

Metaphor in Social History Museums

La metáfora en los museos de historia social

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ABSTRACT

Before the implementation of paper-based archives in the nineteenth century there were many lyrical ways of knowing the past, for example, through song and painting. In the museum developments of the nineteenth century, artefacts took the corresponding knowledge place of the "truth" believed to exist in archived paper. Museum work proceeded with the common sense certainty of a rational one-to-one correspondence between an artefact and its meaning. Reliance on the denotative capacity of the artefact was thus the strategy for conveying meaning to visitors. Museums are now moving away from denotation as a primary communication strategy, one of the modes that emerges being metaphor. Just as the fixed meaning of artefacts was once understood to reside in their sheer materiality, now we see materiality resurfacing in museums, but this time via metaphor which is theorized as resting on the material experience of the world by our human bodies.

KEY WORDS: *Metaphor. Metonymy. Denotation. Visitors. Museum communication. Materiality. Te Papa.*

RESUMEN

Antes de la puesta en práctica de los archivos en papel en el siglo XIX había muchas formas líricas de conocer el pasado, por ejemplo, a través del canto y de la pintura. En la evolución de los museos del siglo XIX, los artefactos ocuparon el lugar del conocimiento correspondiente de la "verdad" que se creía existente en el papel archivado. El trabajo del Museo procedió con la certeza del sentido común de una correspondencia individualizada racional entre un artefacto y su significado. La confianza en la capacidad denotativa del artefacto era así la estrategia para transmitir significado a los visitantes. Los museos están alejándose ahora de la denotación como estrategia de comunicación primaria, y uno de los modos que surge es la metáfora. Así como se entendía antiguamente que el significado fijo de los objetos residía en su pura materialidad, ahora vemos el resurgir de la materialidad en los museos, pero esta vez a través de la metáfora, teóricamente entendida como apoyada en la experiencia material del mundo por parte de nuestros cuerpos humanos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Metáfora. Metonimia. Denotación. Visitantes. Comunicación museo. Materialidad. Te Papa. Museo de Sydney.*

1. Introduction

There is a revolution taking place in museum communication with the dawning realization that assumptions about artefacts and their assumed denotative meanings have been inadequate for communication. The near impossibility of denotation in complex communication arrives as a surprise in the museum world not just because of museums' empirical, scientific roots but, more powerfully, because the intense materiality of the work of museums seems to underpin denotation. Some museums continue to exhibit artefacts as if simple denotation were still philosophically possible. Museum showcases have always been full of undeniably physical things which can be viewed, measured, weighed, photographed and described, actions which have seemed to guarantee the truth of the facts set out by curators. The materiality has seemed to lead naturally to a denotative meaning approach – an artefact has seemed to denote its own self-evident meaning.

Substantially because of this palpable materiality, the unarticulated communication strategies of museums have been interrogated rarely. A host of competing concerns, however, has left denotation increasingly abandoned. It now seems to represent misrecognition of what is the inherently interpretative role of museums. Previously, curators worked in an Enlightenment ethos, philosophically perceiving an artefact in a rational one-to-one correspondence between itself and its meaning and, further, as clearly able to be conceptualized as having meaning quite separate from the contexts of its exhibition and viewing visitors. Today, by dramatic contrast, curators are understood to work in an environment of competing ideologies which frame exhibitions and viewing practices and give rise to meanings. The various contexts of exhibition - visitors, history, space and so on - are understood to provide keys to a plurality of meanings including, very unexpectedly, communication in terms of a return to the idea of materiality.

Rethinking materiality now has the possibility of taking us away from the artefact and towards the wider material world and its role in the formation of metaphor, an aspect of contemporary museum communication which grows in importance. Goatly (2007), Lakhoff & Johnson (1980) and Meier & Robinson (2005) demonstrate that the material world, experienced by the body, gives rise to metaphors. The poetic, intangible world of the metaphor is derived, ironically, from

the material world of body experience. Museums are now including some exceptional, startlingly unconventional metaphors in their communication in order to poeticize and thus create open-ended meanings that, nevertheless, rest on material associations. A bi-material museum text is, therefore, brought into being. The material world as the base of metaphor, plus the material base of the artefacts, thus lead to an intense museum text of intersecting materiality and its seemingly non-material product, the metaphor.

In essence, metaphor is a figure of speech which concerns two elements in a communication system which merge and change each other; it is derived from the Greek *meta* meaning "over" and *pherein* meaning "to carry" (Ben-Amos 2000: 152). There are several terms for analysing metaphors, this paper uses the terms used by Goatly (2007: 11): "target" is the term for the topic of the metaphor and "vehicle" is the term for the source idea of the metaphor. This figure of speech has a long history of academic confinement to poetic appreciation, that is, to a critical history which understood metaphor as a decorative device which enhanced the beauty of language, but which contributed little to meaning (Hallam & Hockey 2001: 28). The emerging understanding of the human biological base of metaphor (Goatly 2007: 16; Hallam & Hockey 2001: 35; Lakhoff & Johnson 1980: 19), however, can take us back to museum materiality, but with new eyes and new questions about meaning and ideology.

Metaphor has its base in human bodily perceptions, that is, the material world, and experiences of it are theorized as the source of metaphor, this is developed by Goatly (2007), Lakhoff and Johnson (1980) and Meier and Robinson (2005: 240) and is considered later in this paper. The materiality of museums thus once again becomes an area of inquiry, but this time rather than returning us to denotation, it takes us to the poetic richness of metaphor, the power of which is observed by Cameron and Low (1999: 182) as creating both a "degree of open-endedness" and "emotional intimacy", as being "affective, as well as cognitive". This extraordinary communication tool has a new place in museums.

This paper focuses on metaphor, but it observes that another figure of speech, metonymy, has always had a place in museums, but has not been appreciated as such in critical analysis. Likewise, metaphor is rarely named although metaphoric communication is appearing in iconic places in

museums. Public memory places are adopting metaphors as fundamental textual elements. This has the effect of aligning museum texts with texts of the imagination that are more familiar in art galleries than social history museums. Metaphor in social history museums demands more of the visitor in the meaning process than has previously been the case in the history environment. This paper commences with a brief overview of metaphor before examining the emerging rhetorical power of museum metaphor. It focuses on the nexus of materiality which is shared by museums and metaphor and examines two well-known examples of foregrounded, highly poetic, non-linguistic metaphor: the pounamu or greenstone in Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington, New Zealand and the sculpture *Edge of the Trees* at the Museum of Sydney, Australia. Both examples show museums obliquely tackling the difficult issues of race, colonization and nature destruction via unconventional metaphor.

2. Moving away from the ornamental flourish

The suspicion with which Enlightenment philosophers regarded metaphor (Goatly 2007: 30), for being primarily emotive rather than cognitive, and for “feeling that it confused thinking” (Goatly 2007: 14), points to the enduring power of this figure of speech. Leezenberg (2001: 1) says that both Hobbes and Locke “reject metaphor as unfit for rational argument”. Ben-Amos goes further saying that metaphor is sometimes regarded even as “deviant”.

The preponderance of metaphor in the context of poetic discourse, contiguously, has given room to the impression that they [sic] are a deviant form of language contrasted with literal language. (Ben-Amos 2000: 153)

Aristotle seems to have been the first Greek philosopher to discuss metaphor and has been associated, perhaps inaccurately, with the deviant quality noted above (Leezenberg 2001: 31).

Ben-Amos sums up the powerful rhetorical impact of metaphor as resting on its combination of “two semantic fields” (Ben-Amos 2000: 153). The suspicion and description of its rhetorical force seem at odds with the banal, everyday recurrence of metaphor, indeed its saturation of our communication is apparent in both linguis-

tic and non-linguistic texts, occurring in written and spoken speech and inherent in other aspects of everyday life. In a series of examples, Goatly (2001: 13) develops the idea of the non-linguistic metaphor: “metaphors we think with are realised non-linguistically in many aspects of contemporary life: building tall, levels of obesity... racial categorisation and exclusion... evaluation of quality by quantity, commodification of nature... (Goatly 2007: 401 - 402). Non-linguistic metaphors are so commonplace that we rarely see them as metaphors, for example, tall buildings as analysed by Goatly.

The first country to symbolize its power and success was the US with, among others, the Chrysler Building and Empire State Building. [There is]... an increasing trend towards tall buildings in the Middle and Far East. Lack of land and density of population may contribute to the upward thrust towards the sky... but a sense of inferiority induced by colonisation and imperialism may also be a factor. Malaysia is less densely populated than parts of Europe, but it has, at the time of writing, the tallest twin towers... Now, apparently, the countries of East Asia are vying amongst themselves for the prestige of the tallest building. (Goatly 2007: 37)

The contemporary, scholarly understanding of metaphor as powerful is recent because metaphor was long relegated to the concept of the ornamental flourish based on the strength of comparison (Lakhoff & Johnson 1980: 153), as a figure of speech whose sole worth was to mark poetic language off from more useful, literal language. Far from the decorative, Lakhoff and Johnson’s (1980) work on the experiential base of metaphor, and their argument that it structures our conceptual system, is a radical repositioning of metaphor. They open with this dramatic statement.

Most people think they can get along perfectly well without metaphor. We have found, on the contrary, that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. (Lakhoff & Johnson 1980: 3)

Goatly (2007: 30) continues their work and argues “that conventional metaphors construct

and reproduce ideologies, and justify and or reproduce certain behaviours". The arguments developed by Lakhoff and Johnson, and Goatly, demonstrate that metaphor is fundamental in structuring human thought and behaviour and that it was a critical error to have confined metaphor to the category of mere language enhancement, and not to have explored its pervasive occurrence.

Of particular interest for this paper is the experiential base of metaphor. Everyday metaphors are overwhelmingly based on body experience and have developed via the human body. In other words, metaphor has an essential biological materiality. Writing more than thirty years ago, Lakhoff and Johnson moved towards understanding the experiential base of metaphor. They speak of their "ignorance" and of the feeling

that no metaphor can ever be comprehended or even adequately represented independently of its experiential basis. For example, MORE IS UP has a very different kind of experiential basis than HAPPY IS UP or RATIONAL IS UP. Though the concept UP is the same in all of these metaphors, the experiences on which these UP metaphors are based are very different. It is not that there are many different UPS; rather, verticality enters our experience in many different ways and so gives rise to many different metaphors. (Lakhoff & Johnson 1980: 19)

Twenty-five years later, Meier and Robinson (2005: 239) could report on psycho-linguistic research, rather than a scholarly feeling, and say that they found "considerable merit" to the proposition that "abstract concepts like affect are represented via the mechanism of metaphor", that is, that there is a direct connection between the development of metaphor and the body. Summarizing studies on affect and brightness, for example, they say that in children

there is an early appearing tendency to link positive evaluations to white objects regardless of race. Metaphor can have "real world" consequences as suggested by the finding that sports teams dark uniforms are penalised more for aggressive behaviour. (Meier & Robinson 2005: 244).

Similarly, with affect and vertical position, the connection was clear: up-ness was more posi-

tive than down-ness. The third review concerned affect and distance for which the results were somewhat less clear - positive items being generally associated with closeness while negative items were associated with distance. Meier and Robinson suggest an explanation could be found in the more unconventional association of value and distance in comparison to the greater conventionality of brightness and verticality. From their review, they conclude that we need metaphor to make effectual experiences concrete, but "we do not need metaphor to conceptualize concrete perceptual experiences" (Meier & Robinson 2005: 251). Thus metaphor assists us in giving physical, body-derived understandings - or sense making - to elusive, abstract experiences. Although most metaphor is used unconsciously most of the time, looking at the ideological consequences of metaphor observed by Goatly, Lakhoff and Johnson, and Meier and Robinson, the inherent political power of metaphor is patent. The apparent common sense of many metaphors and the way in which metaphors are embedded in everyday communication only serve to highlight the crucial importance of attending to metaphor's role in our constructions of meaning.

3. Memory and metaphor

In European-based societies, memory has been conceptualised as residing in a number of receptacles ranging from the formal archive to a common song. This section looks at some of the ways that memory has been imagined, evidently there has been great fluidity. By its very nature, memory is intangible, but of fundamental importance to the ideology, identity and continuation of communities. Metaphor is required in order for humans to grasp memory, for the intangible to be made somewhat tangible. Hallam and Hockey offer an historical review of the many ways that memory has been metaphorized.

The immaterial aspect of an inner world, like thoughts, emotions, dreams and imaginings that are unavailable to any direct gaze, is fused metaphorically with material objects which possess distinct structures and boundaries. (Hallam & Hockey 2001: 26-27)

The concept of "fusing" expresses the melting quality of the tangible and intangible under the impact of metaphor. A survey of metaphors

of memory reveals how very concrete has been the approach to this central and most elusive of human experiences, for example, in medieval Europe, the metaphors of waxed tablets inscribed with information made memory tangible.

The metaphor of memory as a wax tablet established connections between the body, sensory experience and material objects. The inscription of sensory perception upon the body and hence memory was likened to the imprint of wax seals achieved through the application of signet rings. While these metaphors convey notions of memory as material matter, the body was also seen as necessary in the generation of memories. (Hallam & Hockey 2001: 29-30)

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, a favoured metaphor for memory was of a quiet building such as a church, while in the seventeenth century, memory shifted into the personal (Hallam & Hockey 2001: 32). In the nineteenth century, memory was metaphorized as both a “brightly lit theatre of the world” and, being especially revealing of the growing changes in conceptualizations of memory as overwhelmingly personal, “as a mirror of the dark abyss of the mind” (Hutton quoted in Hallam & Hockey 2001: 35). Drawing on work of Fentress and Wickham (1992), Hallam and Hockey say that

one of the effects of this epistemological shift, combined with the increasing use of print technology, was to define textual forms of memory as “objective” and “rational” in contrast with memories or those impressions derived from the senses which came to be designated as “subjective” and “non-rational”. (Hallam & Hockey 2001: 32)

By the mid-nineteenth century after the development of the Public Records Office in London, credibility in the Western world accorded to non-verbal and unwritten memories was degrading fast as memory was increasingly consigned to the realm of the personal and often the irrational. Song, dance and painting fell from grace as legitimate modes of public memory (Bann 1989). In their place, the written word, ideally archived, reigned supreme. The expansion and institutionalization of the Western concept of the museum during the nineteenth century thus coincided with the rise of archival authority and the collapse in

public credibility of more lyrical ways of knowing the past. Archival authority remains dominant today although challenged by innovative memory attempts which link disparate human experiences and draw on the strength of metaphor to express the memory of human experience in the most powerful way, that, is via metaphor and the body.

4. Figures of speech in museums

Unacknowledged figures of speech have saturated museum communication for a long time. This section looks briefly at metonymy and notes Sanders’ (2009) work on the rhetoric surrounding bog bodies which appear unable to escape metaphoric curation.

Museums have relied on one particular figure of speech for much of their exhibition histories, but have rarely called attention to its habitual use. Consideration of metonymy shows how embedded a figure of speech can become in communication to the point of almost escaping analysis. Is the contemporary rise of unconventional metaphor in museums also likely to escape critique?

Even small, local history museums, run only by volunteers, often exhibit a tea cup and saucer as a sign of civilized European society. This exhibition strategy is based on metonymy: one element stands in for a much bigger element with which it is closely associated. Tea cups and saucers were once used for drinking tea in a highly ritualized event which brought people together in an intimate drawing room setting for polite conversation. A museum cup and saucer are usually exhibited with a label detailing the owner, era and manufacturer - Meissen, Wedgwood and so on. Precise details serve to mask other questions that could be asked of the tea cup because a flood of facts has the impact of appearing as definitive information. Museums state facts about the tea cup and saucer’s manufacturing history and then allow it to drift into the metonymic function of referencing conservative aspects of European society in the nineteenth century and into the mid-twentieth century. Polite, colonial society and femininity have also often been metonymized through a tea cup and saucer. Similarly, a crown, for example, can stand in for a king, kingship or indeed a kingdom. Although metonymy seems simple in comparison to the complexity of metaphor, Lahoff and Johnson (1980) point to its importance beyond the mere referential.

It also serves the function of providing understanding. For example, in the case of metonymy THE PART FOR THE WHOLE there are many parts that can stand for the whole. Which we pick out determines which aspect of the whole we are focusing on. (Lakhoff & Johnson 1980: 36)

It is a clear case of misrecognition of curatorial work for metonymy not to have been articulated as a fundamental museum communication strategy. Despite habitual museum reliance on metonymy, it seems that the "self-evident truths" assumed to be embedded in the artefact occluded deeper understanding of the communication strategies employed. The materiality of the artefact gave rise to a common sense understanding of the way that it bore its self-evident meaning and, therefore, cast curatorial communication as transparent although it actually rested on a figure of speech.

There are interesting exceptions to the rule of denotation and apparent transparent curation as inherited from a long history of metonymy, what could be called "denotation-metonymy". The curious cases of bog bodies shows that sometimes metaphor, even in the most conservative of museums, overwhelms the ideal of denotation-metonymy. Sander's (2009) analysis reveals an abiding and unshakeable metaphoricity in relation to bodies dug out of bogs.

Mute, the remains speak "only" in material metaphors... the semiotics of the kind of representations and articulations they undergo, is often pried away from the actual materiality of their remains. Many bog bodies... are known chiefly for the hermeneutic attention they have attracted or for the poetic and artistic ventriloquism to which they have been submitted. (Sanders 2009: 220)

Sanders (2009: 220) traces the many ways that bog bodies have been used metaphorically; the range of possibilities highlights the malleable and multiple ways that metaphor can be used. They have been used "to tell tales of sacrificial victimization, nationality, power, and sexuality". The exceptional and contradictory example of bog bodies highlights the hegemony of denotation-metonymy as an unarticulated interpretation strategy.

Although neglect by critical inquiry of museum denotation-metonymy continues, there is

evidence of a move towards highly creative metaphors which demand our attention - beyond the exception of bog body metaphors. The fact that bold metaphors are appearing is a sign that the self-evident information assumed to be imprinted on the artefact is eroding. We have in its place awareness of enormous communication possibilities that go beyond the linguistic. Two examples from postcolonial societies, New Zealand and Australia, illustrate creative, non-linguistic metaphors in contemporary museums. The biological base of metaphor becomes the point of entry for the visitor's body in exhibitions.

5. Collective working bodies - pounamu (greenstone) in the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington

Encountering the large greenstone rock or, in Māori language, pounamu, is a most memorable part of a visit to the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (called Te Papa) in Wellington. It activates a curious metaphor that is not articulated in curatorial texts, but surely asks to be read into national experience. The pounamu rests in a large basin of water and pebbles in the Te Marae, or open courtyard area, on the fourth floor of the national museum. The visitor is asked to use his or her body to engage with the stone and other visitors, past and present. Dipping hands into the water and taking up fistfuls of small pebbles, visitors rub the stone, in imitation of traditional Māori practice, to remove the heavy oxide layer and reveal the beauty of the greenstone beneath (**Fig. 1**). It is very difficult to remove the oxide and, after the rubbing of millions of visitors, only small patches of greenstone are visible. Many visitors would be tired by the time of reaching the fourth floor, but being asked to use their bodies in one of the exhibitions is invigorating. In observing and participating in rubbing the pounamu on several occasions, I saw children and adults laughing and talking about the difficult work, evidently fully caught up in the pounamu challenge.

The curatorial text either in the museum or online leaves almost unspoken the highly enjoyable collective act of rubbing the famous stone to reveal beauty (<http://www.tepapa.govt.nz/education/onlineresources/sgr/pages/pounamu.aspx>). Curators speak of geology: it is metamorphic, that is, it has been changed from one type of rock to another under extreme heat. They say that it



Fig. 1. Visitors to Te Papa rub the pounamu. Photograph by Michael Hall, courtesy of Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa.

can be called nephrite or New Zealand jade. In the theme of Māori culture, the fact that it is a gift from the Kāi Tahu tribe is also highly significant in curatorial terms. Using Māori language to describe the pounamu, the museum reflects on the generous gift that was made in 1986. Curatorial texts tell visitors that pounamu was and is used to fashion tools, jewellery and weapons. Pounamu is highly prized by the Māori and has a rich symbolic value; it symbolizes firm foundations in relationships. Pounamu is loved for its toughness and great beauty and is used in gift giving, often when a relationship needs to be repaired. It has a spirit or wairua which protects Māori values.

Seemingly absent from curatorial reflection, is the most engaging part of the exhibition: collective rubbing of the stone to reveal its beauty. There are many hands-on activities in museums around the world, but usually one sees immediate results. In this exhibition, no matter how long you rub, it is highly unlikely that you will feel you have made any dent in the tough, oxide surface. The green stone glows tantalisingly beneath the brown, oxide exterior, but seems impossible to expose fully. All around you, people are rubbing, but the museum seems silent on this collective bodily action.

This paper argues that rubbing the pounamu is in fact a highly metaphoric action, the work of visitors rubbing away together on a huge stone of enormous Māori significance in the national museum creates an exhibition that implies national unity. The stone and the action of people rubbing as a community are together the metaphoric “vehicle”, while national unity is the “target”. Contemplating conventional symbols of unity, for example, landscape, war experiences, songs, the flag, unique animals and national stories, one can see just how unusual rubbing a stone is for activating contemplation of the nation. Despite curatorial focus on geology and traditional Māori uses of pounamu, it is very difficult to avoid a national message and one cannot help but look for a clearly articulated curatorial statement to that effect. Surely, if the Kāi Tahu tribe decided to make a valuable gift of the pounamu to the national museum, an institution historically complicit in colonial attacks on Māori culture, the meaning is unavoidable: this great stone must be associated with postcolonial political reality and contemporary desires to reconcile. For the museum to exhibit the stone in a way that requires energy to be expended by visitors surely suggests the work of creating cultural harmony. Implicitly, Te Papa

has taken the Māori idea of the embedded human relationship aspect of pounamu and transferred it to the whole nation of New Zealand. By working together on this rock, there is thus expressed a curatorial hope, via metaphor, of overcoming the historical, colonial nightmare. The fact that one undertakes this activity with one's hand is also important; a hand symbolises many things, a hand takes the hand of another, is creative, cradles protectively and, of course, can be violent.

There is also an aesthetic element to be taken into account, clearly metaphor is very often used because it is a more subtle way of talking about the "target" topic; it is an elegant mode for engaging the visitor in working out the meaning. Hallam and Hockey (2001: 28) argue that the intangible aspects of life are often best expressed through metaphor, in this case the resulting aesthetic surface of the pounamu exhibition is very pleasing.

Using metaphor honours the intelligence of visitors who are assumed to be able to work out possible meanings without heavy didacticism. It is important to distinguish between a metaphor and a symbol, the stone is not a symbol of the nation in the same way that the kiwi and fern symbolize New Zealand. The stone does not stand in for another concept; the concept is not "stone equals nation". The metaphor asks us to think of the community rubbing of the stone as a way to think through it to a stronger, united nation. The working together at the rubbing, combined with the fact of the Māori gift of the pounamu, makes us think about the work of national unity, an ideal which needs both to be achieved and in constant reaffirmation. The embodied cognition of rubbing points back to the materiality of metaphor and its grounding in the body. Hallam and Hockey argue

In psychological discourses, memories are assigned materiality through metaphors, but the human body acts as a source of such images. This is especially the case with emotionally charged memories, which in lay perceptions might constitute those that are most cherished or most burdensome. (Hallam & Hockey 2001: 36)

Many museums are moving towards affective uses of the visitor's body and away from foregrounded curatorial interpretation (Harris, 2012). There is no simple symbol correspondence for the Te Papa pounamu, there is only the rubbing

work of embodied metaphor gesturing to the dynamism of nation building.

6. The permeable body - *Edge of the Trees* Museum of Sydney, Australia

Studies of affect (see, for example, Ahmed 2004) show how the body sticks to the world. Enlightenment concepts of the body's separateness are being steadily dismantled, and the museum environment plays with the newly theorized interchange between the world and the body. Hallam and Hockey demonstrate in their historical survey of memory the way that the body has been drawn on to metaphorize the capacity for memory. The body thus is given object status and has its permeable relationship to the object world revealed.

Versions of memory as internal material structures and objects are consistent with notions of the body as permeable and receptive: the body embraces or enfolds the material world in the making of memories in that certain material forms are incorporated into and held within the body. (Hallam & Hockey 2001: 37)

The permeable quality of the body is at the heart of a site-specific installation at the Museum of Sydney in Australia, a museum noteworthy for eschewing a material culture collection. The sculpture is built on the ruin foundations of the first government house erected by the English. *Edge of the Trees* references Indigenous-European contact when the English began colonization of Australia in 1788 and each group of people peered, literally and imaginatively, at each other through a fringe of trees on the shoreline. Indigenous Eora inhabitants and European invaders met as if in a membrane zone. Artists, Janet Laurence and Fiona Foley, draw on the idea of that moment of meeting as a physical and cultural membrane – intermingling, changing each other, for ever linked, but tragically separated.

as a symbolic space
a membrane where two cultures
looked through to each other –
here they mingle and intertwine
a weaving towards the future
(<http://www.janetlaurence.com/edge-of-the-trees/>)

Like the pounamu in Te Papa, it is elements mostly of the natural world that are used to comment both on cultural contact and the human destruction of nature. In *Edge of the Trees*, Laurence and Foley developed an entrance sculpture of 29 pillars of sandstone, wood, steel, shells, bones and glass representing the 29 Indigenous clans that were living in the Sydney area at the time of invasion (**Fig. 2**). The Eora people are long gone, wiped out through murder, displacement and introduced diseases and, in their place, the surviving Koori people take their place in a sound installation that whispers through the pillars. Disconnected words have fundamental importance in *Edge of the Trees*. Curated by Peter Emmett, they not only echo sadly, but are also engraved on the pillars – a memory of the botanical species from the Governor’s garden, in both Latin and the Aboriginal language, and the names of the wretched people who were selected for the First Fleet of convict transportation to the new penal colony. Seemingly adrift, the haunting words tell us to read this place poetically, in other words, to activate metaphoric reading. They also tell us to move between the pillars and become part of the thickening membrane.

Although words are prominent in this metaphor, the major impact is not linguistic. The combined trees, sound and crucially the location of central Sydney with its surrounding high rise towers, become the highly unconventional metaphoric “vehicle” for the “target” of a remembered cultural and natural catastrophe and a better future for everyone. The contemporary visitor is part of the metaphor. S/he moves in and out of the trees, just catching some words, but missing most of them. The visitor’s body is both metaphoric “vehicle” and “target”, s/he drifts through the membrane, s/he is part of the membrane, perceiving the natural world surrounded by the tough sky scraper world, understanding some sounds and half hearing others. People and objects are intertwined through metaphor: tree pillars, shells, rust, visitors and sounds are inseparable in this sculpture. Embedded in the sculptural objects are raw colonial memories which are encountered on both material and effectual levels by visitors who become part of the installation. Hallam and Hockey (2001: 42) quote Parkin on the concept of the “socio-material prosthesis”, “the extension of personhood ‘beyond the individual’s biological body’ and into meaningful objects”. Everyone



Fig. 2. Visitors in the Edge of the Trees installation by Janet Laurence and Fiona Foley, and the entry cube, Museum of Sydney. Photograph © James Horan, for Sydney Living Museums.

is familiar with the precious status acquired by objects that once belonged to a deceased loved one, the new status reveals the permeable borders between person and object. Drawing on Lupton, Hallam and Hockey say

[if]...material objects can generate emotional responses, then they are possessed of a certain agency or capacity to act within and shape social relations and perceptions. Social interaction with and through material forms tends to destabilize subject/object boundaries such that material objects can become extensions of the body and therefore personhood. (Hallam & Hockey 2001: 43)

The metaphoric link between affect and perception studied by Robinson and Meier reinforces the primary corporeal effects of this unforgettable mode of museum exhibition. They say that looking at models of studies of embodied cognition it “is a mistake to believe that abstract thought and experience function independently of concrete modes of perception and representation” (Robinson & Meier 2005: 250). Thus at the entrance to the Museum of Sydney we move into a complex metaphoric world centred on the body and the materialization of memory in the body. The denotative museum world is far behind us as this new museum strategy dominates.

7. Conclusion

The power of the overwhelming majority of metaphors used in everyday life is derived from their

conventionality. In lyrical forms of communication, however, unconventional metaphors are created in order to exert power for the time of engagement with the text and sometimes enter everyday use. In the case of the examples used here, rubbing the pounamou and passing through the pillars in *Edge of the Trees*, two highly unconventional metaphors have been developed to challenge our perceptions of colonization, race, nature and our museum visitor’s place in these tense discourses. Lakhoff and Johnson argue the transformative power of some new metaphors.

If a new metaphor enters the conceptual system that we base our actions on it will alter our conceptual system and the perceptions and actions that the system gives rise to. Much of cultural change arises from the introduction of new metaphorical concepts and the loss of old ones. (Lakhoff & Johnson: 1980: 145)

It is too early to say whether the bodily memory experience of the pounamu and *Edge of the Trees* will become new metaphors in New Zealand and Australia. What is clear, however, is that the authority of museums that once rested on belief in the possibility of denotation, has almost disappeared. In its place, as metaphor is further developed, we should expect to see increasing opportunities for open-ended meaning generation by visitors. The once clear line between social history museums, art galleries and monuments, should continue to blur. The power and maybe the “deviance” of metaphor in public memory life should continue to challenge.

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