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| INTERVIEW |

'The digital has a big role to play in the decolonisation of museums'   PREMIUM

Museologist Sarah Irene Brutton Kenderdine, in Bengaluru recently to deliver a lecture, speaks about how technology is altering not only the way we view museums, but also culture and history in a broader sense

February 01, 2024 09:00 am | Updated 06:34 pm IST – Bengaluru

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Sarah Kenderdine | Photo Credit: SPECIAL ARRAGEMENT

"Computational museology comprises of a range of technologies that go from generative AI technologies, computer graphics, large-scale interactive visualisation, human-

computer interaction as well as many imaging technologies," says Sarah Irene Brutton Kenderdine, a professor at the École Polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL), Switzerland where she leads the Laboratory for Experimental Museology (eM+).

PLACE–Hampi (2006), interactive installation by Sarah Kenderdine and Jeffrey Shaw. | Photo Credit: Sarah Kenderdine

Hampi Museum (2012), Kaladham, Vijayangar. | Photo Credit: Sarah Kenderdine

Navigable Panoramic world of PLACE–Hampi (2006), interactive installation by Sarah Kenderdine and Jeffrey Shaw. | Photo Credit: Sarah Kenderdine

Kenderdine, who was in Bengaluru recently to deliver a lecture titled 'Museums in the Age of Experience', an introduction to her work in computational museology, at the Science Gallery, refers to this emerging field as "an enframing concept that connects machine intelligence with data curation, the word of knowledge to visualisation and various communities with embodied interaction through immersive interfaces," says Kenderdine, also the director and lead curator of EPFL Pavilions, an initiative that blends experimental curatorship and contemporary aesthetics with open science, digital humanism and emerging technologies. "Our research is not finished until the public is engaged with it."

Traditional museums are often seen as sites of cultural hegemony, places that often drive a problematic narrative entrenched in colonialism, racism and oppressive power structures. How does computational museology alter it?

I think it important to note that large-scale studies have been done for public opinion and museums -- they did quite a few during COVID -- and we know

that museums are considered to be trusted organizations. We are dealing with spaces that are trusted by the public.

Yes, museum collections have often been defined by a colonial mindset or museums themselves have entrenched authoritarian views. The hegemonic and linear worldviews need to change. With digital, we can give visitors a way of making their own journey, a serendipitous way of engaging with archives or objects, a real-time curating machine of their own. These are definitely tools that can transform what a museum can offer.

Or take, for instance, repatriation in relation to the digital world. It is not about sending digital objects back to custodians. It is about sending real objects back to custodians, with museums building an archive of digital material that allows people to have research and public access, even though those things have been rightfully returned.

Obviously digital technologies offer so many affordances in relation to contextualization of objects. Digital engagement can be forensic, revealing things about the objects that we can't see with our eye. For instance, you can zoom into an object more than the naked eye can see or use CT scanning to look inside and see what was previously unseen. Digital tools can teach us to look.

Then there is intangible heritage, which is a very difficult space for museums to deal with. In 2003, for instance, the International Council of Museums decided that intangible cultural heritage should be in a form of definition in museums. But they are left with a big problem because when you are talking about living traditions, the best thing most museums can do is create a linear movie and put it on the wall. The digital, however, has an amazing role to play, in terms of looking at embodied knowledge systems. You have 3D volumetric video, spherical and 360 video formats, motion capture, all sorts of different repertoires there to work with and create these manifestations of intangible heritage in museums.

Also, one of the fallacies of technology in museums is that it is really designed for young people. I absolutely don't agree with that. We must design these interfaces to be all-inclusive for different ages.

What was the impact of COVID on museology? Did it catalyze the adaptation of new technologies or alter perspectives in any way?

There were a few things happening in parallel. For instance, there was the hype of what they call VR—the technical name is head-mounted display (invented in 1968): a broad range of technologies that has been around for the last 50-plus years. which allow people to enter virtual worlds.

Museums jumped on it, putting head-mounted displays on their visitors before they quickly realised that it was a hopeless in the public domain for various reasons, ranging from social isolation, hygiene, usability, maintenance and so on. These challenges may disappear in the future, but for now the technologies is very constrained for mass visitor use. What it points to however is the overwhelming desire in museums to provide new experiences, to let people inhabit virtual places, engage with virtual objects.

The obsession with VR happened just before covid, but the thinking was already there that you could inhabit these different worlds, virtually. Then COVID happened, but it was largely a lost opportunity. Yes, it opened a conversation around digital modes of access again, but it was a conversation that had already happened in the mid-90s when the internet was hosting online museums and there was a great deal of experimentation. What happened in COVID, however, was that most museums decided the best way to deal with it was to put a 3-D model of their museum online. This is the least interesting thing you could do with network technology. I was disappointed, actually.

The best byproduct of covid wasn't what museums did online, but a recognition of how important their audiences are to them. And this is a good byproduct since museums can get a little obsessed with their own narratives. COVID highlighted that their audiences are absolutely crucial to their livelihood. Now many museums are ready to work with community; that recognition is important.

I think another long-term byproduct could be an interest in imaging; everyone wants to digitize today. The evolution of content management or the advent of network technologies streaming content in different ways into the galleries, straight into databases, is powerful for museums.

But one of the things that need to happen, which happens only in a few museums right now, is a real investment in leadership and curators who fundamentally understand technology. It is not that they are going to go home and code an application at night. It

is that they can have intelligent conversations about their vision for something and the ability to decide who to bring to the table to build it.

Currently, digital installations in exhibitions in museums often favour creative agencies, which unfortunately doesn't build internal skills. A lot of this is to do with how things are funded, dovetailed with the fact it is difficult to sustain an internal team unless you have real commitment from the board and directors. But nowadays, there is no reason why museums shouldn't have that team, because it is clear this needs to happen. Museums need to allocate resources to digital preservation and curatorial experimentation, as with any other fundamental aspect of any museum such as conservation

Musuems are often seen as a one-know dissemination of information and knowledge, something digitization changes, making it a more two-way interaction. Can you talk about the role computational museology plays in empowering visitors, therefore, democratising the space?

The ability for the visitor to co-create a space is something we do quite a bit of. We ask visitors to draw responding to different topics, and this gets streamed live onto the gallery walls, so you get this immediate feedback and co-curation of the space. The visitor's ability to have a voice, at some level, is empowering. The museum response to that voice once expressed is critical.

There are also other strategies not necessarily about the digital. It is to do with social networks and community and inviting community in on the programming side of things. And I think that has become more and more apparent.

The Science Gallery in Bangalore is attempting to do this in a really interesting way: to bring communities together, offer them new spaces, and create new things. This is a unique time for museums to transform the model.

Can you talk about the role technology can play when it comes to dealing with difficult heritage?

The digital has a big role to play in the decolonisation of museums. For instance, museums can return the real objects, if the host country wants them and can care for them, while holding onto their high-fidelity digital twin.

But, while some objects like the Parthenon Sculptures currently located at the British Museum is quite a cut-and-dry situation (Britain maintains legal ownership while Greece has demanded their return), there are other situations more complex. There are many issues around repatriation that need to be looked at really carefully. For instance, objects removed from countries of origin are sometimes deemed toxic. They get a negative energy around them since they have been desecrated.

Also, if museums send these objects to places that can't care for them yet, it can become a problem. There is a lot of training and funding that needs to be put in place; recipients need buildings to house these objects correctly, and in a way that the community has access to them, and so on.

There is also another aspect—how the digital copy can be used as a memory tool for communities. For over a century, Richmond's Monument Avenue in Virginia, U.S.A., featured five enormous bronze statues of Confederate leaders, vestiges of America's national trauma, the Civil War. The last one standing in 2020 was that of 19th-century American Confederate general Robert E. Lee. Following the death of George Floyd by Minneapolis police on 25 May 2020, peaceful as well as violent protests erupted. Rather than topple or deface the statue, which stands 60 feet high, its plinth was gradually covered with graffiti and signs calling for racial equity or expressing rage against Black oppression. It was also augmented with artwork, candles and flowers as makeshift gravestones for Black victims of police violence.

Ultimately covered in graffiti, it became a testament to one of the most important country-wide protests in modern America. The monument was modelled using the process of photogrammetry, by Terry Kilby in 2020 and 2021. From this data, we created an interactive work for the exhibition *Deep Fakes: Art and Its Double*, just at the time this statue was being destroyed (the massive bronze horse was removed from its plinth on the day of the opening of the exhibition). The digital work remains the only 3D visible testament to this extraordinary period in American history.

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