

The Authentic Object in the Civically Engaged Museum

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The collection of the Brooklyn Children's Museum (BCM) contains some 27,000 objects, many of which are dolls and one of which is a John Wayne doll currently on display. I became curious about this doll, partly because my Grandmother had told me stories of the famous doll collection she remembered from her childhood, but primarily because the BCM is now famous not for doll collections but for civic engagement and a commitment to the community of Crown Heights. What role could a John Wayne doll be playing in such a civically engaged museum? Could it have a civic life?

The role of the object in the museum today, particularly in the civically engaged museum, is a problematic one. The museum object has been challenged in two distinct ways over the past thirty years, resulting from revolutionary discourse against the power politics of the museum and from postmodern theories of meaning. The Brooklyn Children's Museum is in a unique position to address these questions because it is in and through this particular museum that much of the discourse has come.

The museum of my Grandmother's memory was a modernist institution focused on education through public display of artifacts. This modernist impulse, as David Harvey has described, comes from a desire to categorize and thereby control a world rapidly spinning out of control.¹ This type of museum practice depended on having objects to categorize. The John Wayne doll fit perfectly into this conception of museum practice. It was an example of a specific toy at a specific time that embodied specific craftsmanship, and so on.

The first challenge to the John Wayne doll occurred in the early 1970's. At this time in history, museum practices were called into question because of their oppressive politics and exclusion of minority and underprivileged voices. The BCM met that challenge with the creation of MUSE, an experimental museum in a neighborhood storefront. MUSE was in fact at the forefront of the neighborhood museum movement, and much of the revolutionary discourse about reinventing the museum's relationship with its community came out of the MUSE project itself.² The idea that the museum object was problematic was linked to oppressive museum politics. In order for the museum to be more responsive to the needs of its community it would have to abandon its focus on the object. In this moment, the John Wayne doll would have been in trouble indeed.

The second challenge to the museum object comes from the discourse of postmodernism. For postmodernists, there is no such thing as a fact or as the truth, rather, there are many fictions and many possible truths. In postmodern discourse, meaning is a social construction, located not in an object, but in the narratives that surround that object. This theoretical position is more likely to treat an object as a text, as something to be read. Since for postmodernists it is in texts and not in objects that meaning lies, it is not difficult to see how inessential the object becomes.³

Despite these two distinct challenges, the John Wayne doll remains on display. I would argue that it is indeed possible to treat this object as a text. But in so doing, I would not say that the doll is *only* a text. The difference is that saying the former still allows for the metaphorical and physical presence of material culture – that is, of the object. While saying the later leaves one in a sort of semiotic universe in which every solid thing melts into immateriality – that is, into text. If we take the former stance, this allows us to perform

readings of objects while still maintaining their materiality. It is from this position I would like to consider the John Wayne doll.

What makes this more interesting is that children, like postmodernists, have a way of coming up with their own truths, their own facts, meanings and narratives. The rest of us, of course, call this imagination. But what this presents is both a potential problem and a potential success of the object in the museum. There is always the possibility that a child will create a meaning that has nothing to do with civic engagement or with community understanding. Yet, imagine what the child might create – the possibilities are literally endless.

The John Wayne doll at the BCM is treated in much this way: imaginatively, that is. It has been placed in a case promiscuously with ancient weapons and toy soldiers. It has been given no explanatory text but stands with only its tag as a guide. This part of the BCM is called “Collections Central” and is specifically devoted to teaching children how to engage with an object. The didactic panels at the beginning of the exhibit direct children to “Look” “Make” “Know” and “Imagine” as strategies for thinking about objects. These tools allow for children to make a “reading” of the object as text while still emphasizing the materiality and physical presence of the object.

If we perform these strategies on the John Wayne doll an interesting thing happens. We are performing a reading, and the John Wayne doll comes alive as a civically engaged object. The John Wayne doll suddenly speaks to the oppression of Native American peoples and their positioning as “the other” to a specifically North American conception of idealized masculinity, to a sort of winner-take-all nationalism. It is a symbol of popular representations of westward expansion, of George W. Bush’s foreign policy, of the politics of playing cowboys and Indians, of the popularity of the Western film, of the television series *Bonanza*, of rugged individualism as an American ideal. Even that crazy cowboy who rode an atomic bomb rodeo style in *Dr. Strangelove* comes to mind. All of these things are “readable” through the John Wayne doll, and all of them speak to civic problems and civic responsibilities, and they are all bound up in the doll’s *materiality*. It is the physical presence of the object that makes this reading possible.

Was this sort of civic engagement what the curator had in mind with the John Wayne doll? It is hard to say. What is clear is that while this exhibit space is meant to teach engagement with objects, there is different exhibit space that is supposed to teach community cooperation and understanding. That exhibit, called “Together in the City,” attempts to show that children who may come from different backgrounds nonetheless have certain fundamental things in common. “Together in the City” makes use of constructed environments with specially made objects, rather than a display of artifacts, to make its point. A computer kiosk asks children to record the names that they call family members, and they can listen to the responses of others. In a constructed living room children are asked to talk about and act out the different ways in which they celebrate special occasions. Given my reading of the John Wayne doll and the many potential readings a child could make, was something lost in the exclusion of artifacts from this exhibition space?

For thinkers such as Walter Benjamin, what was lost would be the “aura” of the object. It was after all the “aura” of a cookie called a madeleine that involuntarily evoked Marcel Proust’s memories of his childhood home, and made them more real in the process.⁴ Steven Greenblatt would perhaps agree. In his discussions of the difference between “resonance” and “wonder” in museum display, the power of the object is intrinsic, magical and fundamental.⁵

I believe it is important, even imperative, not to discount the potential power of the object to invoke intangible things, be that an involuntary memory, aura, a sense of awe, the patina of history or even – and perhaps most importantly – the possibility of performing a reading as I have briefly done with the John Wayne doll. Those intangibles are not necessarily at odds with civic engagement. Am I saying that the museum of my Grandmother’s memory should be reconstructed? Not at all, it would not even be possible. What I am saying is that the 27,000 objects in the collection of the Brooklyn Children’s Museum might have just as much to say as the John Wayne doll and that they are perhaps being overlooked as a source of civic engagement.

¹ David Harvey, *The Condition of Post-Modernity*, Cambridge and Oxford: Blackwell, 1990, p. 272.

² Lloyd Hezekiah, “Reflections on MUSE,” *Museum News*, 50.9, New York: Brooklyn Children’s Museum, 1972, pp. 12-14.

³ Susan M. Pearce, *Museums Objects and Collections: A Cultural Study*, Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993, p. 231.

⁴ Walter Benjamin (ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn), *Illuminations*, New York: Schocken Books, 1968, p. 158.

⁵ Stephen Greenblatt, “Resonance and Wonder,” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991, pp. 42-56.