The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display

Edited by Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine

EXHIBITING CULTURES

Smithsonian Institution Press
Washington and London
CHAPTER 6: Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship 88
CAROL DUNCAN

CHAPTER 7: The Poetics and Politics of Hispanic Art: A New Perspective 104
JANE LIVINGSTON AND JOHN BEARDSLEY

CHAPTER 8: Minorities and Fine-Arts Museums in the United States 121
PETER C. MARZIO

CHAPTER 9: The Chicano Movement/The Movement of Chicano Art 128
TOMAS YBARRA-FRAUSTO

PART 3: Museum Practices 151
STEVEN D. LAVINE

CHAPTER 10: Locating Authenticity: Fragments of a Dialogue 159
SPENCER R. CREW AND JAMES E. SIMS

CHAPTER 11: Noodling Around with Exhibition Opportunities 176
ELAINE HEUMANN GURIAN

CHAPTER 12: Always True to the Object, in Our Fashion 191
SUSAN VOGEL

CHAPTER 13: The Poetic Image and Native American Art 205
PATRICK T. HOULIHAN

CHAPTER 14: Four Northwest Coast Museums: Travel Reflections 212
JAMES CLIFFORD

CHAPTER 15: Why Museums Make Me Sad 255
JAMES A. BOON

PART 4: Festivals 279
IVAN KARP

CHAPTER 16: The Politics of Participation in Folk-life Festivals 288
RICHARD BAUMAN AND PATRICIA SAWIN

CHAPTER 17: Cultural Conservation through Representation: Festival of India Folk-life Exhibitions at the Smithsonian Institution 315
RICHARD KURIN

CHAPTER 18: The World as Marketplace: Commodification of the Exotic at the World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893 344
CURTIS M. HINSLEY

CHAPTER 19: Festivals and Diplomacy 366
TED M. G. TANEN

PART 5: Other Cultures in Museum Perspective 373
IVAN KARP

CHAPTER 20: Objects of Ethnography 386
BARBARA KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT

CHAPTER 21: Refocusing or Reorientation? The Exhibit or the Populace: Zimbabwe on the Threshold 444
DAWSON MUNJERI

CHAPTER 22: How Misleading Does an Ethnographical Museum Have to Be? 457
KENNETH HUDSON

Contributors
The editorial page of the Saturday Washington Post carries an array of political cartoons that have been published by other papers during the preceding week. For 7 May 1988 the Post reprinted a remarkable cartoon by Wright that originally appeared in the Miami News. It showed black figures of Ronald and Nancy Reagan in “native” grass skirts, dancing around what appears to be a sacrificial shrine. Ronald holds a goat over his head and Nancy a chicken in each hand. Ronald says to Nancy, “What’s the astrologer say to do next, Nancy?” Answers she, “Sacrifice the goat, singe the chickens and pound the lizard to powder!” This cartoon was a response to previous news reports that the Reagans had used astrological advice to schedule presidential events.

The cartoon evoked a curious echo for me. The image of the Reagans reproduced, quite deliberately, the popular imagery of the
"witch doctor." Herbert Ward’s 1890 travel book, *Five Years with Congo Cannibals*, contains a strikingly similar illustration, drawn without the same satirical intent. It portrays a “witch doctor,” again a black figure against a light background, dancing around a fire, clothed in a similar costume, and holding over his head a “fetish” figure. Patrick Brantlinger, in whose article on Victorian writing about Africans this illustration was reproduced, describes it as “a typical portrayal of African religion as idol or devil worship.”

The parallels between Ward and the *Washington Post* editorial cartoon are striking. I am not suggesting that the editorial cartoonist was copying Ward. Both drew, however, upon a stock of deeply held and patently enduring cultural imagery about the “other,” that generalized artifact of the colonial and imperial encounter. Even more striking was the observation made by a colleague that both the Reagans and the Ward “witch doctor” had assumed standard classical-ballet positions. The effect is singular. Here we have combined in two illustrations the paradox of representing the “other.” On the one hand, the “other” is clearly portrayed as lacking the qualities of dominant, usually colonial, cultural groups. The “other” lacks what “we” have; in this case rationality, symbolic (as opposed to true) animal sacrifice, and an orderly, bourgeois attitude toward the conduct of everyday life. The implication is that these are savages, controlled by emotions and unable to calculate rationally. On the other hand, the cultural resources used to produce an image of the “other” are not derived from a cross-cultural encounter. If the “other” is defined simply in terms of negative features, what it lacks, then it becomes impossible to produce a positive account. The ballet pose is no accident. Negative imagery needs positive associations to make it work, otherwise the consumers of the image would have nothing to grasp. The politics of producing the image of the “other” requires a poetics not just of difference but also of similarity.

Museum exhibitions draw on the resources of public culture and popular imagery to produce their effects. They are as much an arena of discourse about the “other” as editorial cartoons or travel books. They also use the organizing principles of difference and similarity to produce the imagery of the “other.” Which principle predominates in the account or image of a cultural “other” often determines the strategy for how the “other” is portrayed. Usually we think of the “other” as represented primarily as different. Quite the opposite can occur, however. Similarity can be used to assert that the people of other cultures are no different in principle than the producer of the image, or that the differences that appear so great are only surface manifestations of underlying similarities.

An exhibiting strategy in which difference predominates I call *exoticizing*, and one that highlights similarities I call *assimilating*. We are more familiar with exoticizing strategies; they predominate in popular-culture forums such as travel accounts, as well as in some academic writing. Assimilating strategies are less easy to read. They appeal to the audience’s sense of the familiar and natural. They don’t stop exhibition-goers in their tracks and produce a “what in the world is that?” response.

Exoticizing often works by inverting the familiar, showing how a well-known practice takes an inverted form among other peoples. The common accusation that African peoples practice “animism” is an example. The anthropomorphic tendency of most Western religious belief is inverted to produce a class of people who worship divine beings created not in their own image but in the image of nature. That no non-Western religion has ever been known to have
such beliefs has not stopped legions of writers from describing Africans, for example, as “animists.”

Assimilating is a more subtle exhibiting strategy. In fine-art museums that exhibit so-called primitive art the isolation of the object in a vitrine with minimal information is done to emphasize similarities between the aesthetic that is involved in appreciating the object in a museum and the aesthetic assumed to have been involved in its making. The controversial Museum of Modern Art exhibition “Primitivism” in Twentieth-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern is a classic instance of the assimilating strategy. Objects are brought together either because they are known to have provided models for modern artists or because they exhibit “affinities.”

For William Rubin, the curator of the exhibition, affinities exist because artists working independently on similar formal problems arrive at similar solutions. This is pure structuralist interpretation. Considerations of content, such as iconography, or questions about intentionality, such as the religious purposes for which objects may have been made, and even examination of contexts of production and use are all omitted from an analysis of factors that may serve to shape the final form of the object. History also is omitted from consideration. Objects are defined as the products of individuals who accidentally derive their works from a limited stock of available forms. The result is assimilating because cultural and historical differences are obliterated from the exhibiting record. Rubin’s exhibition turns the African, Native American, and Oceanian makers of the objects displayed in the show into modern artists who lack only the individual identity and history of modern art. Using these criteria, their work can be only a footnote to the development of art in the West.

Still, Rubin’s intentions are laudable. He desires to place “primitivist” aesthetics on a par with modernist aesthetics. In the end, however, he only assimilates the aesthetics of other cultural traditions to a particular moment within his own tradition. As a consequence of what he allows and omits in his history of art, he ends up constructing cultural “others” whose beliefs, values, institutions, and histories are significant only as a resource used in the making of modern art. If Rubin had chosen to examine how a “tribal” artist and Picasso each used similar forms in combination with forms not chosen by the other, a more textured and culturally diverse exhibition would have been the result, and he still would have been able to remain faithful to his project.

Natural-history museums often manage to exoticize and assimilate within the same exhibition. The subordination of culture to nature that is so characteristic of exhibitions concerned with hunters and gatherers is revealed by displays that often show how the foraging strategies of animal species and human groups are similar. As a result, hunters and gatherers are assimilated to our ideas about nature at the same time as we exempt our own forms of culture and technology from the same examination. The history of the Smithsonian Institution illustrates this process in a grand manner. Out of the U.S. National Museum, which was a natural-history museum, developed the Museum of History and Technology (the forerunner of the National Museum of American History), leaving behind the Department of Anthropology in what is now the National Museum of Natural History. Thus the Smithsonian, unintentionally but palpably, maintains a nineteenth-century evolutionist distinction between those cultures that are best known and exhibited as part of nature, primarily Native Americans and peoples of the Third World, and Americans, whose primary defining feature was originally conceived as the possession of sci-
ence and technology, and who now possess history, in contrast to natural history.  

No genre of museum is able to escape the problems of representation inherent in exhibiting other cultures. The two perils of exoticizing and assimilating can be found in the exhibitions of virtually every museum that devotes any part of itself to exhibiting culture. Nor are museums that restrict themselves to examining diversity within their own societies able to escape the difficulties described above. Some of the most recent studies of images and ideas about imaginary or unknown worlds (which as a group are coming to be called either the "history of the 'other'" or the "anthropology of the imaginary") demonstrate how the image of the "other" is formed partly from images of class, ethnicity, and gender in Western cultures, partly from negation and inversion, and partly from the "other's" images of their own "others," as they have been recorded and transmitted by explorers, colonials, and other occupants of cultural and imperial frontiers. I am sure that the reverse is also true. Portrayals of African American family life are no doubt affected by the notion that Africans have female-headed households. A vicious circle of mutually reinforcing cause and effect in the history of representing the "other" reinforces the problems inherent in exhibiting culture that all museums face.

One special problem faces museums whose mission is ethnographic. The decline of museums during the period preceding World War II, chronicled by Neil Harris, has been reversed. Public subsidy and private philanthropy have made many museums relatively prosperous. Ethnographic museums, however, generally have been scenes of neglect. One need only consider the shabby Musée de l'Homme in contrast to the resources put into other national museums in Paris, or that the United States is the only major Western nation without a museum of cultures, mankind, or civilizations. At a recent conference a British participant pointed out that the winds of change associated with the independence of Third World countries have had the ironic consequence of causing Western public culture to turn inward. Thus ethnographic museums become museums of another sort; they exhibit ideas about the "other" in the earlier, cruder forms left over from the time in which the ideas came into being, and not in the glossier, disguised forms into which they have developed and in which they are found in many art and history museums.

The ironies are multiple: because their exhibitions are unchanged and unmediated by modern and attractive exhibiting devices and techniques, ethnographic museums often present the imaginary "other" in purer form. That this is so is not because these museums are more retrograde than other institutions. Rather, they suffer from the same neglect that the Third World faces vis-à-vis the First World. And they are subject to many of the same attitudes that characterize colonial social relations. Frantz Fanon observes that poverty is a defining feature of colonial attitudes. The poverty of the subject masses is believed to be the result of their cultural or personal inferiority. The shabbiness of ethnographic museums is often assumed to be the product of the attitudes of the personnel who now staff them. There is a serious need to examine museums systematically not only in terms of attitudes toward the "other," but also in terms of how the strategies of exoticizing and assimilating fit with public culture in the West.

I am going to suggest that art museums that present the art of other cultures in terms of universal aesthetics (which are actually Western) or natural-history museums that exploit middle-class anxieties about the environment in their exhibitions will have an easier
fit with their publics and supporters than ethnographic museums that strive to represent cultural specificity. The attitudes manifested in public culture toward the “other” may take new forms but remain basically unchanged.

Many of the other papers in this volume describe how other cultures are viewed in museum perspective, and could have been included in this section. Part 2, which focuses on the exhibition Hispanic Art in the United States, examines disputes over whether the exhibition used an assimilating strategy, and concludes with a plea by Tomas Ybarra-Frausto for exhibitions that construct a space for displaying cultural specificity. Curtis Hinsley’s paper on the World’s Columbian Exposition, in Part 4, provides a textbook case study of the politics of assimilation and exoticizing in a cultural event cast on a grand scale. The full range of representations of the “other” was played out in Chicago in 1893, and the evidence presented by the papers in this volume reveal that the story is not over.

In this section, “Objects of Ethnography,” by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, provides a history of exhibiting other cultures, their objects, and their people. She usefully distinguishes between two styles of exhibiting, which she calls in situ and in context. In-situ exhibiting is realist in its appeal, the object surrounded by as full a recreation as possible of its original setting. Authenticity and knowledge, at least as far as external features are concerned, are the hallmark of in-situ exhibitions. In natural-history and ethnographic museums, the diorama offers in-situ exhibiting in its purest form. Donna Haraway’s article on the dioramas in the American Museum of Natural History shows that one purpose of the diorama was to present nature in its ideal form. Only perfect animal specimens were sought, and natural settings were meticulously documented and recreated in the museum. The rhetorical appeal of the diorama is that the audience should experience nature, or exotic cultures, as they really are. No interpretive work is necessary for the audience. Ironically, museums end up purveying a tourist experience for audiences unable to pay for the “real thing.” At the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco, members of the audience come to the diorama hall of African mammals, called “African Safari,” dressed in appropriate safari costumes, to be photographed in front of a very elaborate diorama of a waterhole in Ngorongoro crater in Tanzania. The illusion of close fit between the representation and what is represented is sustained by in-situ exhibiting styles. The extension of these styles and accompanying realist conventions of representing to human actions and products is a major theme in Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s article. The absence of any appeal to the audience to engage in mutual acts of interpretation parallels Elaine Heumann Gurian’s account of authoritarian styles of exhibiting.

In-context exhibiting is the alternative considered by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett. In-context exhibitions take a step toward acknowledging the constructed nature of the knowledge presented in the exhibition, and thus also take a step toward inviting the audience to recognize the arbitrary nature of all representations. They do so by using devices such as long labels, charts, and educational programs. By asserting more control over the objects and making the interpretive context publicly accessible, in-context exhibits exert less control over the audience.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett uses this distinction to reply to many of the other papers in the conference. She considers the phenomenology of the museum experience, and how resonance and wonder are produced, by contrasting in-situ and in-context aspects of experience. Most important, she examines how the museum effect either distances or engages the audience with exhibitions of culture.
than any other paper in this volume, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's contribution takes up the question addressed earlier in this introduction: how do styles of exhibiting position exhibitors and audiences vis-à-vis the people of the cultures exhibited? The strategies of exoticizing and assimilating described above posit both relative distance to and degrees of kinship with other cultures. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's consideration of questions of detachment and engagement also addresses whether the audience is invited to participate with the "other" as coeval or not.11

Dawson Munjeri's paper on the national museums of Zimbabwe presents a case of denial of coevalness in its most extreme form. Munjeri describes the situation inherited by the Zimbabwean museums at independence. Indigenous African cultures had been obliterated from the museum record by a political process that had its effects not so much through the assertion of values as through the setting of priorities. This has a familiar ring; the colonial fate of Zimbabwe's cultures is not unlike the fate of contemporary ethnographic museums, described above. The dilemma faced by the national museums is poignant. Their first task is collecting and reconstructing what has been passed over in silence. The second task is for them to define how they will insert themselves into the process of defining national identity. In the 1960s, museums in many newly independent African states were not allowed to exhibit indigenous cultures, as new nations were striving to fashion national culture and identity out of exceedingly diverse cultural groups, languages, and histories. Their initial solution was to attempt to build national institutions that would act as melting pots, to use an American metaphor. Zimbabwe achieved independence twenty years later, as African nations were coming to realize that melting-pot cultures are neither achievable nor desirable. Whether they will be able to transcend the politics of representation that set up such polar categories as traditional versus modern, poor versus developed, and scientific versus custom-bound remains to be seen. At the least, they have the dubious privilege of having had colonial experience firsthand and knowing how colonial culture defines even the most intimate details of everyday life.

Kenneth Hudson notes the sorry state of most ethnographic museums and attributes their lack of influence to a fundamental limit on how they can represent the conditions under which the people of Third World societies live. Hudson takes a strict materialist perspective and argues that the exhibiting process is simply unable to convey the sensuous experience of living under different environmental conditions and often material deprivation. From his point of view ethnographic museums are not capable of becoming museums of influence, museums that serve as models for others.12 Hudson's paper generated a lively discussion at the conference, several people contending that the limitations he sees as specific to ethnographic museums are endemic in all forms of representation.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Kenneth Hudson may have written the most opposed papers in the volume. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett would assert that Hudson's strictures derive from an essentially in-situ view of the role of exhibition in presenting the world, while Hudson might counter that the moral task of exhibiting culture imposes limits on the story one is able to tell. One issue highlighted by the debate over Hudson's paper, but found throughout the entire conference, is that the solutions museums find to the problems of exhibiting culture are profoundly affected by the genre of museum as much as by the overt content of the exhibition. The different styles and strategies of exhibiting discussed in this section are not used equally by all genres of museums. The next task may
be to examine systematically how the history of museums relates to the history of exhibiting culture and to the anthropology of the imaginary. This is a task that has just begun.

NOTES


2. I differ here from the account of how the “other” is constructed presented in Edward Said’s pathbreaking book Orientalism (New York: Pantheon, 1978). Said stresses the negation of the imputed qualities of the West, while I emphasize the mutual dependence of the tropes of similarity and difference in the construction of any image of the “other.” I use the term similarity to refer to what other authors call identity. Actually, both identity and similarity are asserted in the strategy of assimilation, discussed below.

3. My account of Rubin’s account of “primitive” artists should show why I prefer similarity to identity. Even assimilating strategies conclude that identity is modified by critical differences. Rubin’s “primitive” artists are identical to modern artists except for those features of modern art that they do not have. An initial assertion of identity concludes with a declaration of difference. Even Rubin’s decision to retain the term primitive gets him into trouble. How can he avoid the sense that so-called primitives are what we once were, our “contemporary ancestors,” whose only history is our past? Anthony Burgess defines primitivism as “the sense of a stumbling amateur striving towards a hard-won perfection and not quite achieving it” (“Native Ground,” Atlantic 261, no. 1 [Jan. 1988], 89). No matter how Rubin chooses to define his terms, his classificatory practices reveal the sense conveyed by Burgess’s definition.


5. The establishment of the National Museum of the American Indian at the Smithsonian does not solve this problem. The master narrative of the museums on the Mall still assert the dominion of nature over some cultures. The emphasis on fine art in the National Museum of African Art and in the collection of what will be the National Museum of the American Indian only serves to underscore how the aesthetics and history of the dominant culture define the missions of these museums.


10. The diorama is not identified as Ngorongoro crater. In keeping with the idealized and eternalized messages conveyed by dioramas, it has no geographical location.

11. See Johannes Fabian, Time and the Other (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983) for a consideration of how texts create or deny coevalness to the other through the uses of concepts of time.