

Zeitschrift: Studies in Communication Sciences : journal of the Swiss Association of Communication and Media Research

Herausgeber: Swiss Association of Communication and Media Research; Università della Svizzera italiana, Faculty of Communication Sciences

Band: 4 (2004)

Heft: 1

Artikel: Museums and the public representation of other cultures : the ethnic exhibitions

Autor: Tota, Anna Lisa

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-790969>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 11.12.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

ANNA LISA TOTA*

MUSEUMS AND THE PUBLIC REPRESENTATION OF OTHER CULTURES: THE ETHNIC EXHIBITIONS

In the last two decades, museums have been theorised as “sites in which socially and culturally embedded theories are performed” (Macdonald), as “contested sites of remembrance” (Zolberg), as space and place “where symbolic boundaries are created and inequalities in society are reinforced” (Lamont and Fournier), as “texts where gendered relations of representation are displayed” (Porter). Studies concerned with issues of museums generally tend to focus on documenting their communicative nature: exhibitions are analysed as communicative media. This is particularly the case among the studies examining the role and the impact of new technologies, the shift between museums on-line and off-line. In this context a relevant contribute derives from the post-colonial debate which focuses, among others, on the distance between the culture to be displayed and the representation constructed by the cultural institution which displays it. Following this perspective, museums are questioned about their commitment to represent differences, about their role as institutional forms of cultural mediation. In this paper most issues posed by the post-colonial are declined into the art museums case. Are there museum displays more reliable and valid than others in representing ethnic cultures? How can we study the process of cultural translation which occurs when cultural artefacts are displayed into an exhibition? Moreover, which are the strategies adopted by the art museums to sustain the fiction that the set of objects displayed somehow constitutes a coherent representational universe?

Keywords: museums, ethnicity, art and public discourse, ethnography, post-colonialism.

* University of Rome III, tota@uniroma3.it

1. The public representation of other cultures

The builders of Cluny filled their churches with monsters to entertain the plebs, but these were a language, they transmitted a message to the few that could understand [...]. Gothic cathedrals had to be visited in the beating rain: it was then that their dragon-shaped gargoyles would come to life, their coloured enamels would shine and, blocking up, that their water pipes would bellow [...]. We must listen to them, just as we should listen to the silent faces of the Maori [...]. They represent the primeval scream, the Word of God, the wailing of the cosmos. (Zolla, 1972, Ital. ed. 1980, p. 8)

Stones sing for those who have ears. In his study on the three Romanesque cloisters of Gerona, San Cugat and Ripoll in Catalonia, Marius Schneider, one of the greatest ethnomusicologists of our time, attributed a musical value to the fantastic figures sculpted on the capitals by applying correspondences from Hindu philosophy¹. As a result he discovered that the series of figures were not chosen at random but corresponded exactly to the notation of Gregorian chants dedicated to the saints depicted in those cloisters. The capitals are sounds carved in stone, they are entire sets of notes, ritual voices that sing only to those who know how to listen.

Schneider's study, and, in its own way, Chatwin's *Songlines* (1987), followed and sung by Australian aborigines, describe cultures that are distant in space and time. In order to understand them, they require forms of perception and narration that transcend the specific limits of our *Weltanschauung*. Schneider described his book (1972) as requiring a sort of "light of the ears" (*ibid.*), a fusion between sight and sound which is essentially outside Western cultural tradition. Chatwin and Schneider's studies are very different in terms of subject matter, discipline as well as the interests that they pursue. Despite their different perspectives, they nevertheless share something which may be described as the dimension of textual rhetoric: they share a poetics which emphasises the partial untranslatability from one culture to another. They are texts which provide an account of their situated character, they state the knowledge limits of the observer who produced them: when stones sing, unusual

¹ A preliminary version of this paper was presented to the 6th ISA Interim - Meeting of the Research Committee Sociology of the Arts held in Barcellona. I thank for their comments Vera Zolberg, Tia DeNora, Bob Witkin, and Jan Marontate.

insights into the knowledge parameters on which Western rationality is founded are obtained. The singing stones, like the songlines, thus become symbols of the partial immeasurability that binds different cultures, making it ever more clear that the pathways of ethnographic knowledge are above all pathways of authority. When an ethnographer chooses what to observe and, even more so, when an ethnographer chooses what to write, (s)he is performing an operation that is anything but neutral from a political point of view, thereby contributing more or less consciously to the legitimization of the dominant ideologies.

Ethnic exhibitions offer a peculiar viewpoint on the problem of partiality in translating between cultures. Museum exhibitions are analysed as a specific form of narration which, when applied to ethnic objects, becomes even more complex insofar as they take on the nature of *ethnographic writing*. Thus analysing exhibition practices becomes one way of examining the appropriacy of the politics of representation of other cultures, cultures which the West has traditionally considered "non-cultures". The pillars on which this work is based represent three different aspects of the same theme. Firstly it will be documented the partial and situated character of all ethnographic knowledge. As regards the specific theme, it will be shown to what extent any culture and any representation of it is partially opaque. Secondly, it will be considered how the writing of an ethnographic text involves the adoption of exhibition styles - poetics - which, at the same time, constitute the politics of representation of the other. Narrating or writing otherness is not a neutral operation, but the active construction of identity. Continuing the analogy with the written text, a museum exhibition can be viewed as a *sui generis* form of writing. It will be focused the problem of representing a culture in the specific context of ethnic exhibitions, highlighting how cultural institutions such as museums act as a medium, which can and must be transformed from temples mummifying ethnic memories into active institutions which work responsibly to achieve social innovation.

2. Ethnography and writing politics

Clifford (1986) is one of the most prominent post-colonial voices in anthropology. His approach, which gained currency in this field, but later spread to other social disciplines, is noteworthy for denouncing the ethnocentrism of traditional anthropology and its inability to suitably describe other cultures. In fact, he strongly criticises traditional anthro-

pology, stressing that it can no longer speak with automatic authority on behalf of others who are considered incapable of speaking for themselves ("primitives", "those without history"). It will be increasingly difficult to keep other peoples at a distance by placing them in a more or less remote time framework. According to Clifford, cultures will not stand still to be depicted. And if someone tries to do so, one only simplifies, and constructs a certain ego-alter relationship, by imposing or negotiating power relations (*ibid.*).

In the last two decades post-colonialism has grown, thanks also to the contributions made by Althusser's approach, Ricoeur's hermeneutics, the different versions of post-structuralism of Derrida and Barthes, as well as the postmodernisms of Jameson, Lyotard and Foucault. Despite their different perspectives these authors have dealt variously with the problem of the limits of representation and helped to situate traditional anthropology within Western scientific discourse.

Since the Eighties the nature of anthropological understanding has been the focus of numerous studies and seminars. In particular in 1984 a series of encounters were instituted in Santa Fe, New Mexico, the results of which constituted an inevitable point of arrival for all later studies. Among those participating were Paul Rabinow, Vincent Crapanzano, Renato Rosaldo, James Clifford, George Marcus, and Mary Louis Pratt. While the ensuing debate proposed pretexts² to systematically exclude the work of feminist ethnographers, who in actual fact had already produced a consolidated body of studies (Weiner 1976; Roberts 1981; Shostak 1981), it finally helped to situate anthropological knowledge within the paradigm of Western knowledge. It was recognised by many that power inequalities had conditioned ethnographic practice (Clifford 1986). The result of all this epistemological ferment was "that cursed book", *Writing Culture*, as David Schneider defined it, which documented unequivocally how anthropology, while not always comparable with literature, was in the final analysis a *sui generis* form of writing. This also helped to renew interest in the analysis of textual politics and poetics, highlighting how writing, like reading, is essentially a *political act of constructing meaning* and, in this specific case, of constructing ethnic identity.

² One of the more rhetorically obscure arguments used to justify their exclusion is Clifford's claim that Feminist writers had not made any major contribution to the theoretical analysis of the textual character of ethnographic monographs, they had little understanding of the rhetorical and textual theory that the post colonial approach sought to apply to ethnography (Clifford, 1986).

Taking these thoughts as a starting point, a process and reflexive conception of ethnography developed which tends to be conceptualised first of all as a social practice. As Marcus points out (1997), ethnography becomes just one of many “writing machines”. Following this perspective, all ethnographic research is profoundly part of organisations producing culture which can be conceived themselves as writing processes. Marcus' idea of a writing machine is a fundamental characteristic of sufficiently reflexive fieldwork that does *not* allow the primitive writing machine of traditional anthropology to survive in splendid isolation (*ibid.*).

Cultures are written, they are represented through writing processes which, as such, are not neutral, but institutionalised within specific discourses. Thus whatever writing process is applied to a culture, it will always be a partial translation of a situated reading.

3. The “narratives” of the exotic: museum exhibitions as a technology of otherness

The exhibition that focused on the museum was Art/artifact. Again, this exhibition was not about African art or Africa. It was not even entirely about art. It was an exhibition about perception and the museum experience, focusing on the ways Westerners have classified and exhibited African objects over the past century. [...] The exhibition showed how we view African objects (both literally and figuratively), arguing that much of our vision of Africa and African art has been conditioned by our own culture. I felt that unless we acknowledge that African art as we see it has been shaped by us as much by Africans, we cannot see it at all. (Vogel 1988, p. 95)

Susan Vogel identifies one of the most important questions regarding the analysis of ethnic exhibitions: if it is plausible to consider museum exhibitions as a determined form of narration, then the subsequent step is to question the nature of the determinants that constitute it. In other words, once we have adopted the textual metaphor of the museum as a form of writing, analysing the politics behind museum exhibitions may then be compared to analysing the poetics of a text. Hence, while traditional writing employs verbal language, a museum exhibition essentially employs visual and spatial languages. It is in the alternance of the said and the unsaid, in the configuration and in the reciprocal structuring of internal spaces that the narration of this *sui generis* text takes shape. As well as functioning as a technology of the memory, it can also act as a

technology of otherness. There is a prosemic organisation of the representations of otherness which the analysis of museum poetics can help to make explicit.

Exhibitions of specifically cultural objects, i.e. ethnic objects, have certain pragmatic assumptions in common. First of all, their intention is often explanatory: they do not limit themselves to showing mute objects, but tend to explain their functions, making them speak in a language that our culture can understand. They explain what type of objects they are, what they are used for, how they work, and what they look like. From this initial assumption there directly follows a second: since the exhibition's aim is prevalently explanatory, this necessarily implies a process of translation. In other words, the explanation mostly takes place through the adoption of cognitive and cultural categories that are specific to the exhibition's visiting public: when I show by explaining, I re-visit the objects using the language of those who will observe. A museum exhibition implies the presence of a museum visitor, who will have a more or less pervasive influence on the process of cultural translation.

In order to analyse the communication dynamics involved, Baxandall (1991) proposes adopting a model that defines the exhibition as a field game involving at least three distinct, autonomous elements - the producer of the objects, the exhibitor and the museum visitor. He further specifies that the three actors are involved in three different but contiguous types of game which take place partially independently within the same museum field. In the present case the most delicate point of intersection is that which connects the producer's point of view with that of the curator. While it is clearly obvious that the processes that produce meanings are greatly influenced by the characteristics of all three participating actors, nevertheless the most likely point in which intercultural misunderstanding is likely to occur is precisely that between "exotic" cultures - according to the representation of the native artist or artisan who produced the object - and the Western culture of the curator who reads the objects on the basis of the cognitive parameters of his/her experiential world. Choosing to exhibit one object rather than another implies *de facto* having initiated a process of evaluation and distinction. Only within a perspective of naive realism can we suppose that the selection processes depend exclusively on the characteristics of the objects per se and, as such, show themselves self-evidently to anyone who has the certified expertise to observe them. In this regard Mary Douglas's contribution (1986) on the relationship between theories of rational choice and symbolic anthro-

pology is illuminating: it documents how subjective selection occurs within categorising processes which greatly depend on the nature itself of the classifications produced by the institutions. Amartya Sen (1982) also deals explicitly with the problem of the relationship between selection and description, stressing that the description is not only based on observation. It implies the idea of selection. According to Sen, every act of description refers to an implied definition to the relative relevance of the different dimensions of a certain issue. This corresponds to Sen's notion of the choosing basis of the description.

In general it is reasonable to argue that the process of choosing is greatly oriented to the values of the observer. This means that when the curator displays the objects, (s)he is already interpreting and is therefore beginning to chart the pre-packaged map of that piece of "exotic" culture that the exhibition seeks to narrate. In their reception visitors to the exhibition will follow different directions, but these are mostly pre-established for them by the curator.

Museum exhibitions can, thus, be redefined as a classifying machine, as a technology of the memory and of otherness or as an institution which thinks, classifies, selects, as an organised means of remembering or forgetting. In particular, in the process of exhibiting cultures, the cases of institutional oblivion can be tantamount to life and death decisions (Douglas, 1986) in the case of pieces of "exotic" culture. This is true in two ways: while on the one hand an ethnic exhibition is a small piece which actively takes part in the social construction of collective representations of the culture which is exhibited, on the other it is at the same time a device which structures social identity. In other words it acts at the level of memory formation, of collective representations as well as of subjectivity, enacting strategies similar to those "making up people" identified by Hacking (1985) in the case of institutions. When a museum exhibition speaks of the exotic, it becomes one of a number of technologies available to social actors to consider otherness or to consider themselves as *others*. As underlined by Karp and Kratz (2000: 194-5), while inventing the Other, the Western cultures come to invent themselves:

the invented Other is often placed downstairs from the upstairs domicile of European and American art "traditions" which museums and exhibits invent and claim. In museum exhibits as such as in other cultural forms, the construction of cultural identity is achieved through two simultaneously occurring processes: (1) the use of exaggerated differences or oppositions that can

be alternately a mode of exploration and understanding or an act of discrimination and (2) the use of varied assertions of sameness or similarity between audience and object ...

Just as in daily life we can recognise the politics of gesture, in the exhibition space on cultures we can trace the politics of exhibitional intent. As Baxandall points out (1991: 38):

Space (intellectual) exists between label (in its extended sense) and artifact because the label is not directly descriptive of the object. It may offer a name: *mbulu-ngulu*. It may offer a material cause: brass sheet and wood. It may offer a final cause: a Kota craftsman. It does not describe the object. It describes the exhibitor's thinking about the object, or that part of his thinking he feels it to be his purpose to communicate to the viewer.

What does a Western visitor think when confronted with a *mbulu-ngulu* of the Kota culture? Even before approaching the cabinet displaying the *mbulu-ngulu* and even before formulating any aesthetic judgement, the observer will be forced to consider it worthy of his/her attention. This is due to the fact that the museum attributes to this object a cultural importance which acts *a priori*, a taken-for-granted which precedes any subjectively formulated judgement. In other words, it is the authority of place, of the museum effect acting as a "ghost writer" (Macdonald 1995: 21), speaking for and *in the place of* any visitor (and sometimes even in the place of the curator).

It is impossible *de facto* to show an object without at the same time providing pieces of information which not only constitute a description but also an explanation i.e. they are the instructions for interpreting that object. In this sense a museum exhibition is always a kind of putting on show, it presupposes a work of "visual assembly" (Ruffini, 1984) like that required for a play. The curator is like a director, whose play is reduced to pure scenery. As regards the putting on show of the Kota object, Baxandall (1991: 34) notes:

Let us take the case of a European or American viewer with a Kota *mbulu-ngulu* by itself in a case or on a wall [...]. He may or may not find it attractive, but for any of a number of reasons - the museum set, the authority of the exhibitors, or his own curiosity about a visually interesting object - he reads a label or catalogue entry with a view to learning about it. Let us say

the label tells him something like the following: the object is made of brass sheet over wood and is the product of the Kota, who live in Gabon and the Republic of the Congo. They venerate their ancestors, and these carvings are made to warn off evil spirits from the remain of ancestors. The label or catalogue entry also makes two other points. One is that the mbulu-ngulu is to be compared with a wooden Fang bieri head [...] The second is that the Kota mbulu-ngulu is an example of the class of objects on which Picasso drew in making the protocubist paintings of 1907.

Taking Baxandall's analysis further, we could add that in this case it appears evident that the intellectual space between the artefact and label is greatly prefigured by what the curator says. Through the curator's translation the object speaks the language of the visitor: "it is an example of the type of objects that inspired Picasso" is the typical *frame* which transforms the valueless unknown into a known surrounded by a halo of genius. The semantic operation in this case is the citation, which employs the authority of a source to construct the importance of what it says. It is as if the curator seeks to justify the principles used to select the objects in the exhibition, saying that the *mbulu-ngulu* is an object that even Picasso would have chosen. In reality the visitor does not per se have any (even remote) intention of questioning the choice made by the curator, because the authority of the museum institution dominates the visitor's interpretative process. Here it even seems to dominate the voice of the curator who appears to forget the fact that (s)he is writing a text (of the exhibition route) that is already partly pre-packaged by the museum institution. In this case what according to the sender of the message (the curator) helped to legitimise the choice made becomes a resource to interpret a material artefact for the recipient (the visitor). Almost immediately the object loses every relationship with the daily life and the function that produced it, so as to take on an aesthetic value - "source of inspiration for geniuses" - which partly distorts it. The *mbulu-ngulu* thus ceases to talk to us of a culture, it loses at least part of its ability to transport us into a daily life with a very different pace from ours, so as to become merely a rhetorical artifice capable of representing our stereotype of the "exotic". It is reduced from the technology of otherness and of the memory of a people to a fetish of an exotic that exists only in our stereotyped representations. As Baxandall (1991) notes, the curator cannot represent a culture, but can only suggest some points of view.

An exhibition is a very specific medium for writing culture: basing itself on material artefacts, it excludes a priori all those ideas and values of a society which are not crystallised in concrete forms, which are not rooted in material objects. In this context it is worth recalling that such representations run the risk of excluding a large part of the collective conscience of a society. Hence the question to ask concerns the partiality of the medium through which we decide to look. With regard to this Drugman (1991) asks: "What if objects are not enough?".

One of the glaring limits of the ethnic exhibition as a technology of otherness is its partial inability to show the aspects of daily life of a social group which have not been crystallised into any form of artefact. A technology of otherness that is in short greatly based on the Western paradigm of product and its consumption which systematically neglects a large part of the world of dreams and ideas. Therefore, while an exhibition on ethnic art has little difficulty in talking to us about the artistic products of a society, the painting techniques used, the materials employed and perhaps also about everyday life through the images reproduced in the paintings or sculptures, it is less able to provide answers to questions on the inner world, on the *Zeitgeist* and on the profound meanings of existence which that world shared. We thus have a different perspective on the much debated question of the gnosiological immeasurability between subjectivity and otherness. As Geertz recalls (1983), cultural relativism has argued that it is practically impossible to know the imagination of another people or of another period in the same way as one's own. Geertz, however, criticises this position, holding that the creative production of all peoples may be at the same time totally theirs and part of us (*ibid.*).

4. When exhibitions talk to us about their curators

"The problem with things is that they are dumb. They are not eloquent, as some thinkers in art museums claim. They are dumb. And if by some ventriloquism they seem to speak, they lie. The mendacity of objects is all too familiar to makers of collections and exhibitions: once removed from the continuity of everyday uses in time and space and made exquisite on display, stabilised and conserved, objects are transformed in the meanings that they may be said to carry: they become moments of ownership, commodities." (Crew and Sims: 159)

The mendacity of objects is a theme that is particularly dear to the more epistemologically aware anthropologists, as Geertz (1983) who analyses Helms's famous work (1882) on the cremation of widows in Bali: what struck him, just as what strikes any reader even today, is the mixture of horror and aesthetic contemplation that the young Danish anthropologist expresses in recalling an event "that none present could ever forget" (Helms, 1882). The question raised concerns the relationship between us and the artefacts of a society that is culturally very distant such as Balinese culture. Bali in a certain sense is a symbolic case, insofar as for a long time Western anthropologists faced innumerable difficulties in interpreting it. Thus, while the Balinese language has no term to express the concept of art, nevertheless creativity and artistic sensitivity are so widespread in the population as to lead the British anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer to describe the Balinese as a people of artists. Thus it would be worth considering the exhibitional intent that could appropriately inform an exhibition regarding the aesthetic sense of the Balinese.

In analysing the relationship between ethnicity and post-modern arts of the memory, Fischer (1986) suggests that the most suitable manner of representing ethnicity is to use open texts in which the author - or in our case the curator - gives expression to the various voices, also allowing the reader-visitor to hear the original ones. Far from being configured as a "biography of the writer" (*ibid.*), therefore, such an ethnography would provide space and expression to its interlocutors. The same also applies to museum exhibitions: there are ethnic exhibitions which, rather than describing and narrating distant and exotic cultural universes, talk to visitors about the socio-cultural characteristics of their curators. This is something which can always be observed. Indeed exhibitions, like ethnographies, are always to some extent biographies of their curators. In other words, given a particular exhibition, it is always possible to conduct an analysis which reflexively makes the characteristics of the observation point of that culture explicit. We can use the poetics of a museum exhibition to understand the *Weltanschauung* politics which generated it. What counts is the awareness which the curator is capable of incorporating into the exhibition. Like any other text, an exhibition, too, can be reflexive. In analysing the relationship between museums and culture, Lavine and Karp (1991) deal with this problem from two points of view: a) the situated character of every perspective on otherness and b) its intrinsic disputability. If the viewpoints are recognised as plural and intersubjective, they lose that authority conferred on them by the object and

potentially become subject to negotiation and conflict. Far from being pure abstract reflections, Lavine and Karp's observations question the very definition of the museum institution. If the museum can reasonably be considered a form of cultural mediation, a medium for producing and consolidating identity, it becomes interesting as well as necessary to also apply to this field all the wider-ranging observations which sociology has brought to bear on the media. The crucial question becomes: given their capacity to make available to the social actors resources to construct pieces of identity, given their efficacy as technologies producing gender (De Lauretis 1996), memory or otherness, can a democratic society continue to afford a media system which in the name of an apparent and ideological neutrality plays no explicit function of social innovation? As regards ethnic exhibitions, this question is illustrated by the case of the exhibition *Te Maori*, organised in 1984 by the Metropolitan Museum of Art with the participation of Maori elders who agreed to transport their sacred objects (*taonga*). As Lavine and Karp state (1991: 2):

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

Museums have currently shown new levels of attention with regard to the need to support initiatives designed to raise the power of local social groups on the ways in which their culture is "museified". This as a result of the awareness of that exhibitions on ethnic artefacts are a powerful medium. New York's El Museo del Barrio or Boston's National Centre of Afro-American Artists, respectively devoted to Hispanic and Afro-American art, are important cases of institutional innovation. When exhibitions speak of cultures, it is increasingly important to give expression to

the legitimate custodians of those cultures. In this context, it is equally important to recognise that writing culture through an exhibition is a complex operation and, as such, requires specific skills capable of highlighting the always incomplete nature of any exhibition that is also always a cultural representation (Hallam and Street 2000). With regard to the issue raised by the Maori Adrienne Kaeppler (1991: 12) asks:

“Are Maoris and their heritage to be considered separate from [...] other Pacific islanders who make New Zealand their home? Will museums be on the forefront of cultivating new kinds of identity and educating the population about them? [...] Should they echo the political climate or should they be a force for change?”

What is at stake is not only the identity and the memory of a society - already enough in itself - but the very identity of museums which may increasingly be transformed from temples of mummified memories into collective actors that have to take on specific institutional responsibilities. In this case the museums could cease to induce sadness (Boon, 1991) and be transformed into institutional arenas negotiating identities and collective memories, consciously and reflexively playing the role - which, in any case, they have always performed - of technologies of memory or, in the case of ethnic exhibitions, the equally delicate one of technologies of otherness.

5. The Japanese *mitate*, the Indian *rasa* and African art

A museum exhibition is first of all an exhibition of gaze, a structured point of observation on reality. A museum is a medium (Macdonald, 1995) and, as such, produces descriptions of reality which, far from being *natural*, are conditioned by a series of structural characteristics. For example when it acts as a technology of otherness, the museum tends naturally to produce authoritarian descriptions of the other. The museum effect consists of conferring objectivity and universality to the partial representations of the reality it produces. Going back to the example of Baxandall, this means that the *mbulu-ngulu* becomes a mysterious, exotic, proto-Cubist object and a source of inspiration for artists such as Picasso. The exhibition presents them to us in this way and this makes it intrinsically *true*. For the visitor the *mbulu-ngulu* really is “that object”. But if we consider the point of view of the artisan who produced it, the museum

description appears to be utterly absurd, false, incapable of understanding the religious, emotional and symbolic world represented by an object celebrating the cult of ancestors. In actual fact the *mbulu-ngulu* according to the exhibition and the *mbulu-ngulu* according to the Kota culture are two different objects. It is not that a museum exhibition cannot also represent the partiality of its gaze, but this requires a conscious effort on the part of the curator. It requires the production of situated and reflexive texts (i.e. exhibition routes), capable of dialoguing with the authority effect of the museum form.

To this end a number of interesting experiments have been conducted, which have not only aroused the attention of the public, but also that of museum practitioners and researchers. Among the studies available particular importance should be paid to Masao Yamaguchi's analysis of the role and meaning of the *mitate* in Japanese culture, Goswamy's study on the experience of the *rasa* in Indian art and those of Susan Vogel (such as her analysis of *Art/artefact*, an itinerant exhibition on African art, mounted in several American museums between February 1988 and June 1990).

Yamaguchi (1991) makes a major contribution in the analysis of exhibition poetics in Japanese culture, essentially based on the *mitate*, a form of art citation. In Japan this art has extended both to daily objects and artistic objects. In Western terms we can describe it as a special form of "intertextuality" (Kristeva, 1969) which is widespread in everyday Japanese life and applied to objects. Yamaguchi (1991: 58) makes an analogy with Baudrillard's concept of simulacrum: "Mitate, then, is the technique used to associate objects of ordinary life with mythological or classical images, familiar to all literate people". In Japan *mitate* is used to amplify the image of an object and overcome the temporal limits. The author analyses a famous example of *mitate*, that of *The Pillow Book* by Sei Shonagon, a court lady who lived in the Xth century:

In this episode a princess asks her ladies-in-waiting what name they would give a scene of a snow-covered mound in a garden. One of them immediately replies, "The snow of Mount Koro in China" [...] The image of the snow-covered mound was given a mythological dimension by associating it a well-known image from the Chinese classics. (*ibid.*: 58).

For the purposes of this discussion the analysis of the Japanese *mitate* is important insofar as it provides a specific example of how classification systems are culturally determined. A museum exhibition which intends to

actually be multi-cultural, must find ways of dealing with cultural translation issues such as those raised by the Japanese *mitate* technique. Another interesting case in point is the relationship between *rasas* and art in Indian culture. Goswamy (1991) compares the cases of two exhibitions of Indian art, which he helped to mount. The first exhibition was entitled *Rasa: les neuf visages de l'art indien*, put on in Paris in 1986 and the second *Essence of Indian Art* put on at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco in the autumn of the same year. The concept of *rasas* is central to an understanding of Indian art, insofar as these are intimately connected with it. The *rasas* indicate emotional states (originally eight, a ninth one being added later) which the observer of a work of art can experience (*ibid.*, p. 71):

"These conditions, or sentiments, are the erotic [...], the comic [...], the pathetic [...], the furious [...], the heroic [...], the terrible [...], the odious [...], the marvelous [...], and the quiescent [...]."

The Indian concept of *rasa* considers the aesthetic experience as generated entirely by the individual, insofar as it considers that what the individual can see in a work is in the first place that which reflects it. Works of art are merely vehicles of representation. In putting on these two exhibitions the intention was precisely that of communicating, at least partially, to the Western visitor the meaning of Indian art - as set out by the theory of the *rasa*. It was not a case of simply showing the artefacts but of translating a certain type of aesthetic experience, or at least trying to do so. One initial problem which emerged was the impossibility of linking a *rasa* experience to each exhibited work. In fact, in this case, the exhibition could become exhausting for its visitors, and this did not correspond to the curators' intentions. For the Paris exhibition three nine-sided polygonal tables were made, around which nine visitors could sit and see the works appear before them with display times determined by a timer. Regardless of the success or failure of this exhibition, what counts most as far as we are concerned is the difficulty of cultural translation which exhibitions make evident. Susan Vogel's studies on the exhibitions regarding African art are also enlightening on this issue. Vogel explicitly affirms (1991: 201):

The fact that museums recontextualise and interpret objects is a given, requiring no apologies. They should, however, be self-aware and open about

the degree of subjectivity that is also a given. Museum professionals must be conscious about what they do and why, and they should inform the public that what it sees is not material that “speak for itself” but material filtered through the tastes, interests, politics, and state of knowledge of particular presenters at a particular moment in time. The museum must allow the public to know that it is not a broad frame through which the art and culture of the world can be inspected, but a tightly focused lens that shows the visitor a particular point of view. It could hardly be otherwise.

All her observations centre on the effects of museums' efforts to recontextualise objects. Vogel, who has many years of experience in mounting exhibitions on African art, has tried various means to question her curatorial work within the meaning-making pathways that exhibitions activate in visitors: one such interesting example was her attempt to question the criteria used in selecting the exhibits. In *The Art of Collecting African Art* - mounted at the Center for African Art in New York in 1988 - all the objects were exhibited, including those discarded by the curator as mediocre or clearly fake. In addition the labels used were informal, so as to highlight the fact that they were by no means neutral, but highly subjective opinions. In short this exhibition explicitly attempted to question the presumed objectivity of the museum exhibition as a form of representation of other cultures. In sociological terms, it was a reflexive poetics of exhibition. If reflexivity, in fact, is no longer conceived as rhetorical tool but is used as practical issue, it may become a very powerful mean to change the politics of museum displays. On this respect, reflexivity seems to be the most effective way for representing (or inventing) “otherness”, and understanding that in doing this we are also describing ourselves.

References

- BAXANDALL, M. (1991). Exhibiting intention: some preconditions of the visual display of culturally proposed objects. In: KARP, I. & LAVINE, S. D. (eds): 33-41 (Italian translation: Intento espositivo. Alcune precondizioni per mostre di oggetti espressamente culturali. In: KARP, I. & LAVINE, S. D. (eds) (1995:15-26).
- BOON, J. A. (1991). Perché i musei mi mettono tristezza. In: KARP, I. & LAVINE, S. D. (eds.) (Italian translation 1995: 137-68).
- CASSANO, F. (1996). *Il pensiero meridiano*, Bari: Laterza.
- CHATWIN, B. (1987). *The Songlines* (Italian translation: *Le vie dei canti*, Milano: Adelphi 1988).
- CLIFFORD, J. (1986). Introduzione: verità parziali. In: CLIFFORD, J. & MARCUS, G. E. (eds.) (Italian translation 1997: 23-52).
- CLIFFORD, J. & MARCUS, G. E. (eds.) (1986). *Writing Culture: Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- CREW, S. R. & SIMS, J. E. (1991). Locating Authenticity: Fragments of a Dialogue. In: KARP, I. & LAVINE, S. D. (eds.):159-175.
- DE LAURETIS, T. (1987). *Technologies of Gender. Essays in Theory, Film and Fiction*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- DOUGLAS, M. (1986). *How Institution Think*, Syracuse, New York Syracuse: University Press.
- DRUGMAN, F. (1991). Una meravigliosa risonanza. In: KARP, I. & LAVINE, S. D. (eds.) (Italian translation 1995: VII-XII).
- DUITZ, M. (1992). L'anima di un museo: il Brooklyn Children's Museum al servizio della comunità. In: KARP, I.; MULLEN KREAMER, C. & LAVINE, S. D. (eds.) (Italian translation 1995: 31-56).
- FISCHER, M. J. (1986). Etnicità e arti postmoderne della memoria. In: CLIFFORD, J. & MARCUS, G. E. (eds.) (Italian translation 1997: 245-92).
- GEERTZ, C. (1983). *Local Knowledge. Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*, New York: Basic Books.
- GOSWAMY, B. N. (1991). Altro passato, altro contesto: esporre l'arte indiana all'estero. In: KARP, I. & LAVINE, S. D. (eds.) (Italian translation 1995: 61-74).
- HACKING, I. (1985). *Reconstructing Individualism*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- HALLAM, E. & STREET, B. V. (eds.). (2000). *Cultural Encounters. Representing "Otherness"*, London: Routledge.
- HELMS, L. V. (1882). *Pioneering in the Far East and Journeys to California in 1849 and to the White Sea in 1848*, London.
- YAMAGUCHI, M. (1991). La poetica dell'esposizione nella cultura giapponese. In: KARP, I. & LAVINE, S. D. (eds.) (Italian translation 1995: 47-60).
- JEDLOWSKI, P. (1994). *Il sapere dell'esperienza*, Milano: il Saggiatore.
- JEDLOWSKI, P. (2000). *Storie comuni. La narrazione nella vita quotidiana*, Milano: Bruno Mondadori.
- KAEPLER, A. (1991). *Paradise Regained: The Role of Pacific Museums in Forging National Identity*, unpublished paper.
- KARP, I. & KRATZ, C. A. (2000). Reflections on the fate of Tippoos Tiger. Defining cultures through public display. In: HALLAM, E. & STREET, B. V. (eds.): 194-228.
- KARP, I. (1992). Musei e comunità: la politica dell'intervento culturale pubblico. In:

- KARP, I.; MULLEN KREAMER, C. & LAVINE, S. D. (eds.) (1992). (Italian translation 1995: 7-29).
- KARP, I. & LAVINE, S. D. (eds.) (1991). *Exhibiting Cultures. The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, Washington: Smithsonian Institution.
- KARP, I.; MULLEN KREAMER, C. & LAVINE, S. D. (eds.) (1992). *Museums and Communities. The Politics of Public Culture*, Washington: Smithsonian Institution (Italian translation: *Musei e identità. Politica culturale delle collettività*, Bologna: CLUEB 1995).
- KUO WEI TCHEN, J. (1992). *Fondare un museo dialogico: l'esperienza del Chinatown History Museum*. In: KARP, I.; MULLEN KREAMER, C. & LAVINE, S. D. (eds.) (Italian translation 1995: 57-108).
- LAVINE, S. D. & KARP, I. (1991). *Musei e culture*. In: KARP, I. & LAVINE, S. D. (eds.) (Italian translation 1995: 169-80).
- MARCUS, G. E. (1997). *Prefazione all'edizione italiana. "Quel dannato libro"*. In: CLIFFORD, J. & MARCUS, G. E. (eds.) (Italian translation 1997: 9-18).
- MACDONALD, S. (1995). *Consuming science: public knowledge and the dispersed politics of reception among museum visitors*, *Media, Culture & Society* 17: 13-29.
- ROBERTS, H. (ed.) (1981). *Doing Feminist Research*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- RUFFINI, F. (1984). *Remarques sur le montage au théâtre*. In: *Approaches de l'Opéra, Actes de Colloque AISS (Royaumont)*, Paris: Didier.
- SCHNEIDER, M. (1972). *Pietre che cantano. Studi sul ritmo di tre chiostri catalani di stile romanico*, Milano: Guanda.
- SEN, A. (1982). *Choice, Welfare and Measurement*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- SHOSTAK, M. (1981). *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- TOTA, A. L. (1999). *Sociologie dell'arte. Dal museo tradizionale all'arte multimediale*, Roma: Carocci.
- VOGEL, S. (1988). *Art/artifact: African Art in Anthropology Collections*, New York: Center for African Art.
- VOGEL, S. (1991). *Sempre fedeli all'oggetto, a modo nostro*. In: KARP, I. & LAVINE, S. D. (eds.) (Italian translation 1995: 119-36).
- WEINER, A. (1976). *Women of Value, Men of Renown*, Austin: University of Texas Press.
- ZOLLA, E. (1972). *Prefazione a Schneider* (Italian translation 1980: 7-9).