



The Poetics
and Politics
of Museum
Display

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Introduction: Museums and Multiculturalism

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Every museum exhibition, whatever its overt subject, inevitably draws on the cultural assumptions and resources of the people who make it.

Decisions are made to emphasize one element and to downplay others, to assert some truths and to ignore others. The assumptions underpinning these decisions vary according to culture and over time, place, and type of museum or exhibit. Exhibitions made today may seem obviously appropriate to some viewers precisely because those viewers share the same attitudes as the exhibition makers, and the exhibitions are cloaked in familiar presentational styles. We discover the artifice when we look at older installations or those made in other cultural contexts. The very nature of exhibiting, then, makes it a contested terrain.

In the United States at this historical moment, especially given the heightened worldwide interest in multicultural and intercultural issues, the inherent contestability of museum exhibitions is bound to open the choices made in those exhibitions to heated debate. Groups attempting to establish and maintain a sense of community and to assert their social, political, and economic claims in the larger world challenge the right of established institutions to control the presentation of their cultures. They challenge exhibitions that overlap with their concerns, demand real power within existing institutions, and

establish alternative institutions. Inevitably, even those curators and museum directors who respond to these concerns find themselves in difficult territory, fearful of the passion of the debates and often insufficiently aware of the unconscious assumptions that underlie their own exhibitions. Their efforts, moreover, are compromised by the complex interactions of competing parties and interests that exist in any museum.

The Te Maori exhibition from New Zealand's Maori people, organized by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1984, provides a good example. The organizers of the exhibition consulted with Maori elders to secure consent for their *taonga* (treasures) to travel. Because all but one of the *taonga* already were the property of museums, this process was not strictly necessary, but rather reflected the feeling among white, middle-class New Zealanders that their identity was traceable to the Maori and that the Maori still had a spiritual right to the *taonga*. The ultimate effect of the consultation was to increase awareness among the Maori of the status of their *taonga* as art objects and to focus their attention on the ways in which their culture was presented in museums. Tensions rose especially over the ethnological and historical background provided in the exhibition catalogue, which the Maori elders considered pure nonsense.

In the wake of the exhibition, pressures have mounted in New Zealand for the development of procedures and institutions that will allow the Maori to define their own heritage. The question now, as researcher Adrienne Kaeppler has suggested in an unpublished paper, is how imaginative museums in New Zealand will be in response to the situation: "Are Maoris and their heritage to be considered separate from . . . other Pacific islanders who make New Zealand their home? Will museums be on the forefront of cultivating new kinds of identity and educating the population about them? . . . Should they echo the political climate or should they be a force for change?"¹ Such questions, difficult though they are, are inevitable.

Decisions about how cultures are presented reflect deeper judgments of power and authority and can, indeed, resolve themselves into claims about what a nation is or ought to be as well as how citizens should relate to one another. As Kaeppler notes in her paper, sometimes it is easier to understand the political and social implications of such decisions when one looks at the museums of other cultures. Fiji, for example, has dedicated itself to pluralism, but intermarriage is discouraged and there is no framing ideology of the "melting pot."

Directly expressing these assumptions is the fact that the majority of the Fiji Museum's exhibitions are Fijian, with only occasional exhibitions devoted to the large Chinese and Indian populations. In contrast, Papua New Guinea, which is home to more than seven hundred linguistic and ethnic groups, has made the forging of a shared national identity a national objective. Consequently, exhibitions in that country deliberately highlight continuities across cultures, showing, for example, similarities in pottery made by different ethnic groups.

It is much more difficult to uncover these connections within more familiar cultural settings. In recent years, however, there has been a series of incisive readings of both historical and current exhibitions in European and American museums. Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach have analyzed the architecture, decoration, and art-historical arrangement in what they call universal survey museums—the Louvre, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and so on—and conclude that these elements create rituals of citizenship. They argue that together, these elements "claim the heritage of the classical tradition for contemporary society and equate that tradition with the very notion of civilization itself," all as part of the process of legitimating the modern state.² The new Musée d'Orsay in Paris was met with a wide array of analyses, all of which assumed that the construction put on the art must be accounted for on social and political as well as aesthetic grounds. Perhaps the most compelling analysis to date is Donna Haraway's reading of the Akeley African Hall and the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Haraway relates both the taxidermal preservation of the animal specimens and the iconography of the memorial to the era's concern with eugenics and conservation, the need to find "a prescription to cure or prevent decadence, the dread disease of imperialist, capitalist and white culture."³

Writing in 1971, Duncan Cameron usefully distinguished between two distinct museum-related stances, the traditional one of the museum as temple and a newer one of the museum as forum. As temple, he wrote, the museum plays a "timeless and universal function, the use of a structured sample of reality, not just as a reference but as an objective model against which to compare individual perceptions." In contrast, as forum, the museum is a place for "confrontation, experimentation, and debate."⁴ Twenty years ago it still was credible to assert the possibility of the temple role, but now few serious museum practitioners would claim that a museum could be anything but a forum

(although exhibitions themselves often have failed to reflect this changed view). Nor have we thought carefully enough about who participates in the forum.

In art museums, a modified version of universalist aesthetics still persists. Curators rely on their eye, taste, and experience as the final arbiter in making judgments about what to collect and what to exhibit. But even in this context, curators often assert that theirs is only one of many possible points of view and that exhibitions done from other perspectives can be equally valid.

Perhaps the forumlike nature of the art museum is most clearly expressed in the increasing complexity of activity that confronts the museum visitor—from shops and restaurants to galleries, lectures, and performances. The story of Western art, which once was the central experience of the museum, now is complicated by the addition of arts from non-Western traditions and from minority cultures in the United States.

Despite the increasing diversity incorporated in art museums, curators and exhibition designers still are struggling to invent ways to accommodate alternative perspectives. This is especially true where exhibitions go beyond the individual artist and make some claim to present a culture or group. The enthusiastically received but much-debated exhibition *Hispanic Art in the United States* provides a helpful example. The curators, John Beardsley and Jane Livingston, set out to redress what they saw as an underestimation of Hispanic artists in discourse about and the market for contemporary art. Although they recognized that their subject matter was defined by such social criteria as the content of the art and the ethnic identity of the artists, the curators chose to select works whose quality was defined in relation to contemporary American art practice generally.

Within this framework, Beardsley and Livingston's exhibition strategy reflects good current thinking about the nature of pluralism within ethnic groups and the relation between art and ethnicity. Particularly valuable is their direct challenge to the idea that as artists approach the realm of high art, the elements of ethnicity in their work inevitably disappear. Indeed, the curators argue in the catalogue that "ethnicity, along with other forms of regional or cultural particularity, can now be perceived as one of the primary ingredients in the alchemy that is good art."⁵ In identifying artists who might be included in the exhibition, the curators consulted extensively with professionals concerned with Hispanic art; the host institution, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, undertook the project as the beginning of a long-term

process of building a stronger bridge to local Hispanic communities. A committee of fifty Hispanic community leaders was organized and has been maintained subsequently.

The exhibition has been successful in achieving Beardsley and Livingston's central goal: a general audience not previously well acquainted with Hispanic artists has been introduced to their work. Even commentators who have been critical on other grounds have not quarreled with the quality of the selections. But Livingston and Beardsley have been criticized for the inadequacy of the exhibition's presentation of the history, range, and social and aesthetic goals of Hispanic artists (and, by inference, of Hispanic culture).

Specific criticisms of the exhibition have fallen into three general categories: (1) that by omitting murals and installations, the exhibition underestimates the overt political dimension of contemporary Hispanic art; (2) that the selections favor folkloric and "primitivistic" work, thereby displaying a naive understanding of the interaction of art and ethnic concerns; and (3) that the exhibition format strips the work of the linkage to the social arena that is fundamental to Hispanic art. Finally, some of the Hispanic art professionals consulted during research for the exhibition objected to the final result. They maintained that although their research and long commitment provided much of the basis for the exhibition, the authority granted to mainstream institutions such as the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, made it almost inevitable that the power and resources to do the exhibition would end up in the hands of non-Hispanic institutions and non-Hispanic curators.

To each of these criticisms, Beardsley and Livingston have reasoned responses. Murals and installations cannot travel easily, and in any case, the exhibition is filled with images from which political and social implications can be drawn. The apparent emphasis on folkloric material is the result of how the show was mounted, with the more culturally idiomatic images displayed early as a way to make a diverse body of work intelligible. And some artists preferred that their work be judged without reference to their ethnic origins, but rather by the standards of mainstream cultural institutions.

The larger point, however, is that no matter how the exhibition was organized, it would have been disputed. The subject matter inevitably was open to multiple responses, based on the cultural assumptions of the curators and the viewers. Museums attempting to act responsibly in complex, multicultural environments are bound to find themselves enmeshed in controversy. Only when as a society we have

achieved sufficient opportunity for art and artifacts of "other" cultures to be seen can we expect this kind of controversy to become less heated. Now an exhibition often bears the burden of being representative of an entire group or region. With multiplied opportunities, each exhibition will be just one assertion in an ongoing discussion.

In the meantime, the museum world needs movement in at least three arenas: (1) the strengthening of institutions that give populations a chance to exert control over the way they are presented in museums; (2) the expansion of the expertise of established museums in the presentation of non-Western cultures and minority cultures in the United States; and (3) experiments with exhibition design that will allow museums to offer multiple perspectives or to reveal the tendentiousness of the approach taken.

In the first arena, significant progress has occurred during the past two decades. The first generation of museums dedicated to the work of African American and Hispanic artists, such as the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists in Boston, and El Museo del Barrio in New York, have weathered difficult times and established impressive records of accomplishment. Newer museums, such as the Mexican Museum in San Francisco and the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art in New York, have been inspired by their example.

Generally poorly funded and operating on a limited scale, these and smaller institutions identified with other minority populations in the United States have demonstrated an ability to identify heretofore unrecognized materials and issues, to serve nontraditional audiences, and—at their best—to suggest new possibilities for exhibition design. Two examples drawn from Native American museums are the Kwagiulth Museum and Cultural Centre in Cape Mudge Village, British Columbia, which exhibits material in conventional glass cases but arranges it according to original family ownership (an entirely new conceptual base for most non-Indian viewers), and the U'mista Cultural Centre in Alert Bay, British Columbia, which displays artifacts in a traditional big house and arranges them in the sequence of their appearance in the potlatch ceremony.

Not even the exhibitions mounted by these museums, however, can escape contestation. They face charges about who has the right to control the exhibition and how cultural and community identities are to be defined within it. The assumptions on which their exhibitions are organized are perceived as limited, and serious questions are raised

about the omission of diverse perspectives. Still, they are helping to expand our sense of the possibilities inherent in exhibition design and in the reconfiguration of the relation of exhibition to audience. Support must be found to allow them to function at full capacity; at the same time, we must recognize that, inevitably, some will be empowered at the expense of others.

Among established institutions, growth has taken place in the attention paid to non-Western cultures, from the Michael Rockefeller Wing and the Asian galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York to the National Museum of African Art and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., as well as other museums across the United States. There has been less activity in historical and ethnological museums, although there are definite signs of renewed energy there also. The challenge is to use this capacity well, especially in devising strategies that do not merely rehearse traditional Western ways of organizing experience and that respond imaginatively to the presuppositions of visitors not acquainted with the areas involved.

For example, we need experiments in which the artwork is organized according to the aesthetic categories of the cultures from which it derives. One such experiment, *Essence of Indian Art*, an exhibition mounted at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco in 1984, arranged work according to the various *rasas* (sentiments) of Indian tradition. Also, more experiments are needed involving indigenous experts and the sharing of authority with cultural groups that have a special interest in a given exhibition. For example, at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, where a major reinstallation of the African collection is under way, an extensive consultative process has been designed to involve Chicago's African American community. The organizers are trying to respond to the knowledge, background assumptions, and concerns their audiences will bring to the museum so that the resulting exhibition will speak intelligibly to them. Groups that previously have felt uncomfortable within the institution may come to have a voice in what is shown and said. The institution will gain through diverse aesthetic and intellectual inputs, new concerns, new approaches, and a new awareness of how a given exhibition is actually understood by viewers.

Finally, we need experiments in exhibition design that try to present multiple perspectives or admit the highly contingent nature of the interpretations offered. This will be a challenge: people are attracted by the authority of museums, and audiences could lose interest

if that authority is called into question. One of the most successful examples to date has been the Art/artifact exhibition, organized by the Center for African Art in New York. In the exhibition catalogue, Susan Vogel explains that

this is not an exhibition about African art or Africa. It is not even entirely about art.

Art/artifact is an exhibition about the ways Western outsiders have regarded African art and material culture over the past century. . . . An exhibition on how we view African objects (both literally and metaphorically) is important because unless we realize the extent to which our vision is conditioned by our own culture—unless we realize that the image of African art we have made a place for in our world has been shaped by us as much as by Africans—we may be misled into believing that we see African art for what it is.⁶

To this end, African art was exhibited in simulations of several different environments: the traditional art museum, the contemporary gallery, the ethnological-museum diorama, the cabinet of curiosities, and (via a video installation) some of the objects' original habitat. By bringing to consciousness the extent to which cultural presuppositions frame our view of both artworks and artifacts, the exhibition challenged us to begin to create installations that admit and clarify the limits of their own perspectives.

In December 1989, as the new year approached, New York mayor Ed Koch announced a "melting pot parade" to celebrate the city's racial and ethnic diversity. By the next day, the mayor's advisers had persuaded him to abandon the plan for fear that it would be taken as making light of serious racial problems. A prayer vigil was proposed instead.

It is not just New York but the entire United States that is debating its own pluralism—uncertain that the melting pot works or should work, in search of some territory of shared culture, uneasy about the place of the United States in the international arena. These debates—which are, after all, about how we will live in the future—echo in the precincts of the museum. If the museum community continues to explore this multicultural and intercultural terrain consciously and deliberately, in spite of the snares that may await, it can play a role in reflecting and mediating the claims of various groups, and perhaps help construct a new idea of ourselves as a nation.

NOTES

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1. Adrienne Kaeppler, "Paradise Regained: The Role of Pacific Museums in Forging National Identity" (Dept. of Anthropology, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., photocopy), 12, 14, 18.
2. Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach, "The Universal Survey Museum," *Art History* 3, no. 4 (Dec. 1980), 451.
3. Donna Haraway, "Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, 1908–1936," *Social Text* 11 (Winter 1984–85), 57.
4. Duncan Cameron, "The Museum: A Temple or the Forum," *Journal of World History* 14, no. 1 (1972), 201, 197.
5. John Beardsley and Jane Livingston, *Hispanic Art in the United States: Thirty Contemporary Painters and Sculptors* (New York: Abbeville, 1987), 46.
6. Susan Vogel, *Art/artifact: African Art in Anthropology Collections* (New York: Center for African Art, 1988), 11.