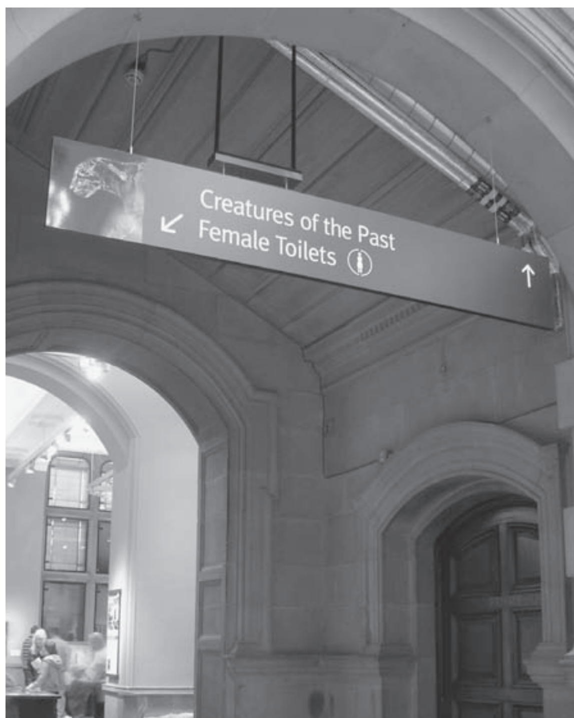
Blairism on the walls at Kelvingrove

Stephen Dawber

After three years of closure, Glasgow's great Art Gallery and Museum is once again echoing to the footfall of a curious public. Undergoing only piecemeal improvements to its fabric since the Second World War, the total refurbishment of the building promised a heightened mix of individual enchantment and collective spectacle. Such are the sustaining myths of this public space – palace of childhood fantasy on a rainy day, transcendent crucible of an otherwise divided civic culture – that little thought was given to the possibility that the renewal might go wrong. But it has, perhaps disastrously so, and the task now is to begin to explore why, and what it is that might be done.

In the history of Kelvingrove the uses of culture evolved from a patrician Victorian commitment to the value of artistic and industrial display for economic and moral improvement.[1] But more so than any other similar civic project, the pressure of the 'masses' shaped it from the start – the canny first Superintendent of Museums, James Paton, pursued his vision of Kelvingrove as a site of both social reconciliation and popular spectacle. Linked in conception – as well as by a vitalizing umbilical cord of cash – to the hugely successful International Exhibitions of 1888 and 1901, the formation of the museum owed at least something to the logic of commodification, including, perhaps, a desire on the part of the working-class in the second city of the Empire to become more fully part of the world of things. But at the same time, and particularly as the twentieth century wore on, experience of the museum also took on a more complex and potentially resistant form – a space of collective belonging, deeply felt.

This is to begin to explain Kelvingrove's popular appeal, its encompassing emotional scope. It may not actually be the case, but it feels as if I can recall every childhood visit, experiences both bewitching and unsettling as I learned over the years to negotiate the perils and pleasures of viewing. An apparently pristine contact with strange and alluring objects still lives on: the dishevelled bathos of Sir Roger, the famous stuffed elephant; the romance (never quite convincing) of the armour collections; or the almost hypnotic ordering in endless glass cases of seemingly worthless ceramic pots and pottery sherds. All this I can today conceptualise as the experience of enchanted looking, a gradual awakening of reflective judgement held in tension with the



functionality that is so often ascribed by theorists to the public museum.[2] More so than any other Scottish gallery, Kelvingrove contained something of the promise (now often chastened) of a public identity to come. As a space perhaps relished most by children, Kelvingrove allowed us all to maintain a stake in fantastic dreaming.

At a cost of nearly £28 million, that dreamworld has been radically altered, transformed by shiny new displays, a renovated layout and a good deal of hype. There is even a self-serving theory attached, a 'new epistemology of museums' drafted by Mark O'Neill, Glasgow's Head of Museums and Galleries.[3] O'Neill's apparent innovation is to cast out the old Victorian taxonomies, which, he claims, still governed experience of the museum, to replace them with a more egalitarian system of classification based on the telling of stories. A commitment to 'elitist' disciplinary specialism is thus displaced by an orientation towards popular comprehension and 'social justice'. The West and East wings of the building are described by broad general categories – 'Life' and 'Expression' respectively – and (we are told) displays are now structured by over 100 stories selected by the staff. Rooms are therefore ordered thematically under titles such as 'Glasgow Stories', 'Conflict and Consequence' and 'Scottish Identity in Art'. The role of the art collections – one of the richest municipal holdings in Britain – is both reduced in relation to the museum displays and spread throughout the building, challenging a supposed division between the class-bound artwork (previously relegated to the upper galleries) and more accessible functional objects.

There is much to be said for O'Neill's ambition – complex cultural monuments such as Kelvingrove are rarely reordered so extensively – and the explication of his reasoning is part of a welcome trend on the part of British-based museum directors to justify their activities.[4] His arguments deserve to be dealt with in more detail than I can manage here, although O'Neill's 'epistemology' turns out to be more a medley of received ideas, rather than any worked through method. This is, I think, significant because the schematism of academic injunction is not easily equivalent to adequate museum praxis. When it comes to museology, the quality of embodied comprehension constitutes an important measure of success. Turning to O'Neill's writings after visiting Kelvingrove fairly quickly gives rise to a suspicion: that the gulf between his confident, even bullish 'theorising' and the actual experience of the museum reveals an arch propagandist at work.

Two problems dominate Kelvingrove, each intimately related to the other: the breakdown in the presentation of the object and the absence of adequate narrative or interpretation. The number of objects on display has been increased from 4,000 to 8,000 – a symptom of the pressures of bureaucratic quantification? – and their accommodation is rarely a success. A busy human thoroughfare is now a disjointed and claustrophobic space as visitors and artefacts jostle up too close to one another, reducing the space necessary for active contemplation and criticism. The integration of museum objects into art displays is sometimes handled so badly as to make paintings unviewable, expressing a profound lack of confidence in the fine art collections. A proliferation of makeshift barriers and signs pleading 'Do not touch' suggests that built-in psychological barriers have failed to work. Some installations are simply crass (the largest object in

a case devoted to Adam Smith is an advertisement for the Thatcherite Adam Smith Institute); whilst others appear already degraded (on one of my visits an interactive installation dedicated to 'Powerful engines' was broken, an unfortunate irony in light of the lack of attention paid to Glasgow's industrial past). The interpretative display – comprising around 10,000 colour images and on average less than 30 words per object – is distracting and often inconsequential (paintings and reproductions of the same image are placed side by side). I could easily go on, but in an important sense Kelvingrove needs to be seen to be believed.

This is not just a result of incompetent design, although it is very much that. It also expresses a marked hesitancy towards the auratic qualities of the museum object and a compensatory anxiety to provide explanation on a grand, if often trivialising, scale. Museum artefacts produce meaning through context, but they also require a sympathetic relationship to what is always an embodied (if necessarily precarious) experience of understanding. For O'Neill, it is overwhelmingly contextual 'resonance' that generates democratising pressures, which accounts for the populist tenor of Kelvingrove's presentation. But a cacophony of signs and objects leaves little room for what I take to be the equally egalitarian possibility of experiencing affective 'wonder'; indeed, it radically negates it.[5] Mediation triumphs over content in a way that makes the Victorian taxonomy, intellectually opaque as it may be, a far more potent system of visualization.

Much of this would be less worrying if the interpretative schema were not also so inept; again, Kelvingrove needs to be visited to be believed. Victorian taxonomies may be vanquished, but so is chronology, any sense of disciplinary knowledge (particularly problematic for the paintings and ethnographic displays), and much understanding of history, let alone a past active in the present. The work of interpretation manages to be both minimal and intrusive, diminishing context to facile illustration and reducing intellectual access to the same unvariegated voice. This latter is particularly troubling, not least as it refuses the stipulations of the Heritage Lottery Fund (a major public sponsor) that museums should find ways of reaching the interests of *all* their visitors. (The fact that after supposedly thorough scrutiny, Kelvingrove has got away with this confirms what many have long suspected, that the HLF is little more than a political fix.) Some installations (generally more detailed) work better than others – that concerning the optician-artist, James Pringle, for example, or (perhaps inevitably) those covering the history of Kelvingrove. Similarly, the attention paid to children's specialised viewing needs is an example of the curators taking the breadth of their audience's competencies seriously. But, on the whole, the new museum is marked by a persistent evacuation of layered content, a complaint that cannot be dismissed – as O'Neill so often does – as

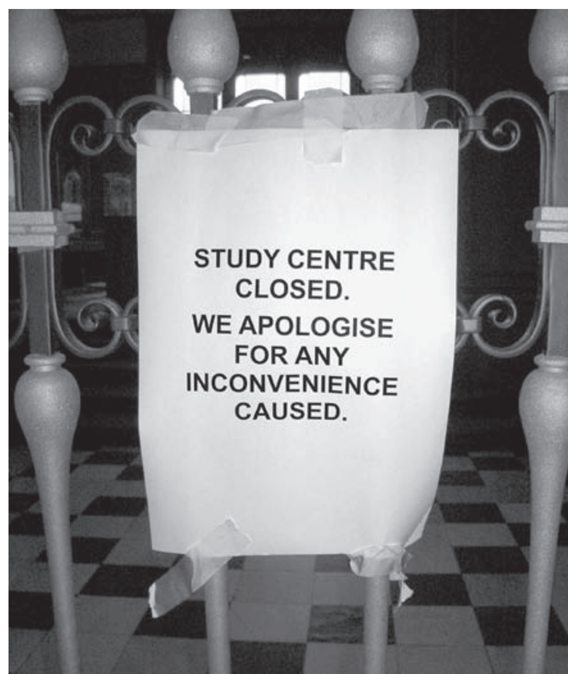
an expression of bourgeois privilege.

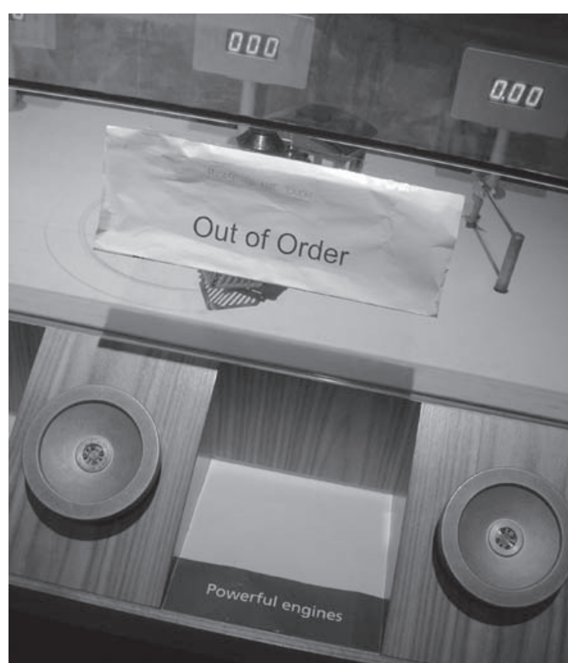
This, again, encourages a suspicion: that the bureaucratic mobilisation of superficiality, seemingly well intentioned, might in fact be accompanied by a dubious politics. And, of course, there is a politics active here: "Blairism on the walls" as I overheard one disgruntled visitor describe it. Blair, as we all now know to our cost, is a hollow politician, and by 1997 had put in place a hollowing out of the Labour Party, briskly trampling all opposition to the accommodation of City interests.[6] In earnest imitation, Blairite apparatchiks have pursued a similar emptying out of our public culture, negating the energy of collective debate, dismissing the intractability of history and blunting all resistance. In England, the shallowness of this assault generated some professional opposition; a propaganda campaign was launched by the government with the support of Demos, a pliant think-tank, to convince cultural workers that New Labour, too, could, after all, sustain a 'complex culture'.[7] In Scotland, where arts managers have proved less resistant to politicisation, an axis of inanity now creeps West to East, capturing municipal provision and making inroads on the national institutions. Under the direction of Gordon Rintoul, and backed by the support of Jem Fraser (Mark O'Neill's partner), it seems the National Museums of Scotland may be next to enjoin this technocratic rush to the bottom.[8]

At the heart of the political process is the programme of social inclusion, a central plank of New Labour social policy since 1997. As the Cultural Policy Collective has recently shown, its ideologues' great project is to dragoon the poor into a low wage economy through the instrumentalisation of culture. Social inclusion feigns to stand up for the working class, but is in fact – in its failure to address the causes of inequality – a technocratic fix on the part of bourgeois cultural managers.[9] The link between public policy and museum practice is not always direct, but in the case of Kelvingrove the bonds cut unusually deep. (For those unaware of the relationships that tie Glasgow's museum culture to Scotland's political elite, a nauseating hymn of praise in the catalogue to Bridget McConnell, Glasgow's Director of Cultural and Leisure Services, provides more than an adequate hint.) Kelvingrove is also social inclusion on the walls and it clearly exposes the destructiveness of its logic to any evolved presentation of culture.

With much complexity denied, content collapses into form and the museum is transformed into a shallow supermarket of objects. It functions less and less as a potential site of self-knowledge or collective belonging. O'Neill has subverted the remnants of an older Victorian taxonomy, only to replace it with another, far lesser form – that shaped by the sensational and flattened rhetoric of mass mediation. This is the governing logic of the new Kelvingrove, one that negates the roles of curators and educators as mediators of a common culture, the resonance of which – perhaps particularly in the case of working-class Glasgow – is a constant embarrassment to the brave new world of neo-liberalism.

This is a profoundly conformist strategy and is very much the containment, rather than exploration, of egalitarian potential through public spectacle.[10] For each and every visitor, being is privileged over self-becoming as content is sensationalised and presented in the same unmodulated tone. Narrative is crucial to human emancipation, but my guess is – and this must now be the focus of rigorous study – that visitors leave with very little sense of meaningful 'stories' having being told. A commitment to social justice is barely present; when it is attempted the results tend to be conservative (the privileging of nature conservation over a more radical environmentalism, for example) and never described as open to contest. Finally, and equally tellingly, the museum's new thematic taxonomy offers virtually nothing to the understanding of historical change. Glasgow's contradictory and unresolved past – potentially such a challenge to neo-liberal orthodoxy – is dispelled from the present.[11]





Deliberately or otherwise, Kelvingrove constitutes yet more evidence of the evacuation of complex meaning from our public culture, a process inimical to the fostering of an informed citizenry.[12] Certainly, there is little chance of achieving any form of substantive equality when cultural leaders end up submitting to the task of political containment convenient to their paymasters (in this case Glasgow City Council, the HLF and Scotland's ruling neo-liberal elite). O'Neill's failure also suggests there are a lot of problems to be worked through: rethinking the presentation of contested narratives in public culture; developing a theory of museum praxis that exceeds both the instrumentalism of the technocrats and the functionalism of much museology; and establishing a model of what democratic cultural practice might mean in the context of the museum, to name only a few.

In the shadow of Kelvingrove, and as neo-liberalism (in Blairite guise) sheds any semblance of legitimacy, now would be a good moment for cultural workers to recover their recalcitrance: the babbling of professional discontent heard behind closed doors requires an open airing. But in the end it is a popular movement of opposition that the torpid denizens of Glasgow's Cultural and Leisure services will fear the most. Public appointees should be held to account and citizens' committees could be established to monitor their contrition. In this way, museum workers could be compelled to provide their visitors with meaningful content, at once moving and substantive. In the meantime, Glaswegians could do no worse than restore an older form of public display to Kelvingrove Park. They should clamour to see Mark O'Neill's head on a spike – symbolically speaking, of course.

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Notes

1 There is still no adequate history of Kelvingrove, although an outline is attempted in the new catalogue written by Muriel Gray, *Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum: Glasgow's Portal to the World*, (Glasgow, 2006). Some insight into its twentieth-century history is offered by T. J. Honeyman's memoir, *Art and Audacity*, (London, 1971).

2 For an important critique of museum 'theoryology' see Colin Trodd, 'The discipline of pleasure; or, how art history looks at the art museum', *Museum and Society*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2003, pp. 17–29, available at www.le.ac.uk/ms/museumsociety.html.

3 'Essentialism, adaptation and justice: towards a new epistemology of museums', *Museum Management and Curatorship*, no. 21, 2006, pp. 95–116.

4 See in particular the writings of Neil MacGregor and Nicholas Serota. O'Neill has recently criticised MacGregor in 'Enlightenment museums: universal or merely global?', *Museum and Society*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2004, pp. 190–202, available at www.le.ac.uk/ms/museumsociety.html.

5 For a discussion of these terms, see Stephen Greenblatt, 'Resonance and wonder', reprinted in Bettina Messias Carbonell (ed.), *Museum Studies: An Anthology of Contexts*, (Oxford, 2004), pp. 541–55.

6 One of the best accounts of this process is David Osler, *Labour Party PLC: New Labour as a Party of Business*, (Edinburgh, 2002). For a useful assessment of Blair the politician see Richard Gott, 'The third crusade', New Left Review, 33, May–June 2005, pp. 149–58, available at www.newleftreview.net/?view=2568.

7 Tessa Jowell, 'Government and the value of culture', May 2004, available at www.culture.gov.uk/Reference_library/Publications/archive_2004/Government_Value_of_Culture.htm.

8 Jem Fraser was until very recently the Royal Museum Project Director, managing a £44.5 million programme of renovation awarded nearly £17 million by the HLF. She reported ultimately to the current Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the National Museums of Scotland, Sir Angus Grossart. Grossart, a merchant banker, was previously Trustee and Vice Chairman of the National Heritage Memorial Fund and Chairman of the Heritage Lottery Fund in Scotland. His other unpaid interests include Patron of the Governors of the National Galleries of Scotland. His company Noble Grossart Ltd. owns 25% of the auction house Lyon & Turnbull Ltd. and 29% of The Fine Art Society; he is also a Director of the Scottish Daily Record. Grossart is thought to control at least £70 million in personal assets. The extensive links, historical and contemporary, between Scotland's cultural institutions and business elites have never been adequately investigated. The extent to which cultural leaders are under pressure to make decisions against the public interest can only be a matter of conjecture.

9 *Beyond Social Inclusion: Towards Cultural Democracy*, (Aberdeen, 2003). One obvious point this pamphlet fails to make is that social inclusion policy very directly serves the economic interests of the higher ranks of cultural managers. In the maintenance of a low wage, low tax economy, in its refusal of redistribution and in its efforts to regulate a compliant workforce, social inclusion policy is very much the workhorse of neo-liberalism. In their desire to maintain existing structural inequalities, it is the social includers who are the real 'elitists'. For a valuable theoretical discussion of this question see Peter Kennedy, 'Social policy, social exclusion and commodity fetishism', *Capital and Class*, no. 85, 2005, pp. 91–114.

10 The evacuation of the category of class from Kelvingrove (although not always from the historical narrative provided by the catalogue) is particularly telling. It points to the evasion of a vital question: how in an era of declining welfare provision, growing inequality and environmental crisis is Glasgow's working class going to respond? One answer is suggested by István Mészáros, 'The challenge of sustainable development and the culture of substantive equality', *Monthly Review*, December 2001, available at www.monthlyreview.org/1201meszaros.htm.

11 The retreat from exploring historical transition – and its complex cultural phenomena – has become something of a trend in recent years, a museological equivalent to Francis Fukuyama's 'The End of History' (1989). For a related critique of 'thematic euphoria' that might usefully be extended see Franco Moretti, 'MOMA2000: the capitulation', *New Left Review*, 4, July–August 2000, pp. 98–102, available at www.newleftreview.net/?view=2258. For the political significance of an adequate understanding of historical change, see István Mészáros, 'The rise and fall of historical temporality', in . T. Brotherstone and G. Pilling (eds.), *History, Economic History and the Future of Marxism*, (London, 1996), pp. 251–92. As Mészáros concludes, 'the suppression of historical temporality is probably the most powerful methodological device in the arsenal of the ruling ideology' (p. 284).

12 For a recent discussion of this beyond the realm of museums, see Leo Panitch and Colin Leys (eds.), *Telling the Truth, Socialist Register 2006*, (London: 2006).