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THEORIZING MUSEUM PRACTICE THROUGH PRACTICE THEORY

Museum studies as intercultural practice

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Introduction: the intercultural museum

The museum has usually been seen either as a temple or a forum, a beacon of cultural democracy or a space where peoples, identities and nations are made and unmade in the image of powerful elites. The literature of museum studies and related fields is full of critiques of museums as power houses of social inequality or engines of public good. In these studies, the arts are marginalised as reflections of social relations. The problem with this black and white model of museums, as with other cultural institutions, is that Foucauldian theories of discourse, representation and power/knowledge restrict academic analysis by focusing on the contest of good/bad ideas at the expense of what people do, in other words of social practice. In this handbook, by contrast, intercultural arts are understood as places where cultures meet, negotiate, translate and intermingle, making an important contribution to scholarship in the arts and humanities by examining the intersection of theory and practice. It seems to me that what is required, as well as attention to history and theory in academic scholarship, is a sense of practice which grounds the phenomenon or object of study in its context amid the swirl of lived social relations.

The notion of artistic ‘practice’ is ubiquitous in art criticism, loosely referred to as the ‘work’ artists do. Professional practice in museums is similarly generally seen in somewhat narrow terms as a set of working methods or ways of doing things in this particular industry which is officially sanctioned and formally described through codes or manuals. In this chapter, I take this basic understanding of professional practice, and position it within a more complex framework drawing on anthropology, sociology and the tradition of practice theory which theorises practice as the things that people do. In short I propose a re-theorising of museum practice by grafting on to it critical theories of cultural practices (Turner, 1994), and in particular Bourdieu’s (1977) theory of practice which conceives of social action as part of a field. In doing so, I argue that theorising practice through practice theory lends a greater sophistication, depth and complexity to the study of cultural heritage in relation to social institutions and particularly non-Western perspectives on arts and heritage. How can these ideas be put into practice with students of museum studies and museum professionals? Through a case study of the yearly wānanga (workshop) which takes place on a Māori marae (village complex) in the Museum and Heritage
Studies programme at Victoria University of Wellington, I show how this model of a grounded museum studies as intercultural practice can be put to work and incorporate indigenous perspectives into teaching and research, theory and practice.

Background: the absence of practice in museum studies

What is the place of museum practice within museum studies? While there has obviously been much useful academic research on what museum professionals do, readers do not really find much direct writing about museum practice in the literature of museum studies, which has been concerned rather more with academic theory than with the everyday work of museums and galleries. The incorporation of social and cultural theory into the subject from the 1980s on was necessary for strengthening museum studies, and has produced much work of a high quality that has added immeasurably to the breadth and depth of the subject (Macdonald & Fyfe, 1996). However, this drive to theorise museums did have the unintended consequence of unhinging much research and writing about museums from current practice in museums (Grewcock, 2013). There has been an explosion of publishing, mostly written by academics and critics from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds who have had plenty to say about museums, which furnish concrete manifestations of any number of fashionable scholarly topics, but that is arguably of limited actual use to museums, those who work in them or those who use them (Rice, 2003; Spiess, 1996; Starn, 2005). Indeed, research conducted among graduates of museum studies suggests many find the university curriculum too theoretical, and complain there should be more practical content in courses (Duff, Cherry & Sheffield, 2010, p. 376). Likewise museum professionals sometimes regard university programmes as out of touch and believe that degrees in museum studies are not necessarily good preparation for the workplace (Davies, 2007).

‘Practice’ is one of those ubiquitous words often heard in relation to galleries and museums, the visual arts and heritage, but what does it really mean? In art history and curatorial studies, and even more so in art criticism, there is a widespread habit of referring to contemporary art and curatorial ‘practice’, meaning the work(s) of an artist/artists whatever form or medium that might take, but this appears to be a loose application of the word that is not necessarily related to academic theories of social and cultural practice surveyed below (Schjeldahl, 2011). ‘Theory’ has been a buzzword in humanities scholarship for the last 30 years, though academic work on museums is often criticised for being overly theoretical and not grounded in current practice. Lois Silverman and Mark O’Neil (2012, p. 195) have complained with some justification that much theory is ‘jargon-ridden, pretentious, and difficult to understand’. Some traditionalists working in museums do not appreciate the value of theory at all, seeing it as the ethereal product of ivory tower academics with little relevance to the demands of their working day. But of course ‘common sense’ is no excuse, as it is really just ‘old theory’, they remind us (Silverman & O’Neil, 2012, p. 195). At the same time they recognise that the museum profession finds ‘graspable explanations’ helpful to ‘support and guide its practice’. The problem, according to Silverman and O’Neil, is that ‘our demanding daily schedules leaves little time for deep, critical and sustained discussion and analysis of theory’ and therefore a ‘deeper and more complex understanding of the museum experience’ (2012, pp. 193–194). They contend that ‘too many museums remain uncommitted to the development of a deeper understanding of the field as a cornerstone of practice’ (Silverman & O’Neil, 2012, p. 194).

Of course the relationship of theory and practice is rather more complex than naturalised understanding of abstract ideas in the academy and real work in the museum. This false dichotomy is harmful to both university research and professional work, as Hilde Hein observes:
The challenge that museums face in a time of transition is obscured on the one hand by theoretical rhetoric that interprets museums from a distance and ignores their concrete vulnerabilities, and, on the other, by too close a focus on the immediate exigencies of circumstance, which then discourages speculative contemplation.

(Hein, 2000, p. ix)

In order to overcome the false split between theory and practice, I argue that theories often underpin practical work, but equally practice should be understood as something that goes beyond mere day-to-day tasks and practical procedures – it could be argued that every time we carry out some activity or procedure, a theory or set of assumptions is in place to give meaning to that action. In a recent book, I put forward an integrated model of museum theory, practice, research and professional development which overcomes some of these problems by seeing them as part of the same continuum (McCarthy, 2015). Drawing on work by other scholars (McLeod, 2001; Simmons, 2006), I conclude that professionals in the field become researchers, and academics are immersed in practice – everyone collaborates in the service of common goals.

One part of the world where theory and practice, museum studies and museum practice, seem to be coming together is Canada. At a 2010 conference marking the 40th anniversary of the museum studies programmes at the University of Toronto, Taking Stock: Museum Studies and Museum Practices in Canada, Jennifer Carter and her colleagues positioned themselves as ‘scholar practitioners’ who cut across disciplinary differences to establish a common ground for discussion in ‘issues-based dialogue’:

We intend that the term scholar practitioner refer to a variety of practices that currently characterize how museum scholars, professionals, and consultants engage in their work be it research, practice, or scholarship. While the term practitioner generally refers to someone who practices in the field, such as a museum educator or curator, the term scholar practitioner expands upon this concept to include scholars conducting fieldwork research and practitioners conducting scholarly research. Conclusions may fold back into practice and enrich our understanding of the nature and value of museum work.

(Carter et al., 2011, p. 417)

The papers from this conference advance the conversation in several areas. Elise Dubuc for example talks about the need for an ‘enlarged’ pedagogy of museum studies programmes in response to the allied professionalisation and diversification of museum practices in a changing world which are characterised by ‘interdisciplinarity, professionalization, globalization and new technologies’ (Dubuc, 2011). Lyn Teather has a long-term interest in ‘weaving back together a widening theory practice split in arts, culture and heritage work’ (2009, p. 30). Teather seeks to empower the professional through reflexive learning and professional development: in other words a ‘Critical Reflexive Museum Practice’ (CRMP) (Teather, 1991, 2009). Teather’s CRMP navigates a path beyond the ‘dysfunctional divide’ of practitioners and theorists by acknowledging that any theoretical precept relates to practice and vice versa (2009, p. 27). She argues that university curricula should employ research through field work in museums which moves from theory to practice and back to theory. This ‘theory-practice-theory’ (Teather, 2009, p. 27) learning cycle reconnects the university and museum, advocating a critical museology while being wary of an ‘extreme critical stance’ which can ‘block a transformative practice’ (Teather, 2009, p. 28). Other scholars involved in museum studies, information studies and related fields at the University of Toronto recommend ways of ‘challenging the idea that theory and practice exist as separate areas of knowledge’. Students engage
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in ‘reflexive case studies’, by using an active learning framework to observe professionals at work or by participating themselves in museum work, such as mounting a real exhibition in a museum setting. In so doing, they argue, theory and practice are ‘not presented as dichotomous educational goals’ (Duff et al., 2010, p. 379).

Yet another scholar in Canada whose academic work on the museum is thoroughly grounded on her experience working in the museum is Ruth B. Phillips. In her book reflecting on the indigenisation of the Canadian Museum, Phillips contends that museum studies needs to make more use of case studies which provide both ‘a site for theoretical analysis and models of innovative practices’ (2011, p. 21). As a teaching methodology and pedagogy this has the appeal of opening out into museum training and ‘inoculating’ students against unrealistic and individualised models from the academy, instead preparing them for the negotiation and compromise required in the pluralist world of the museum, especially in working with native and tribal peoples. The equation Phillips proposes for research is an ideal synthesis for academics, students and professionals to aspire to: ‘history + theory + practice = critical museology’ (McLeod, 2001, p. 16). At this point, this chapter moves into the realm of practice theory, so I want to explore this field in more depth before assessing how it can strengthen and refine museum practice, and the artistic and cultural practices which it collects, exhibits and interprets.

Theoretical framework: practice theory

So what is practice? Most people would point to common sense dictionary definitions which describe the practising of a profession, the ongoing pursuit of a craft, or the practising of a skill to become proficient in it (note the difference between practice [noun] and practise [verb] in British English). Broader meanings include: action, regular activity, training and work (OED online). Here we have to note the difference between practice singular (understood as human action in general) and practices plural (seen as particular routinised types of behaviour) (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 249). Whereas professional practice in museums is generally seen in somewhat narrow terms as a set of working methods which is officially sanctioned, I want to take this basic understanding and re-theorise it by grafting on to it critical theories of cultural practices (Turner, 1994).

What I want to focus on here is the analytical purchase of practice theory for theorising museum practice and artistic practice in museums. In this chapter I argue that practice theory brings clarity to the analysis of museum practice and opens it up to critical interrogation. Of course we need to be mindful while focusing on professional practice not to treat it as a natural category that is somehow below the level of critical enquiry. In my research on museums in New Zealand, I found that the professionalisation of museum practice protected entrenched interests, thereby resisting change and inhibiting experimentation, for example smothering Māori efforts to regain control of their alienated ancestral heritage. When in the 1980s the ground-breaking exhibition Te Maori initiated sweeping changes in the ways in which Māori objects or taonga were dealt with in collections, exhibitions and public programmes, it was possible for these changes to occur because the sector was relatively unprofessionalised (McCarthy, 2007).

In itself, local museum practice in New Zealand museums was a relatively self-interested and conservative European paradigm that was part of the domination of indigenous material culture and heritage within the British Empire. However, despite a history of British colonisation familiar to other former settler colonies such as Australia and Canada, the indigenous Māori people have engaged with museums successfully over the last 30 years so that now aspects of professional practice are strongly inflected by Māori perspectives and values, e.g., collection care incorporates elements of tikanga (cultural practice) in the management of taonga (treasures).
by kaitiaki (literally ‘guardians’, but also the term used for Māori collections staff). In my book *Museums and Māori* (2011), based on interviews with over 60 academics, professionals and community leaders, a political analysis of the dramatic changes in New Zealand museums over the last three decades reveals both the resistance of mainstream museology to different ways of doing things and the power of indigenes to adapt and steer mainstream institutions to their own goals and interests.

The turn to practice, seen in much recent work in science and technology studies, has much to offer the study of museums and the arts by avoiding the preoccupation of cultural theory with language and meaning. Attention to practice, seen as emergent, performative and relational (Pickering, 1995; Pickering & Guzik, 2008), allows scholar/practitioners to be more attentive to the complex organisational interplay of things, people and organisations with their constantly changing networks of social and material agency. It is thus eminently suited to seeing objects, collections, exhibitions, and the professionals who manage them, within a broader social context without losing sight of the often intimate relations between them.

Where did practice theory come from? Practice theory has a long academic genealogy with the work of sociologists such as Pierre Bourdieu, who sought to balance the study of powerful structures in society by paying more attention to human action. As well as schools, asylums and other institutions, Bourdieu took a great interest in museums, photography, literature and other arts, and the ways in which, while supposedly being open to all, they actually preserved social distinctions:

> The museum, as it isolates and separates (frames apart), is undoubtedly the site par excellence of that act of constitution . . . through which both the status of the sacred conferred on works of art and the sacralizing disposition they call for are affirmed and continually reproduced.

*Bourdieu, 1995, p. 294*

Sadly, only a handful of scholars have picked up on Bourdieu and practice theory in museum studies and related fields (Grenfell & Hardy, 2007). In curatorial studies, Paul O’Neill is one, who in describing the rise of the curator as a creatively active producer or agent in the creation of art who works with rather than against artists and community, quotes Bourdieu’s point that the creator of value and meaning of an artwork ‘is not the producer who actually creates the object in its materiality, but rather the entire set of agents engaged in the field’ (O’Neill, 2007, p. 15). Museum director and academic Anthony Shelton, well known for his groundbreaking work with native peoples at the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, has recently presented a manifesto (Shelton, 2013) for critical museology drawing on Bourdieu’s field theory. Critical museology analyses ‘operational museology’, which has ‘constructed the museum’s institutional authority on an uncritical acceptance of empirical methodologies anchored in theories of objectivity’ (Shelton, 2013, p. 11). In opposition, Shelton argues that ‘museological practices should be understood in relation to the field in which they unfold’. ‘This reflexivity is a necessary condition for establishing a theory of practice,’ he adds, ‘from which a practice of theory can emerge’ (2013, p. 14).

In my own work analysing art and culture, museums and indigenous people in a former settler society, I have found art history and theory little help, but Bourdieu’s work is useful in investigating the complex relations between things, people and society (Bourdieu 1984, 1993; Bourdieu & Darbel, 1991). While working in and studying museums, I have always sought ways to link object and subject, structure and agency, production and reception within the same analytical frame. As Steinmetz points out, Bourdieu is often understood as a crudely structuralist
theorist of reproduction who underestimates social agency, but his key concepts should really be understood as inherently historical and open to ‘conjuncture, contingency and radical discontinuity’ (Steinmetz, 2011, p. 46). In contrast to some cultural studies where theory becomes a heuristic device, or a box to place data into, or even a concept imposed on or read off a topic/site, Richard Harker and his New Zealand colleagues argue in an important book on Bourdieu’s ‘practice of theory’ that theoretical work has to be grounded ‘through empirical research and ethnographic investigation’ (Harker, Mahar & Wilkes, 1990, p. 10). They describe his work as ‘generative structuralism’ which accounts for ‘both the genesis of social structures and of the dispositions of the habitus of the agents who live within these structures’ (1990, pp. 3–4). A useful formulation is provided: ‘(habitus \times capital) + field = practice’ (1990, p. 7). I have always found this formula very appealing because it links the notions of ‘habitus’ and ‘field’ in pointing to ‘practice’, the everyday social actions and things that people do, so helpful in thinking about art and culture. In looking at objects in social and relational rather than philosophical or aesthetic terms, Bourdieu provides a useful model of material culture, in which, as John Codd put it, art is seen as ‘a cultural product situated at a conjuncture of economic, social and historical conditions, any of which may change with the course of time’ (Codd, 1990, p. 153). As Bourdieu wrote, ‘The experience of the work of art as being immediately endowed with meaning and value is a result of the accord between the two mutually founded aspects of the same historical institution: the cultured habitus and the artistic field’ (1993, p. 257).

According to Harker et al. (1990, pp. 8, 9) Bourdieu’s theory of the field construes social domains as ‘a field of forces, a dynamic space in which various potentialities exist’ including ‘areas of struggle’. Another French scholar, Michel de Certeau, although very different in orientation, sees the practice of everyday life in similar terms, as tactical ‘ways of operating’, thus demonstrating that people do not simply consume products in a passive way (de Certeau, 1988, p. xi). For anthropologists, analysing cultural practices allowed them to take account of both structure and agency, because practice provided a more complete account of the social world, showing that people are not simply victims of brute social and economic forces looming over them from above (Sahlins, 2005). As Sherry Ortner argues, practice theory situates cultural processes in the grounded social relations of people and institutions, revealing the dialectical connections between the practices of social actors on the ground and the systems that constrain them but which are also capable of being transformed by them. It therefore gives us the tools to examine ‘the production of social subjects through practice in the world’ as well as ‘the production of the world itself through practice’ (Ortner, 2006, p. 16).

In an important book on the ‘practice turn’, Theodore Schatzki and his co-authors call practice a ‘set of actions’, but also a ‘nexus of doings and sayings’ which combines the things that people say and write as well as do (Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina & von Savigny, 2001, pp. 48, 53). Furthermore, Schatzki et al. say that practices are ‘embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organised around shared practical understanding’ (2001, p. 2). In a similar vein Andreas Reckwitz explains that practice is not just doing anything at all, but is a ‘routinized type of behaviour consisting of several elements interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, “things” and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge’ (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 249). This ‘block’ or complex of ‘body/knowledge/things’ is understandable not just to those carrying out the practice but to outside observers as ‘a routinized way in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described and the world is understood’ (2002, pp. 249–250).

What does practice theory have to offer the study of professional practice? Theorising museum practice as a social practice provides a focus on practice as an important domain of
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museum work in its own right. 'Practice, broadly speaking, is what we do,' writes Joy Higgs, ‘and more specifically what we as practitioners do in particular practice communities and how others engage with this practice’ (Higgs, 2010, p. 1). Another advantage of practice theory, is its capacity to strengthen and redirect, and refine research on/in/through museum practice. By foregrounding action and performance, and exploring human patterns of behaviour in the workplace, practice theory positions practice as the first object of enquiry and consequently reveals embodied actions, meaning formed by doing, and the performance of everyday work.

The turn to practice, then, allows scholar/practitioners to be more attentive to the complex organisational interplay of things, people and organisations with their constantly changing networks of social and material agency. In place of the theoretical obsession with representation, the idea of practice as ‘thought-in-action’ emphasises immanence and becoming (Thrift, 1996, p. 7; Thrift, 2008). In summary, practices can be seen as the ‘regular, skilful “performance” of human bodies’ (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 251). As Reckwitz puts it: ‘Practice theory “decen-tres” mind, texts and conversation. Simultaneously, it shifts bodily movements, things, practical knowledge and routine to the centre of its vocabulary’ (2002, p. 259).

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Finally, I have applied this model described here, a museum studies grounded in practice, to a new book: Museum Practice (McCarthy, 2015), which is part of the series International Handbook of Museum Studies. Whereas the other volumes in this series cover museum theory, media and transformations, this one focuses on current practice. It sets out to balance theory and practice, analysis and debate with an assessment of recent trends which is grounded in and illustrated by concrete examples and case studies. As a handbook, I see this volume not as a textbook as such, but a reference work which describes and critically analyses current practice from the ground up in order to provide a clear overview of the contemporary museum at work. No less than 27 authors, who are mostly experienced professionals, write about a broad range of topics unprecedented in their scope and detail: mission, governance, policy, audience, ethics, value, economics, marketing, collections planning, management and care, conservation, repatriation, curatorial theory and practice, exhibition development, design and display, community engagement, visitor research, educational and public programmes, and digital heritage in its many forms.
Putting (practice) theory into practice: Wānanga Taonga

Merely writing this book about museum policy and practice was not enough. While writing it I have tried, with some success, to direct the findings from the research back into a university course on the same topic as part of our Master’s degree at Victoria University, as well as professional development in the wider sector. Since 2013, we have held weekend wānanga (workshops) on a marae (meeting place) outside Wellington exploring Māori approaches to a range of museological topics including governance, collections, exhibitions, community engagement, conservation and research. Through a partnership between our university programme and the national museum sector training organisation National Services Te Paerangi, we brought together Māori experts from museums, university and local community to speak to the students and professionals who attended the course, mixing together and learning from one another. This was an example of the kind of blended learning I am advocating in this chapter, in which theory and practice, university and museum, come together to address common concerns.

The Wānanga Taonga (workshop on cultural treasures) has now been run annually for the past three years as a weekend sleepover (Friday–Sunday) held on Hongoeka marae near Plimmerton. It is offered to a total of 40–50 people, made up of Museum and Heritage Studies and other university students, university staff and heritage professionals from the local sector. The wānanga aims to equip students and professionals with the knowledge, understanding and skills to work with Māori communities and appreciate different cultural perspectives on heritage reflecting the latest thinking on values education (Atkinson 2014). The participants are required to go through a pōwhiri (welcome ceremony), sing a waiata (song) and deliver a mihi (introduction in the Māori language), help out in the whare kai (dining room), and participate in workshops on a variety of topics including tikanga taonga (Māori cultural practices for looking after treasures), the Treaty of Waitangi, mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge), and kaupapa Māori (Māori-based methodologies). An important part of the process is the opportunity to mix with and learn from the small local community, the Ngati Toa people, and see firsthand how they view the landscape, care for their taonga (treasures), engage with museums and the local city council, and consider their future cultural heritage development. In this specific context, museum and heritage practice is seen as something concrete, connected, performed, and intimately linked with people’s lives and wider environment.

The learning style is based on the Māori whare wānanga (tribal houses of learning) in which students sit around in a circle inside the meeting house engaging in discussion, group work and activities. Readings are examined, and then participants are asked to consider scenarios they may face in the workplace and come up with responses to do with how they would deal with Māori objects, communities and worldviews. The wānanga ends with a panel of Māori heritage professionals talking about current issues in the sector. The wānanga is taught with staff of Te Kawa a Māui, and offered in partnership with National Services Te Paerangi, the training organisation based at Te Papa. It is very attractive for professionals in local organisations who want to know more about this important area of current practice, and reflects the programme objectives of bringing together theory and practice, and developing an Indigenous Museology that will serve the needs of Aotearoa New Zealand into the future.

The wānanga run in 2013 and 2014 received very positive feedback through informal channels from both students and professionals, particularly for the sense of immersion in Māori culture, the opportunity to apply theory to practice and the shared learning experience and opportunity for university-sector networking. In 2015 we conducted a more formal evaluation of the wānanga. All of the sessions were ranked higher than a 2-point average on a scale where 1 = very helpful. A sample of comments for what participants ‘most enjoyed’ include:
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‘1: learning about the spirituality of the customs and the taonga of the Maori; 2: getting to know fellow students; 3: the immersion of the time in terms of being at the marae and its customs.’ (MHST student)

‘All of it! Each discussion was interesting. Staying at the marae was a unique experience for me.’ (Professional)

‘Learning history of Hongoeka and Ngāti Toa Rangatira’s mātauranga tuku iho (knowledge handed down). Awesome speakers and discussion.’ (Professional/MHST student)

Other comments that illustrate how participants appreciated this experience include:

‘It was very valuable to our studies giving us insight we wouldn’t have learnt any other way.’ (MHST student)

‘Hongoeka was an excellent choice of location – very special to stay in this community and I found myself admiring the place, the people and the work they have done. Added value moving away from University environment.’ (Professional)

Conclusion: intercultural arts practices

In this Handbook, the term ‘intercultural’ points to the complexity of locations, identities, and modes of expression in a global world, and the desire to facilitate awareness, dialogue or understanding across contexts. The term interculturality suggests that artistic and cultural practice resides both in a location – whether geographical, spatial, or corporeal – and also within an in-between space – among and within individuals, milieu, social constructs, and cultures. In addition the editors argue that the word ‘practice’ refers to conceptual processes as well as to processes of making and becoming. These ideas have, I hope, been reflected in the discussion of museum studies and practice, New Zealand museums and indigenous cultural/museum practices surveyed in this chapter. The experience of museums in the South Pacific is in line with this theoretical framework, reinforcing the notion of museum practice as something flexible, interconnected, and performed, a social practice which is imbedded in local political and cultural contexts. I have shown how an understanding of both arts and heritage, and the museological work which manages, displays and interprets it, as intercultural practices, aids in the wider critical analysis of museums and indigenous people and culture. I have also demonstrated how indigenous museum workers transformed the ways in which they collected, exhibited and managed their cultural heritage – in other words through the emerging Māori museum practice seen in local institutions – by educators, curators, managers and other staff, who likewise work to decolonise the institution through their actions. In conclusion, museum studies/practice can be seen as intercultural mediation, the work of changing society by actively working on, in and through the social.

References


