterile sex, endlessly repeatable, so too the period room is endlessly repeatable History is ultimately all the same, abstract temporal sequence, object of display and possession It is a homogeneous history

The partner of the eternal virgin Artemis is the whore of the period room brothel, instantly available, open, easily penetrated But 'the openness of homogeneous history is both seductive invitation and frustrating refusal, since in entering its gaping void you are entering precisely nothing' (Eagleton 1981, pp 45-6 The ease of penetration is here a sign of the sterility of the relationship

Sex in pornography is stylized as a system of fetishistic objects - clothing, parts of body, physical acts Sexuality is bound and immobilized, spectacular So too with the commodified past The visitor looks upon 'the past' in the period room History is appreciated For this to happen history is stylized, 'history must be complete and fully accomplished As a process which is fully accomplished, history, with all its promise of future change and development is closed down and confined entirely to what can be exhibited as "the historical past"' (Bommes and Wright 1982, p 291)

The George Joicey Museum, Newcastle upon Tyne Converted seventeenth century almshouses The top floor of eleven inmates' cells form a sequence of period rooms in chronological order, from sixteenth to twentieth centuries

> Is it true, do you think, that if they move us from here they will not let us keep our own furniture? I do hope they will because because, well, it's home you know (Inmate quoted just before the almshouses were closed in 1935 Brown 1934, p 122)

> the bourgeoisie have taken possession of an apartment which they pre-leased from the moment humanity appeared on earth
>
> (Dorfman and Mattelart 1975, p 86)

In the Joicey Museum narrative is tied to situational display Ideological distortion accompanies the formal elimination of history The narrative is one of change in furni ture It is a chronology of antiques, the archetypal bourgeois collector's item, uniting the aesthetic and the commodity

temporality is again absent it is the social practice which is utterly excluded from the sequence of rooms This is disguised by the linear row of cells, units of homogeneous time The cells are antique showrooms The informational text reads like a showroom catalogue

> In the Regency Period British prosperity grew in combination with naval supremacy and expansion of the Empire, and this is reflected in the style of furniture and the use of new woods The mahogany table with tip up top is flanked by a pair of dining chairs, with bowed top and reeded sabre legs Similar in style is the armchair The satin-wood cabinet in the Sheraton tra dition has a bowed central section with a panel painted in the manner of Angelica Kaufmann

Time is utterly consumable Pop round the corner after the visit and buy a piece of history - if you can afford it

The furniture is presented in the form of period rooms, theatres without actors again Presenting the past, the stage is set, but where are the actors'[1] They are the audience The actors supplied by the visitor again belong to the present The rooms represent the nuclear family through the centuries in its living room The past is a sequence of interior design, redecoration occurring even century or so Change is the consumerist change of contemporary capitalism, everything changes and stays the same This is the ideological distortion What of the constituting reality of social practice - structures of family life, gender, patriarchy? What of the social reality of the almshouses? The past has been evicted together with all her furniture

Shop-front commodification

th*e Castle Museum York* two converted eighteenth-century prisons house a series of 'folk' collections, 'everyday' objects -agricultural implements to toys to truncheons dating from the eighteenth century onwards Many were collected by a local country doctor, John Kirk, at the turn of the century There are two reconstructed streets containing shops, pub, garage, fire station, a water mill, many period rooms, prison cells partly converted into traditional workshops, conventional case displays

The overwhelming metaphor of the Castle Museum is the shop front, the shop display presenting the consumable variety of capitalist society 'Kirkgate', the older reconstructed street of the museum, consists predominantly of shop fronts displaying commodities, simply that The objects simply evoke recognition of empirical similarity and difference to the present, and it isn't all that different *(cf* Museum of Antiquities) The artifacts are quite literally commodified The museum case has literally become the shop front The museum visit has become a confrontation with empirical commodity change (Commodification again')

The shop front has become museum case; the shops and galleries bear the imprint of the 'collector'. Shopfronts display *collections* of gold, silver, Sheffield plate, dinner services. The guidebook proclaims: 'to many people the Castle Museum is "the museum with the street". Kirkgate is a spectacular re-creation that has caught the atmosphere of the nineteenth-century … It is in constant demand as a "set". But Kirkgate is not, of course, a stage-setting. It is a collection of real buildings and shop-fronts.' Kirkgate is a series of collections, not a street. The 'vivid picture of the everyday life of the past', which a plaque records as the founder of the museum's aim, is a collection of everyday objects.

The Chapel Gallery, which presents the miscellany of the museum, includes cases of horse brasses, weights and measures, model steam engines, lace, knitting, embroidery, drinking vessels, police truncheons; farm implements lie on the floor. Clock pointers, watch-keys and clock-faces: Kirk's collections of what he termed 'bygones' are the individual units of commodified time. They represent the hysterical compulsion to repeat, the failing of memory, reproduction of the always the same under the appearance of the new, the hysterical compulsion to collect and consume.

But this commodification is the reality of developing capitalism. The rhythm of the 'variety' of the objects reveals their abstract identity. The objects lose their empirical distinctions. The meaning of case after case, shop after shop of everyday objects slides into one of repetition. Meaning is no longer present in the object. This is disguised by the frequent adoption of 'realistic' situational displays; the lack of labelling and supportive material implies that the objects explain themselves.

Yet the 'realistic' display is repeatedly undermined by deconstructing details. Kirkgate's fire-station contains cases of objects; the carriage in the street is surrounded by a fence; the street is in perfect order and repair, spotlessly clean; informational text appears on walls. In the costume galleries empty suits of armour stand in a cased mock-up 'realistic' landscape. Further on, in a dark gallery with shored-up 'trench' walls, clean freshly-pressed uniforms on shop mannikins fight again in reconstructed Flanders mud. Haute couture dresses revolve in pastel pastoral landscape setting, richly furnished shop window sets.

The prisons play deconstructing counterpoint to the exhibits and displays. Peer through a slit in a door in Kirkgate (locked again) and inside is a padded cell: the hysterical historical? Just as the hysterical, delirious maniac incorporates what he or she sees and hears into his or her self-absorbed fantasizing, so too the museum seizes on manifestations of the past in order to possess them and unfeelingly incorporate them into its myth. We are in the prison of capitalist commodification. Remains of the prisons are frequently encountered: barred windows, iron-grill doors. The cells of one prison, interiors and corridors whitewashed, house workshop collections of blackened tools of Victorian pipemaker, wheelwright, blacksmith, printer. The rooms are obviously cells, some even retain grill doors; they are hardly neutral setting for 'period workshops'. The juxtaposition of blackened tools and whitewashed cells draws further attention to the stark contrast between present artificial setting and display, original carcereal use of the settings and the craftsmen's tools. The Castle Museum dismantles its own pretensions to pictorial re-presentation.

Heritage: Visiting a mythical past

The North England Open Air Museum, Beamish, County Durham 200 acres of countryside are the setting for reconstructed and refurbished buildings, some *in situ,* most transferred from around the North-East, which are meant to represent late-Victorian north-east England There is a railway layout, colliery, pit cottages, a farm and a town area with terraced houses, pub and co-op A large hall houses collections and archives Sounds of traditional fairground and brass band, the rattle of trams, the smell of engine oil and steam add considerably to the nostalgic atmosphere, the museum is animated with brass band concerts, engines in steam, passenger trams, summer fairs, whippet racing, pitmen's *wi*ves baking bread and scones, and a co-op grocer weighing sugar bags filled with sand

We left Gateshead to get away from houses like this (Visitor's comment)

Geordie's Heyday' the declared aim of Beamish, the 'Great Northern Experience', is to preserve the North-bast's heritage, the northern way of life 'about a century ago when the North-bast was in the forefront of British Industrial development' (Official Guidebook) Local heritage is the focus of the visit to Beamish, a visit into a mythical past Beamish is a commemoration of a mythical past, objects never intended to com memorate anything are transformed into monuments of mythical meaning

Fig 4 3 Beamish valley A The Hall B The Town, C The Railway Station D The Home Farm F The Steam Navy, H The Colliers, G Geordie (after Carmichael c 1830)

Although the museum houses a reference library and photographic and sound archives, the heritage Beamish outwardly presents is property and artifacts, the property of a Utopian community with all classes harmoniously in their place in Hall or terraced house, collecting mounts from stable block or working the colliery steam winder All the dehistoricized elements of an anaesthetized past have been miraculously transported from Consett, Gateshead, Alnwick to a picturesque rural setting It is hard to believe that this valley bottom is only a few miles from Newcastle, at Beamish history is isolated from the present

History, objectified in property, industrial capital and the object, is the existent (as long as it is carefully preserved) and at Beamish it is eminently visitable and consumable in leisure time Objects and buildings from the past are extracted from their present con text and displayed at Beamish History is staged as 'historical' sights, images and events In this way 'history is abstracted from the historical and becomes an object of generalised social attention' (Bommes and Wright 1982, p 290) History is extracted from the present

We have noted the working of the exchange principle in relation to objects It applies also to historical sites and to museums themselves Beamish is eminently visitable, a place for the family to visit on August Bank Holiday As such it is equivalent to other such places of 'historical 'interest castles, stately homes, cathedrals The places have meaning overwhelming in relation to one another History again becomes an 'abstract system of equivalences' Its relation to everyday life is one of consumption in leisure time Where should we go this weekend?

But to locate history in sites, monuments, museums, uninhabited places isolatable from the present 'suppresses at one stroke the reality of the land and that of its people, it accounts for nothing of the present, that is nothing historical, and as a consequence the monuments themselves become undecipherable, therefore senseless What is to be seen is thus constantly in the process of vanishing' (Barthes 1973a, p 76) Beamish does not provide a window on the past Beamish is an agent of blindness The past is trans formed into its image, a spectacle

The past can be visited at Beamish, but this past is another world, a fantasy, a myth, a nostalgia It is another time, 'as in other aggressive fantasies and the dream of primal bliss, it exists in allegory rather than actual time It is a reverse image of the weaknesses of the present, a measure of our fall' (Samuel 1983, p n) As theatrical spectacle replaces life so nostalgia replaces history

Beamish nourishes a 'soft focus nostalgia' (.ibid) for times more congenial when pit-men, 'prodigious gardeners, breeders of animals, and often gamblers' (guidebook) grew leeks (the gardens arc set) and raced whippets (there has been whippet racing at Beamish) and yes, took baths in front of the open fire It must have been this way re*ally,* mustn't it, because people lived in the terraced cottages until 1976 and provided 'information about how *their* cottages were furnished' (guidebook, our emphasis) Jo, from number 26, died after being rehoused when his cottage was given to Beamish by the National Coal Board, but with the help of his family his cottage has been recreated He lives on doesn't he'

Beamish capitalizes (sic) on the indeterminacy, the ambiguity of artifacts and through

selection and relocation at Beamish presents a sentimental experience of an imprecise time and place, a Utopian gratification, a euchronia. This movement from the concrete naturalism of the exhibits to imaginary make-believe 'Geordieland' is a neo-lribal gesture, an assertion of'roots' in the face of the anonymity of everyday life in contemporary capitalism. The transformation from real artifacts to imaginary past occurs through and for the initiate, the Geordie of today. The past is pre-recognized before arrival at Beamish. Beamish confirms recognition of the myth of the past. Older people recognize objects similar to those they lived with but now anaesthetized in the terms imposed by Beamish. Younger visitors listen to their mams and dads, grandmas and grandads.

This recognition and remembrance is not wholly conditioned: 'we left Galeshead to get away from houses like this'. Positive energies of past hopes and dissatisfactions, senses of tradition and freedom are aroused. However these energies emerge in an isolated realm of leisure, that 'removed and anodyne realm in which gratification is offered for dissatisfaction in relation to work' (Bommes and Wright 1982, p. 296). As an 'experience' encountered in leisure time, the past is over, finished, relevant only in terms of a visit on Saturday or Sunday or a holiday, a day out with the kids. So why not just remember the good times - the steam engines and trams, leek shows and . . . ? Let's have a good day out at Beamish. We hope to show that such concepts of diversion and amusement - here applied to the presentation of Beamish's nostalgic mythology - are as appropriate in ideology critique as more conventional analysis which would assign Beamish's displayed past to particular sectional interests, criticizing a story mistold (see Adorno 1967, p. 30).

History is timeless through the logic of abstract equivalence. The objects and buildings also have a timeless quality because they have endured. They have defeated history's process of decay. Historical time is experienced as degeneration. We nostalgically look back from the edge of an abyss to a time of community and human dignity. This backwards look, and prospect of only further decay, is hindering: we must stop, rescue and preserve. 'Under the entropic view of history, supported as it is by High Cultural paradigms, "the past" is revalued and reconstructed as an irreplaceable heritage - a trust which is bestowed upon the present and must be serviced and passed on to posterity' (Bommes and Wright 1982, p. 291). We must preserve the past; it needs servicing, mending, fixing. But fixing is immobilizing.

The rusting items of industrial machinery scattered around Beamish are testaments to history as decay. They proclaim the need to service the past, preserve it, rescue it. They also proclaim its endurance. Together with the work in progress reconstructing buildings, these objects declare Beamish is incomplete.

However this is not a declaration that history is forever incomplete, or that history is open to human agency. It means *Beamish* is incomplete, a marketing ploy that Beamish will always be open for the visitor to return again and again to view the most recently fixed bit of the past. It means the past is still hanging on, it has endured, it is enduring, just like Jo in his cottage. It means our freedom, our agency, is restricted to being mechanics for a broken-down Gateshead tram.

The past endures, clinging to the present, weighing down the present. A sticky,

slimy past sucks the present into its mire An unfinished past of domination, unfreedom and suffering seeps into the present and drags us into a mire of compulsive repetition, unresolved conflicts, because the past is forgotten (Schapiro 1977 p 147) The past endures with the help of the present but in being preserved in this way the past is forgotten The truth of the past is suffocated beneath a pile of preserved objects which only proclaim a self-evident but deadened 'truth'

Labour and discovery: the archaeologist as hero

Jorvik Viking Centre, York an underground 'interpretation centre' beneath a shopping centre Visitors make a 'journey in time' on talking 'time cars' to a street and alleyway in Viking Jorvik, complete with sounds, smells and models of people A guide to archaeological excavation is followed by conventional case displays and a museum shop

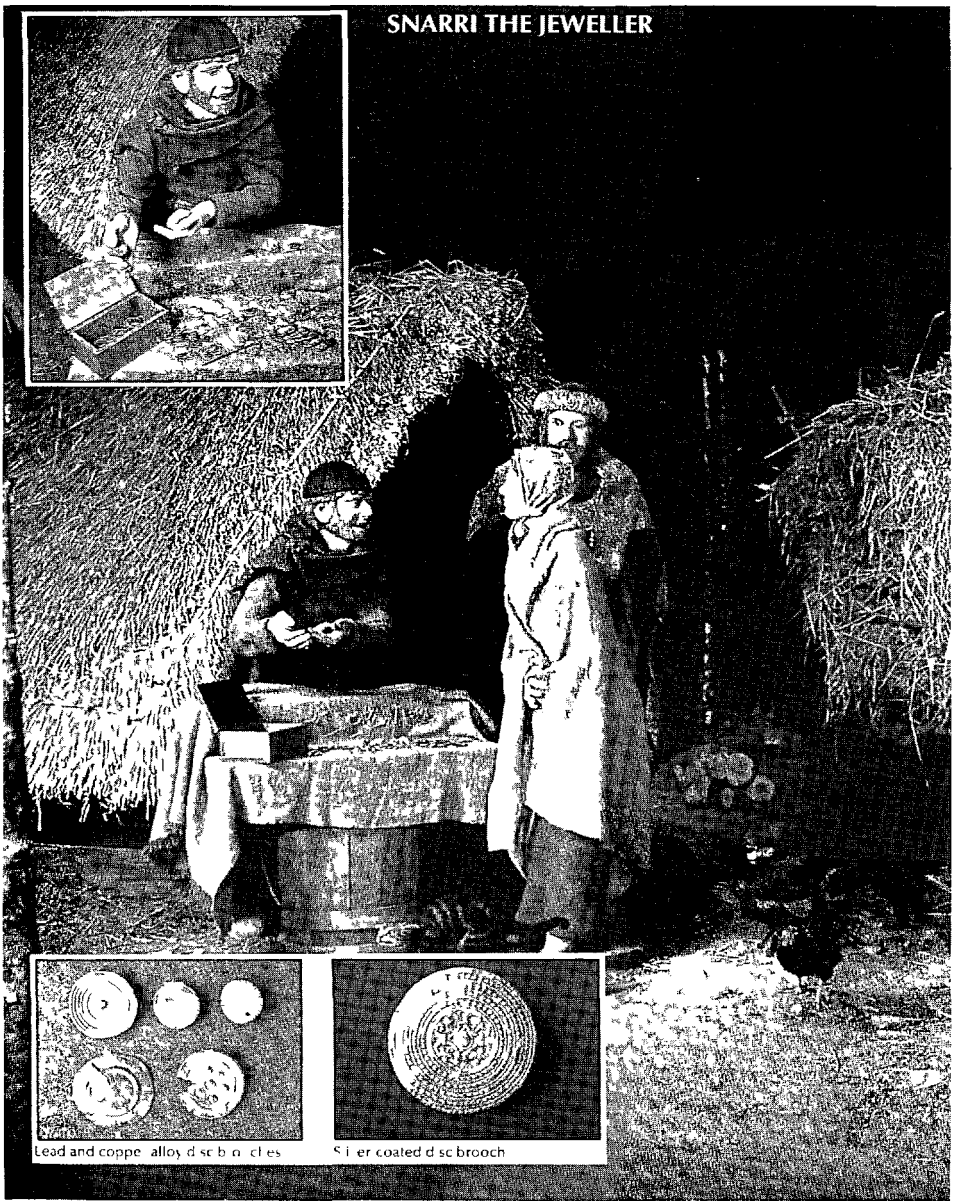
'A revolutionary concept in museum design' so claims 'Jorvik Times', an official 'newspaper' produced by the York Archaeological Trust It is apparently so revolutionary that the label 'museum' cannot be applied to the Jorvik Viking Centre The centre is a project of the York Archaeological Trust and aims to 'remind people of a forgotten but important and exciting piece of English history, and at the same time explain how archaeologists go about their task' (official guidebook) A visit to the centre is again an experience, the 'Jorvik Experience', a 'journey in time' to Viking Age York, Jorvik brought back to life (Jorvik Times) The experience is of discovery of the past and the labour involved in revivification

The experience begins with a 'trip back in time', an impressionistic audio-visual presentation, after which 'time stops, history is frozen, this is Jorvik' (time car commentary) The visitor proceeds to view the reconstructed street and alleyway The past has been discovered and reconstructed through immense archaeological labour, the scientific processing of'15,000 (or is it 30,000) objects' a quarter of a million pots[1] four and a half tons of bones'' (commentary) In the supporting literature and commentary, stress is repeatedly placed on the detail and accuracy of the reconstructed street, its basis in enormous amounts of factual evidence Indeed the reconstruction is said to be so accurate, so real, that 'if the Vikings themselves were to return they would feel com pletely at home' (Jorvik Times) Yet the objects are made to carry meanings which would have mystified their makers empirical detail, representational accuracy, inanimate display for educational purposes Stress is placed on authenticity achieved through science and (technology and the sophistication of the audio-usual presentation (see Wishart 1984) The stress is on the identification of empirical accuracy and 'life', the life of Jorvik But life doesn't live

After the street comes a jump forward to 1980 and the discovery of what lay buried The archaeological site is preserved half excavated, a work site, labour in process, finds in a trav, wheelbarrows full 'Archaeologists from the York Archaeological Trust are revealing the remains of the loos and wells, warehouses, workshops and homes we have just visited they peel off layer after layer of soil, labelling, measuring, photographing and planning everything as they go' (guidebook)

More labour is revealed the evidence, having been discovered, is processed The

visitor arrives at the real detective work, 'digging is only the start of the archaeologist's detective work' (commentary) The visitor passes by a desk with work obviously in process and then is presented with a reconstructed conservation laboratory complete with white coated expert looking down a microscope Another white-coated figure (a member of an environmental archaeology unit, we are told) sieves biological finds On the opposite wall life-sized photographs attest to scientific industry the commentary



the past brought back to life Reproduced with permission of Cultural Resource Management Ltd

enlightens the visitor this is biological detective work which together with detective work on other material evidence, shows the archaeologist what life was like in the past, what conditions were like, when the enormous three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle is pieced together

the labour of discovery and reconstructing the past so great is the stress on authenticity that 'scientific technique must be shown to the visitor And science excludes the visitor - the white coated dummy looks down the microscope, but not the visitor We are to understand that scientific discovery guarantees the authenticity of the trip, a tourist trip into history 'You are HERE, and you are THERE, both at the same time (Magnus Magnusson in guidebook) Time has after all been arrested The past is present We are present in the past This is the actual site of the street These are the actual timbers The detective work draws the visitor closer to the past Accordingly it is appropriate that the visitor should be allowed to actually touch the past, panels of potsherds and other objects are attached to a wall

Between the two white-coated experts is a reminder of the conceptual associate of 'labour' 'discovery' A marble slab in the floor records the discovery by two construction workers of the 'Coppergate Helmet' (Anglo Saxon in date)

'Now come and see the objects' the penultimate element in the Jorvik Experience is a conventional gallery of 500 case-displayed objects With the supporting text they form a descriptive account of subsistence and crafts Finally comes the museum shop where you can 'take your pick from a host of beautifully crafted mementoes of the city the Vikings called Jorvik' (Magnus Magnusson in guidebook)

Jorvik is described as an experience and like any experience it just happens, as does the thrill of discovery discovery of treasure, of the aesthetic artifact, of the artifact laden with information The visitor passively experiences, locked for half of the visit in a moving 'time car' We are guided by the anonymous cultural policeman (but isn't it that kindly Magnus Magnusson) whose precise rehearsed sentences are truly sentences - *sententiae* - acts of penal speech (Barthes 1977a, p 191), telling us what we see, tying down the meaning of the artifacts, tying the artifact to the 'realistic' The 'journey in time' and visit to reconstructed Jorvik is a sentence against polysemy There is no turn ing back, the visitor cannot leave the 'time car' Museum shop follows object gallery follows object laboratory follows what is presented as the life-world of the artifact The fixed sequence culminates in the revelation of the meaning of the Jorvik Experience Object gallery and museum shop are the commodified object of archaeological labour and the reality of commodity purchase, reified object on display followed by an oppor tunity to buy a memento of the purchased experience, to buy the past (1,000 year-old pieces of timber (a £1 a square inch)

> facilis descensus Averno
> sed revocare gradum superasque evadere ad auras
> hie opus, hie labor est
> (The descent to Avernus is easy but to retrace your steps and escape
> back to upper airs this is the labour, this is the toil)
>
> (Virgil *Aeneid* VI 126-91

> The present is the bull whose blood must fill the pit if the shades of the departed are to appear at its edge (Benjamin 1955, p 314)

Aeneas, Trojan hero, visited Cumae where the Sibyl prophesied his destiny and guided him into Avernus, the underworld, where he encountered Rome's destiny Beamish is a visit to a mythical past Jorvik is a mythical journey in the steps of the archaeologist as hero

Like Aeneas, the archaeologist (and later the privileged visitor) is guided on a ritual journey to 'knowledge' For Aeneas it is a fixed and irresistible destiny and future For the archaeologist it is 'the past', finally isolated in realistic photographic detail, fixed and certain

For Aeneas, the irresistibility, the veracity of his destiny and Rome's future is confirmed respectively by his guide, the prophetess Sibyl and her inspiration from the god Apollo, and by the supreme effort and labour required of the hero to gain access to the underworld and there discover knowledge For the visitor the 'truth" of Jorvik is confirmed by the guides Magnus Magnusson and other commentators - stressing the divine origins of the reconstruction in scientific endeavour, and also by the supreme effort and labour required of the archaeologist-hero to discover and reconstruct the past

But there is a striking absence The Aeneid is Virgil's epic Virgil, the author, is absent from Aeneas's journey The Sibyl's and Aeneas's prophetic visions of things to come are Virgil s present, his offering to his patron Augustus So too with Jorvik, the reconstructed street, the result of the labour of the archaeologist hero, and the guiding commentary are self-fulfilled prophecies They too are irresistible and unavoidable because of the absent author This is why Jorvik is described as an experience Like any true experience it happens, is irresistible, author less The Sibyl's certainty and the certainty of Aeneas's experiences belong to Virgil because Virgil is projecting his present into a mythical past The truth of the Jorvik reconstruction belongs not in the objects, in the 'past', but in the present, in present archaeological practice, uncovering, unconcealing the fragments of Viking Jorvik

We may take the classical analogy further Walter Benjamin also writes ' The soothsayers who found out from time what it had in store did not experience time as either homogeneous or empty Anyone who keeps this in mind will perhaps get an idea of how past times were experienced in remembrance namely in just the same way' (1973e, Thesis XVIIIB p 266) The ancient prophet interpreted phenomena as signs (e g flights of birds, hysterical ramblings of a priestess) Uncertainty and doubt existed over the status of phenomena as prophetic signs, over the meaning of the signs and the reality to which they might refer To perform an interpretation was to arrest the present in grasping the momentary connection of the signs with the future and reduce the doubt over meaning in a prophetic reading Reservation was repressed, meaning assigned and then asserted - interpretation was open to criticism and debate within the community So the prophet's experience of time is not empty duration /povog but xaiyog - the critical moment, conjunction of present and future (Kermodc 1967, pp 46ff , *cf* Leitch 1983, pp 3-6) To interpret the past is also to play the prophet Jorvik, or rather its

creators, read the fragments of the past and tie them to a particular un-mediated meaning, descriptive, empty, its connection with the present forgotten but not absent

PART TWO PAST AND PRESENT IX THE MUSEUM

The museum's aesthetic eliminates the concrete author of history, it suppresses the concrete authorship of the past in the present. And this is in spite of the museum's frequent use of a linear "book' format - using artifacts to carry or support a story line In presenting the archaeological and/or historical process of acquiring knowledge as one of passive discovery and subsequent description of the past, history is presented as being written by the white-coated expert, a faceless author, a universal author, god or science The present's implication in the past is one of objective contingency

On another level, the present is accepted as being implicated in the museum as an institution First, the museum is an active intervention in the past as it conserves and preserves artifacts which originated in the past. Secondly, it presents these to the public - the objects are exhibited Authorship refers to the creativity of interpreting the past for the public - the exhibition is designed The present's implication in the past is here one of subjective contingency

At both levels the link between past and present is contingent. The past is fixed and complete, the present turns to the past according to its own subjective decision. The decision is made to turn to the past because it is conceived as valuable to the present, as value-laden. But this is an abstract monetary value, it doesn't really matter what the past was like in its details. The decision is to turn to a past pre-conceived as fixed, complete, in-itself

This contingent relation between past and present determines the themes open to discussion concerning the museum as an institution

(1) Does the museum materially preserve the past with efficiency' The management and conservation of collections Research and collections
(2) The museum and the commodity Services/of the community - information services, object identification The relation of museums to other institutions and bodies (such as local government, planning departments, English Heritage, government departments, local societies, adult education). The museum's contribution to tourism
(3) Education and the museum - museums and educational institutions (schools,, universities), loan services The museum and its message- educational theory and museum applications, traditional knowledge areas (art, history, natural history) and the museum.
(4) Is the museum effectively getting across its message' Communicative effectiveness and 'interpretation' in the museum ('Interpretation': 'an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by first hand experience and by illustrative media rather than simply to communicate factual information' (Tilden 1957, p. 8).) Exhibition design and layout - use of supportive 'interpretive' material (labels, models,

text, diagrams, maps), static and interactive display, object-based and concept-based display Formal and technical matters

The majority of work and discussion on museums is confined to these themes (see the comprehensive bibliographies produced by the Department of Museum Studies, University of Leicester")

As a means of critique, we will now consider two particular debates concerning archaeology's relation with the present

Entertaining the public: 'real' and 'popular' archaeology

The display which aims at the uninitiated visitor and sets out to stimulate, entertain, divert, but ultimately to educate, is the shadow of a 'real' archaeology which is isolated from its determinate context, an autonomous archaeology which searches desperately among the debris of the past for the immediacy and meaning it has overlooked in the present The popular exhibition is the social bad conscience of 'real', serious archaeology (Adorno and Horkheimer 1979, p 135) Archaeologists dig up the past, lodge their finds in the museum and *may* speculate according to their theoretical models as to the meaning and significance of what they have found. Presenting any of this to a public - those who do not belong to the community of archaeologists - is entirely contingent, a separate matter from 'real' archaeology Popular presentation is split from the real work of archaeology The link between archaeology/artifact and public becomes 'interpretation' of archaeology'artifact'history Interpretation is the function of the museum The museum becomes a service manned by professionals

So the museum presents *for* the public, the uninitiated ('knowledge', 'concepts', 'ideas', artifacts - it doesn't matter in this purely technical relation) Experts supply cultural goods, cultural capital for the visitor, manufacturer for customer The supermarket-museum is simply the physical locus for this transaction.

Archaeology 'is in the end reduced to mere communication Its alienation from human affairs terminates in its absolute docility before a humanity which has been enchanted and transformed into clientele by the suppliers' (Adorno 1967, pp 25-6) Reduction to communication, reduction to broadcast the only form of creativity and agency within this technical relation is the 'creativity' of the curator-entrepreneur, supplying his inventiveness to the marketing of the past, the design of displays. All that can be said to the visitor concerning her agency is 'you too could be an expert'

Those museums and commentators who draw on progressive educational theory and advocate interactive displays - displays which involve the visitor in some active way, w hich centre themselves on the visitor - do not alter this relation. They merely comment on the presumed efficiency of the communication, that an interactive display will convey more of its 'message' to the visitor They are equally manipulative of the visitor *(cf.* critiques of progressive educative techniques, c g Elshtain 1976, Entwistle 1979)

To entertain, inform, educate the present, the past must be presented in an accessible way Hawkes (1968) has voiced the conscience of humanist as opposed to scientific archaeology Decrying the inhuman works of scientific archaeologists shored up 'behind ramparts of jargon and other specialist defences' (p 260), Hawkes wants an

accessible humanist archaeology, 'historical (i.e. descriptive-narrative) writing of the quality and humanity of the work of the young Gordon Childe, Mortimer Wheeler, Christopher Hawkes, Stuart Piggott, or even, in his more austere way, Grahame Clark' (p. 256). Hawkes wants historical synthesis, extraction of 'historical' meaning from disparate facts.

For Hawkes, a return to, or re-emphasis of humanist writing would overcome the split she perceived between inaccessible scientific archaeology and traditional archaeology. The link between the archaeological artifact and popular accessible writings is the imaginative *personality* trained in the humanities (p. 261). There is still a split between real archaeology concerned with the past and popular archaeology for the present. The link is the imaginative personality instilling human values into dusty dry artifacts, writing historical synthesis. Clarke also acknowledges the split between real and popular archaeology. For Clarke, vulgarizing archaeology is the last refuge of the humanities-trained archaeologist unable to deal with real analytical archaeology and seeking material gain (1968, p. 22).

Both of these positions rely on a conception of an autonomous archaeology. For Hawkes, archaeology's autonomy from contemporary society is its basis in eternal human values; archaeology is a pursuit of the cultured (Childe read Pindar after dinner? Hawkes 1968, p. 261). For Clarke, archaeology is archaeology is archaeology. Analytical archaeology is autonomous in that it is a scientific discipline in quest of knowledge coming to its maturity. Archaeology as culture, archaeology as analytical discipline: both oppose the notion of archaeology fundamentally being for-something-else. Primarily archaeology exists in-itself.

In these conceptions archaeology has no *necessary* link with the public, with a clientele, with its social context. The links that are established between archaeological artifact and the public are due to the social responsibility and sense of social duty of the archaeologist or curator, the personality of the archaeologist or curator.

All the discussion of the reasons behind the archaeologist's quest for the artifact and its eventual residence in the museum is a vacuous rhetoric, a marketing ploy to justify the ideological work done in the name of culture, science or whatever other reified and alienated realm. Why dig up and preserve the past? Because of natural curiosity, the human will to knowledge and understanding; as an aesthetic quest to secure beauty and variety; to establish symbolic links with the past, a sense of national or human identity; because humans need a past, a communal memory, a sense of the past; because of a sense of social duty - the past is being destroyed; for personal satisfaction; to entertain and divert; for nostalgic reasons - a search for more congenial times; to learn from the past and educate the present; to find a model for inspiration; to reconcile East and West and solve the world's problems (see also the discussion in Chapter 1, pp. 25—7).

The answer lies in the split between real archaeology and its presentation and/or justification to a public. The error is in posing the question after the act of separating real and popular archaeology. Discussing and considering the presentation of archaeology, or its relevance to the present, or justifying archaeology to the present with entertaining or diverting popular works and exhibitions presupposes the gap which such rhetoric is to bridge. The relation between archaeology and the present remains arbitrary because

archaeology is absolutized as though grounded in the inner nature of knowledge; it is justified in an a historical way by reference to eternal human qualities or values. Archaeology is reified, separated from the present (Horkheimer 1976, p. 212).

Archaeology is reified, rooted in the antinomies of a fragmented capitalist society. This brings a secret source of comfort in the split between real and popular archaeology. That the fatal fragmentation might some day end is a fatal destiny, nemesis - retribution for archaeology's pretension to autonomy, its hubris (see Adorno 1967, p. 24). Reification, involving those eternal values of humanity and objectivity must not end. Archaeology must not be contaminated by society's materialism, the mob armed now with metal detectors, wrecking the past in search of material gain. Archaeology must counter this growing barbarism with educative measures, popular works and exhibits accessible to the mob, to justify its civilized alternative, to appease the mob.

Archaeologists as creatures of their times

> Was fallt, das sollt Ihr stossen (Nietzsche)
> (If it's falling down, give it a shove)

The autonomy of archaeology is potentially violated by the archaeologist and curator who address the public with justifying and entertaining works. The archaeologist and curator are, of course, members of society, but what is the significance of this? Is the autonomy of archaeology compromised?

Fowler writes: 'as a factor in our use of archaeological evidence, the meaning we give to it, the fashion of the times remains potent . . . The archaeologist is a creature of his own time . . . There is no ultimate, finite truth to be revealed by archaeological evidence ... all interpretation of it is relative' (1977, p. 136). Fowler separates the artifact, the evidence, from its interpretation by the fallible archaeologist, a creature of his *(sic)* times.

Clarke's controlling models locate the archaeologist in society determining his or her confrontation with, his or her interpretation of the past (1972, pp. 5-10).

Daniel expresses scepticism regarding 'new' archaeologists - they will realize that the past is something to be recorded, described and appreciated. Their deviations from this empiricist truth are due to their (defective?) personalities, their subjective experience and disposition (1981, p. 192).

So from these points of view archaeology's autonomy lies in its object. Archaeology is further abstracted from its determination in the present in the assertion that its practitioners belong to the present. Archaeology is judged according to its practitioners who are subsumed, assimilated in an administrative manner into the prevailing constellations of power *which the intellect ought to expose* (Adorno 1967, p. 30). The 'artifact' retains its purity and integrity in spite of the potential violation. The present though is absolved from guilt in this absolutization of an immediate relativity.

But the present is not absolved from its duty to the past. Archaeology's autonomy, its truth, lies in the artifact, patiently enduring time and subjective interpretation. The past is objectified as property. The obvious conclusion is that the object past must be preserved, protected. Property is sacred. In the devaluation of the practical confrontation

of archaeologist and the past to a universal relativism, the artifactual past is the historical constant, our Heritage to be preserved for interpretation in the future Every present needs a past to be interpreted We must preserve the sacred past for the future (Fowler 1977, p 192) Museums preserve the future's sacred heritage, its private property Objectivity is sacred fetishized property Whose property- -* The property of Man'

'Disputing the decay of works in history serves a reactionary purpose, the ideology of culture as class privilege will not tolerate the tact that its lofty- goods might ever decay those goods whose eternity is supposed to guarantee the eternity of the classes' own existence' (Adorno 1964, p 62 translation by Susan Buck-Morss) We remain hidden in the labyrinth of a commodified past, a labyrinth of deadened and preserved objects Destruction is necessary to create openings to get out, tor the sake of liberation Away out must be uncovered In this sense truth is the Greek aArj9£ia a practice of uncon cealing The way out has been forgotten (reification is a forgetting), it is hidden behind a heap of decaying objects (see the discussion in Chapter 1;

What is the nature of the relation between curator and his or her society' In an analysis of the National Air and Space Museum, Washington D C , Meltzer makes use of a concept of 'ideology, which he claims to derive from Althusser, 'to view our society's manner of reinforcing and reproducing its economic structure' in the museum 'The Museum is about air and space, but only on a superficial level, it is more properly about us' (1981, p 125) Meltzer utterly neutralizes the concept of ideology in what he recognizes as an apolitical analysis (ibid p 125) For Meltzer, the museum as ideo logical institution means that it tells 'us' about 'our' economic structure 'Our' use of artifacts of the past tells 'us' about 'ourselves' 'We', presumably, are citizens of the democratic U S A , good American capitalists

Mediating past and present

It is necessary to mediate these two related poles, to mediate a metaphysics of history where history is identified as the past, and a relativization of history, where history is a reflex of present social and material realm, present social conditions

Leone suggests one form of mediation Drawing on Bloch's proposal (1977a, 1977b that discussions of the past among most peoples have little or nothing to do with the facts or processes described but are entirely about the present, being models of how society ought to work, Leone claims that the scientist s social structure is replicated when his or her work is presented to the public, in the ritual of public performance The archaeol ogist is concerned in his or her professional work with giving the objects accurate mean ing (1981a, p 12) this search for objective accuracy produces boredom when pre sented to the public because it ignores the link between past and present The way out is to 'allow the past to be the image of the present it must be by its Very nature in a ritual setting' (p 13) the professional and private work of archeology is separate from its ritual and public performance A bored reception indicates lack of meaning in the original work an unrealized connection with the present The solution is to credit the public performances with their private-professional authors Let the public settings

based on interpretations change, 'show them changing and teach how they are changed and what they change in response to' (p 13, of Schlereth 1978)

Leone locates the determinate link between archaeology and the present in its public presentation The professional private work of the archaeologist must respect the present's creation of the past if the ritual of presentation, of performance is to be meaningful

However we would argue that there is no homogeneous present creating the past - the present is fragmented and contradictory Secondly, professional archaeology and its public presentation arc both forms of performance

Presentation as performance

There can be no 'realistic' objective representation of the past We have argued that actual past history is not identical to its representation in archaeological reason There is no genuine past to be brought into harmony with archaeological thought and neutrally re presented to the public Archaeology does not provide a mirror to the past nor does it provide an abstract system which expresses the 'reality' of the past This is to identify reason with the past and does not do justice to the material practice and suffering of human subjects in the past Such an identification justifies the tyranny of thought over individual human existence, 'it is the triumphant tyranny of the concept, the relentless sublation of discrete particulars to a system radically closed in its very dreary infinity' (Eagleton 1981, p 120) The qualitative meaning of the past is lost in the universal authors' quest for the objective past Reified, commodified objectivity, empty quantified detail, communicating universal 'truths' of history as progress, decay, or simple objectivity yielding to present reason, destroys the historical meaning of the artifact, its temporality

The past is not a three dimensional jigsaw puzzle buried beneath the archaeologist, or a palimpsest All such conceptions reduce the past to a monolithic structure, a syn chronic structure of spatial relationships Artifacts are not neutral elements with a frozen meaning ready for defrosting, but fields of contention and contradiction with constantly shifting significance and connotation, shifting according to their inscription in past and present social practice

The past is not a tangle of tactual details to be decoded, presented to and appreciated by those with an educated sense of the past' (Fowler 1981), 'but consists rather of the numbered group of threads that represent the weft of the past as it feeds into the warp of the present The subject matter of history once released from pure facticity, needs no *appreciation* For it offers not vague analogies to the present, but constitutes the precise dialectical problem that the present is called upon to resolve (Benjamin 1979, p 362)

So the museum exhibition is not so much representational or referential as figural and rhetorical II is the rhetorical performance of the museum, its *act* of interpretation and persuasive intention which opens up meaning

There are several implications of the notion of presentation as rhetorical performance

Archaeology and its presentation in the museum cannot begin with an abstractly defined objectively or a priority method but must begin *in medias us* with the artifact in its present historical circumstance, riddled with error, contradiction, doxa (Benjamin 1973b, p 103) The primary question is not ontological or methodological but strategic, political Not what is the past and how should we approach it, but what do we want to do with the past and why? *{cf* Eagleton 1983, pp 210-11;

Archaeology does not receive its meaning from the artifact The artifact surrenders and receives meaning in the practice of archaeology and presentation in text or in the museum This does not sacrifice truth in a relativism whereby it is impossible to decide between rival explanations and presentations if each springs rationally from a particular way of life, from particular social conditions in the present Such a relativism is only a problem if the concern is with the relation of an *abstract* consciousness or subjectivity in general, formulating explanations and creating presentations, and an abstract object of study The abstract subject's explanation and presentation of the abstract object is relative to present social context This problem 'disappears in the concrete process in which subject and object mutually determine and alter each other' (Adorno, quoted by Buck Morss 1977, p 51) Objectivity itself is heterogeneous, not abstract The artifact cannot be completely defined in terms of abstract, ahistoncal, objective qualities such as form, dimension and all related categories of type It is the insistence and agency of the act of interpretation, explanation, presentation which restricts the ambiguity of the artifact to meaning and understanding Artifacts have endured and are authentic materially, but they are vulnerable Their truth is precarious and in constant need of re articulation Truth is time bound, temporal, historical

The material reality of the artifact is not mythically permanent The artifactual past is not eternal abstracted objectivity to be appropriated by archaeological reason The artifact is time-bound, transitory Non chronometric time enters into the meaning of the artifact Material reality is in a permanent state of historical becoming The past is irreversible, discontinuous, particular and thoroughly mediated objectivity The past is not a systematic array of objects and their relationships, a fixed reality of commodified objectivity towards which archaeologists are groping and which may be represented in museum display Such a conception is a denial of temporality, the past is here presented as an eternal image or myth The past instead must be realized as the 'subject of a construction whose locus is not empty time but the particular epoch, the particular work (Benjamin 1979. p 352) The artifacts must be broken from historical continuity

We must renounce all abstract closedness and totality in definitions and re-presentations of artifacts There is no unified identity behind all artifacts As such there can be no universal method, no formal principles of interpretation and display

The contradictory present

Why go to a museum To see the past because it exists, to be educated The answers to the question offered by the museum exhibition are inadequate in their masking of aporias, contradictory relations lodged in contemporary social experience We have tried to show how these contradictory relations he within the museum's aesthetic, its presentation of the artifact

	spatial		temporal
closed	completed past	open	unfinished history
	eternity		history
	reified		relational
	repetition		particularity
	identity		difference
	presence		absence
	homogeneous		heterogeneous
	coercive		explorative
	passive		active
	monologic		dialogic
	forgetting		remembrance
	conservation		redemption

the museum manipulates these relations, suppressing contradiction, fixing the past as a reflection of the appearance of the present the present recognizes itself and is justified The museum as ideological institution suppresses difference and heterogeneity in advertisements for the world through its duplication in the artifactual past the museum suppresses temporality and agency In the museum the past becomes the death mask of the present

Conclusion: towards a redemptive aesthetic

Some implications can be drawn from our argument

(li We must retain heterogeneity and difference, the fragmentary and discontinuous reality of the past as a means of overcoming the ideological effects of a reified object world, past and present The presented artifact is a reified object in the museums we studied Social relations which provide meaning to the artifact are transformed into an appearance of relationships between objects The exhibited object's pretence of transparent naturalism is a rendering of society as opaque, of history as homogeneous, always-the-same Opaque homogeneity, running in a continuous flow through history, conceals the antagonistic and contradictory class-structured present and imposes an image of the present on the past We must resist the power of reification, shatter the homogeneous past, reveal the social relationship of past and present in a true realism, a social physiognomy which embodies objective social contradiction, which embraces contradiction, discontinuity and conflict in a dynamic totality (Adorno 1967, Jameson 1977)

(2) We must oppose professional preservative History with its archaeologist curator speaking for a monolithic and murdered past We should democratic and personalize authorship in an attempt at avoiding the absorption of author-archaeologist and visitor into the product (display, book) (see CCCS Popular Memon Group 1982, p 2 IS) This involves an active reconciliation of production and reception of the past, a renunciation

of the conventional relationship of professional producing the past *for* a consuming public, of experts presenting an elitist high culture

*(1) W*e must recognize the full implications of authorship and fully embrace reflexivity So all presentations are to be understood as being precisely that intimately tied to the present Their truth is to be found in the present's specific encounter with particular aspects of the past We must present a specific and unique engagement with the past, an engagement original to every new present (Benjamin 1979, p 352) We must present specific acts of construction, work in progress, varied forms of relationship with the artifactual past instead of a fixed relation of representation of a completed past The museum can allow the visitor to construct a past along with the archaeologist curator participation not as a means to a pre-given, pre-discovered end, but as an open process of constructing different pasts

{4) The artifact must not be reduced to uniform abstract objectivity The artifact is not reducible to a one-dimensional representational sign of the past The past is not fixed to be represented, but changes according to its specific engagement with the present So we must detach the artifact from its 'self-evident' meaning as object of scientific study, reveal the artifact as non identical with us apparent meaning, strip the object of its pretension to being in itself, strip the object of its immediacy in order that it might be released from the sterile continuum of the homogeneous history of the aways-the same (Wolin 1982, p 125) this may involve enabling the artifact to gesture to its own material inscription in social practice, its own material existence, al the same time as it conveys a meaning in the context of a museum display It certainly requires considering recent work on the symbolic meaning and use of artifacts the style of function (see Chapter 7)

Techniques for achieving these ends

(1) Introduce political content into conventional displays show how the past may be manipulated and misrepresented for present purposes

(2 Break artifacts from fixed chronological narrative and from their original contexts and reassemble them with contemporary artifacts similarly decontextualized juxta position, montage (a) as a means of drawing attention to and engaging with official cul tural meanings of the artifact and effecting an ideological critique of commodification, and (by) as a means of illustrating alternative (non-commodified*)* meanings

(3) Supplement objective third person narrative' with exaggeration irony, humour, absurdity, as a means of stripping the self evident meaning of the artifact of its power

(4) Avoid permanent displays, emphasis authorship and changing perceptions of the artifactual past

(5) Encourage the use of artifacts of the past outside the institutional space of the museum Allow community use of museum artifacts, people constructing and presenting their own pasts in the museum