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REVIEW ARTICLE

EXHIBITING DIFFERENCE

JEREMY MACCLANCY

IVAN KARP and STEVEN D. LAVINE (eds.), *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, Washington, DC, and London: Smithsonian Institution Press 1991. x, 468 pp., Figures, Photographs. $40.00/$15.95.

IVAN KARP, CHRISTINE MULLEN KREAMER and STEVEN D. LAVINE (eds.), *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*, Washington, DC, and London: Smithsonian Institution Press 1992. x, 614 pp., Figures, Photographs. $45.00/ $16.95.

MICHAEL O'HANLON, *Paradise: Portraying the New Guinea Highlands*, London: British Museum Press for the Trustees of the British Museum 1993. 96 pp., Bibliography, Index, Figures, Plates, £10.95.

Paradise: Change and Continuity in the New Guinea Highlands, London: Museum of Mankind (the Ethnography Department of the British Museum), 15 July 1993–July 1995.

IN the last five years museum studies has been established as a respectable and popular quasi-discipline: the literature is already burgeoning and some academics are even preparing courses on 'critical museology'. What is surprising is not that this new academic domain has recently appeared but that its emergence has taken so long. After oil and the manufacture of cars, tourism and leisure comprise the third largest industry in the world. In the UK a new museum opens almost every

week and museum managers vie with one another and with the curators of poorly budgeted state museums, for visitors. The idea of Westerners practising an almost obsessive 'museum culture' was already so well established twenty years ago that contemporary composers (such as Harrison Birtwhistle), performance artists (such as Antony Howell), and other leaders of the subversive edge of the avant-garde were even then parodying its consequences. It is equally surprising that the academic study of the problematic nature of ethnographic museum display has taken so long to be included on the anthropological agenda. For anthropologists have been well aware for some time of the difficulties attendant on attempting to represent other cultures. The two new brick-heavy tomes produced by the Smithsonian should not, therefore, be seen as particularly innovative, but rather as developing an already established debate.

Both books are internally divided into parts, each prefaced by several pages of commentary from one of the editors. So many issues are discussed in these two volumes that I can only deal with a very few here. Some contributors discuss the ways the medium—the museum exhibition—affects the message—the portrayal of another culture. As Svetlana Alpers points out, it is difficult for visitors to be uninfluenced by 'the museum effect': the laying out of objects in such a manner that people scrutinize them more for their aesthetic qualities than for the stories they may be made to tell about other forms of life. At the same time, the contrary type of exhibition, presented in a strongly narrative manner, runs the risk of reducing visitors' potential interpretations into one, supposedly authoritative story-line. One exit from this apparent impasse is to exploit 'the museum effect' by exhibiting the objects in such a way as to reveal the aesthetics of a different culture, by suggesting to visitors that items of material culture can be categorized, viewed, and appreciated in terms and sensations other than those of industrialized Western society. Another exit is for curators simultaneously to proffer alternative and not necessarily complementary readings of the material on view; a further possibility is to present different parts of the same exhibition in different ways: either way the dangerous tendency towards authoritativeness on the part of the presenter is deliberately undercut and the visitor is provided with a sense of potential creativity. In this way visiting a museum exhibition holds the promise of becoming a thoughtful encounter, rather than simply a tour of objects on parade.

Michael Baxandall chooses to concentrate not on the exhibition itself, but on the making of exhibitions. In other words, the process by which the different participants (the producers of displayed objects, the exhibitors, the sponsors, the intended audience etc.) negotiate and try to work together over what is to be displayed, and how. This is contested—at times highly contested—terrain, where the interested parties argue over who has the right to project the identity, or identities, of a culture within the museum space. For example, three contributors debate the exhibition *Hispanic Art in the United States: Thirty Contemporary Painters and Sculptors*, held at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston and other venues from 1987. Its organizers argue that their primary concern was to re-evaluate positively the work of several artists of Chicano background; Tomas

Ybarra-Frausto, himself a Chicano, counter-argues that its organizers homogenized the variety within the Chicano artistic community and muffled the challenge its members present to Western notions of aesthetics—another form of 'the museum effect'? The underlying tension here concerns the terms on which the art of a people is to be exhibited in the temples of Western culture: by having their art seen as beeing as aesthetically valid as that which fills the Louvre, the National Gallery and the Met, or by questioning the very notion of art embodied by such once-venerable institutions?

According to various contributors, some curators try to resolve problems surrounding the making of exhibitions by inviting the audience for which their shows are intended to participate in their organization. Some try to involve the owners or producers of the objects in the exhibition process itself. But thorny issues quickly arise. Who is to have the ultimate say in what is shown? How is one to resolve the dilemma of pleasing a previously denigrated minority culture by exhibiting aspects of its ways of life without at the same time ignoring unpalatable—to members of the exhibited culture—aspects of its past? The potential scope for inflamed debate is huge.

One solution is simply to give the objects back to the descendants of their original owners and to allow them to display them in whichever way they choose. For if, as Carol Duncan demonstrates in her essay, the grand national art museums in Washington, France and the UK are physical embodiments of national identity, and if visiting them is a 'ritual of citizenship', then an indigenous group, newly enriched with its repatriated objects can, if its members so wish, display their own sense of identity by exhibiting the returned items in a manner they consider culturally appropriate. The two Northwest Coast museums run by Northwest Coast Native Americans, discussed by James Clifford in his contribution, are a case in point. Of course, grave questions about the notion of ownership then emerge to trouble this politically corrected scene, for who exactly 'owns' what? If repatriation is not to cause as many problems as it is meant to solve, then possible answers to these questions need to be very carefully researched before any 'handing back' is considered. Clifford's essay is indeed a case in point, for further work in the same area by Barbara Saunders of the University of Utrecht has revealed how the indigenous museums have become part of a local power-play, one where the latter-day possessors of the objects are using their ownership of them to boost both their own (contested) position and their own (contested) conception of their group. For those who know what they are looking at, a tour of these two museums does not simply tell us about Northwest Coast portrayals of Northwest Coast ways of life, it also tells us much about contemporary interfactional differences expressed via the exhibition of objects (see Saunders forthcoming).

The main strength of these two books is that they can serve as compendia of the way issues in museum studies are being debated now. Their various contributors repeatedly underscore the essentially political and problematic nature of museum display and the complex arena within which decisions about exhibitions are made. They do not provide any easy answers, because there aren't

any. What they do provide is a guide to the sort of negotiated solutions that curators and others are today attempting to achieve. Instead of authority and timelessness encased in an Anglo-Saxon domain, they stress compromise and provisionality in a multicultural world. The main weakness of the books is that they are unnecessarily long. Given that the quality of the essays is very uneven and that the message of several of them is somewhat repetitive, it is hard not to feel that the editors could have been much more harsh in their selection. Two slimmer books, with fewer papers, would still have contained the same essential points and would have presented them in a more effective manner.

Michael O'Hanlon's *Paradise* is a very different sort of book. Admirably concise and unrepetitive, it was written to accompany the eponymous exhibition which he has organized at the Museum of Mankind. In his book O'Hanlon sketches the 'crash course of modernity' undergone by the Wahgi (the New Guinean group with whom he lived as a doctoral student) since the first arrival of Whites sixty years ago. But all has not been sudden change among the Wahgi for, as O'Hanlon demonstrates, they had been adapting to altering circumstances even before the Whites turned up, and they continued in the same adaptable mode afterwards. With the end of the Pax Australiana, for instance, skirmishing has reappeared, but this time with guns as well as with spears, and with shields decorated with both traditional border patterns and stylized representations of advertisements and beer-bottle designs.

What makes *Paradise* different from the usual run-of-the-mill exhibition catalogue is not just O'Hanlon's concern to correct any popular stereotyping of the Wahgi as Stone Age jungle-dwellers, but his desire to portray the process by which he collected the objects for the exhibition. He wishes to show how Wahgi principles simultaneously constrained and aided his efforts, how local agencies and perceptions influenced what he could collect. His account does not stop there but goes on to describe the process of putting the Wahgi artefacts on exhibition in the Museum of Mankind. Here an alternative set of principles and constraints pertain, determining what can be shown, in what way, and at what time. O'Hanlon is right to wish to remind us that the final outcome is not the simple product of a single-minded curator but the negotiated result of a complex procedure during which he/she has to operate in a successive variety of contexts, each with its own habitual practices and proscriptions. In recent years there have been many personal accounts of fieldwork; O'Hanlon's essay is, to my knowledge, one of the first personal accounts of the nature of collecting and of its endpoint—in a national gallery in the heart of London.

And the exhibition itself? A triumph of perseverance and imagination over economy of means. O'Hanlon would have liked to have shown more, in more space. But there wasn't the money, so we must be grateful for what we get. Despite this obstacle, the exhibition achieves its aim, for only the most blinkered or resolutely prejudiced of visitors could come away from it without gaining some idea of the ways in which Papua New Guinea is developing. True, old trading shells and some traditional ritual structures are on view, but so are a modern trade-

store, gorgeous net-bags bearing contemporary designs, and bullet-holed shields painted in the colours of local lager companies.

Survival International used to complain about the Museum of Mankind's habit of mounting exhibitions which represented a people as living in some timeless, supposedly traditional manner, and rightly so. This time I am sure they would only wish to cheer.

Reference

Saunders, Barbara forthcoming. 'Contested *ethnie* in Two Kwakiutl Museums', in Jeremy MacClancy (ed.), *Anthropology, Art and Contested Identities.*

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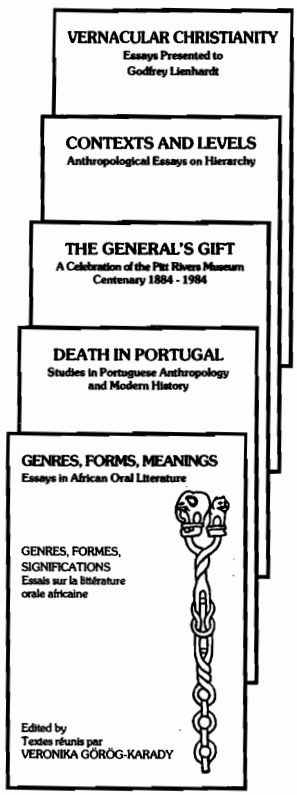

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