



The Poetics  
and Politics  
of Museum  
Display

Edited by  
Ivan Karp and  
Steven D. Lavine

# EXHIBITING CULTURES

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PART 4

Festivals

IVAN KARP

The introduction to this volume describes museum exhibitions as contested arenas, settings in which different parties dispute both the control of exhibitions and assertions of identity made in and experienced through visual displays. In this section we bring together four papers that examine how festivals present yet another public forum in which cultural displays tend to produce disputes over meaning.

Although these papers originally were commissioned for different purposes, each paper describes how issues of culture and representation emerge not only within the confines of the museum, but also in those often self-conscious, antimuseum settings called fairs and festivals. Fairs and festivals do differ from museum exhibitions in any number of ways. The organizations that produce fairs are often temporary, set up for special purposes and disbanded after the event. If they perpetuate themselves they do so not continuously but

periodically, such as in the annual community or regional festival. Still, there is a paradoxical sense in which the curatorial hand is both less and more evident in displays produced for festival settings. Since the "objects" on display are usually not objects but live performances, festivals frequently promote the notion that performers are primary agents determining the performance's content. Yet the greater the cultural distance between the performers and their audience, the greater the perceived need for an interpretation that explains and sets the scene for those attending the festival.

These interpretations can range from the relatively simple act of having the performer slipping frame and explaining the context, setting, or origin of the performance to the far more elaborate procedure practiced by the Smithsonian Institution's Festival of American Folklife, in which trained folklorists who have extensive experience with the performers' special genre interpret the performances for the audience. The professional interpreter of the festival has clear parallels with museum docents, who interpret exhibitions for special groups and tours.

"Living museums" provide a special case of professional interpretation, because a living person is both an interpreter and part of the exhibition. In these cases, guides assume both the costumes and the personas of people who would have occupied the settings that the audience is visiting. Their training can be extensive, as it is in Williamsburg, or more casual and seasonal, as when college students are used at theme parks during the summer. Both "living museums" and theme parks use costumed guides, "authentic" or playful; thus the same display technique can be used in settings that assert either authenticity or fantasy. But the purpose of a costumed, living interpreter-performer is the same—to guide and stimulate the audience to experience a world they know only through the faculty

of the imagination. Whether the world to be imagined ever existed is irrelevant to the display devices that are used. The larger metamessages of "authenticity" and "fantasy" are the product of the overall story spun by the exhibition, and not a product of the specific display forms used in exhibitions and festivals.

This point is essential. Far too many debates about the nature of exhibiting assume that a type of museum is defined by the poetics of display rather than by the politics of interpretation that exhibitions establish. Although exhibitions in natural-history and art museums (to take two museum genres) increasingly look alike, their politics remain separate. The appeal to "visual interest," for example, can be found in either museum setting. But in natural-history museums, the display of beautiful objects is usually a means to another end, such as the stimulation of interest in how crystals are formed or in the meaning and history of the peace pipe in Native American life.

The "living" dimension of the festival is the feature most frequently cited when the festival and the exhibition are contrasted. In his discussion at the conference, Richard Bauman sharply contrasted the sensory experiences of the exhibition and the festival. He noted, for example, that exhibitions are settings for restrained and sensually restricted experience, since most museums limit interaction between audience and object. Museums set up barriers between the audience and the display. If physical barriers are absent, as in some contemporary exhibitions, electronic devices emit alarms to warn that the space enclosing the object has been entered, just as guards placed at strategic intervals warn the audience about violating space.

A double message is communicated in exhibition spaces. First, the audience views objects that are believed to have "visual inter-

est” or “visual distinction.”<sup>1</sup> Second, the audience is made aware of the high cultural and financial value inhering in the objects on display. Rareness, preciousness, or authenticity are communicated by the museum exhibition.

Festivals communicate messages about authenticity while they also invoke pleasurable, sensual experiences that more totally involve the person. Bauman described this totalizing participation—which engages acting, tasting, or feeling, in addition to looking—as “blowout.” The stance that is stressed in festivals is active rather than passive, encouraging involvement rather than contemplation. We might contrast the relatively authoritarian learning experience implied by the classic museum setting, in which one member of the museum set—the audience—receives the experience provided by the exhibition makers<sup>2</sup> with the more democratic and nonjudgmental participatory and sensory aesthetics of the festival.

These differences place museum exhibitions and festivals on a continuum: the control exercised by one agent over another’s experience contrasts with openness and participation by all parties. The museum exhibition, which strives to produce refinement of taste, is at the other end of the continuum from the festival, which strives to allow the fullness of the experience to be shared among all the participants. In the middle of the continuum are the interactive exhibits discussed by Elaine Heumann Gurian in this volume. In those settings, audience and exhibition makers interact, but they do so in a structured way, since the range of possible audience responses is both limited and guided toward predetermined ends.

These contrasts between the museum exhibition and the festival may have a familiar ring, for they are also the contrasts between elite and popular culture. These two forms of culture exhibit real divergences in style and claims to authority. On the other hand,

elite culture claims its authority on the basis of its possession of cultural resources and experience. Connoisseurship and training are claimed as central elements in the construction of exhibitions and the selection of objects.<sup>3</sup> Even where the purpose of an exhibition is didactic rather than aesthetic, the authoritative claim is based on possession of knowledge and those cultural resources we call “collections.” The operative term is *possession*. Whether these possessions are skills and knowledge or material resources, claims to authority based on ownership or possession is a fundamental feature of elite culture.

Festivals, on the other hand, do not emphasize differences in taste or ownership among their participants. Festivals that display folk performers do make something of differences in skill and knowledge, but they characteristically assert that such knowledge and skill derive from nonelite settings and are available to everyone who comes to the festival. The central issues that are implicitly contested between museum exhibitions and festivals are ownership of culture and how it is defined.

Raymond Williams has shown how the meaning of the concept of culture has changed radically over time.<sup>4</sup> From its initial association with agriculture, culture has come to be conceived as the mark of the cultivated, civilized person and, more recently, as the common possession of a human group. Elite culture tells a story of cultivation that has universal implications. In this volume, the papers by James Clifford and Carol Duncan describe how museums with encompassing, universal stories arise out of and are mechanisms for the production of elite culture. Festivals tell stories that deny or ignore the universalizing themes of elite culture, in that they often entail just those cultural experiences and groups that resist the universal. Universal stories lead to tidy events; particularizing stories

do not allow their tellers to wrap them up into neat packages. Nor are multisensory, “blowout” settings easy to predict or control. A striking aspect of the papers in this section is how the diversity festivals celebrate can and usually does lead to messy events and disorderly, disputatious performances.

Yet the very essence of the festival—the inclusive, celebratory nature of the event—makes it an attractive forum for the exhibition of other agendas. The more important festivals become, the more the tension between politics and control manifests itself in their history. This is certainly the history of festivals presented in this set of papers. Ted Tanen describes his diplomatic program for using the festival format to educate U.S. audiences about other countries, and he does so in a modest and honest fashion. The result of that mission has been two remarkable events—the Festival of India and the more recent Festival of Indonesia. If Tanen provides us with a view of these festivals from above, and Richard Kurin describes the scene from within, there is still considerable similarity in their agendas. Both are very concerned to produce an attitude of respect toward and an increase in knowledge about the culture of India. However, their respective ideas about Indian culture are very different. Tanen’s is a consumer’s stance, while Kurin’s anthropological engagement with India leaves him with a committed, if ironic, point of view. Kurin’s paper is characteristically anthropological in that it simultaneously stands both inside and outside; it appreciates while it seeks to explain.

For Kurin, the Aditi and Mela exhibitions, part of the Festival of India, were ultimately successful for two reasons. First, they raised the status of despised groups of performers in India itself, and gave these groups a measure of control over their lives. This is one of the ironic consequences of diplomacy. (I was left wondering

if a similar effect wasn’t produced by the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition, described by Curtis Hinsley; unfortunately the historical evidence is missing.) The second success of the festival derived from the inability of its organizers, including Kurin, to control the performers. Though its organizers conceived the festival as a series of carefully orchestrated, partial glimpses into the performers’ lives, the audience instead often encountered endemic rebellion, in which the performers reframed the representation of a performance into a performance itself, regulations notwithstanding.

The discussion of Kurin’s paper at the conference included a heated debate about some of the “exhibits” in Aditi. Members of the audience were very concerned about how some of the displays “museumified” craftspeople doing essentially everyday, nonperformance activities. They were distressed at observing live persons put on display as if they were objects. This is the underside of the festival frame. If festivals are difficult to control because they engage the total sensory person, they are also organized forms of display that often reduce the whole person to a partial performer.

Folk festivals have special problems. Often the folk activity is not an indigenous performance genre, and the square peg of an everyday craft is forced into the round hole of show business. This problem was evident in all three of the festivals described in this section. Richard Bauman and Patricia Sawin make this experiential contrast the key point of their paper. Essentially they provide us with a political ethnography of how a festival contains a dialectic of control and resistance. They show how ideas about folklife often force performances into an ill-fitting frame, and, as Richard Kurin does, they show that festivals reach beyond the event to the communities from which artists come. The legitimating function of the festival often takes unforeseen forms.

Curtis Hinsley describes the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition as a fair fighting against itself. The exposition was a remarkable event, one whose history questions some of the received wisdom about festivals I describe above. Despite the fantasy, fun, and sensual fullness, it is clear that part of the event was ultimately controlled by commercial interests. Though the primary goals of the exposition were educational and directed at increasing the respect paid to the groups exhibited—the same goals that animated the Festival of India—the anthropologists were definitely relegated to the periphery. Hinsley provides a picture of something like a Festival of India within a commercial exposition. Perhaps the “natives” who participated in the exposition received a degree of legitimacy upon their return home, but that is another research project. Clearly, the relativizing and legitimating goals of anthropological science had a place only on the periphery of American society, and the fair's displays were undercut by the assumptions held by anthropologists themselves. Festivals do not always succeed in all their goals, and the happy consequences described by Richard Kurin are neither automatically nor easily obtained. This is especially so when the subject matter displayed is the lives of members of non-Western cultures, which is the topic examined in Part 5, “Other Cultures in Museum Perspective.”

#### NOTES

1. See the essay by Svetlana Alpers in this volume for a defense of art museums as temples of “visual interest.”
2. It is interesting to consider the Hall of the North American Indian at the Peabody Museum, Harvard University. This brand-new anthropology exhibit (1990) uses virtually every traditional display technique known to museums, from almost-empty vitrines to dioramas with labels explaining why dioramas are a bad thing. The master narrative reproduces traditional museum anthro-

pology nonetheless. The exhibits are still arranged in terms of regions and the objects are chosen to demonstrate diversity among regions. The catalogue is even more striking in this regard. Primarily a book of pictures of decontextualized objects, it is organized by region alone and has no time dimension.

3. Acquiring the “best” examples of a type of art or a species is a passion museums share with individual collectors. To my knowledge, no one has studied how the reputations of museum directors are defined by the collections they acquire. Such an inquiry is long overdue.

4. Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (London: Fontana, 1976).