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My Others' Others Other: the limits of Museum Ethnography⁽¹⁾

Anthony Alan Shelton

University of Sussex / Horniman Museum, London.

"...the history of museology has been a history of the various attempts to deny the heterogeneity of the museum, to reduce it to a homogenous system or series." (2)

Douglas Crimp.

THE PAPER IS SITUATED BETWEEN DOUGLAS CRIMP'S astute observation above and Frederick Bohrer's exhortation that: "The student of exoticism must necessarily be a connoisseur of discontinuity"(3). Museum ethnography, like anthropology itself, is based on the premises of discontinuity and difference; the discontinuity between consciousness and some sort of external reality and the attendant division between subject and object as well as the whole series of differences that such discontinuities engender between the individual and society and the 'I' and the 'other'. 'Otherness' has become an increasingly inflated term. Even in the late 19th century, the category had been extended outside the jurisdiction of non-western cultures to include the large section of rural British inhabitants, often of Celtic origin, who still harboured 'quaint customs', which folklorists eagerly sought to trace back to antiquity. Taking on a class-based dimension, 'otherness' referred to the 'savage' within European culture as well as the 'pagan' races beyond its frontiers⁽⁴⁾. By the mid 20th century, the category became further extended in George Steiner's work, and later that of Pierre Bourdieu and Chris Searle for example, to include even the relationship between men and women and

the adults and children belonging to a particular speech community. The basis on which this 'other' has been defined and used needs to be subjected to some measure of scepticism; the very term 'other' proving remarkably elusive and phantasmagoric until in the works of theorists like Paul Ricoeur⁽⁵⁾ it has redoubled its trajectory back onto our own fragmented consciousness to make us 'other' to ourselves. Anthropological discourse therefore becomes twice removed as a reflection of my 'others' discourse on one among many 'others' of a fragmented 'otherly' subject.

By failing to question the epistemological basis of such a view of the world and ignoring the sustained self-criticism that anthropology itself has undergone in the past two decades, museum ethnography has lost much of its interpretative conviction. The discipline continues to equate material objects with specific cultures whose existences it objectifies by reference to their defined geographical territories under specific political jurisdictions. The classification of styles of material culture with specific ethnic identities, defined by local geography and political administration, often ignores the conditions of contemporary cultural productions which are sited at the interstices of societies and reflect far more complex relationships between competing productive and ideological strategies which constantly re-negotiate their makers' own histories and identities, sometimes independently of their ethnic or nation-state affiliations. The discipline is therefore, at best, ill-equipped to represent many groups like Santamarina's Guerrerenses⁽⁶⁾, indigenous peasants from one of Mexico's poorest and most isolated states, who work in Montreal and communicate in a mixture of Spanish, Otomi, and a pastiche of Quebecois French and American English or the sign board painters of Nairobi⁽⁷⁾ brought-up in the countryside as Kikuyu or Luo, but eking out an existence as brokers of global imagery in their country's metropolis. Museum ethnography is even less equipped to provide the apparatus to visualise contemporary Black culture, not by nationhood or tribal affiliation, but according to a tri-continental culture developed over many centuries from the experience of slavery, forced settlement, re-settlement and travel⁽⁸⁾. Cities and seas are the sites of cultural productions (historical, material, narrative, oral and musical), which are not constrained or reducible to containment by national or tribal divisions but which offer possibilities of creative and open-ended strategies and responses to a world capitalist system. The cultural expressions they nurture reflect identities not based

on any necessary continuous territorial, genealogical, historical or political claims or affiliations, but on the exaggerated discontinuity and fragmentation experienced unequally within a singular global history. It is no wonder then, that museum displays in the UK, Belgium, Germany and elsewhere, evoke an almost unrecognisable picture of the people they purport to represent. The functionalist displays of Exeter, Ipswich and Glasgow and the contextual display genre pioneered by the Museum of Mankind in London and the Museum voor Volkerkunde in Leiden, just as much as the aestheticised displays of Berlin, Dresden, Antwerp or Norwich's Sainsbury Centre for the Visual Arts, offer nothing less than a radical recontextualisation of culture situated within well rehearsed western discourses. With few exceptions, ethnographic museums place the peoples of the world in disconnected existences which avoids perceiving them as responding, each from their unique experiences determined by their position in global society, to a dominant common western social 'reality'.

The methodological presuppositions that are fundamental to anthropological practices have deep philosophical roots. Philosophy has long held a dichotomous view of human nature. Aristotle contrasted the automaton-like body with the driving force of the soul, later incorporated, by St Augustine, as a central dogma of western theology. With Descartes the mechanical-like body was rethought as an organism which independent of thought was devoid of its own self-awareness. Thought was the precondition of consciousness. For Kant, the mind entombed in the body was both maker and receptor of experiential knowledge, but was nevertheless alienated from the transcendental source of the a-priori categories of time and space which made such knowledge intelligible. In the 20th century, Bergson's intuitionism and Husserl or Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology continued this line of thought on the dichotomous body by basing their method on the presupposition of a radical break between experience of the world and its articulation in consciousness.

The binary epistème, responsible for the splitting of the human constitution into the self and external reality, so prevalent in western thought, necessarily leads to self-estrangement and alienation. Following the mind/body split, alienation has been viewed in two different ways; metaphysical alienation, in other words, the alienation of the self from the self or the alienation of self from society manifested in alienation

from the means of production. In the first condition, alienation is the product of our existence in the world. For Kant, for example, the separation of the individual's experience of the world and his or her awareness that there is little hope of penetrating the transcendental pre-conditions of that knowledge, alienates the individual from any empirical or rational guarantors of truth or criteria for ethical judgement. For Marx, on the other hand, alienation is only a temporary and specific existential condition; a product of the social and economic organisation of capital which separates the product of labour from the labourer. Alienation then becomes a consequence of a binary episteme which isolates a fragmented self from the totality of the world which it distinguishes as 'other'. It is either the distance between the expressive or representational capacity of language and the 'objective' existence of the signified or an historically specific ideological cloaking effect of language, that renders part of existence as 'other'. The use anthropology has made of language as a central analogy for understanding such diverse areas of study as exchange, symbols, art, even music, has extensively reproduced 'otherness' as an alienatory effect of its discourse.

The modern idea of the naturalised person, the product of the Enlightenment that was so essential to anthropological thought, viewed the individual as a rational creator in a natural world(9). Such a formulation led to secular empiricism's model of individuals and nature being governed by identical and universal laws whose workings can be verified by observation. In its most uncompromising formulation, expressed in the work of John Stuart Mill, a founding father of modern sociology, "human beings in society have no properties but those that are derived from and may be resolved into the laws of the individual man"(10) .Human development is determined by the laws of character formation which are part of universal laws of human nature(11). Individuals are characterised by their possession of rationality and it is their consciousness of this rationality that permits mastery over nature, that allows us to change our culture and to fashion and re-invent ourselves(12). In distinguishing ourselves and our own culture from a speculatively defined 'other', and sometimes even having doubted the rationality of the shadow thus constructed, anthropology has had to acknowledge its own complicity in denying other cultures three characteristic traits of humanity, namely science, history and identity.

This view of the person is, of course itself, historically and culturally specific to Enlightenment thought and has already begun its inevitable demise. Michel Foucault, in the last paragraph of *The Order of Things* anticipated the end of 'man' with these words:

"As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end. If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared, if same event of which we can at the moment do no more than sense the possibility-without knowing either what its form will be or what it promises - were to cause them to crumble, as the ground of Classical thought did, at the end of the 18th century, then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea⁽¹³⁾.

It has been twenty four years between Foucault's prophecy and its proclamation by Jean Baudrillard in The Transparency of Evil (1990). Within this period our concept of human nature has undergone revolutionary changes, replacing Mill's naturalised model of human beings with another based on cybernetics which questions humanism's most cherished precepts. 'Telecomputer Man', forms an integrated circuit with machines; "they are so many transparent prostheses, integrated into the body to the point of being almost part of its genetic makeup.... Thanks to the machinery of the virtual, all your problems are over! You are no longer either subject or object, no longer either free or alienated - and no longer either one or the other: you are the same, and enraptured by the commutations of the sameness. We have left the hell of other people for the ecstasy of the same, the purgatory of otherness for the artificial paradises of identity"(14). The human body itself has been critically reappraised as an idealised construct formulated by medical generalisations on a normative condition of physical existence, from which pathologies can be mapped (15). Any attempt at privileging medical or any other scientific discourse has been repudiated by Roland Barthes who, by negating the distinction between denotation and connotation has collapsed the very standard on which objective statements could be anchored into an infinite series of epistemologically identical distinctions. Sameness and difference have emerged as a central subject of contentious debate, with critics like Stuart Hall (16) and Gilane Tawadros⁽¹⁷⁾ acknowledging the cultural relativity they inevitably give to questions of identity and Gayatri Spivak and Sarat Maharaj(18) debating whether hybridity represents a drift towards sameness or constitutes an interdependent term whose origins are at the interface between projects of cultural translation and their 'untranslatable' residues.

Given such radical changes in the conception of human nature and culture which underlie older social sciences, curators can no longer escape culpability for their practices by protesting the irrelevancy of the theorisation of such new and unsettling conditions⁽¹⁹⁾. Curators have an incumbent responsibility to engage in such debates that affect their own practices. This brings the need for much greater awareness of works that treat the contemporary epistemological fractures of their subjects; works like Jean-François Lyotard's The Post-modern Condition. A Report on Knowledge, Jean Baudrillard's The Political Economy of the Sign, Michael Taussig's Mimesis and Alterity and Johanne Fabian's Time and the Other; methodological correctives such as Hommi Bhaba's The Location of Culture, and moral stories like Edward Said's Orientalism, Patrick Brantlingerts Imperial Gothic, Mary Louise Pratt's Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation and Anne McClintock's Imperial Leather. Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context, and of particular significance, given the potentially disastrous political course such unsettling intellectual insecurity implies, Guy Debord's The Society of the Spectacle and its sequel, Comments on the Society of the Spectacle.

Once anthropology could constitute its object of study by the privileged power of the practitioner who labelled 'otherness', without grounding the discursive practice of naming firmly within the same intellectual milieu of the language game one has assumed. It was, and is, not non-western peoples who define themselves as 'other', but we ourselves through our objectification of foreign cultures and deviant individuals and subcultures within the west. 'Otherness', some have argued (20), is composed of the alterity that our nostalgia desires to encounter and recognise in distant cultures because it has been excluded by capitalism from our own direct experiences. One is here mindful of the many societies that have re-formulated their cultural history to comply with the perceived expectations of those who define the nature of 'otherness'; Haida argillite carvers of the Northwest American coast who reinvented styles and iconography for western traders, collectors and curators; the Nahua communities of the states of Guerrero and

Morelos, who resurrected pre-Columbian motifs for the designs of their masks and invented correspondingly exotic dance dramas to provide their ideological glosses⁽²¹⁾. The inhabitants of the Purepecha village of Ocumicho in the Mexican state of Michoacan had (by the late 1970s when I began fieldwork in Mexico) constructed a whole corpus of legends around the figure of the Devil, who, it was claimed, was buried under a nearby mountain, to legitimate the production and animate the sale of folk pottery which depicted the various stories relating to him. In other places some groups within dominant or foreign cultures have emerged as brokers of art forms and meanings: the 19th and early 20th century weavers of the Mexican city of Saltillo who produced Navajo blankets, contemporary Navajo factories that carve Hopi katcinas, Zapotec weavers from the Mexican town of Teotitlan del Valle who reproduce the work of early 20th century painters for the Japanese market. More dramatically still, and infinitely more successful in their scale of organisation, versatility and marketing are the members of those Balinese communities who interpret and rework the varied art styles of African and North American masks and sculptures and early American curios for sale to western decorative art markets.

Western constructions of 'otherness' have furthermore been culturally re-inscribed by groups to create a difference that marks them off from others. Regardless of whether one discusses the ready use to which restituted collections such as potlatch items have been put to reformulate political and status distinctions between Kwakwaka'wakw groups⁽²²⁾, the religious and ceremonial revivalism aided by the canonisation of Boas's historical texts on Northwest Coast peoples, or the intervention of government sponsored agencies among people like the Gogodala of the Papuan Gulf⁽²³⁾, difference has been re-inscribed in the terms of adopted western texts, discourses and, it might be argued fantasies. As Fabian⁽²⁴⁾ reminds us "... the history of cultures and social formations is unintelligible except in relation to a history of value orientations, value ideals, goods values, value responses, and value judgements, and their objectification, interplay and transformations".

No longer can museum ethnography lay uncontested claim to a privileged position through which it effects the classification of those within and outside the boundaries it tries so rigorously to draw. Once the distinct ontological status of the western subject 'I' is dissolved, there

is no comparable term with which to oppose and define 'otherness'. The series of differences collapses in on itself. Johannes Fabian has attributed the ideological effect which removes anthropologists from their subject (re-presented in anthropological discourse as object), to a western homogenising trans-subjective concept of time which distances subjects from our felt experiences of humanity. Removed both temporally and spatially, subjects become treated as objects and the opposition between 'them' and 'us' becomes mediated by the privileged observation of the scientist. Such difference, necessary for the very foundations of anthropology's supposedly objective status, underpins what Fabian calls a 'political cosmology' entrusted with patrolling the frontiers of western culture; "it has always been a Grenzwissenschaft, concerned with boundaries: those of one race against another, those between one culture and another, and finally those between culture and nature"(25). By founding its method partly through reducing indigenous languages to tools, by focusing on the use of visual devices like maps, charts, diagrams and tables to prepare a visual manifestation of a summary empiricism and by privileging the anthropologist's position as a kind of panoptic witness, anthropology has created a pseudo-science that museum ethnography follows when it omits other dimensions of experience.

"No provision seems to be made for the beat of drums or the blaring of bar music that keeps you awake at night; none for the strange texture and taste of food, or the smells and the stench. How does method deal with the hours of waiting, with maladroitness and gaffes due to confusion or bad timing? Where dues it put the frustrations caused by diffidence and intransigence, where the joys of purposeless chatter and conviviality? Often all this is written off as the "human side" of our scientific activity. Method is expected to yield objective knowledge by filtering out experiential "noise" thought to impinge on the quality of information. But what makes a (reported) sight more objective than a (reported) sound, smell, or taste? Our bias for one and against the other is a matter of cultural choice rather than universal validity" (26).

Trinh T. Minh-ha who exposes the hypocrisy of an ethnographic method which, rightly or wrongly, she identifies with male exercise of power, expresses her similar frustration with the continual western monopoly over the terms in which inter-cultural encounters are phrased.

"What I resent most, however, is not his inheritance of a power he so often disclaims, disengaging himself from a system he carries with him, but his ear, eye, and pen, which record in his language while pretending to speak through mine, on my behalf" (27).

Museum ethnography, like many other disciplines, continues to be based on positivist epistemological pre-suppositions. "One of the conceits of anthropology lies in its positivist dream of a neutralised language that strips off all its singularity to become nature's exact, unmisted reflection"(28). Scientific method is defined as exterior to, and independent of, human consciousness. It becomes itself a transcendental 'other' whose truths are independent of the subject. Frederic Jameson⁽²⁹⁾ clarifies such a theory of knowledge as "an essentially realistic epistemology which conceives of representation as the reproduction for subjectivity of an objectivity that lies outside it projects a mirror theory of knowledge and art, whose fundamental evaluative categories are those of adequacy, accuracy, and truth itself". Anthropology and museum ethnography have attempted to uphold the liberal ideals of judgement-free relativism while maintaining a positivist or rationalist epistemology which supports the problematic dualism essential to guaranteeing the discipline's methodological privileges. The collapsing inwards, on the one hand of subjectivity itself and on the other, of the system of differences that separates it from the object of perceptual thought has serious implications for the very future of ethnographic method. Nevertheless, it remains unclear how the conditions or properties of any exterior reality can unconditionally and incontestably ever be known when, without God or Science, our knowledge and perceptions are constrained by our subjective consciousness. It is this late 20th century netherspace of ever receding clarity, 'values' and 'certainty' that Baudrillard tries to capture within the terms of his fourth simulacra

"At the fourth, the fractal ... stage there is no longer any equivalence, whether natural or general. Properly speaking there is now no law of value, merely a sort of epidemic of value, a sort of metastasis of value, a haphazard proliferation and dispersal of value. Indeed, we should no longer speak of 'value ' at all, for this kind of propagation or chain reaction makes all valuation impossible.... it is ... impossible to make estimations between beautiful and ugly, true and false, or good and evil" (30).

The conditions of the present appear to promise only a pessimistic future infected by a total confusion of categories which can no longer

be put into hierarchical or binary orders or predicated on any assumed transcendental theory of truth or common good. 'Cool Memories' become the norm(31). With the decline in the authority of 'regimes of truth', how does any dialogue not only on multi-culturalism, but between different interest groups, perhaps even between the members of a family or one culture proceed? Consensus appears to be undermined, or at least can no longer be taken for granted. The idea of an ideal consensual community that social institutions have been designed to serve is disappearing, if it ever really existed, and with it any consensus on the management of representations within museums is also receding as a viable assumption (32). It is noteworthy that the modern theorists of community, Max Weber, Ferdinand Tonnies and Emile Durkheim, defined the term at that very moment of human history, when the social reality of their theoretical formulations was fast disappearing as a result of industrialisation and urbanisation. The formulation of such concepts may not, therefore, have been entirely bereft of nostalgia, if not romanticism.

By denying 'otherness', or by seeing it as an historical symptom of Enlightenment individualism, regardless of whether it is the 'otherness' of heroes or the 'otherness' of our deepest fears and anxieties, we forfeit our grasp on any criteria to privilege the rights of one group to represent another. Such a position harbours both undreamed of opportunities, but also dangers, opening new possibilities for the democratisation of museum spaces, as well as wielding the threat of the imposition of a naked, arbitrary absolute form of knowledge on museum representations. In such extreme contestations, the museum, stripped of the ideology of its natural rights to existence can no longer feign disinterestedness or indifference to the world around it. The other side to these new conditions, disappointing by present day expectations, is that the conflation of the 'I' with the 'other' and the contiguous mosaic of indices of difference creating a sameness of meaning, may disarm us from passing judgement on some of the most politically charged questions facing museum practices. The implications of such a position are immense.

On the issue of restitution, the erosion of consensus on ethical or truth criteria, brings into question the very basis on which any group can make convincing claims for the repatriation of human remains as has recently been witnessed by the legal and ethical controversies surrounding the identity, ownership and status of Kennewick Man, a 9,300 year old skeleton discovered in a mudbank along the Columbia River⁽³³⁾. Ownership and responsibility for the bones are contested between a First Nation people, the Umatilla, and scientists claiming that the remains represent the earliest evidence of a Caucasian presence on the American continent. With no consensus between the contesting parties on the significance of the find, the ethical responsibility for the bones, or acceptable criteria for ascertaining their identity, a legal battle has begun on the legitimate rights over the interpretation of American history, with protagonists variously arguing over a Caucasian, African or Amerindian origin of the continents first inhabitants. If the category of the 'human' and the criteria of a consensual community is problematised, the related legal and ethical rights and obligations enter a similar problematic status. The whole fabric of 'natural law' is thrown into dispute. The problem is already familiar to museum workers who in attempting to find community representatives as consultants for re-display projects frequently encounter the spurious condition of supposedly strong or coherent communities and authorities.

The post-modern malaise also infringes on questions surrounding the restitution of cultural property. Once the classical equation tying together the object and its meaning (value) has been made redundant, the significance of objects is opened to endless re-invention and negotiation. The iconic function of certain objects which charges them with significance and value incommensurate to their material existence can no longer be adequate in itself to justify their special status as harnessing nationalist or ethnic sentiment. Seen as historically contingent, the status of objects are revalued as relative. Furthermore, like the bronze horses of the Venetian cathedral of St Marcos, such objects may embody a whole archaeology of successive historical and mutually conflicting cultural significations as trophy, art, and metropolitan symbols. Objects, in post-modern theory participate in strategies not unlike words in Wittgensteinian language games in which the connections between individuals, communities or nations with symbols has only superficial and momentary significance in temporarily fixing essentially shifting concepts of identity. The meaning of imagery in the contemporary world, circulated from one culture to another through electronic technology and transnational publishing companies, has never been so promiscuous and indeterminate.

Together with the crises over the legal and ethical rights of now problematic 'sovereign' bodies, there is a crisis over the basis of the authority that controls the sites of authoritative textual or visual productions. This has already been affirmed and explored in what has become an exercise in institutional self-criticism by organisations like Lisbon's National Museum of Ethnography, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and the Museum of African Art, New York. Artefactos Melanésios (1988) confronted the problem by examining the relations between a system of objects, the indigenous meanings of its constituent parts, its documented understanding as it was collected by German ethnographers and its significance, as attested through its consecutive labelling, by Portuguese social scientists. The relationship between text and image was also explored in Boston's The Label Show (1992) which used sixty five individuals to write object labels, encouraged visitors to participate in the same exercise, and freely exchanged labels between objects. Art/ Artefact (1987), held at the Museum of African Art, moved away from the interrogation of the relationship between texts and images, to the strategic framing of objects themselves and the manipulation of their connotative abilities. Taken together, these and other institutional experiments on the conditions and destabilisation of the 'metaphysics of presence', have helped provide an alternative view of museums as 'heterotopic sites'. Such examples, nevertheless remain few and far between, with most museum authorities resolute in upholding the grand metanarratives whose tatters can still guarantee the exclusivity of homogenous systems and series⁽³⁴⁾. In the recent, sometimes acrimonious debates within the Royal Academy as to whether contemporary art should be admitted into the institution, academicians revealed an uncompromising resilience which even censored contemporary works from the otherwise successful exhibition Africa: Art of a Continent. Modern works from the Afro-Caribbean, Native American, Australian or Asian world, having fallen between the interstices of traditional art gallery and the ethnographic museum, have a precarious and intermittent existence only in a handful of less orthodox institutions such as the Whitechapel Gallery, originally established to attract culturally disenfranchised segments of the capital's population, the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, or the ethnography museums of Rotterdam and Hamburg. The world after post-modernism allows only the battle of

sensibilities or the rule of pragmatism where previously there was recourse to an apparently judicious logic. Conversely, while it is customary for museums and art galleries in the United States, Britain and Australia to respect the wishes of indigenous peoples concerning display and/or restricted access to particular sacred items or human remains, by what criteria can such wishes be enforced where similar material like Hopi Katcina masks, for example, remain in Belgium museums and elsewhere⁽³⁵⁾, on public display if such countries have different strategies with which they participate in an international language game?

Museum ethnography in the 1990s can no more afford to ignore the changing conditions of knowledge and the constitution of what it is to be human, than could academic anthropology in the 1 970s. Whereas the earlier crisis relating to the colonial origins of anthropology, and the possibility and limitations of translating and recognising potentially non-western logical systems when they are inevitably mediated by Aristotelian logic, apparently bypassed UK museum practitioners, the recent empowerment of subjects, once held to be the objects of such enquiry and presentation, together with the erosion of a community consensus over the significance of objects and knowledge, now places museum ethnography at the forefront of a critical debate to which it must respond or surrender its existence. The self-discovery that Paul Ricoeur envisaged when our confrontation with other cultures would bring with it the self realisation that we ourselves "are an other among others"(36), has in the thought of Baudrillard given rise to a shared concept of sameness in which 'otherness' becomes so many permutations of finely variegated differences. In this viral world, images are made, circulated and remade to appear in so many different narratives, each of which assigns them different meaning and value in a global economy of signs.

The demise of objective knowledge, nevertheless leaves intact the necessary and inescapable relationship between work and experience which returns us to Sartre's insistence on the determining importance of the moral action of the individual. It is ironic that Foucault, the critic of Sartre's humanism, returns us back to his fundamental principle that "man is condemned to be free" and must shoulder the heavy responsibility of his individual actions. In recent decades, it is not museums that

primarily have come under attack but their authority. If museums find themselves forced to relinquish the security of scientific method based on the gaze for the strategies of games played by the intellect, they can nevertheless, by their commitment to defined ethical practices uphold and demonstrate the virtues of their plays. In a time beyond good and evil, individuals, curators included, must reassert their independent scepticism and moral judgement even though their epistemic value and communal acquiescence is restricted within the language game in which they find themselves.

Intellectual openness cannot proceed independently of new political and institutional openings. Here, the problem of ethics asserts itself at the very centre of our existence, and one is unavoidably left with placing the burdensome responsibility of action firmly on the individual. Nevertheless, the gulf between actions predicated on the values of a local language game and those used by the infinitely more complex strategies performed in the international arena are daunting and may lead us to ask whether a new consensus is possible to enable an internationally acceptable criterion of practice to be agreed that lies beyond ethics and the language games in which they are inscribed? Both prudence and good faith would be compromised, by the contemporary standards of ethical language games, if curators were to place themselves in outright opposition to the resolutions passed by indigenous conferences such as, for example, the declarations of Chapultepec, Chicago and Barbados which established a consensus over the political responsibility of anthropologists and the rights of oppressed peoples in the Americas. Such guidelines might be extended by curators acknowledging ethical principles endorsed by organisations such as Indigenous Survival International, Amnesty International or the United Nations. While museums have a tortured relationship with the collecting and exhibition policies of their past, their responsibilities for their present actions are undeniable and, while some museums in Britain have active collecting, research and even exhibition projects with countries like Myanmar, curators would do well to distance themselves from all pariah regimes which have been widely condemned for their inhumanity and for whom their work might benefit. The debate on the relationship between anthropology and colonialism as well as the much advertised cases where published ethnographies have been used to locate and erase insurgents by hostile regimes(37), or

where studies of African carvings have been used as guides for looters of village treasures⁽³⁸⁾ are too common to permit museum ethnographers to limply insist on the innocence or neutrality of their practices.

A good injection of post-modernist theory into museum ethnography may not therefore, be any bad thing. To acknowledge that work is a performance within a field or language game is only dispiriting if we yearn for the surety of positivist knowledge and the authority that it can confer. Language games offer a kind of mythopoetic conveyance of signification. The exhibitions that emerge from them are provisional, individual and the criteria by which they are judged may be based on subjective appreciation, like a novel rather than a piece of engineering. The exhibition Fetishism (1995)(39) was a good example of what a work that examines the consecutive meanings given to a term can look like. The exhibition was divided into three sections which treated the European construction of African religion, the 'scientific' adoption of the term by psychoanalysis and the surrealist reading of it, and the influence of the Marxist and Freudian interpretations on contemporary art. By de-privileging Western historical and contemporary usages of the word (concept), the exhibition provided a different kind of multicultural display which acknowledged the role of the west not in its discovery or understanding of Africa, psychoanalysis or political economy, but in its invention and reproduction.

The institutionalisation of ethnic arts in museums of ethnography, circumscribed by one or other of the anthropological discourses already noted, and in western art galleries presented according to the tenets of a connoisseurial art history (museums of idealised 'others' and museums of ourselves idealised) are already being quietly undermined. To an extraordinary degree, the Royal Academy's presentation of *Africa Art of a Continent (1996)* used a display strategy whose many large, though oddly shaped, wall cases wore reminiscent of older style ethnographic displays. Furthermore, if the attempt to incorporate utilitarian objects, pots, weavings, beadwork, metal castings, etc. into the show was predominantly aimed at extending the category of the aesthetic object, the design strategy together with the non-figurative nature of such objects created a counter tension to impute a sense of the ethnographic over the art historical. Familiarity with the utilitarian functions of objects conjured-up the partial erasure of the difference between ourselves and

the discursively constructed 'other'. If such an effect was unintentional in the uncompromising connoisseurship of the Academy, the decision for the Museum of Mankind to host an exhibition on the works of the contemporary Nigerian sculptress, Sokari Douglas Camp to coincide with the Academy's show was a conscious corrective to the Academy's refusal to admit contemporary art into their exhibition. During the few months when these shows ran together the fine art academy and the ethnographic museum temporarily reversed their subject matters. Over the past few years, the Museum of Mankind has greatly diversified its exhibition genres, with Images of Africa: Emile Torday and the Art of the Congo, 1900-1909 (1990-2), erasing the traditional opposition between aestheticised and ethnographic exhibitions while exploring the colonial context of collecting in central Africa; Play and Display: Masquarades of Southern Nigeria (1995-6) combining historical ethnographic collections with the interpretations of a contemporary sculptress from the Delta region; and Rain: Native American Peoples of the Desert Southwest (1996-7), presenting mainly contemporary traditional art in a show curated by native American peoples.

In the five years since the completion of a survey which related British ethnographic displays to anthropological paradigms⁽⁴⁰⁾, museum presentations of non-western cultures have changed considerably. Most notably, functionalist style displays at Brighton and Manchester⁽⁴¹⁾ have been replaced by reflexive permanent exhibitions which focus on the construction of the collections. The comparativist exhibition at Aberdeen has similarly been replaced by another on ethnographic and archaeological collectors while a new display at the Lady Lever Art Gallery focuses on Lord Leverhulme as an ethnographic collector. The focus on collectors suggests the apparent emergence of a new genre of ethnographic display which it is to be hoped will not become so current that it crystallises into another paradigm that merely succeeds those earlier examples discussed in my 1992 paper. While Glasgow Museum has made only slight changes in its permanent ethnography gallery, the Service has opened a new museum of religion, St Mango's, which incorporates much ethnographic material and which contributes to the de-ghettoisation of non-western cultures in the museum space. Other museums - Liverpool, Exeter, Leeds and the Horniman are all planning major re-displays of their ethnographic collections for the near future.

Perhaps the most interesting idea, developed by Louise Tythacott for Liverpool Museum, is to re-display ethnography to retrace the 19th and 20th century routes of shipping companies that played an instrumental role in assembling the museum's collections. Presenting collection history in the context of colonialism and the wider social, economic and political forces which sought to reshape Liverpudlian identity in line with the idea of the classical imperial polis, at one and the same time, effectively re-configures ethnography within a wider cultural history that situates the local within the international. The Horniman's new galleries concepts also take note of new trends in critical theory for a new permanent re-display of their African collections. Curated by an international team of six curators drawn from Nigeria, Trinidad and the United Kingdom, the gallery will focus on providing a series of providential glimpses on African and African diosparic related cultures through the assemblage of collections that the history of western science, empire and caprice have bequeathed to the institution.

A good part of this work has its origins in the Cultures and Green programmes undertaken by the Ethnography Department of Brighton Museum between 1991-1995. Influenced by the success and innovative reputation of some medium sized continental museums such as Neuchatel's ethnographic museum and the Hildersheim Museum, Brighton's Department of Ethnography looked at how existing resources could be re-deployed between different arts and educational bodies in order to stimulate the growth of a previously moribund curatorial department. The Department established what where up until 1995, strong links with the University of Sussex, resulting in an extraordinarily successful and creative programme of work that gave rise to taught courses in Critical Museology and Non-Western Art and a new MA in Critical Museology. Students were encouraged to do historical research on ethnography collections, distinguished academics acted as curators for temporary exhibitions and contributed to a newly established occasional paper series⁽⁴²⁾ which sought to critically explore the problems and politics of museum representations. University facilities permitted the production of videos for exhibitions, bi-lingual text-panels, as well as supporting conferences⁽⁴³⁾. Students provided a constant critical backdrop in which to develop new permanent ethnographic galleries by their involvement in special seminars, surveys, historical research and the production of

a video⁽⁴⁴⁾ which documented the process of re-designing and curating a new gallery interspersed with interviews with public users, local politicians, and cultural critics. The momentum of the project attracted a generous donation to create a viable anthropology library and secured fixed term funding to establish the Green Centre for Non-Western Art and Culture with its own research and fieldwork programme, public events, lecture series and purchase budget.

This re-configured space between the academy and the museum encouraged the first experiment in a UK ethnography department to apply aspects of critical theory to a museum exhibition. The space given to ethnography was almost doubled, but was divided between two separate galleries. The Cultures Gallery, which opened in 1993, focused on a limited comparison of certain aspects of non-western and western cultures, using as its criteria active noun-verbs rather than descriptive institutional or abstract speculative categories in an attempt to avoid the use of 'real names' (exchange instead of economics, performance instead of ritual, worship rather than religion, conflict instead of warfare, feasting in place of ceremonies, association instead of secret societies)(45). The exhibition strove to de-exoticise the arbitrarily defined 'other' by comparing the motivations behind the use of things with those found in Europe, while aspiring to draw critical comment on our everyday appreciation of the world. The gallery also sought to demonstrate the cultural construction of gender and its distinction from sex, as well as include sections on non-western representations of Europeans to demonstrate the reciprocity and flexibility in the global manipulation of images⁽⁴⁶⁾. Although the electronic support systems meant to provide a variety of recorded guides by people of different cultural backgrounds, had still not been agreed on by 1995, the gallery was, nevertheless designed to provide different indigenous conceptions of aspects of culture intended to confront unquestioned western presuppositions⁽⁴⁷⁾. In contrast, the second gallery, The Green Gallery which opened the following year, presented material culture through the eyes of six 19th and 20th century collectors - James Ashbury and William Kebbell, Frederick Lucas, Colonel James Green, and Marie-Clare Adam. A sixth collection, placed on loan to provide token coverage of the Americas, belonged to the curator himself (although senior management decided its source should remain anonymous on the text panels). The two

galleries were intended to confront each other as a multiplicity of voices which, in different ways, had articulated non-Western material culture from contesting perspectives. The result was an heterotopic site which was meant to relativise discourses and frame the authority of museum representations as conditional. More importantly, the two galleries were not intended to represent certain ways of viewing artefacts and cultures, but to actively participate in the negotiation and re-negotiation of meaning within the museum environment and thereby provide their own intervention within an ethnoscape whose most essential quality was semantic discontinuity and rupture. Since the projects inauguration in 1994, four small temporary exhibitions (48) and an artist's intervention were facilitated in the galleries which sought to problematise and explore the public's experience of museums, the politics of representation and the disciplinary regimes such institutions uphold. Two of the exhibitions, Kinyozi: The Art of African Hairstyles (1994) and Badgering the People: A Mao Badge Retrospective (1994), where intended to question the public expectation of African and Asian ethnographic art respectively. By providing an historical perspective and looking at the influence of centric nationalist forces as well as trends in the globalisation of visual culture, the exhibitions challenged stereotypes of the sculptural quality of African art or the monument / folk dichotomy of Asian art. Kinyozi treated an urban art form, which far from reflecting the cultural identity of any one ethnic group, exemplified the fundamental hybridity of an interstitial creative site which had developed in response to commercial demand. Similarly, Badgering the People, looked at the design of Mao badges, the identity they conferred on particular factories and farms and their use in the cult of Mao and as gifts widely used in exchanges between different groups and peoples in Chinese society.

The programmes at the Museum and the University of Sussex also encouraged the intervention of contemporary artists in galleries and seminars. This partly dated to the exhibition *In Fusion* exhibition when it became clear that some contemporary artists were exploring a similar intellectual terrain using visual media to what academics were textually concerned with. This lead to the exhibition *Hold* (1995) with works made by Shirley Chubb that incorporated ethnographic objects from the collection, and *Peep* (1995) by Sonia Boyce. In *Peep*, Boyce followed-up her residency at the Museum, by an installation in the Cultures Gallery,

which comprised tracing the shadows thrown by some of the exhibits onto tracing paper, which were then cut to provide only an angled vista onto the original object. Consequently, visitors were forced to contort themselves at awkward angles, displacing their usual voyeuristic gaze on the material arts of dominated cultures with a spectacle of themselves in the voyeuristic act⁽⁴⁹⁾.

The disruption of the boundaries that separate non-western from western art has been advocated historically by a small handful of art centres and galleries. The Icon Gallery, The Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, the Photographers' Gallery, The Arnolfini, The Whitchapel, Southbank Touring Exhibitions and INIVA have all lent their spaces and / or energies to developing a critical discourse between contemporary western and non-western art forms (a problematical distinction if there ever was one). The Hayward Gallery's Another Story (1989-90) attempted to fill the gaps in official art history by making visible the works done by African, Asian and Caribbean artists who had lived and worked in the United Kingdom from 1945 to 1985. This was quickly followed by Sunil Gupta's An Economy of Signs. Contemporary Indian Photographs (Photographers' Gallery 1990) which exhibited the work of sixteen photographers who presented snap shots, not of a unified or structurally coherent society but of a complex series of mosaics that cut across diverse ethnicities and castes to reveal a disarticulated country in the throws of modernisation. These are alternative strategies; imbalanced conditions structured by a non-homogenous temporal structure unable to act as a totalising or standardising framework to support other stereotypical models laundered by the exoticising discourses of the west (anthropology and tourism). Many more group and one person shows have followed in the last six years, including the Southbank's In Fusion. New European Art (1993) which Caroline Collier and myself intended opening at Brighton Museum to coincide with the inauguration of the new Cultures Gallery and thereby provide different lenses through which to see and question cultural differences and commonalties (50). What is important to note, however, is that in response to shows which have not only illustrated the creative vitality of people from previously called 'non-western' nations, but in some cases like the works of Jimmie Durham or Gordon Bennett which have provided a critique and a reaction against western objectivising discourses (visual and textual), museum ethnography has remained unaccountably mute. With some ethnography departments themselves, like that of the British Museum, which has purchased and exhibited the work of artists like Sokari Douglas Camp (1995-), and Brighton Museum, with its Sonia Boyce installation (1995), together with examples of collaborations between anthropologists and artists, such as that which gave birth to *The Impossible Science of Being* (Photographers Gallery, 1995) becoming more prolific, museum ethnography can no longer avoid an engagement which is long overdue and which is a necessary overture to re-thinking the politics of its own display practices.

What then is the future of museum ethnography, which began its life by spawning Victorian anthropology, only to find itself abandoned by its successful and dynamic offspring which underwent academic institutionalisation, leaving behind only the chrysalis of its former self⁽⁵¹⁾. It would, perhaps, be no exaggeration, to see museum ethnography as, methodologically, bankrupt, practically or performatively, outdated, and its public product as deceptive of the 'reality' it claims to represent, if not distasteful to the subjects which it constitutes through those representations. Nevertheless, as we approach the end of the millennium, when the dominant episteme that has informed and guaranteed the very foundation of human knowledge over the past 200 years, appears increasingly less reassuring and objectively insurmountable, museum ethnography is not alone among the social sciences in being haunted by such threatening and uncomfortable spectres.

Despite its prefix, post-modernism has no chronological rights of succession over modernism. Some exponents of anthropology have already made a considerable and important contribution to the critique of modernism by their acts of incredulity towards metanarratives; Pocock, Leach and Levi-Strauss on the nature of time and history, Leach again on kinship, Needham on belief and the work of Edwin Ardener on method, to name some of the earliest contributors to anthropological post-modernism. Possible methodological exemplars of another current have included the ethnographies of Kapfarrer, Fabian, Tedlock and Price who by exploring the use of dialogue in the generation of meanings in dramatic or ritual discourses have recast culture as performative, open, and creative. Although museum ethnography has failed in the past to produce its own avant-garde, the subject is becoming sufficiently mature

to produce a line of new leaders whose works show great promise in facing the far greater complexities of history, society and culture at the century's close than the conditions that prevailed up to the 1960s. Many older subjects are undergoing radical reintegration as disciplinary boundaries are being redrawn, sometimes to create new academic fields like cultural studies, media and image studies, which might point to museum ethnography becoming incorporated or reintegrated in a wider and more theoretically advanced field of studies. It is no accident that those galleries whose curators, one suspects, have been trained in British universities in the new art history, with its more general accommodation of critical and cultural theory as well as part of sociology, often ignored by anthropology, have been responsible for many of the most exciting developments and exhibitions in the arts of Africa, Australasia and the Americas over the past decade. If museum ethnography fails to respond to the challenges posed by such radical rethinkings of the world and its history, the subject may well continue its downward drift to becoming methodologically and ethically destitute, leaving the products of its practices to be viewed as little more than charming marginalia; curiosities of 20th century classifications attesting to the century's history of errors rather than its great achievements.

NOTES

- (1) The ideas in this paper were developed at the Coimbra Conference in 1994 and a summary version presented to the 1996 Annual General Conference of the Museum Ethnographers Group, Manchester. A shorter earlier version was published as The Future of Museum Ethnography, Journal of Museum Ethnography, 9, 1997: 33-48.
- (2) Crimp, D. 1995?. On the Museum's Ruins, Cambridge. MIT. p.54.
- (3) Frederick Bohrer, 1994. The Times and Spaces of History: Representation, Assyria and the British Museum. In D. Sherman and I. Rogoff (eds.). Museum Culture. Histories, Discourses, Spectacles. London and New York, Routledge. P. 197.
- (4) Coombes, A. 1991, Ethnography and the Formation of National and Cultural Identities. in S. Hiller (ed.), The Myth of Primitivism. Perspectives on Art. London and New York, Routledge.
- (5) Ricoeur, P. 1965, Universal Civilization and National Cultures. In P. Ricoeur, History and Truth. Evanston, Northwestern University Press.
- (6) Guillermo Santamarina. 1994, Recodifying a Non-existent Field. In Jean Fisher (ed.), Global Visions. Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts. London, Kala Press. p. 24.
- (7) Louise Tythacott. 1994, Kinyozi. The Art of African Hairstyles. Brighton, The Green Centre for non-western Art and Culture.
- (8) An argument which has been forcefully put forth by Paul Gilroy. 1993, The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness. London and New York, Verso. In this respect it is telling how little Liverpool's Maritime Museum used ethnography in the construction of the narrative for their excellent slavery gallery.
- (9) Martin Hollis. 1977, Models of Man. Philosophical Thoughts on Social Actions. London, Cambridge and New York Cambridge University Press. p. 11.
- (10) J.S.Mill. 1961, A System of Logic. London, Longmans. vi. 7.
- (11) Hollis Op. cit., 24.
- (12) Ho11is Op. cit., 12

- (13) Michel Foucault. 1970, The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences. London, Tavistock Publications. p. 387.
- (14) Jean Baudrillard. 1990, The Transparency of Evil. London, Verso. pp. 58-9.
- (15) Canguilheim
- (16) Stuart Hall. Minimal Selves. In The Real Me: Postmodernism and the Question of Identity. ICA Documents 6, London, Institute of Contemporary Art.
- (17) Gilane Tawadros. 1994, The Case of the Missing Body: A Cultural Mystery in Several Parts. In Jean Fisher (ed.), op. cit.
- (18) Sarat Maharaj. 1994, 'Perfidious Fidelity': The Untranslatability of the Other. In Jean Fisher (ed.), op. cit.
- (19) At the end of conference summary, the 100th Annual General Meeting of the Museum's Association, held in Brighton in 1995, dismissed a session on the implications of critical theory to ethnography as irrelevant to the work of curators. Such an attitude remains commonplace in UK museums.
- (20) See, for example, Michael Taussig. 1993. Mimesis and Alterity. London and New York, Routledge, James Boone. 1977, The Romance of Bali 1597-1972. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, and my article, Fetishism's Culture, op. cit.
- (21) See A Shelton. 1994, Fictions and Parodies: Masquerade in Mexico and Highland South America. In J. Mack (ed.), Masks. The Art of Expression. London, British Museum Press.
- (22) Barbara Saunders. 1995, Kwakwaka'wakw Museology. In A Shelton (ed.), Museums and Changing Perspectives of Culture. Cultural Dynamics 7. Sage Publications, London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi.
- (23) A-L. Crawford 1981, Aida. Life and Ceremony of the Gogodala. Port Moresby, National Cultural Council of Papua New Guinea.
- (24) Johannes Fabian. 1983, Time and the Other. How Anthropology Makes it's Object. New York, Columbia University Press.
- (25) Fabian Op. cit., 117.
- (26) Fabian Op. cit., 108, but the recent works of Paul Stoller have attempted to develop an anthropology of the senses.

- (27) Trinh T. MMinh-ha. 1989, Woman, Native, Other. Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism. Bloomington, Indianapolis, Indiana university Press. p.48.
- (28) Trinh T. Minh-ha. op. cit., p.S3.
- (29) Introduction to Jean-François Lyotard. 1984, The Post-Modern Condition. A Report on Knowledge. Manchester, Manchester University Press. p. viii.
- (30) Jean Baudrillard 1990, The Transparency of Evil. London, Verso. p.5-6.
- (31) The style of Baudrillard's personally disconnected prose narrative. J. Baudrillard, 1990. Cool Memories. London and New York, Verso.
- (32) A. Shelton. 1995, Introduction to Sonia Boyce, Peep. London, INIVA.
- (33) Allen-Mills, T, 1997. Ancient bones make white mischief in US. Sunday Times, 15th June, p.22.
- (34) Crimp, D. 1995, On the Museum's Ruins. Cambridge, Mass. MIT Press p.54.
- (35) At the Royal Museum of Art and History in Brussels or the International Museum of Carniva1 and Masquarade at Binche, for example.
- (36) Paul Ricoeur. 1965. Universal Civilisation and National Cultures. In Paul Ricoeur, History and Truth. Evanston, Northwestern University Press.
- (37) The use of Georges Condominas's work (We have Eaten the Forest. The Story of a Montagnard Village in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. London, Allan Lane. 1977), by American counter-intelligence services during the Vietnam war to locate and destroy the very people the anthropologist had documented.
- (38) Ulli Beier's work, The Story of Sacred Wood Carvings in One Small Yoruba Town (Nigeria Magazine, 1957), provides an early example where an anthropological text was misused to aid criminal acts, but the problem is well known among archaeologists who frequently must employ ploys to neutralise the usefulness of their reports to would be looters.
- (39) See A Shelton (ed.). 1995, Fetishism. Visualising Power and Desire. London, Southbank / Lund Humphries.
- (40) Shelton, A. 1992, The Recontextualisation of Culture: in UK Museums. Anthropology Today, Vol. 8, no. 5.
- (41) See G. Bankes, 1997. From Ethnology to Explorers and Encounters. Journal of Museum Ethnography, 9.

- (42) Three volumes were published before the series was cancelled. L. Tythacott, 1994. Kinyozi: The Art of African Hairstyles; G. Hilty, D. Reason and A. Shelton, 1995. Hold: Acquisition, Representation, Perception. Work by Shirley Chubb; and R.Benewick and S. Donald (eds.), 1996. Belief in China. Art and Politics, Deities and Mortality. E. Hallam and N. Levell's catalogue to the exhibition Communicating Otherness: Cultural Encounters (1996) was published by the University of Sussex.
- (43) English / Mandarin text panels for Badgering the People, a video for the same exhibition and another on the politics of display at Brighton and an international conference organised by James Donald to coincide with the exhibition Fetishism.
- (44) A Short Film About Cultures, produced by Johnny Shipp, University of Sussex.
- (45) This idea was suggested by Louise Tythacott.
- (46) We had already curated an exhibition with Caroline Collier, the then exhibition organiser at Brighton on Northwest Coast representations of Europeans portrayed through argillite carvings.
- (47) Without the electronic recordings or sufficient funding to commission non-western peoples to participate in the writing of text panels, this was always an ideal, which we could do nothing more than try to approximate.
- (48) These were Textiles from the James Green Collection (1993), Kinyozi: The Art of African Hairstyles (1994), Badgering the People: A Mao Badge Retrospective (1995) and Glimpses of Hell: The Underworld Gods of China. During the same period plans were also discussed to host an exhibition curated by E. Hallam and N. Levell of the University of Sussex on representing knowledge (Cultural Encounters: Communicating Otherness), another, curated by Karel Arnaut on a conection of Bedu masks and related material he had been commissioned to make for the Museum and an intervention by the artist Sally Payern. These were implemented after 1995.
- (49) See Sonia Boyce, 1995. Peep. London, Institute of International Visual Arts. The exhibition also contained photographs and hairpieces representing her work.
- (50) As it happened scheduling did not allow the exhibition to coincide with the opening of the new gallery.
- (51) Shelton, A. Forthcoming, Museum Ethnography: An Imperial Science. In B. Street and E. Hallam (eds.), Cultural Encounters. London and New York, Routledge.