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cultural geographies in practice

In the footsteps of angels: Tim Brennan's 'Museum of angels' guided walk

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We gather at the British Museum's information desk. The place is crowded as usual, but a dozen or so are waiting to go on Tim Brennan's guided tour. Two women join the group; they have a story to tell. 'We tried to buy the Guide in the bookshop', they say excitedly, 'but the bookshop told us they didn't stock the Guide, and that there'd been some fuss over it.' The group closed in. What, we wondered, could the fuss have been? Before we could hear the answer, Tim Brennan appeared. We exchanged 'hellos' and then Tim said 'follow me'. So we did.

In 2003, Tim Brennan was the artist in residence at the British Museum. Much of his artistic practice relies on the idea of the 'guided walk'.¹ For Tim, the walk is the artwork. The walk is a *work* of art: something that is practised, and doesn't have a definite object as a product. Through these *manoeuvres*, as he calls them, Tim hopes to do a number of things. In part, the walk is an exercise in mapping, tracing out new times and spaces. In part, it is about guidance, where Tim points to bodies of knowledge that are associated with specific locations on his trails. In part, he wishes that his audience – the group on the guided tour – become part of the work/walk of art. In this respect, Tim is attempting to make artists of his audience, through their participation in the walk. However, the walk also highlights those points at which new possibilities for subjectivity, geography and history are blocked, resisted, denied. Brennan's spatial art practice has already attracted the interest of geographers. Thanks to David Pinder, Brennan has even conducted one of his guided tours at the Royal Geographical Society (during the 2003 annual conference). In summer 2003, though, he was taking groups on a tour of the winged creatures held in the British Museum.

We began on the steps of the main entrance to the Museum. Tim explained that this was not going to be an ordinary tour, where he would give us historical facts about artefacts. He would lead us around, reading extracts from a wide variety of sources.

Tim opened his guide-book, pointed at the frieze atop the British Museum and read a short passage from Milton's *Paradise lost*. Without delay, we then headed off into the Museum itself. At the stairwell beyond Room 12, Tim stopped in front of an image of heaven that covered almost the whole wall. Heaven, in this representation, was a tall, hierarchical structure. Tim read another extract. This one explained the difference between the Seraphim and the Cherubim, and what thrones were. Not Milton this time, the source was www.angelacademy.co.uk. In Room 13, Tim asked us to consider the bodies that angels assume or manifest. According to Thomas Aquinas, it was entirely possible that angels never assume a corporeal, physical form, but only manifest themselves in the imagination.

Tim guided us through Rooms 14, 15 and 16. Using a short passage from Sol Yurick, Tim made a link between angels and electronic communication. If angels are about communication, then it would seem that contemporary capitalism is a factory of angels: of signs and messages. Angels, we learnt, are guides to action, to the future. On we went. Through Rooms 17 and 18, up the stairs, back through 17, on through 19 and 20, into 21, and down the stairs to Room 77. Into Room 78. Back through 77, into 21, through 23, to Room 10. Through, round, up, down, back. By manoeuvring the group around the walk, Tim was mapping the spaces and times of the British Museum differently. It was as if the procession of the group, interrupted by Tim's incantations, was itself part of some magical ritual – transforming the museum's times and spaces.



FIGURE 1 Tim Brennan and the winged creatures of the British Museum. (Photo by Steve Pile.)

Brennan's work is a deliberate intervention in the commonsense body of knowledge embodied both in the British Museum and in its distribution of artefacts, where history and geography are cut up into bits and pieces that are then stuffed into separate rooms. The winged creatures Tim had painstakingly catalogued seemed to be all over the place – a hidden seam running through the museum's vast collection. As he guided us through the museum, Tim continually pointed to other bodies of knowledge, other linkages and connections between things, other ways in which the knowledge of the museum might have been given flight. The question posed was this: on what bodies of knowledge – on what wings, by what magics – is the British Museum founded?

Angels and bodies of knowledge

To convey Tim's strategy of pointing to other bodies of knowledge, I will use the example of Dr Dee. In part, Tim Brennan is interested in Dee because of their mutual interest in angels. But, as we will see, there is more to this than first meets the eye. In Room 56, Tim read a passage from Benjamin Woolley's biography of Dr John Dee.² The passage speculates on some of the devices that Dee used to communicate with an angel, Uriel. It is worth saying a little bit more about Dr Dee, because it turns out that he lies at the heart of the matter – the matter being not just the very origins of the British Museum and how it lays claim to bodies of knowledge, including history and geography, but also, curiously, the foundations of geography itself as a body of knowledge.

According to the British Museum's own website, www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk, Dr Dee (1517–1608/9) was a renowned mathematician, astrologer and occultist, connected to the court of Elizabeth I. However, the British Museum says that Dr Dee was eventually to be derided as a trickster and conjuror. There is, indeed, a developing 'official' narrative about Dr Dee. A good example is the story told in an exhibition of Elizabeth I's life and times at the National Maritime Museum (2003), where Dr Dee was presented as one of the four key men in the English Queen's court. As a young man, Dr Dee had gained much from studies on continental Europe. There, he had learnt the mathematical principles behind the movement of the heavens and also behind navigation at sea. He had also obtained a series of state-of-the-art navigational instruments, including the astrolabe and two of Mercator's famed (and expensive) globes, along with the skills necessary to use them. Indeed, Dr Dee wrote the standard text of navigation for English seafarers. The most famous English explorers and adventurers of the age, Drake, Raleigh, Frobisher, Chancellor and Davis, expressed their gratitude in letters to Dr Dee. In this view, Dr Dee was responsible (in part, at least) for the base knowledges that would make English domination of the high seas, and ultimately the British Empire, possible.

In this story, however, Dr Dee's experiments in conversing with angels are given short shrift. In the British Museum's description, it is hinted that Dr Dee's fall from grace had something to do with his occult research and seeking contact with divine spirits.

Similarly, E.G.R. Taylor's examination of Dr Dee's contribution to Tudor geography barely mentions angels, yet concludes that his preoccupation with them resulted in the failure of his endeavours.³ The moment Dr Dee attempts to converse with angels, his reputation for astrology and mathematics, for navigation and geography, collapses. Yet, Dr Dee's conversations with angels cannot be so easily set apart from mathematics and navigation.

If one starts from the assumption that God created the universe, then the movement of the heavens would be part of God's design. If mathematical principles could be discerned in the movement of the heavens, then this might suggest that there were universal principles underlying creation. Not only would this confirm the existence of a divine creator, but it would also suggest that a basic code for understanding absolutely everything was an obtainable goal. Such work found Queen Elizabeth's favour for two understandable reasons: not only would access to such a code enable secret communication between the Queen and her agents abroad, it also offered the possibility for manipulating matter itself (for example, being able to turn base metals into gold).

Dr Dee attempted to uncover the basic code of the universe both by the mapping of the movement of heavenly bodies and also through a variety of alchemical experiments. Such work was extremely detailed and time-consuming. It was also prone to error, with a large number of calculations having to be made accurately. A quicker route, obvious at the time, would be to ask someone 'in the know': that is, to ask an angel. In 1582, Dr Dee met Edward Kelley (?1555-97). Kelley claimed to be able to channel (i.e. to act as the manifestation of) the angel Uriel. Over a seven-year period, Dee recorded a series of conversations with Uriel. Sadly for Dr Dee, Uriel never revealed God's language, though constantly promising to.

On the walk, Tim Brennan's interest in Dr Dee, on the face of it, seemed to be motivated primarily by his conversations with angels. Indeed, while cataloguing the Museum's angelic artefacts, Tim had noted its possession of some of Dr Dee's magical devices, including an obsidian mirror, a quartz sphere and some engraved wax discs. Many of these objects are normally on display, but not, strangely, at the time when Tim was describing the British Museum as a museum of angels. Even so, there is more to Tim's interest in Dr Dee. More than simply a trace within the museum of angels, Brennan was hinting that Dr Dee's magical body of knowledge is part of the very constitution of the British Museum itself.

The angel of history

In the introduction to his guided tour, Tim Brennan imagines a correspondence between himself and the founder of the British Museum, Sir Hans Soane (1660-1753). According to this, Sir Hans Soane has no time for Tim's detailed cataloguing of angelic figures in the British Museum. Such an attendance to magic and myth is inappropriate for the British Museum, which instead is a source for rational, scientific knowledge, a source of reputable history. Tim Brennan replies robustly:

In the lead up to my residency at The Museum in its 250th anniversary year I had been considering the speaking of quotes in my work as a kind of ‘ventriloquism’, and how they might be related to the definition of ‘angel’, as a conveyor of messages from one realm to another. And then a coincidence occurred. I discovered that Dr John Dee, who was a Tudor royal mathematician and alchemist, had made proposals to Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth to found a National Library. The initiative was not taken up during his lifetime but eventually took root and developed out of his own private collection of Natural Philosophy (what we now term broadly as ‘magic’) books and manuscripts once they had found their way into the possession of Sir Hans Soane. Dee’s works are in fact a major ingredient within the foundation of the British Museum – the first public museum in the world.⁴

Tim’s contention is clear: that the British Museum is founded upon magic. The consequence, of course, is that the Museum’s claims to scientific knowledge, to history itself, must be re-examined in this light. In fact, Dr Dee’s library came into Sir Hans Soane’s possession after it had been through Elias Ashmole’s hands. Broadly, magic seems to have had a much wider influence than is suggested in stories about the foundation of libraries and museums. In its 250th year, the British Library launched its own version of events. The exhibition set the context of the Museum’s foundation within London of 1753. The implication was that the Museum was born of London – a neatly centred and bounded geographical location and time. But, as Brennan’s manoeuvrings reveal, the histories and geographies of London stretch beyond the Museum’s narrow sense of itself.

Tim Brennan’s guided tour is remarkable for making links – if in form alone, between winged figures – between every department of the British Museum. Angels and winged creatures appear in many different historical and geographical contexts. Yet, in weaving a web of connections between these figures, Brennan shows that these figures have been detached from their historical and geographical contexts – from the bodies of knowledge that brought them into being. Brennan questions the Museum’s collection, its reason to be, by repeatedly pointing to those knowledges the museum cannot cope with.

The British Museum has long suffered criticism that it houses the treasures that the British Empire looted from the rest of the world. Moreover, many countries have long demanded the return of artefacts taken from their territories – especially Greece and Egypt, more intensely so when they discovered that the museum had not been taking good care of their treasures. In response, the British Museum now argues that it is the world’s museum. According to this argument, the British Museum is one of a few world museums that houses, and juxtaposes, objects from across history and across geography. The implication is that, as a result, these artefacts can be measured and evaluated against this global human history, from the year dot to now. The British Museum, in this sense, lays claim to a (singular) world history and geography. Thus, to break up the collection would be to lose not just the ability to compare objects from different times and places, but also a sense of universal human progress.

But Tim and the angels are saying something else. His labyrinthine mapping of these winged figures begins to disrupt the British Museum’s cosy, consensual world story. The winged creatures simply do not add up, do not become one single body of knowledge. Against this universal history we find that angelic discourse is not so easy to

discern. It is not that Tim's citation of different bodies of knowledge points to the incommensurability of the times and spaces of the Museum, but rather that these bodies of knowledge have become detached for their objects, leaving them (both) isolated, bereft. Angels themselves, thereby, appear helpless in the face of history. Tim Brennan cites Walter Benjamin's famous description of Klee's painting, *Angelus Novus*:

His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet.⁵

Perhaps Brennan's walk reveals this: what the British Museum's collection ultimately presents is the continuing catastrophe of uninterrupted progress.

Notes

- ¹ A. Phillips, 'Crusade', in T. Brennan, ed., *Codex: crusade* (Sunderland, Art Editions North, 2004), pp. 36–49.
- ² B. Woolley, *The queen's conjuror: the life and magic of Dr Dee* (London, Flamingo, 2002).
- ³ E. G. R Taylor, *Tudor geography 1485-1583* (London, Methuen, 1930).
- ⁴ T. Brennan, *Museum of angels: guide to the winged creatures in the collection* (London, British Museum/Gli Ori, 2003), pp. 2–3.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 57.