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The Museum of Art-Thropology: Twenty-First Century Imbroglios

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The First Peoples Hall of the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Gatineau, Quebec, was opened in 2003. Guided by an Aboriginal Advisory Committee, the introductory section emphasizes the messages of diversity, contemporaneity, and strong relationships to land, while also incorporating elements of fine art and ethnographic display. Photograph by Harry Foster, courtesy of the Canadian Museum of Civilization.

The museum of art-thropology

Twenty-first century imbroglios

RUTH B. PHILLIPS

In looking at the history of the museum we see not only its changing mode of ordering the heterogeneous, but also changing conceptualizations of heterogeneity itself.

—Kevin Hetherington¹

There's a sense in which cosmopolitanism is the name not of the solution but of the challenge.

—Kwame Anthony Appiah²

The invitation to explore the relationships of art history, anthropology, and the museums they sponsor extended by the organizers of Harvard's "Crossing Boundaries" conference has a situated and personal resonance which provides me with a point of departure for my discussion. As an undergraduate at Harvard during the mid-1960s, I spent two summers visiting my parents in northern Nigeria, where my father was working on one of the many post-independence economic development projects funded by the U.S. government. One of the ways in which members of the large expatriate community in Kaduna mediated their experiences of strangeness, cultural difference, and disparities of economic power was by collecting African art. My mother was bewildered but intrigued by the ready availability of unfamiliar forms of art that were being eagerly snapped up by her friends and neighbors, and she turned to me, proto-art historian (albeit then focused on the Italian Renaissance), for advice on what was "good" and "authentic." I could offer little except for vague notions about authenticity and style that came straight from modernist primitivism, yet the carvings that the traders unpacked from their large sacks onto my parents' living-room floor compelled my interest. Apart from their powerful aesthetic attraction, they seemed ripe with unexplored iconographic and stylistic problems. The questions they posed began to suggest

how, by working to make art history more inclusive, a young academic might contribute to the struggles for racial equality and cross-cultural understanding that were gaining momentum in the America of those years.³

In my senior year, I sought out courses to take and faculty to talk to in preparation for graduate work in African art history, but I found little. African art was not taught in the Fine Arts Department, although Professor John Rosenfield offered cautious encouragement, seeing a parallel to the way his own interest in Japanese art had been sparked by his military service in occupied Japan. In the Department of Anthropology, material culture studies and the anthropology of art were out of fashion, and the African carvings on display in the Peabody Museum were still installed according to culture area and taxonomic models derived from late nineteenth-century natural history. This situation was not, needless to say, peculiar to Harvard, but was typical of major universities throughout North America and Europe. The program for "Crossing Boundaries" throws into sharp relief the enormous changes that have occurred in the two disciplines during the past forty years, stimulated both by the active contestations of indigenous peoples and by the poststructuralist and postcolonial critiques of the 1970s and 1980s. Although the changes in museums have been more unevenly distributed and are usually more subtle, both art and anthropology museums have also been responding to pressures to become culturally inclusive, to recognize the contemporaneous modernity of all peoples, to develop multivocal interpretive strategies, and to become more accessible to nontraditional audiences.

I will discuss the revisionist gestures that museums have made more fully later in this paper, but I want to emphasize at the outset that they raise important questions about the status of the new narratives of art and culture developed within the protected intellectual spaces of the academy and their impact—or lack of

1. Kevin Hetherington, "From Blindness to Blindness: Museums, Heterogeneity and the Subject," in *Actor Network Theory and After*, ed. John Law and John Hassard (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), p. 52.

2. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), p. xv.

3. I have discussed the project of African art history as I experienced it in the 1970s in "Can You Go Out without Your Head?: Fieldwork as Transformative Experience," *RES* 39 (Spring 2001): 61–77.

impact—on the stories museums tell to their broader publics. Two decades of debates over exhibitions of everything from African art to the American West to French Impressionism testify to a gap between poststructuralist and postcolonial understandings of art and visual and material culture and actual practices of curatorship, installation, and interpretation.⁴ To some critics, the divide between the intellectual elites and popular audiences has seemed inevitable and unbridgeable, and there is a tendency to explain it in practical terms—altering bricks and mortar, lighting systems, and exhibition furniture is a slower and much more expensive process than writing books. Alternately, critics may point to the force of traditions, institutional cultures, and the expectations of patrons and visitors, which often brake the speed with which familiar installations can be dismantled and changed. Yet, as Mark Salber Phillips has urged, traditions need to be considered as “enlarged frameworks” that “include issues of authority as well as invention”—not just as reactionary forces to be dismissed or debunked, but as active and elastic conditions of possibility.⁵ I have come to think that we must take not only the revisionism, but also the conservatism of museums seriously. We need to seek explanation for the remarkable resilience not only of modernist metanarratives of art and culture, but also of the art and artifact installation modes that continue to differentiate an increasingly global museum typology. The staying power of these display paradigms, despite two decades of deconstructionist critique, is, I would argue, the evidence not only of their continuing authority, but also of a desire for the kinds of experiences they promote that now extends beyond the “West.”

As I will argue in more detail below, however, alongside the persistence of “pure” installation styles, there has also been a growing trend toward borrowing, hybridization, and overlap of art and artifact installation types that had previously been defined as categorically distinct—or even as dialectical opposites. The most obvious examples of this cross-fertilization are the

extended labels now used by many art museums on the one hand, and the incorporation of both contemporary art and aestheticized installations of selected objects into anthropology museums on the other. I would argue that “museum dilemmas”⁶ often arise in those exhibitions where different paradigms converge, because it is at such junctures that excess meanings accumulate and stimulate public debates over value, inclusivity, voice, and restitution. The controversies that erupted around the Smithsonian’s 1991 exhibition of nineteenth-century American painting, “The West as America,” and the Royal Ontario Museum’s 1989 exhibition about colonial collecting, “Into the Heart of Africa,” are two notable examples.⁷

Other reasons for the particular vulnerability of art/anthropology “crossings” to such “museum dilemmas” are not hard to identify, for the objects at issue are usually those that flowed into the West as a result of its colonial and neocolonial incursions into the rest of the world. I will argue in this paper that in order to forge a new relationship between art and anthropology museums, we need, first, to detach the paradigms of art and artifact from their tainted modernist and colonial moorings and recognize their global currency as flexible technologies of representation. Such a project requires that we extend still further the systemic analyses of museums that have been developed within critical museology in order to resituate art and artifact display conventions not only as technologies but also in relation to the intensified interconnectedness of peoples, discourses, and institutions that is being produced by postcoloniality, diasporic migration, and globalization.

My conviction of the need to attend to interconnections and networks has grown steadily as I have shuttled back and forth between universities and museums during the past three decades. In particular, it has been impressed upon me by a series of exhibitions in which I have been involved (directly or indirectly) where academic and museological projects have

4. See essays in *The Two Art Histories: The Museum and the University*, ed. Charles W. Haxthausen (New Haven: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute and Yale University Press, 2002), and especially Griselda Pollock’s “A History of Absence Belatedly Addressed: Impressionism with or without Mary Cassatt,” pp. 123–141.

5. Mark Salber Phillips, “What Is Tradition When It Is Not ‘Invented’? A Historiographical Introduction,” in *Questions of Tradition*, ed. Mark Salber Phillips and Gordon Schochet (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), p. 25.

6. I borrow the term from *Exhibiting Dilemmas: Issues of Representation at the Smithsonian*, ed. Amy Henderson and Adrienne L. Kaeppler (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997).

7. On “The West as America,” see William H. Truettner, “For Museum Audiences: the Morning of a New Day?” in *ibid.*, pp. 28–46, and his “A Case for Active Viewing,” in *The Two Art Histories* (see note 4), pp. 102–112. An excellent case study of the controversy surrounding the “Into the Heart of Africa” exhibition is Shelley Ruth Butler, *Contested Representations: Revisiting “Into the Heart of Africa”* (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2007).

overflowed their boundaries into realms of politics, ethics, and practice to which they had initially seemed unrelated. This kind of excess has been characterized by Bruno Latour, the anthropologist and philosopher of science and a cofounder of Actor Network Theory, as a sign of the breakdown of the categorical separations imposed by modernism. Some of Latour's key concepts seem very useful for our present problem. In particular, I want to make use of his notion of "imbroglio," defined in his 1991 book *We Have Never Been Modern* as an entanglement of unrelated phenomena.⁸ Like Latour's imbroglios of phenomena purported to belong to incommensurable realms of the scientific and the social, the museum dilemmas of recent years often occur when categorical distinctions between art and non-art or the West and the rest, are revealed as always already fictive. The analysis of the modern Western construct of art/non-art as specific to particular ideological, class, and gender formations has been well established by a generation of feminist and poststructuralist critics, while the actual historical interpenetration of Western and non-Western peoples and cultures has been a major focus of scholarship informed by postcolonial and globalization theory.⁹

Applying Latour's notion of the imbroglio to the anecdote with which I began, for example, I see my travel to Africa and my subsequent decision to study African art history as arising not just from serendipity or a disciplinary turf war, but rather from a set of networked phenomena that included, in addition, Cold War politics and economics, the American Civil Rights movement, the Biafran War, and the taste culture of modernist primitivism. Only in combination could these factors shake loose objects and people and send them traveling across oceans where they could begin to act upon one another. And only by considering these heterogeneous apples and oranges together can we fully understand the issues that have subsequently arisen. In the second half of this paper, I will discuss three particularly consequential imbroglios in more detail as a way of arguing for the value of thinking about

institutions and disciplines as components of networks. Before turning to these examples, however, it will be useful to map, with necessary brevity, the intellectual and institutional histories out of which contemporary museum imbroglios arise. These are the modernist tradition of art/artifact discourse, the insights of critical museology, the hybrid approaches that have been developing within art and anthropology museums in response to these critiques, and the explanatory force of Latour's work.

Art and icon: Modernist paradigms of the object

Art history and anthropology are sometimes spoken of as opposing constructs, but they have historically been more like a pair of fraternal twins—coeval and born of the same parents, but different in appearance. As Carlo Ginzburg has shown, in their formative late-nineteenth-century periods, both disciplines adopted a comparative methodology based on visual study and description, derived from natural science, for which collections of material objects and visual images were essential.¹⁰ Both judged value in terms of similar standards of aesthetic quality derived from Kantian aesthetics and the Western hierarchy of fine and applied arts; both were governed by an evolutionist and progressivist metanarrative; and, in the early twentieth century, both began—through, for example, the parallel projects of Franz Boas and Alois Riegl—to move toward more relativist modes of analysis and understanding. What came to distinguish art history and anthropology was not so much their underlying assumptions about culture and art, but rather their differences of scope and emphasis. Art historians looked only at the subset of material culture deemed to have aesthetic value and therefore to be able to produce uplifting individual experiences, while anthropologists have been primarily concerned with the role of material culture as evidence of historical development and with art and aesthetic expression as technologies useful in social reproduction. Art historians have primarily studied the European tradition in diachronic development, while most anthropologists have studied non-European peoples synchronically.¹¹

8. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

9. See, for example, Janet Wolff's very useful summary of foundational critical work on "levels of art" in *The Aesthetics and Sociology of Art* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983), pp. 7ff. On the convergence of the West and the non-West, see James Clifford, "Traveling Cultures," in his *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 17–46.

10. Carlo Ginzburg, "Clues, Roots of an Evidential Paradigm," in his *Clues, Myths and the Historical Method* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), pp. 96–125.

11. I have developed this contrast more fully in "The Value of Disciplinary Difference: Reflections on Art History and Anthropology at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century," in *Anthropologies of Art*, ed. Mariet Westermann (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), pp. 242–259.

In 1959, in the moment of high modernism, anthropologist Robert Redfield delivered a lecture entitled "Art and Icon" at New York's Museum of Primitive Art in which he succinctly and eloquently defined the distinctive museological practices that had developed out of the two disciplines during the previous half century.¹² He began by contrasting the different kinds of access art and ethnography museums could offer to a Dogon sculpture from West Africa in the museum's collection. The art museum, he said, encouraged the viewer to appreciate its "immanent" formal qualities in order to maximize visual pleasure and aesthetic experience. This is typically accomplished by spatially isolating and carefully lighting the object and minimizing texts and other distracting accompaniments. In contrast, the ethnographic display directs attention to the object's iconic or "transcendent" meanings in order to favor the visitor's cognitive understanding. Transcendent meanings are drawn out through the use of extended texts, photographs, maps, dioramas, mannequins, and other didactic materials. Redfield argued that although delivered in isolation from each other, these two ways of experiencing objects are neither antithetical nor mutually exclusive. Rather, he urged, they offer complementary paths to understanding and can never be completely separated. "Whether we come to see the artifact as a creative mastery of form, or see it as a sign or symbol of a traditional way of life," he concluded, "we are discovering, for ourselves, new territory of our common humanity."¹³

Redfield also explored issues of power through the rhetorical conceit of an imaginary dialogue between himself and a "common [female] viewer" whom he set up as a kind of alter ego. This common viewer asks how it is that outsiders can acquire the right to judge objects made by members of other cultures, for "perhaps the values they see in the work, the aesthetic values, are quite different from what you outsiders see." Redfield, the anthropologist, answers that the artist is too far away to respond to such questions, may no longer make these types of objects, and probably lacks a tradition of critical discourse about art. The common viewer objects that "this exclusion of the artist and his own audience

from the discussions seem[s] . . . somehow not quite right—a great power decision on the aesthetic affairs of little peoples."¹⁴ At this point in his internal dialogue Redfield finally pulls out the argument of cosmopolitanism as a fundamental attribute of "civilization":

There is no one in any better position to attempt to find reasons for the artistic success of the primitive artist than we modern Western outsiders for the reason that no one else has as much experience with many kinds of art. . . . The great civilizations of wide influence represent a coming together of various traditions. They are a mixing, a stimulating, a comparing of one traditional way with another. In these the habit develops of putting one meaning or value beside another. Western civilization is such a civilization.¹⁵

The modernist ideology of universality that suffused both mid-twentieth-century anthropology and art criticism comes through clearly in these passages.¹⁶ The worlds of the West and the other are separated by real and conceptual distances that can be bridged only with great difficulty. Modernity, travel, and cosmopolitanism are assumed to be prerogatives of the West, which also has the effect of suffusing the museum with nostalgia for lost authenticity.

Critical museology

Even as Redfield was lecturing, however, a new era of fieldwork-based scholarship on non-Western art forms was beginning. Pioneering scholars such as Anthony Forge, Robert Thompson, Warren D'Azevedo, and Douglas Fraser were interested in documenting the understandings and uses of art objects not in the past or by outsiders, but as articulated by contemporary users and makers. By 1984, when the Museum of Modern Art undertook to explore the "affinities" of modern and "primitive" art, a rich literature had begun to accumulate that provided access to such perspectives. The goal of that exhibition, of course, was to trace the histories of visual borrowings and encounters between modern artists and the non-Western objects that had inspired them, but because it made no attempt to provide access to the emic perspectives of members of originating cultures, it opened a critical floodgate, which

12. See Robert Redfield, "Art and Icon," in *Aspects of Primitive Art*, ed. Robert Goldwater (New York: The Museum of Primitive Art, 1959), pp. 11–39.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 38. Redfield's essay must be read against the political context of the McCarthy era and in relation to such projects as the Museum of Modern Art's major photographic exhibition of 1955, "The Family of Man."

14. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

16. For a critique of the "universality principle," see Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 23–36.

rejected the right of Western art lovers to appropriate the cultural property of others into contexts of viewing which, in turn, rendered them meaningless to members of the originating communities.¹⁷

This controversy and other related conflicts stimulated a project of critical museology that has illuminated the complex roles museums have played historically and continue to play in inscribing social and political norms. Although it is impossible to do justice to this literature in a few short paragraphs, it is important to my larger argument to describe the range of concerns and theoretical propositions that have been advanced. The work of critical museology falls into two complementary registers. The first includes works that interrogate the conventions and practices of the Western museum and reflexively re-presents them as artifacts that reveal fundamental premises of Western culture. In her landmark exhibition and publication *Art/artifact*, Susan Vogel put on display in New York's Center for African Art the two modernist display paradigms as themselves artifacts of the Western gaze.¹⁸ Similarly, many of the contributors to the definitive anthology *Exhibiting Cultures* were primarily concerned with what Western museum conventions revealed about the West. As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett wrote in her essay "Objects of Ethnography": "Exhibitions, whether of objects or of people, are displays of the artifacts of our disciplines. They are for this reason also exhibits of those who make them, no matter what their ostensible subject."¹⁹

The deconstructive valence of this phase of critical museology was paralleled by the more sharply

postcolonial critiques of contemporary indigenous artists. Fred Wilson's 1992 *Mining the Museum* project, shown at the Maryland Historical Society, revealed the complicity of museums in silencing African-American histories through exhibitionary strategies of selection and editing.²⁰ Gerald McMaster's contribution to the National Museum of the American Indian's inaugural 1994 exhibition "All Roads Are Good" disrupted the specimen installation typical of anthropological museums by arranging over a hundred pairs of moccasins in concentric circles centered on a drum. Unlike the old, butterfly-collection mode of placing moccasins flat to the floor in rows or grids, McMaster mounted toes and heels in the postures of dancing feet.²¹ Such counter-installations answer back to the art gallery's characteristic presentation of singularity and the anthropology museums' rational and typological tradition. They continue to constitute a key postcolonial strategy, utilized most recently by Tuscarora curator-artist Jolene Rickard in her installations of pre-Columbian figurines, guns, and Bibles in the National Museum of the American Indian's new building in Washington.

A second approach taken by critical museologists has built on the first. Its aim is to map the "field of forces," to use Pierre Bourdieu's phrase, within which the museum operates. Maps of the "system of the museum" range from the eccentric but richly interesting triangulated model of collecting practices, art markets, and art history put forward by Joseph Alsop, to James Clifford's charting of the movement of objects through the Western art-culture system, to Bourdieu's sociological analysis of the ways in which museums construct social distinction. Also belonging to this register are Tony Bennett's and Carol Duncan's analyses of the ways in which museums, art galleries, and other public exhibitions structure and serve as sites for ritualized behaviors that are valuable to the state in the socialization and production of citizens.²² Museums, as

17. See William Rubin, "Modernist Primitivism," in *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, ed. William Rubin (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1984), pp. 1–79; James Clifford, "Histories of the Tribal and the Modern," in his *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 189–214; Hal Foster, "The 'Primitive' Unconscious of Modern Art, or White Skin Black Masks," in his *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1985), pp. 181–208; and Thomas McEvilley, "Doctor, Lawyer, Indian Chief: 'Primitivism' in Twentieth-Century Art at the Museum of Modern Art," in his *Art and Otherness* (Kingston, N.Y.: McPherson and Company, 1992), pp. 27–56.

18. See especially Vogel's "Introduction" to the exhibition publication, *Art/artifact: African Art in Anthropology Collections* (New York: The Center for African Art, 1988), pp. 11–17, and Arthur Danto's essay, "Artifact and Art" in the same volume, pp. 18–32.

19. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Objects of Ethnography," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Politics and Poetics of Museum Exhibitions*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), pp. 386–443; p. 434.

20. See *Mining the Museum: An Installation* by Fred Wilson, ed. Lisa G. Corrin (New York: New Press, 1994).

21. *All Roads Are Good: Native Voices on Life and Culture* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of the American Indian and Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994).

22. See Joseph Alsop, *The Rare Art Traditions: The History of Art Collecting and Its Linked Phenomena Wherever These Have Appeared* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982); James Clifford, "On Collecting Art and Culture," in *The Predicament of Culture* (see note 17), pp. 215–251; Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984); Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum* (New York: Routledge, 1995); and Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

these and other theoretical formulations demonstrate, remain very effective institutions, reproducing social structures and forging imaginary communities. They establish who is located at the center and who is at the margin, what is valuable and authentic, and what is unworthy or fake.

The museum of art-thropology?

As I noted earlier, both art and anthropology museums have been responding to indigenous activism and the mounting body of academic critique by moving away from the pure forms described by Redfield. Anthropology museums have been borrowing art museum installation strategies to highlight the aesthetic qualities of objects, while many art museums now feature extended labels that provide contextual information not only for non-Western, but also for Western art. Art museums have expanded their mandates beyond the Western tradition to include contemporary indigenous art and historic world arts, while anthropology museums have begun to address the cultures of diasporic and other communities living within the "West."

The overlaps of scope and the hybrid installation strategies are causing contemporary art and anthropology museums to resemble each other more closely than did the high modernist institutions of fifty years ago. To give a few examples, some of the same curators contributed to the culturally contextualized exhibition "Listening to Our Ancestors: The Art of Native Life Along the Northwest Coast" at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian and to the Vancouver Art Gallery's aesthetically centered exhibition "Raven Traveling: Two Centuries of Haida Art." In the same year, both the National Gallery of Canada and the Canadian Museum of Civilization were exhibiting nineteenth-century Mi'kmaq quilled boxes and the paintings of contemporary Anishinaabe artist Norval Morrisseau.²³ And visitors could find similar examples of historic and contemporary African art on view in the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art and its National Museum of Natural History's "African Voices" exhibition. When the British Museum reinstalled its African collections in the newly built Sainsbury

Galleries, its designers opted for an art-gallery style installation that contrasted sharply with the re-created environments of its predecessor, the Museum of Mankind.²⁴ The new Musée du quai Branly in Paris, which combines collections formerly exhibited as "art" in the Musée des Art Africains et Océaniens and as ethnographic artifact in the Musée de l'Homme, instantiates even more fully the tendency toward hybridization.

We have never been modern

Latour's understanding of the modern both predicts and explains these trends. "*The proliferation of hybrids*," he writes, "*has saturated the constitutional framework of the moderns*" [italics original].²⁵ In other words, such blurrings and convergences indicate that our categories can no longer contain the accumulated contradictions bred by their own fictiveness. As Latour notes, "when the word 'modern,' 'modernization,' or 'modernity' appears, we are defining, by contrast, an archaic and stable past. Furthermore, the word is always being thrown into the middle of a fight, in a quarrel where there are winners and losers."²⁶ But the response he advocates goes further, for in order to reconnect that which has been severed by the modern "work of purification," we must substitute what he calls a "work of translation" in which we engage actively in identifying those networks that have, all along, connected the multifarious phenomena of the world. In his words:

the word "modern" designates two sets of entirely different practices which must remain distinct if they are to remain effective, but have recently begun to be confused. The first set of practices, by "translation," creates mixtures between entirely new types of beings, hybrids of nature and culture. The second, by "purification," creates two entirely distinct ontological zones: that of human beings on the one hand; that of nonhumans on the other. . . . The first set corresponds to what I have called networks; the second to what I shall call the modern critical stance.²⁷

Latour's formulation helps to explain the reasons for the recurrent museum dilemmas, to which I will now turn, and indicates some directions that may help us to find

23. These items were on view in two long-term installations, "Art of This Land," the National Gallery of Canada's historical survey of Canadian art, and the Canadian Museum of Civilization's exhibition on the arts and cultures of Canadian Aboriginal peoples, the "First Peoples Hall."

24. For a more detailed discussion, see Ruth B. Phillips, "Where Is 'Africa'?; Re-Viewing Art and Artifact in the Age of Globalization," *American Anthropologist* 104 (3; 2002):944–952.

25. Latour (see note 8), p. 51.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

27. *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11.

our way out of them. As we have seen, the museum has served as one of modernity's key tools of separation and purification and, as such, it has been a natural target of contestation. But if we focus on the activity of translation, as Latour recommends, we may be able better to reposition it within networks of complex and apparently heterogeneous social, political, economic, and natural events.

First imbroglio: The Spirit Sings boycott

I study museums today because of a major imbroglio in which I became caught up nearly twenty years ago. It developed around a major exhibition entitled "The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada's First Peoples," which was organized by the Glenbow Museum for the Calgary Winter Olympics of 1988. The controversy has been much discussed, especially in Canada, but it so well illustrates the networks of interconnection of which Latour speaks that I will use it as the first of my examples.²⁸ "The Spirit Sings" was planned as a "treasures" exhibition of early-contact period objects collected from Canada's indigenous peoples, based on a set of parameters which immediately invoked the criteria of rarity and authenticity associated with the Western traditions of rare art collecting and primitivism. It was the most expensive exhibition that had ever been organized in Canada, funded by provincial and federal governments and by a major corporate sponsor, Shell Oil. The controversy began when a small Aboriginal band called for a boycott. The Lubicon Cree had been trying to have their traditional lands confirmed as a reserve for forty years, having been "missed" when the treaty commissioner came through in the 1930s. After oil was discovered on their land in the 1960s, they had been forcibly relocated, and disease and community breakdown soon followed.

The Glenbow hoped to borrow from almost a hundred museums, most of them in Europe. Many curators in the museums approached were supportive of the Lubicon land claim and sympathetic to their

accusations of the hypocrisy of celebrating Aboriginal culture against the backdrop of deprivation and suffering. Others considered the boycott an unacceptably opportunistic attempt to hijack an important project of research and display for political purposes which had nothing to do with its content or with the Glenbow museum. Pressure brought by the Canadian government through diplomatic channels helped to ensure that the show went ahead largely as planned. But this was only the beginning, for once the exhibition opened, the number of grievances multiplied. Different groups of Aboriginal protestors brought a court case to force the removal of a mask regarded as sacred, demanded the restitution of some of the objects on display, condemned the lack of indigenous curatorial input, and objected to the exhibition's focus on the distant past rather than contemporary Aboriginal art and life. Faced by the relics of extinct peoples, overwhelmed by the quantity, variety, and beauty of the objects from the past, and confronted by the loss of many skills and techniques that had been used to make them, many Aboriginal visitors responded with grief and confusion. Inadvertently, I would argue, the hybrid installation aggravated the confusion. Although the exhibition had been organized by the Glenbow's ethnology division, the designer made use of a mixture of art and anthropology approaches, using a fine art display style in some sections, and cases that made postmodern references to early twentieth-century ethnographic museum furniture in others.

To the curators and Aboriginal advisors who had worked on the exhibition, the number and range of explosive issues that came to be associated with "The Spirit Sings" seemed far to exceed what was actually in it and to be disconnected from what was written in the text panels and captions. In reality, of course, this "explosion" was less a response to the exhibition itself than to a range of problems that had been affecting the Aboriginal population for many years. The modern separation of sacred and secular, furthermore, has made it difficult for the museum, defined as a modern secular institution, to respond to assertions that some objects have inherent power or should be removed from public display. Yet the networks of connection can be traced. Museums are connected to governments and private corporate interests through their boards of trustees, their sponsorship relationships, and their enabling legislation and government funding. Governments are networked to land claims tribunals and courts as well as to the public university system that trains and authorizes museum curators. And museums, as repositories of public

28. See, for example, Julia Harrison, "Completing a Circle: 'The Spirit Sings,'" in *Anthropology, Public Policy and Native Peoples in Canada*, ed. Noel Dyck and James B. Waldram (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), pp. 334–357; "Point/Counterpoint: The Spirit Sings and the Lubicon Boycott," *Muse* 6, no. 3 (Fall 1988):12–15; and Robyn Gillam, "The Spirit Sings: A Sour Note in the Museum's Halls," in her *Hall of Mirrors: Museums and the Canadian Public* (Banff, Alberta: The Banff Centre, 1991), pp. 101–134.

collections, are networked to private donors, missionaries, and publicly funded scientific collecting expeditions regarded by many indigenous people as having improperly removed cultural property. "The Spirit Sings" controversy marked the beginning of a realization that the museum has *multiple* publics whose needs arise from different cultural formations and that its custodianship of cultural property creates networks of responsibility not only to sponsors and governments but also to the communities from which these collections originated.

Second imbroglio: Mende Sande Society masks

The point of departure for my second example of an imbroglio was a brief stop in the late, lamented Peabody Museum gift shop. Visiting the shop in 2000, I saw on its shelves several masks of a type worn in initiation ceremonies by Mende, Vai, and Gola women in West Africa. This time—unlike my long-ago experience in Nigeria—I was in a position to know that they were authentic, because these masks had been the subject of my doctoral dissertation. Sande Society masks have not been as common in the art market as other genres of African art, and it was initially surprising to see several being offered for sale at once in a museum gift shop—and at a relatively modest price. In 2000, however, the probable reason was not hard to guess, for one result of the terrible violence then raging in Liberia and Sierra Leone was the appearance of unusual numbers of these masks on the market, although it was impossible to know whether they had been looted or sold by refugees.

Another result of this violence, equally trivial in relation to the unimaginable suffering of the people of the region, is that no new art-historical fieldwork on this masquerade tradition has been possible for many years. As a result, I regularly receive email inquiries and photographs of masks from museum curators who are considering purchasing or exhibiting these masks, even though my research is now thirty-five years old. I am also asked for permission to use my field photographs as didactic aids in new installations, and I have been keeping rough track of the installations in which they appear. In the unofficial exhibition typology of African art, Sande masks are usually used as a way of talking about women, initiation, and the education of the young. Yet in Sierra Leone during the 1990s and still today in the aftermath of horrific violence, the tragic reality is that many women, adolescents, and children are struggling to recover from trauma, rape, and the horrors inflicted on and by child soldiers. Whenever I

see one of these exhibits, I come away feeling disoriented. It seems obscene to me to write captions that project a timeless vision of the ritual cycle and make no reference at all to recent history. Yet I also agree that it is important, as the curators of the National Museum of Natural History's "African Voices" exhibition were told by their African and African-American consultants, to present the positive vitality of African societies to publics who usually hear about Africa only in relation to famine, poverty, AIDS, and war.²⁹ And it is also important to honor the creativity and achievements of African artists and allow museum visitors to experience this art aesthetically. To trace the network or not? Ethics, cognition, respect, and aesthetics seem to be at war in this imbroglio.

Third imbroglio: "The Spirit of Islam" and 9/11

Imbroglis are not, however, negative or contestatory by definition. Networks of causality and interconnection can also enhance museum endeavors and produce positive impacts. This happened in October 2001, in the aftermath of September 11, while I was working at the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology. Four years earlier, in 1997, the leaders' summit of APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) had been held in the museum's majestic Great Hall at the request of the Canadian government.³⁰ Because three of the leaders in attendance were Muslim, the government commissioned a local architect from the Vancouver Muslim community to build a prayer space within the museum for their use. After APEC, the museum was invited to open the prayer space to its visitors for a few weeks and quickly organized two lectures on Islamic belief and architecture. Members of local Muslim communities filled the lecture hall. No museum in the Vancouver area had previously presented programs about Islamic art or belief, and some community members asked if the museum would work with them on a larger project. An exhibition proposal was the result, and the museum organized it using the partnership model it had worked out with local Aboriginal communities. The advisory

29. Mary Jo Arnoldi, Christine Mullen Kreamer, and Michael Atwood Mason, "Reflections on 'African Voices' at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History," *African Arts* 34(2; 2001):16–35, 94.

30. For another imbroglio that developed around the APEC meeting, see my "APEC at the Museum of Anthropology: The Politics of Site and the Poetics of Sight Bite," in *Ethnos* 65, no. 2 (2000):172–194.

committee that was set up to guide the project included members from all the major Islamic sects and diasporic communities in the lower British Columbia mainland. Given the diversity of the group, agreeing on the exhibition's content was a challenge. The members of the committee decided to focus on calligraphy because it is a shared tradition, and they also agreed that they would present only those tenets of faith and statements about identity on which they could all agree. Remarkably, a museum exhibition project provided the occasion for these communities to work together on a common project for the first time, creating a basis of mutual understanding upon which they have since been able to build.³¹

From the beginning, it was also agreed that the main purpose of "The Spirit of Islam: Experiencing Islam through Calligraphy" would be public education. The exhibition was planned in three sections: first, the prayer space itself; second, a madrasa, or education space, where paired Muslim community and museum docents delivered educational programs; and, third, an art gallery, where rare historical examples of Islamic calligraphy were presented. The project would serve non-Muslims by informing them about Islam and Muslims by using the museum's facilities and borrowing power to make available for viewing treasures of Islamic art from distant collections. The museum, which has no Islamic collections of significance, benefited by being able to secure loans of exceptional quality through the community's connections. The bombing of the World Trade Center occurred a month before the opening date of the exhibition, which had been three years in development. In Vancouver, as in other North American cities, the Muslim population was vulnerable to various kinds of harassment, and the museum also worried about possible threats to the security of its visitors, the building, and the borrowed art. The decision about whether to open the exhibition as scheduled was referred to the community advisory committee, which was unanimous in deciding to go ahead.

The network of issues in which "The Spirit of Islam" was situated was—like all networks—unique. Linked together were an APEC economic summit complete with globalization protest, multiple diasporic communities, and religious traditions, the precedent of indigenous Aboriginal activism, official multicultural policies, terrorism, security, religion, education, and art connoisseurship. And, of course, as in all attempts to

trace networks, this list does not begin to exhaust the web of interconnections, which can neither be fully known, nor predicted, nor controlled. Yet I think that just as we berate ourselves for failing to see interconnections and for misjudgments of timing or societal need when things go wrong, so should we recognize that constructive responses can prepare a museum by creating strong alliances and extending its network deep into communities. In the case of "The Spirit of Islam," if the museum had not welcomed the suggestion of collaboration from the Muslim community in 1997, it would not have been able to respond so constructively to the unforeseeable events of 2001. Chance, as Pasteur said, favors the prepared mind.

This example also brings me back to the questions about politics and art that I raised in my discussion of Mende masks. The choice of focus and topic in museum exhibitions is always, at some level, political, just as visitor response is always contingent and situated. The contingent factors that have to be taken into consideration include the local history of inter-ethnic relations, the history of previous exhibitions, and the level of trust built up through prior collaborations. These, too, are elements in the networks that can and should be traced when exhibition programs are being designed. In retrospect, it is clear that one of the major reasons for the success of "The Spirit of Islam" was that its heterogeneous political, educational, social, aesthetic, and intellectual purposes—and the religious significance to practicing Muslims of the exhibition's contents—were articulated at the beginning. As a result, the decision was made to separate the exhibition into three clearly defined areas devoted to religious architecture, education, and art. To have presented calligraphy only in a didactic context would have deprived visitors of the opportunity for aesthetic experience, while to have presented the theme only as art would have reduced the educational impact of the project, which had been defined as the priority for diasporic communities anxious to become better understood and known.

In the context of a conference about "crossing boundaries" and the search for common ground, my example of the separate spaces for education and viewing in "The Spirit of Islam" suggests one way in which aesthetic experience and educational/cognitive experience can be fruitfully linked without becoming confused. One final example illustrates how different paradigms of museum display can complement each other in ways that also respect the need for honesty where dark histories are associated with museum

31. Visit <http://www.moa.ubc.ca/spiritofislam/>.

objects. In 2006, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art created an installation of five paintings by Gustav Klimt, including his great portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer. The exhibited paintings had been returned by the Austrian government to Bloch-Bauer's descendants after a long legal battle that was resolved when archival documents were located that proved that they had been confiscated from the family during World War II. These paintings, like the Mende masks, are aesthetically powerful objects, which are tied to histories of human suffering and loss. In them, to borrow Stephen Greenblatt's terms, wonder and resonance are inextricably associated.³² The museum installed them in a small gallery. On a monitor mounted outside the entrance, visitors could watch a documentary film narrating their history of creation, confiscation, and legal contestation. Entering the gallery, a wall to the right displayed a series of large didactic text panels that provided information about Klimt, the Bloch-Bauers, and the subsequent history of the painting. The paintings themselves were hung on the opposite walls where they could be experienced as works of art. Yet visitors came to the moment of viewing having passed through the historical journey that the paintings themselves had made. The experience of the paintings was not, in my view, diminished, but neither was the viewer left in ignorance of their unique historical resonance through the museum's refusal to trace the network that had brought them in that time, to that place.

Conclusion

The museum world has by no means finished with imbroglions born of contestations over representation, power, possession, or voice. We do not yet know how to respond to demands for restitution, to the ethics of sponsorship, to censorship, or to demands for the inclusion of intangible heritage in institutions that were designed as showcases for the material and the visual. Furthermore, as art and anthropology museums increasingly encroach upon each other's traditional territory, the blurring and confusion that arise may also engender a wasteful competitiveness. Will museums of art-thropology be the inevitable result? Will the walls that have segregated the domains of nature, history, art, and ethnography in modernity finally come down? Nothing quite so logical or extreme seems to be occurring. Rather, more often than not, as this new

"museum age" of building and expansion unfolds, the existing museum infrastructure is being renewed along preexisting lines. The Western typology of museums and the art and artifact display paradigms it characteristically deploys are, in fact, being extended to communities and countries around the world that have had no previous museum tradition. The system of the museum is thus proving itself to be an elastic and adaptable technology that is available for appropriation to serve new purposes. The hard evidence of its resilience and vitality is the billions of dollars being invested in museums, new and old, by governments and private individuals.

Yet, as we have also seen, the museum has also been changing as it responds to needs from new and diverse audiences—less homogeneous in education and expectation, more diverse ethnically, socially, and economically. The move toward "inclusivity" draws in not only new kinds of visitors but also new kinds of objects—from motorcycles and haute couture in the Guggenheim to interdisciplinary exhibits of chocolate, gold, and pearls in museums of natural history and ethnography. In a provocative essay, Kevin Hetherington has attempted a Foucauldian "effective history" of the museum, which uses as its key analytical tool the insights into the significance of heterogeneity developed by Latour and other proponents of Actor Network Theory. He argues that "we can think of the contemporary museum as an exhibitionary space in which heterogeneous effects and uncertainty are subject to controlling and ordering processes."³³ In the modern art gallery "all attempts were made at removing heterogeneity . . . from the display itself. The objects on display were then to be viewed with a Kantian eye by training the public to appreciate the beauty of improvement/civilization/the nation as it was represented through a narrative about beautiful objects."³⁴ Increasingly, however, in the post-Dada world, "the object is made heterogeneous through its incongruous location in a space in which it does not belong. It creates a fold in the Euclidean space of the modern museum or gallery . . . it introduces a trickster element into the object . . . a functional blankness that has agency written all over it . . . and in so doing it performs a blind spot before the eye."³⁵ For Hetherington, this "blindness" may lead us into new realms of sense that are no longer controlled by Western ocularcentrism: "No doubt the next issue will be to

32. Stephen Greenblatt, "Resonance and Wonder," in *Exhibiting Cultures* (see note 19), pp. 42–56.

33. Hetherington (see note 1), p. 70.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

35. *Ibid.*, pp. 68–69.

reveal the unbounded and fluid character of the object," he predicts, "dissolved into a similitude of signification with no attachment to a subject at all. That is perhaps the project for the next type of museum."³⁶

Such an application of Actor Network Theory to the museum, I would argue, does not account for the persistence of both art and artifact paradigms in the present day. Rather than predicting their future dissolution, I would rather urge on museums the ethical necessity of tracing networks while fostering the processes of translation for which Latour has called among distinct modes of cognitive and aesthetic communication that are allowed to maintain their distinctiveness. The importance of "translation" is underlined by the fact that it is being invoked today not only by science studies theorists, but also by postcolonial scholars in the humanities, such as Kwame Anthony Appiah. As recounted earlier in this essay, in the full confidence of the high modernist moment, Robert Redfield told his audience at the Museum of Primitive Art: "Whether we come to see the artifact as a creative mastery of form, or see it as a sign or symbol of a traditional way of life, we are discovering, for ourselves, new territory of our common humanity."³⁷ Fifty years later, in his *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, Appiah reconsiders the notion of universality, but although he eloquently restates a notion of common humanity that acknowledges its genealogical link to thinkers like Redfield, his argument, like Latour's, also emphasizes the irreducible facts of human difference and cultural heterogeneity which can only be resolved by "conversation" and translation. "The position worth defending might be called," Appiah writes, "a partial cosmopolitanism."³⁸ "Cosmopolitans suppose that all cultures have enough overlap in their vocabulary of values to begin a conversation. But they don't suppose, like some universalists, that we could all come to agreement if only we had the same vocabulary."³⁹ As Appiah also makes clear, museums are excellent institutions for enabling translation and conversation:

Conversations across boundaries of identity—whether national, religious, or something else—begin with the sort of imaginative engagement you get when you read a novel or watch a movie or attend to a work of art that speaks

from some place other than your own. So I'm using the word "conversation" not only for literal talk but also as a metaphor for engagement with the experience and ideas of others. And I stress the role of the imagination here because the encounters, properly conducted, are valuable in themselves. Conversation doesn't have to lead to consensus about anything, especially not values; it's enough that it helps people get used to one another.⁴⁰

We have lost the innocence of Redfield's moment, at least with regard to "Primitive Art" and the notion that there are "traditional ways of life" that can be maintained in the fiction of isolation. The weight of the colonial past is upon us, as are the many examples of our common inhumanity. Contemporary artists have entered the art gallery, moved things around so that we see them from new angles, and introduced transgressive media from body fluids to elephant dung. In the anthropology museum, descendants of the makers of the exhibits have burned sweet grass, offered tobacco, feasted, and removed once-static masks to dance them again in their own communities. Such gestures, materials, and actions reestablish networks of connection between human actions, politics, environments, and artifacts. So far, technologies of art and artifact display have proved elastic enough to enable such displays to become changed and enriched by the processes of translation and conversation while remaining recognizable and connected to their own traditions.

40. Ibid, p. 85.

36. Ibid.

37. See note 12.

38. Appiah (see note 2), p. xvii.

39. Ibid., p. 57.