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The Album as Museum? A Response to Patrizia Di Bello on an interdisciplinary approach to Mrs Birkbeck's Album

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The relationship between the verbal and the visual has proved a fruitful area of exploration for scholars of nineteenth-century literature and culture. To cite but a few works that have mined this rich vein of interdisciplinary enquiry, Kate Flint's *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (2000) draws on authors of fiction, the work of artists, scientists and cultural commentators to explore the Victorian attitude towards sight. Nancy Armstrong's *Fiction in the Age of Photography* (1999) maps the relationship between photography and realist fiction and Carol Christ and John Jordan's edited collection *Victorian Literature and the Victorian Visual Imagination* (1995) contains essays which examine, amongst other things, the relationship between illustrator and novelist and the links between optical devices and visual perception. There is also a burgeoning interest in the subject of ekphrasis, usually defined as 'the verbal representation of visual representation', a relationship explored (among others) by WJT Mitchell in *Iconology* (1986) and James Heffernan in *Museum of Words*.¹ Patrizia Di Bello has herself contributed to this body of work with recent articles that discuss the relationship between women, photography and visual culture in the nineteenth century.²

Di Bello's article 'Mrs Birkbeck's Album: The Hand-written and the Printed in Early Nineteenth-Century Feminine Culture' explores the links between literature and visual culture as they intersect in the practice of women's album-making. This is also the subject of her forthcoming book *Women's Albums and Photography in Victorian England: Ladies, Mothers and Flirts* which examines Victorian women's albums, in particular those which combine photography with other media.³ Di Bello reminds us that Mrs Birkbeck's album is both interdisciplinary in the nature of its content but also that its meanings can only be unlocked through an interdisciplinary approach. The album, she writes:

at once suggests and constructs a rich network of social and cultural contacts, whose histories, meanings and connotations cannot be fully analysed without not only an interdisciplinary approach, but also expertise – on the literary and art scenes of the time,

on diplomatic and women's history, on visual and print cultures – best provided by a team (6).

By overseeing the digitalization of the album, Di Bello aims to facilitate interdisciplinary collaborative research into the individual contributions in the album and to make this unique object available to a wider audience.

Mrs Birkbeck's album, a leather-bound, 250 page long volume, contains a collection of literary and visual material contributed by a number of important figures in Victorian society including author Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, poet Letitia Elizabeth Landon, artist William Behnes and social reformer Robert Owen. In introducing us to the album, Di Bello raises a number of useful questions about how such a collection of texts and images generates meaning:

Are these created by the authors who have contributed individual entries to the album, or by Mrs Birkbeck as the collector or 'curator' of the album as a whole? Are we to see the album as the statement of an author, perhaps as a form of informal or private written speech, like diaries; or as evidence of reading practice, of how one particular woman read, copied, contributed or sought contributions of texts and images? (7).

This multidimensionality will be fascinating to unpick once the digitization project is complete. Di Bello's aim in her article, however, is to explore the meaning of the album as a whole and to consider it 'as part of a feminine culture (and a culture of femininity) constructed by and through the image of the 'lady'(9).' She begins by focusing on those self-reflexive entries which address the topic of the album itself, arguing that these contributions reveal an understanding of the practice of album-making as a middle-class female accomplishment (10-12). In these, questions of arrangement and composition are immediately foregrounded. For example, an entry by John Britton explicitly addresses the form of the album, described as 'a quilt of patchwork [which] consists of various miscellaneous pieces of different hues and qualities, but jointly combining to make a pleasing and useful whole'(13).

This description of the album as 'various [...] pieces' collected together to form a 'whole' invokes one of the Victorian period's most enduring institutions, the museum, which

is the starting point for my own doctoral research on the museum idea in nineteenth-century literature. I would like to suggest a model in which women's album-making can be interpreted through an analysis of museum language and practices.⁴ In this way, it is possible to show how the album both subverts and appropriates aspects of the Victorian museum. Di Bello remarks on the differences between the album and the museum arguing that unlike museums, 'albums impose little taxonomic order or value on their contents'(7) but the language she uses to describe the album suggests some interesting parallels. She talks about the 'sequences and juxtapositions' that are evident in the album, both of which are key elements in museum display (7). For example, it is noteworthy that the date of Anna Birkbeck's death in 1851 coincides with a suggestive entry at the back of the album which appears to state 'Year Museums, le 28 Septembre 1851'.⁵ The entry reflects the contemporary interest in the Great Exhibition and its place at the end of the album implies a link between Mrs Birkbeck's life span and that of her collection. This highlights a correspondence between the composition of the album and the construction of the conventional museum display with its clear chronological progression from beginning to end. However, as Di Bello implies, Mrs Birkbeck's album also challenges the idea of the traditional, sequential taxonomic display. Although it embodies a temporal space that runs from 1823 to 1851, the entries are not arranged chronologically. Hence a poem titled 'Solitude' dated 1823 is found on p187, after an anonymous sketch of two women on p.167, which dates from 1841. As Laurel Brake has argued in relation to the periodical, the album is also 'historical, contingent, looking backward and forward with a historical identity'.⁶ In the same way that the contributions to the album form a rich, intertextual matrix, their historical identities engage in a kind of temporal interplay which challenges the concept of the chronologically progressive museum display. This historical interaction is illustrated further when we find that a ticket to the International Exhibition of 1862 is loosely inserted on p.41. Whilst this is suggestive of the museum interests of the readers of the album,⁷ it also acts as a piece of chronologically displaced material culture, reminding us of the ongoing life of the album as literary artefact that continues to engage with the present after the death of its author/curator.

To dismiss the similarities between the album and the Victorian museum on the basis of the former's challenge to taxonomia, however, would be premature. Many Victorian

Museums were systematic in their approach to display, drawing on evolutionary ideas to create typological narratives, but they are not synonymous with taxonomia. If we take a different model of the museum, it can be argued that in fact, women's albums utilize some aspects inherent in museum display, particularly juxtapositional elements. Recent work in Museum Studies (another discipline that can be brought usefully to bear on this subject) suggests a less reductive model of the museum in which the visitor is at the centre of the interpretive process and effects her own metonymic collisions by moving through and between objects.⁸ This 'constructivist' museum visitor can be seen at play in the Victorian museum. Despite contemporary constructions of the nineteenth-century museum and its objects as 'intimately connected with notions of progress – historically, technically and socially', it is important to remember that museums also contain people and where the visitor enters, surprising things can occur.⁹ One only has to look at fictional representations of museums (see the anarchic scenes at the Sydenham Crystal Palace in Gissing's *Nether World*) to see that visitors don't always read museum scripts, consume 'object lessons' or move through the space in the ways dictated by curators.¹⁰

Mieke Bal has discussed how in the art museum, meanings emerge when 'one image reads another by hanging next to it', even if these meanings were not anticipated by the curator.¹¹ In Mrs Birkbeck's album, the juxtaposition of entries suggests a series of fascinating metonymic relationships. Di Bello points to an interesting combination of entries in which a poem by George Birkbeck is positioned in the album next to the card announcing his own funeral. Further exploration of the album will no doubt reveal more interesting juxtapositions, 'knowingly curated' or otherwise.¹² Like the visitor to the museum, the reader of the album is free to create her own associations by starting in the middle or dipping in and out and with this comparison, a clear affinity emerges between ideas inherent in reader-response theory and the concept of the constructivist museum visitor.¹³ Some of the contributions reflect this reader/visitor-centred approach highlighting the fact that contributors are both readers and writers and revealing an interesting adjunct to the idea of juxtaposition which lies in the dialogic nature of the entries. For example, a poem on p.95 by Eliza L. Emmerson was written 'on reading the beautiful lines written upon the statue of the infant son of Mr Hope', referring to a poem on p.86 by Joseph Bannan. This is an ekphrastic description

once removed; a gallery discussion that takes place in text, collected and exhibited by Anna Birkbeck.

And it is to the figure of the female collector that Di Bello now turns. She situates the album alongside the collecting practice of high status eighteenth-century women such as the Lennox sisters who collected poetry, books, porcelain and paintings, including portraits painted by their friends, highlighting a social network akin to that reflected in the album. The collecting and amateur art activities of Louisa Conolly (nee Lennox) are examples of a woman using the domestic interior as an exhibition space and Di Bello describes how women ‘had the time and cultural means to cultivate their taste, not only as consumers but also as practicing amateurs’(19). ‘In this context’, she argues

we can see Mrs Birkbeck’s album as a miniaturised and compressed version of the kind of collections more wealthy and aristocratic women were able to spread over drawing rooms, picture galleries, libraries and specialised print rooms. The album formed and displayed her taste and showcased her husband’s reputation, not only for selfish satisfaction, but also for the benefit of her family and visitors (20).

The album highlights the productive role of women in cultural exchange and challenges the association of women solely with consumerism. Later in the century, collectors Charlotte Schreiber and Dorothy Neville kept detailed records of their collecting activity and it would be very helpful if archive material existed in which Anna Birkbeck similarly discusses the processes involved in the creation of her album in a way that might shed light on her role as collector/curator.¹⁴ Without such material, what conclusions can we draw? As Di Bello shows, those entries that address her as gendered subject help construct Mrs Birkbeck as a ‘lady of taste’, but are there any other ways in which her gendered subjectivity enters the discourses of the album? Perhaps this emerges in those entries addressed not directly to Mrs Birkbeck but that take women as their subject. If we see these entries as collected ‘objects’ we can examine them using some key ideas about collecting and the construction of identity. According to Russell Belk, ‘because a collection results from purposeful acquisition and retention, it announces identity traits with far greater clarity and certainty than the many other objects owned’.¹⁵ Thus, the objects with which we surround ourselves are part of our selves.¹⁶ In this way, the poem on p.143 in which beauty is deemed to be of secondary importance to

‘plain good nature’ might suggest something of Anna Birkbeck’s own views on the subject. Furthermore, the female reflection described in the poem on p.194 which returns the gaze of a woman ‘with answering look of sympathy and love’ suggests, perhaps, something of the importance of sisterhood to Anna Birkbeck and the self-confidence that ensues from mutual female affirmation. At the very least, the album displays her interests, in drawing, landscape (see picture of Crummock lake on p.179) and children. Much of this is speculative and the argument may stand or fall on how far Mrs Birkbeck gave her contributors a free reign or how far she encouraged them to focus on particular subjects. Nonetheless, it is fascinating for the reader/visitor to reflect on the potential meanings that emerge through an analysis of her ‘collection’.

The idea of the collection remains key in the final part of Di Bello’s article where she considers albums as printed media, arguing that they need to be seen in relation to the ways in which such media represented and appropriated feminine collecting practices. She discusses the rise in popularity of ‘annuals’; a mixture of prints, poems, prose and periodical material in which ‘images were chosen first, and then accompanying texts were commissioned to match or poetically illustrate the images’(25). This, I would suggest, is reminiscent of object-labelling practices in museums and the tensions that lie therein and it shows that in the case of albums, such a forced ekphrastic approach can cause problems. The battle between word and image is commented on by Mrs Oliphant who writes ‘whether it will ever be possible to make verses and pictures ‘to match’ without sacrificing one of the united arts [...] it is a question which we will not undertake to answer’(26). Di Bello is particularly interesting on representations of such albums and illustrated books in fiction. In *Jane Eyre*, ‘looking at albums [...] is a cool pose in a social and sexual game of momentary seductions and skirmishes in long-term strategies of matrimonial conquest’ (28-9). In *Vanity Fair*, albums are examples of the use of visual culture to climb up the social scale and in *Middlemarch*, the keepsake is used to show that despite her accomplishments, Rosamund Vincy is still ignorant of ‘cultural subtleties’ (32). These fictional examples show the extent of the album/annual’s immersion in early nineteenth-century culture and illustrate some of the ways it was used to construct different models of femininity. Anna Birkbeck’s album, however, is a cut above

such annuals and as Di Bello shows, the personal, ‘one-off’ nature of the album ‘removes it from the world of mass-circulated and commodified culture’(32).

The album is indeed a ‘one-off’. A unique mixture of the verbal and the visual but also of the palpable; its materiality as book-object and the tactility of the decoupage in certain entries forming a key part of its character. Like many contemporary museums which have embarked on the digitization of their collections, these factors present a challenge to Di Bello’s project. How can the materiality of the album, its ‘thingness’, be rendered digitally so that, in the words of the Nineteenth-Century Serials Edition project, a resource is created which ‘preserves what is gained in readers’ experiences of engaging with periodicals as historical material objects’.¹⁷ In a recent reading of Walter Benjamin’s essay ‘Unpacking my library’, I was struck by his reference to women’s album-making and his emphasis on the importance of the long-term survival of such objects: ‘Now I put my hands on two volumes bound in faded boards which, strictly speaking, do not belong in a book case at all: two albums with stick-in pictures which my mother pasted in as a child and which I inherited’.¹⁸ It is interesting to speculate on Benjamin’s mother creating her album at around the same time as Mrs Birkbeck but Benjamin’s essay is also illuminating in that it places the women’s album alongside other literary artefacts worthy of consideration as part of a library. These include ‘autograph books or portfolios containing pamphlets or religious tracts [...] leaflets and prospectuses [...] handwriting facsimiles [...] and certainly periodicals’.¹⁹ This acts as a useful (though somewhat daunting) reminder to those working in the field of nineteenth-century studies of the sheer range of extant material available that demands attention, and its topical variety reminds us once again of the need to develop skills in interdisciplinary enquiry that will help make sense of it all.

The album is now part of a broader collection in the library at Birbeck and thus its ‘museum life’ continues. Benjamin talks about the importance of inheritance in relation to his mother’s albums: ‘For a collector’s attitude towards his possessions stems from an owner’s feeling of responsibility toward his property. Thus it is, in the highest sense, the attitude of an heir, and the most distinguished trait of a collection will always be its transmissibility’.²⁰ Di Bello’s digitization project will allow us all to become the heirs of Mrs Birkbeck’s album and

its transmissibility to future generations will be assured. Her article provides a fascinating introduction to the album which contains much that will be of interest to scholars working in nineteenth-century visual culture as well as those with a particular interest in the work of the many 'donors' to the album. It will be well worth a visit!

¹ James A. W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (London, University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 3.

² See for example Patrizia di Bello, 'The "Eyes of Affection" and Fashionable Femininity: Representations of Photography in Nineteenth-Century Magazines and Society Albums' *Phototextualities: Intersections of Photography and Narrative*, eds. A. Hughes and A. Noble (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2003), pp. 254-70.

³ Patrizia di Bello. *Women's Albums and Photography in Victorian England: Ladies, Mothers and Flirts* (Ashgate: forthcoming 2006).

⁴ The idea of the journal as museum has been discussed by Susan Crane in *Collecting and Historical Consciousness in Early 19th-Century Germany* (Cornell University Press, 2000).

⁵ This entry appears on p.241 of the album and the identity of the contributor is unclear.

⁶ Laurel Brake, 'Writing, cultural production, and the periodical press in the nineteenth century', *Writing and Victorianism*, ed. J. B. Bullen (London: Longman, 1997), p. 54.

⁷ The ticket is signed 'Mr and Mrs Gardner'. These were probably members of Mrs Birkbeck's family. Her maiden name was Anna Margaret Gardner.

⁸ See for example George Hein, *Learning in the Museum* (London: Routledge, 1998) and Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 2000).

⁹ Victor Buchli, 'Introduction', *The Material Culture Reader*, ed. V. Buchli (Oxford: Berg, 2002), p. 4.

¹⁰ George Gissing, *The Nether World* (1889; repr. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp.104-13. This argument challenges Tony Bennett's concept of the 'exhibitionary complex' in favour of a model of museum communication with more of an emphasis on visitor response. See T. Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum* (London: Routledge,1995).

¹¹ Mieke Bal, *Double Exposures* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.87.

¹² One such juxtaposition appears on p.194 where a poem whose subject is a woman examining her reflection in a lake sits next to a drawing of a female nude looking down into the water.

¹³ I explored this idea in an unpublished Master's dissertation *How can Museums support the teaching of literature* (Leicester: Department of Museum Studies, 1999), a small part of which appeared as 'Using museums to teach language and literature: three projects at the Geffrye Museum' *Journal of Education in Museums* 19 (1998), pp.27-30. For a far more sophisticated analysis of the links between reading and viewing in relation to

reader-response methodology see Luisa Cale, 'A visual interface for the act of reading' *Comparative Critical Studies* 1 (2004), pp.97-118.

¹⁴ See *Lady Charlotte Schreiber's Journals: Confidences of a Collector of Ceramics and Antiques*, ed. by Montague Guest, (London: John Lane, 1911).

¹⁵ Russell Belk, 'Of mice and men: gender identity in collecting', *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, ed. S. Pearce (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 240.

¹⁶ William James was later to make the point that 'between what a man calls me and what he simply calls mine the line is difficult to draw'. See William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 2 vols (Henry Holt: New York, 1890), I, 291.

¹⁷ www.ncse.kcl.ac.uk/about/about.html

¹⁸ Walter Benjamin, 'Unpacking my library', *Illuminations*, ed. H. Arendt (London: Pimlico, 199) pp. 67-8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.68.