

# Ethnographic Exhibitions Today

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During the last two decades, controversy has been growing over ethnographic exhibitions in museums. Ethnographic museums throughout the world, including MINPAKU, the National Museum of Ethnology to which I belong, have been accustomed to focusing on cultures extraneous to the country in which the museum is located. Museums have been likely to approach this task, however, from the vantage point of their own cultures. Recently, however, peoples of the world who have been the subjects of ethnographic exhibitions have become more aware of their own cultures and histories, and thus have begun to protest against this prevalent one-sided approach to exhibitions of ethnic cultures. Under the circumstances, museum curators are now trying a variety of new approaches. My task here is to sketch some of the movements under way in the field of ethnographic exhibitions.

## 1. The Show *Primitivism in 20th Century Art*

The 1984 exhibition *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinities of the Tribal and the Modern* at the museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York rekindled controversies surrounding museum practise. As the sub-title suggests, works of modern art and examples of what curators termed 'tribal art' that may have influenced modern art or that resembles it were juxtaposed in the exhibition so that formal or conceptual similarities -- what the curator of the show, William Rubin, called 'affinities' -- might be evoked. Masterpieces by many modern artists such as Picasso, Matisse, Giacometti, Moore and Richard Long, among others, were collected from art museums all over the world, while at the same time, relevant 'tribal art works', that is African, Oceanic, and American masks and sculptures, were brought from various ethnographic museums in Europe and America.

This large scale encounter of modern art with tribal art was intended to demonstrate the affinity between the two, and thus a universal humanity. However, the exhibition stirred up controversy concerning the Eurocentric ideas behind the show. Rubin's purpose was not so much to recreate a detailed account of the influence of one art tradition upon another, as it was to identify ways in which each European artist was 'influenceable', in other words, to point out the potential each artist possessed innately

to receive and be affected by non-Western Art. For example, while Rubin points out that Picasso was directly influenced in his creation of 'Guitar' by a Grebo mask, citing Picasso's own words, he also quotes Picasso's declaration that "African sculptures that hang around my studio are more witnesses than models" [Rubin ed.1984: 17]. Here, he identifies African works as objects which make legitimate the reforms of modern art, which were already under way.

MOMA's 'Primitivism' show tried to describe the history of modern art as the process of discovering the affinity between it and the tribal. Rubin believed that such a history would demonstrate the creative artistic potential common to all humanity, and thus help to overcome Eurocentric dispositions. Yet when he wrote in his catalogue the following sentences, he was not aware of the one-sided power relations implicit in his view:

That many today consider tribal sculpture to represent a major aspect of world art, that Fine Art Museums are increasingly devoting galleries, even entire wings to it, is a function of the triumph of vanguard art itself. We owe to the voyagers, colonials, and ethnologists the arrival of these objects in the West. But we owe primarily to the convictions of the pioneer modern artists their promotion from the rank of curiosities and artifacts to that of major art, indeed, to the status of art at all.  
[Rubin ed. 1984: 7]

The act of creating new culture by incorporating foreign products into ones own abounds everywhere in the world. Should we call it, however, 'a triumph'? It is not surprising that many writers criticized Rubin's assertion. Among them was James Clifford. According to Clifford, when the history of modern art is depicted as a process of rescuing the products of tribal art, the historical fact that most tribal societies were quickly brought under European political, economic and religious domination, and hence that the creativity of those societies was seized and appropriated by the West, is obscured:

Art is not universal, but a changing cultural category. The fact that rather abruptly, in the space of a few decades, a large class of non-Western artifacts came to be redefined as art is a taxonomic shift that requires critical historical discussion, not celebration. [Clifford 1988: 196]

Clifford makes a final judgement by saying, in conclusion:

Not having recognized this, the exhibition and the catalogue succeeds in demonstrating, not any essential affinity between the tribal and the modern or even a coherent modernist attitude towards the primitive, but rather the restless desire and power of the modern West to collect the world.[Clifford 1988: *ibid.*]

After Clifford's condemnation of Rubin's 'Primitivism' show, many other critics joined the debate.

Perhaps the most important achievement of the exhibition was to assemble so many works of Western and non-Western art from art as well as ethnographic museums, thereby expanding the discussion of primitivism, which until then had been a subject of treatment only within the art world, to now include anthropologists and historians, thereby elevating the discussion to a reconsideration of modernism itself. In fact, one of the most important contributions that mark the show, is that it fuelled the positive process of coming to clear terms with the preconceived frameworks inherent in the distinction between art museums and ethnographic museums. For example, why is it that while creators of the works displayed in art museums are regarded as individual geniuses and so indicated, the individuality of those who created the works in an ethnographic museum is completely ignored, the only specificity being the indication of tribe and locality on the label? Why is it that one always talks of modernism in the West, while Third World modernism, which developed simultaneously in the Third World, has been diminished by the developed world's focus on only the traditional aspects of non-Western cultures? The strategy of the 'Primitivism' show was to juxtapose Western with non-Western works of art, that is, works from art museums with artifacts from ethnographic museums. In doing so, the exhibition revealed the heretofore silent and hallowed assumptions about differences between the 'civilized' and the 'primitive,' the self and 'the other' -- that the self is too complex to be generalized, while 'the other' is simple and capable of being generalized.

As a result, the 'Primitivism' show promoted a more self-conscious use of language in exhibitions. Since then, various alternative display agendas have been presented. In the sense that it led to these new movements, the *Primitivism in 20th Century Art* show was more than an art exhibition. Indeed it was an important event for art in the final decades of the twentieth century.

## **2. Exhibitions on Global Modernism**

Among the various alternative display strategies promoted by the 'Primitivism' show is revisionist representation, which focuses on Third World modernism, or more

precisely, global modernism. The 1989 exhibition *Magiciens de la terre*, held at the Pompidou Center in Paris can be called a pioneering exhibition in this field. Jean-Hubert Martin, the curator of the exhibition, remarked to me that he planned the exhibition as an answer to the issues raised by the 'Primitivism' show.

In the *Magiciens de la terre* exhibition, 100 artists were selected from all over the world. Together with the works of British artist Richard Long, and American artist Barbara Cruger, a Gereade dancing mask by Dossou Amidou from Benin, coffins in the form of a Mercedes motorcar by Kane Kwei from Ghana, and bark paintings made by Nera Jambruk from Papua New Guinea were on display. Four artists from Japan participated: Tatsuo Kawaguchi, On Kawara, Tatsuo Miyajima, and Hiroshi Teshigawara. The exhibition treated the creator of each work, Western or non-Western, as an individual with his/her own name on the labels. Artifacts from ethnographic museums and art works from art museums were treated in the same way. The fact that Martin used the term 'magicians' instead of 'artists' suggests his intention to relativize the concept of 'art'. *Magiciens de la terre* was an epoch-making exhibition of contemporary arts co-ordinated from a global point of view. Even in this exhibition, however, there was a shortcoming. While many works from the West showed the artists' interest in exotic cultures, most of the works of non-Western artists were still closely connected with traditional culture and religion. Of course, many paintings and sculptures are connected with traditional culture and religion in Europe. But such works were not included in this exhibition. Again, works of African artists who were trained in Western art schools and academies were not on display in the exhibition either. By and large, the composition of 100 artists disclosed the stereotyped distinction between the vanguard West and the traditional non-West, the open self and the closed other. By pointing out these pitfalls, some writers criticized the exhibition as a form of neo-colonialism which re-labelled non-Western arts as 'primitive'.

In spite of these critiques, however, *Magiciens de la terre* created a growing interest in contemporary art in the Third World. In 1991, at the center for African Art in New York, an exhibition opened called *Africa Explores*. Susan Vogel, the Director of the center, said "in some respects this exhibition is an answer to *Magiciens de la terre*" [Vogel ed. 1991:12], and characterized her exhibition as an attempt to underscore the importance of placing contemporary African art in the context of African art, history, and culture.

The exhibition outlined five major strains of art that can be found in sub-Saharan Africa today: traditional art (a village based art that continues an old form or an old function, or both), new functional art (communal art made for multiethnic groups for new purposes and ideologies), urban art (either commercial paintings made

for small businesses or 'art to look at' for urban workers and Europeans), international art (art made by academically trained artists), and extinct art (traditional art that has gone out of use but continues to inspire contemporary artists and to symbolize national heritage and unity). As the terms suggest, these categories overlap and are sometimes even confusing. Since too many objects were included without clear categorization, the audience did not easily understand the scenario of the exhibition. However, the exhibition was important because it demonstrated that traditional art was never static and did not die on contact with the West, but that it coexists with modern culture that is also identifiably African.

Ethnographic museums are also trying new approaches to global modernism. The 1993 exhibition 'Paradise: portraying the New Guinea Highlands' which was held at the Museum of Mankind in London should be noted in this context. It reconstructed a Highland trade store with a corrugated iron roof. Goods on display on the shelves in the store clearly show how firmly the New Guinea highlands, though one of remotest area from Western culture, is incorporated into the modern world system. Traditional shields incorporating modern designs also tell us the same story. Here the act of exhibiting does not remain transparent or neutral. At the end of the gallery there was a big panel entitled 'The Making of the Exhibition' which showed the process of collecting in the field with the assistance of the *Wahgi* people, as well as their participation in the process of exhibiting in London. In one of the photos on the panel, we can see Michael O'Hanlon, the curator of the exhibition, putting the objects on display.

Alfred Gell voiced his appreciation of the exhibition by saying: "Paradise" is an ethno historical exhibition with a clear narrative thread, rather than a display of Art." [Gell 1993: 9] James Clifford also commented: "Here, change in the New Guinea Highlands is not portrayed on a before/after axis, with a traditional baseline preceding the arrival of outside influences. Rather we are thrown into the midst of transformations." [Clifford 1997:154]

A major problem with this exhibition was that though the exhibition focused on a particular people, there was no channel through which the people could represent themselves. *Wahgi* people were not involved in the exhibition program at all. Clifford also pointed out this problem by saying that one was struck by the absence of *Wahgi* input, whether directly or indirectly. Needless to say, one exhibition cannot fulfil all requirements. At least the 'Paradise' exhibition was an important step toward the historicization of ethnographic exhibitions.

### 3. Reflexive Representation

Another current exhibition option is reflexive representation, which problematizes the politics of representation itself. In 1989, the Center for African Art in New York sponsored a challenging exhibition, *Art/Artifacts: African Art in Anthropology Collections*. The exhibition presented a series of galleries depicting different ways of displaying African Art: an 18th Century Curiosity Room, a Natural History Museum Diorama, an Art Museum and Contemporary Art Gallery. The audience saw how a bundle of hunting nets could become an art object in the setting of an art gallery. This exhibition demonstrated that an exhibition is not a means of objective representation, but a means of creating meaning or attaching new meaning to objects.

The 1989 exhibition *Into the Heart of Africa* held at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, Canada, was based on a concept similar to the 'Art/artifact' exhibition, but instead sparked renewed political controversy. The exhibition aimed to represent the contexts in which the ROM has acquired its collections. The installation included a military gallery exhibiting objects collected by Canadian military officers, a missionary gallery including missionary propaganda and objects donated by missionaries, and a gallery demonstrating contemporary cultural events with storytellers, dance groups, and films [Jones 1993:210]. The missionary gallery displayed a map entitled 'Dark Africa' in which Christianized areas were painted in white and unchristianized areas in black. In the military gallery, a picture from a 19th century journal was exhibited. It showed a horse-riding British soldier stabbing a Zulu warrior through his shield. The curator of the exhibition, Jeanne Cannizzo, had presented these materials with the purpose of criticizing colonialism. However, the show created a storm of controversy; a boycott, a riot, and the refusal of other museums to take the travelling exhibition. Critics asserted that the exhibition fuelled and perpetuated racist stereotypes.

The 1997 exhibition at the National Museum of Ethnology (Osaka), *Images of Other Cultures* which I curated, is another example of a reflexive exhibition. By means of this exhibition, which presented a number of objects mainly from the British Museum and the National Museum of Ethnology, we tried to trace the 'entanglement of gazes' as it has occurred in modern times, by which I mean how the West, Africa, Oceania, and Japan have seen one another. To some people, this may have seemed an unusual combination. Africa and Oceania have often been described in terms of two contrasting images--as Wilderness or as Paradise. Cultures in these two areas have been regarded as 'alien,' and the farthest removed from the culture of the West. It is from these regions that, commonly, ethnologists, anthropologists, and ethnographic museums

have collected objects and information.

On reflection, Japan is similar to Africa and Oceania in having been seen by the West as an 'alien' culture. However, the Japanese have come to see themselves as part of the Western world and they have adopted a Western point of view toward other cultures, regarding them as exotic or alien. The exhibition was an attempt to shed some light on the Japanese view of 'other cultures,' as well as to gain awareness of the gaze we direct at others. The point of departure of this investigative exhibition was a reproduction of the ethnographic gallery of the British Museum as it was in 1910, represented with artifacts from Africa, Oceania and Japan. While the initial room showed how the West looked at other cultures, the second room presented aspects of other cultures from which the West deliberately averted its eyes. Presented here were the new cultures created in Africa, Oceania and Japan by incorporating Western elements. These two rooms represented an attempt to reassess the cultures of Africa, Oceania, and Japan as cultures which have both observed the West and been observed by it. In the third room, we traced how Japan has adopted a Western view of African and Oceanic cultures as its own, through a variety of media such as newspaper reporting, books, cartoons, films, and television productions. The last room, number 4, was entitled 'Border Crossing Cultures Today.' While the peoples of the world share many of the same cultural elements, at the same time they are creating individualized cultures. This is an essential characteristic of the present era. In this last room, we introduced hybrid art forms to represent this. Kiosks from Africa, Oceania, Europe and Japan were also displayed as symbols of globally shared cultural elements. As a whole, we tried to make ourselves more fully aware that we all co-exist in the present world, and that we have a shared future.

In this exhibition, as in the *Into the Heart of Africa* exhibition, we exhibited several materials and objects, which might have revitalized old stereotypes of other cultures. A reflexive exhibition, which tries to reconsider previous stereotypes, can easily be seen as a re-affirmation of stereotypes or prejudice. Yet, verbal and material representations of prejudice, which was once common in different historical periods, provide evidence and testimony of the same. Unless we confront the representations of prejudice head-on, we cannot expect to overcome stereotypes. What is most important is to place objects containing stereotypical images in a wider, but clearly recognizable context that will allow reconsideration. Then, even an object which shows such a stereotyped image can be understood as something from which we can take a lesson for the future.

#### 4. Dialogical Approach

Attempts to reconsider the politics of representation promote a dialogical approach, which may take the form of joint exhibitions organized by those exhibiting and those exhibited. It is now common for museums to have close collaborative relationships with the people who are represented in exhibitions.

One of the pioneering exhibitions of this sort is the 1986 exhibition at the Museum of Mankind in London called *Madagascar: Island of Ancestors*. This exhibition was put together from the historical collection of the University Museum in Antananarivo and the contemporary ethnographic collection of the Museum of Mankind. The plan for the exhibition was made jointly by the two museums. The exhibition travelled from London to New York, and then to Antananarivo. In each venue, curators of the two museums worked together to mount the exhibition.

Another example is the 1985 exhibition *Te Maori: Art from New Zealand Collections*, which opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and travelled to several cities in the States. To export Maori cultural properties, the organizers consulted Maori communities. Maori people agreed, and their representatives attended each opening ceremony and performed traditional rituals in front of their ancestors' treasures which they call *taonga*. Paora Tapsel said that through those rituals, Maori arts were inspired with new life and once again became Maori *taonga*. [Tapsel 1996:31-33] The occasion called for a clear realization that a museum's collections did not belong solely to the museum, but were still in the hands of the original owners.

#### 5. Self-representation

Involvement of the peoples who are the subjects of ethnographic exhibitions has promoted their awareness of their own cultures and histories. Now there is a vigorous movement in the Americas, in Asia, Africa, and Oceania, to build ethnographic museums to present on-site culture rather than some sort of exotic 'other' culture. There is a movement to return the rights of cultural representation to the owners of the culture. A typical example is the New Zealand Museum. After the 'Te Maori' exhibition, Maori people more fully recognized the importance of their cultural properties and became more and more interested in the way they were represented in museums. Since then, they have been seeking methods of controlling their cultural properties by themselves. The Museum of New Zealand /*Te Papa Tongarewa* is the result of this movement. The museum is said to be a 'bicultural museum,' run jointly by

peoples of European as well as Maori origin. In establishing this museum, Maori people have finally obtained the right to maintain and control their own taonga.

Not only in New Zealand, but also in many other regions of the world, construction of museums dedicated to specific ethnic groups or kingdoms are under way. This movement is welcome, and ought to be promoted further. However, it should be noted here that self-representation does not settle the question of who has the right to represent a culture which is not of their own making. No group of human beings is uniform. There is a variety of images in culture which vary according to age, sex, social status, and region. Which view should represent the whole community? In the usual case, images of in-site culture held by the elite or the curators are chosen for display. I propose that in such cases, the question of Who has the right to represent a culture has not yet been solved. As Jan Pieterse pointed out, an attempt at self-representation only shifts the question from the intercultural to the intracultural sphere. [Pieterse 1997] In the end, we cannot be free from issues of power and the politics of representation as long as we engage in mounting an exhibition.

## **Conclusion**

I have pointed out several new approaches in the field of cultural exhibitions since the 1980s. Among them are revisionist representation, which focuses on Third World modernism, and reflexive representation, which problematizes the politics of representation itself. Self-representation, which is representation by the owners of the culture themselves, is also an option. A further option is a dialogical approach which may take the form of a joint exhibition organized by those exhibiting and those exhibited.

It goes without saying that our acts of exhibiting 'other' cultures can not be freed from the bonds imposed on it by our own way of thinking. It is crucial for ethnographic exhibitions today is to look into the stereotypes which govern our images of others as well as to develop dialogical relationships with those who are exhibited. Since the ethnographic museum is engaged in communication between different cultures as its main activity, it can model itself only on the most basic mode of communication, and that is the personal communication with the other, through which we can grasp the concepts of the other and the self simultaneously.

According to the art historian Duncan Cameron, museums have two choices open to them, to become either a temple or a forum. The museum as temple is a place where people come to worship 'treasures' with pre-established value. The museum as forum is a place where people can encounter an unknown, which generates discussion

and debate. Cameron also writes: "The forum is where the battles are fought. The temple is where the victors rest. The former is process, the latter is product." [Cameron 1974: 199]

It is almost certain that the ethnographic museum will increasingly be required to play the forum role, a role in which the participants are not only the exhibitor and the viewers, but also the living representatives of the culture which is on exhibition.

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