
COMPETENCES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF ETHNOGRAPHIC MUSEUMS AS GLOBAL ACTORS

Anette Rein

193

ABSTRACT

The article begins with the central issue of exhibiting ethnographic artifacts. Either museums reduce objects to art objects according to the Western concept, or the context of artifacts is shown, as analyzed by curators. The description of the three stages of muzealization demonstrates the fragmentation of any museum object. Through the history of ethnographic museums and several examples of exhibitions it is shown how the perspective of the other(s) turned from a relational approach into one of the OtherS. The text ends with an appeal to ethnographic museums to embrace their political responsibility.

Key words: ethnographic museums, history of museums, different concepts of exhibiting ethnographic objects, others and OtherS, relational approach

COLLECTING AND EXHIBITING

Maori cloaks (*kakahu*), made from the shiny New Zealand flax, were traditionally woven by women using a special technique called finger-weaving (*whatu*).¹ During the weaving process the women had to comply with several taboos, such as not eating or drinking, or working when menstruating. The preparation of the flax fibres and the delicate weaving process required all their concentration if it was to be successful.² It was believed that the woven thread connects ancestors with their descendants.³ The production of a single cloak took about one year. Some of the weavers “signed” the cloaks on the back with their individual little pattern in red. These cloaks of different material, of different length and with different decoration, were extraordinary objects because they represented more than simply status and prestige for their owners. These items were not made to remain in the hands of one owner but had to circulate. While cloaks were regularly exchanged between chiefs, or important men and women,

¹ Many thanks to Lisa Renard who gave an exciting workshop about the weaving process and the concept of *mana* in the Linden-Museum on 6 May 2012 and who did the proof reading of this text. As an expert on Maori traditions she inspired me to use the exhibited cloaks as a classical example for the situation in which curators are caught between the devil and the deep blue sea while displaying only fragments of ethnographic contexts.

² I decided to use the past tense because I mainly rely on an old cloak. But as Lisa Renard has pointed out, even today the women have to respect several taboos during the weaving process.

³ Heermann & Veys 2012: 78.

their temporary owners could accumulate the concentrated *mana* (spiritual power) connected with the cloaks. If a cloak – after the long journey from one hand to the next – returned to its first owner (which happened in only a few cases) this represented the greatest amount of *mana* or spiritual power, an owner could accumulate.

However, *mana* as spiritual power was not only allocated to a cloak as a valuable material object. The concept has to be understood as a complex system of elements that have to be in harmony so that *mana* can be present. A cloak alone was a very powerful item, but to activate *mana* for its owner, his/her cloak had to be worn and had to be connected, for example with the landscape, ancestors, the tribe, the language (*te reo*), the other *taonga* (ancestral treasures worn by the prestigious people of the tribe), the *moko* (tattoo), and the personality of the owner, who had to have a special attitude while wearing the cloak.

194



Fig. 1: Two Maori cloaks, left: *tukakumai* made and owned by Kohai Grace 2010; right: *kaitaka* with *taniko* border, 19th century; Linden-Museum Stuttgart. (Photo: Anette Rein, 2012)⁴

In the exhibition “Maori. Die ersten Bewohner Neuseelands” (“Maori, The first inhabitants of New Zealand”⁵; 01.04.-14.10.2012), the Linden-Museum in Stuttgart shows several historical cloaks in different display cases. From a Maori perspective, through the special weaving technique these cloaks have their own voices. Consequently, any presentation in a museum requires a special approach and usually the request is for a display as close as possible to how the cloaks would look when worn. The result can be seen see on Figure 1, on the cloak on the right, which is wrapped around a stand resembling the shape of a human body.⁶ The

⁴ Thanks to Inès de Castro for approving the publication of my picture.

⁵ Translated by the author.

⁶ Ingrid Heermann e-mail: 10 May 2012. „...die meisten anderen wünschten (oder bestanden auf einer) eine mehr den Tragegewohnheiten entsprechende Präsentation, um ‚die Stimme‘ der Webarbeiten zu erhalten.“ While preparing items for a display case, the voice of the conservators is one of the strongest. If they decide that a hanging of the cloaks would damage the cloaks, there is no other way than of a lying position for the textiles – although this contradicts the concepts of the Maori completely” (Renard 2012, oral comment).

contemporary artist Kohai Grace, creator of the second cloak, seen in the centre, agreed to the flat hanging of her artefact.

Referring to the concept of *mana* and the belief in the spiritual power of any cloak woven with the finger technique, the decoration of the display case seems to be a very poor one that fails to communicate the vivid Maori spiritual traditions. The complex narrative is reduced to a fixed position and the objects are presented as “glass-cased [...] to be gazed upon, admired, and understood only in relation to themselves”⁷ and in relation to the biography of the one who admires them. This follows the Western art concept and mediates the aesthetic quality of the objects. Neither the process of decoration together with the dialogues between the curators and the Maoris, nor the reduction or fragmentation into single, material or technical aspects of the displayed items is mentioned in the text (“Sozialer Status”) seen in the display case or in the catalogue. Although the curators corresponded with Maori representatives, the displayed cloaks underwent a process of “musealization”, which will be discussed in detail in what follows.

PROCESSES OF MUSEALIZATION⁸

According to Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett,⁹ all ethnographic objects are “an art of excision, of detachment, an art of excerpt. Where does the object begin and where does it end? [...] Shall we exhibit the [collected] cup with the saucer, the tea, the cream and sugar, the spoon, the napkin and placement, the table, the chair the rug? Where do we stop? Where do we make the cut?” She prefers not to talk about *ethnographic objects* but about *ethnographic fragments*, created by ethnographers who made their personal choice in the field, segmented, detached, and carried the artefacts away to become part of a museum collection. The different steps are elaborated in the process of musealisation which, according to Anja Laukötter, consists of three steps.¹⁰ Figuratively they correspond with the classic model of liminality in rituals that, following Arnold van Gennep,¹¹ can be summarized colloquially as: *remove – recreate – reintegrate*.¹²

First: *removed* from their original context, the things are robbed of their function – they are taken out of time and space – in order to be exported in this still *unclean* condition for further processing.

⁷ Macdonald 1999: 2.

⁸ Rein 2011b.

⁹ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1990, p. 388

¹⁰ Laukötter 2010, pp. 120.

¹¹ In 1909, Van Gennep described the structure of rites of passage for the first time. In the exhibition *Reisen und Entdecken. Vom Sepik an den Main* (October 27, 2007-August 30, 2009) the various steps of musealization were staged and explained in a companion book to the exhibition (cf. Raabe 2008).

¹² I wish to thank Dr. Matthias Jenny, director of the Palmengarten in Frankfurt am Main for the information that these three steps of musealization not only apply to things, but also to plants. The arrangements of plants in public shows are not to be equated with nature, but rather represent our Western idea of nature. The composition of arrangements and collections also lies in the responsibility of curators. In German the terms are *raus – rüber – rein*.

Second: the semantic change of the objects takes place along a prescribed path through the various departments of the museum: in a process of gassing, inventory, conservation, restoration and declaration. They are integrated into the museum's system of rules and regulations in the workrooms far from the public eye. Dislodged from their true symbolic context, the objects are sorted according to principles of materiality, authenticity, analogy, causality or functionality and then assigned to a culture – ergo, *recreated*.

In this second step, the prerogative of interpretation is defined after physical appropriation has taken place. The objects become scientifically legitimized and are often declared exceptional. Specially chosen pieces are given this mark of quality by labelling them as *top exhibit* or *masterpiece* for the general public.¹³ An object that has been sanctified in this way comes to represent an entire culture, since ethnographic museums never show the people themselves, but only their forms of cultural expression.¹⁴

196

Third: the last step of musealization is its exhibition. The visitors' individual perspectives give things their exclusive aura and thus turn them into museum objects.¹⁵ Their new status is now also perceived by the public and thus they are *reintegrated*.

“For the museum context, a single object was not sufficient. Instead, it needed [...] an exhibited collection in order to fulfil the expectations that had been created.”¹⁶ Only with the help of the presented objects, a sheer vast mass of things, could e.g. ethnographical museums convincingly demonstrate to the public their expertise in the mastery of knowledge and the interpretation of the world in the midst of the ostensible chaos of cultural diversity. The final decision of what is shown in an exhibition, and in what way, resides with the curator – the established scientific expert.¹⁷

For a better understanding about changing paradigms in collecting and exhibiting ethnographic objects, let us have a brief look into the history of museums.

THE BEGINNINGS OF ETHNOGRAPHIC MUSEUMS

In Europe the 16th and 17th centuries, collecting became an obsession of rulers, aristocrats, churches and, later, of academics. The natural sciences had not yet developed and people worldwide collected exciting and exotic things for their curio galleries.¹⁸ Such collections were intended to prove that the objects

¹³ See: *Being Object – Being Art. Meisterwerke aus den Sammlungen des Museums der Weltkulturen Frankfurt am Main*, <http://www.mdw-frankfurt.de/Deutsch/> (March 21, 2010).

¹⁴ Köstering 2003: 17.

¹⁵ Laukötter 2010: 121.

¹⁶ Id.

¹⁷ Laukötter 2010: 122.

¹⁸ Cabinet of wonders or curiosity (Golding 2011: 38)

therein were examples of the varieties of the creational act. The criteria for collected pieces were the unusual and the rare. Ethnographic objects were seen as equal to European ones and all artefacts were presented according to their material conditions and functions. Neither the provenance nor the traditional context was of interest to the collectors. The owners of these galleries invited one another to private soirees where together they enjoyed the contemplation of items characterized by curiosity and marvel. The emotional reactions of the visitors can be described as ranging from defence to longing. The combination of the object's presentation was dictated by the personal inclinations of their owners. The collection of artefacts was regarded as a demonstration of the owner's power, wealth and knowledge, and simultaneously as a representation of the cosmos. A possible explanation for this passion for collecting and amassing artefacts is that Europeans slowly started to recognize that Europe had to be seen and understood in a wider context. As a consequence of the rise of worldwide travel, all the theories formally used to understand the world were put to the test.

At the end of the 17th century, the natural sciences were born and the politics of collecting changed. The great expeditions of James Cook to the South Seas in the 18th century brought for the first time masses of ethnographic objects to the European market. At this point, specialized collecting politics emerged with a new way of systematizing objects. The former universalism vanished and an ambiguity arose regarding the way in which ethnographic objects should be categorized. In the 19th century, the majority of large national museums and some of the ethnographic museums were founded. Step by step these collections were opened to the interested public: bourgeoisie, workers women, men, and children. Compared to the former practice of exclusive events for a selected public, the process of the democratization of knowledge began. After the closure of the curio cabinets and the handing over of collections to the new museums (such as natural history museums or historical museums), primitive people were regarded institutionally as being part of nature, comparable to flora and fauna. "The choice of the term 'ethnographic'¹⁹ (object) was based on the assumption that mankind's differences were not only physical, as the anthropological collections demonstrated, but also cultural, and that physical and the cultural were closely linked."²⁰

Ethnographic items were now organized according to a natural science system: they were ordered according to their geographical provenience and similarity of their forms and classified according to an imagined stage of civilization. Questions arose as to how far these objects represented an original primitive world, the bottom of a pyramid of human evolution, which culminated in the white Anglo-Saxon male. In addition, the colonial exhibitions, which were the origins of many ethnographic museums, offered panoramas of power in which imperial hierarchies were on display."²¹

¹⁹ Instead of calling it an 'art object'.

²⁰ Dias 2006: 175.

²¹ Nederveen Pietersee 2005: 164.

Museum display labels foregrounded the predominance of the *white man* and his cultural and industrial achievements. Hence without any comprehensive concept, great numbers of objects entered museum collections. In the best cases, contextual knowledge about the artefact's origins, such as time, place and ethnic group was acquired and presented. As Nélia Dias has shown, ethnographic museums in France in the 19th century, conceived as democratic spaces at the service of the public, aimed to provide spaces for visualizing human difference, particularly racial and cultural differences. "Moreover, ethnographic museums attempted to display the progress of human civilization by linking race and progress."²²

198

According to Andrew Zimmermann, the "Berlin Museum was not merely a place in which anthropological objects, already defined as not-art, were stored; it was also an apparatus that rendered them as not-art and therefore as objects of natural science in the first place. This transformation was enacted largely by glass and iron cases designed specifically for the museum (known as the *Berlin iron case*)"²³ and which produced a new kind of museum display. The iron cases allowed daylight to fall onto masses of ethnographic objects and their arrangement in parallel rows in large halls which enabled the visitor to "view the contents of a number of cases simultaneously. From almost any position, the viewer's gaze passed through multiple, cases thus creating what was referred to as a 'total impression' (*Total-Eindruck*) of the artefacts."²⁴

The attitude of collectors at this time, vis-à-vis those they took items from, can be exemplified by the way in which human remains were merchandised all over the world. The remains were not treated like human belongings, but rather as objects serving the scientific purpose of gaining knowledge about human races. Individual personality and respect for the Other were totally disregarded. Collectors gathered information about objects by interviewing only chiefs (or their translators) about specific issues. Their motto was: "One tribe – one chief – one voice". Interviews with people of different generations or addressing gender issues were largely absent. The objects were displayed according to geographical and technological series that stressed their scientific rather than an aesthetic dimension.²⁵ Defining them as artefacts, specimens, and documents (not as art) was a key strategy for securing the scientific status of anthropology as a scientific field studying the distinction between the so-called natural and cultural peoples.²⁶ In the *Berlin iron cases* the ethnographic items were presented as being artless, cultureless, and ahistorical.²⁷

²² Dias 2006:175. See also Macdonald 1999: 12.

²³ Zimmermann 2006: 287.

²⁴ Id.

²⁵ Dias 2006: 178.

²⁶ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2006: 362.

²⁷ Zimmermann 2006: 296.

EXHIBITING THE OTHER(S) IN THE 20TH CENTURY

Up until the 1930s, many exhibitions in Europe and the USA included people from overseas, especially imported for the shows, under the heading: 'Wild people, wild animals'. They were primarily put on display in zoological gardens and world exhibitions. According to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett,²⁸ the museum institution took over the new role of offering events which could have been visited in theatres before. It "was particularly useful in England and the United States during the early nineteenth century because performances that would have been objectionable to conservative Protestants if staged in a theatre were acceptable when presented in a museum [...] This reframing of performance in terms of nature, science, and education rendered it respectable..." At the time, the museums world wanted to represent the power of the colonial states opposed to the colonized. A big step forward in changing discriminatory perspectives of the Other was the disentanglement of artefacts from the evolutionary system and the establishment of a new approach to evaluation based on cultural criteria. The height of the dioramas was reached after their introduction in the 19th century and museums began to reconstruct scenes that offered insight into cultural background, such as scenes of ordinary daily and religious life.

199

The shift from showing exhibitions about cultural differences (e.g. in the Trocadéro in Paris 1878) to cultural equality started in France with the newly designed *Musée de L'Homme* in 1937. According to Dias, the museum's focus on equal worth has to be considered from a double perspective: recognition of cultural diversity and its complexity in the spirit of relativism and the rejection of human hierarchy. Evolutionism as a theoretical framework was categorically rejected.²⁹ "By emphasizing racial and cultural equality, the *Musée de L'Homme* recognized the possibility of alternative social and cultural forms. This institution left aside the issue of artistic manifestation, a sensitive domain that would risk calling into question its relativist message as well as the status of French (and Western) art [...], the acknowledgement of the diversity of cultures and of their equal worth did not necessarily imply the willingness to accept their artistic equality."³⁰

Since the 1970s, thanks to the demands of New Museology, the sole claim to expert status in dealing with the world has been broken by the active participation of those affected from the countries of origin in the interpretation of the world. This was the beginning of the ongoing process of deconstructing expert knowledge and the role of the curator versus the knowledge of laymen. Since then, with new educational programmes and new political challenges, museums put more effort into working and engaging with public expectations. Visitors demanded to know more about people from other countries: how they lived, how they worked and their thoughts and opinions about life. New technical media, such as photography and video, were introduced into museum exhibitions. In the 1980s, academic

²⁸ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1990: 397 ff.

²⁹ Dias 2006: 181.

³⁰ Dias 2006: 179 f.

discussions started regarding the relationship between the aura of an object and the use of technical equipment.

Ethnographical exhibitions which tried to meet this need invited people from abroad (as seen from Germany) to share information about their way of life, for example, in the Museum of World Cultures in Frankfurt am Main in 2002³¹ the exhibition "Indian Times. Nachrichten aus dem roten Amerika" with the two guest curators Christian Feest from the Goethe University Frankfurt am Main and Foster Kalama from the Warm Springs reservation in Oregon; or in 2006 "Ma Lakota! Indianische Kindheit in Nordamerika" together with the guest curator Arthur Amiotte from the Akta-Lakota-Museum, presented in the Intercultural Atelier (IKAT) of the Museum.³²

200

Despite these attempts to restage the cultural meanings of collection items, the reconstructed "native point of view" remained subordinated to the dominant Western, perspective. Up until the present day, the voices of the Other(s) have been excluded from the majority of museum presentations. Although there have been lengthy debates about this difficult issue, many museums are still missing key concepts of collecting and documentation for working with, at times vast, *unknown* collections. Museum artefacts have been presented under Eurocentric measures of value in three principle ways: **exoticising** (emphasizing difference = in situ with reconstructed habitats), **assimilating** (emphasizing similarities = art exhibitions) and **encyclopaedic exhibitions**, which follow mixed strategies.³³

A **classic ethnographic exhibition** mirrors the traditional Western scientific way of bringing systematic order into the world with objects, languages and with clear borders for the living areas of tribal societies. In those displays one will not find any interviews with people about their view on their cultural environment or their ways of organizing their life styles. Nothing will be mediated about what the source communities think about the use of their ancestral objects in a museum's exhibition.³⁴

Another way of presenting ethnographic artefacts still relies on a geographical background but chooses all-embracing categories like the 'the world of women' or 'the world of men'. In such a case typical items and their different use by both sexes are shown. Tribal borders are of less interest. According to the chosen topics, suitable artefacts from different tribes are used to exemplify gender roles in society³⁵. Following such a functionalistic approach, which became fashionable in museum practice since the 1950s, objects are shown as being part of a holistic cultural concept. They are interpreted as tangible illustrations of abstract, non-material and cognitive correlations representing social organization and also used

³¹ Rein 2009/10.

³² "Ma Lakota! Indian Childhood in North America" was on display from 13 February until 27 August 2006. www.frankfurt-live.com (consulted 20 February 2006); booklet of the exhibition.

³³ Neverdeen Pieterse 2005: 164 f. Dias 2006: 182.

³⁴ For a more detailed description of an exhibition in Dresden see Rein 2010.

³⁵ See Rein 2009/10 and Raabe 2008.

as an expression of religious rituals. In this approach the ‘indigenous point of view’ is not simulated, but the cultural context of the objects is explained and interpreted e.g. in texts and displays.³⁶

The **assimilative concept** presents ethnographic artefacts as ‘pure’ art objects following a formal, aesthetic viewpoint – now treating former ‘ethnographic objects’ like Western ‘art objects’. I coined the term art-party to describe an influential group of the curators. This group defends the high aesthetic and technical quality of the artefacts made by tribal societies. They reclassified these artefacts and display them in the same way as Western art is usually shown in Art Museums or Art Galleries. In these exhibitions, the object itself and its composition are the focus, together with the artist (the ‘culture’ where it comes from became of less interest).³⁷ Those new defined art objects are presented isolated for aesthetic contemplation, completely removed from their cultural context or suggestion of an original use. In the absence of any given context, objects are interpreted by visitors on an individual basis, grounded in personal experience and knowledge.

201

Within these different approaches the current concept of the Museum of World Cultures³⁸ in Frankfurt am Main uses a method which can be connected with artists working in the early 20th century, such as Pablo Picasso and Emil Nolde. According to Andrew Zimmerman “artists in Germany and France turned to the objects assembled in ethnographic museums as sources of inspiration for their own paintings.”³⁹ This use of ethnographic objects has generally been presented as an important step in the history of artistic modernism. In 2012 e.g. in Frankfurt am Main, seven directly invited contemporary artists⁴⁰ chose from within the ethnographic museum’s collection of about 65 000 objects those which inspired them to create their own art object. The exhibition “Object Atlas. Fieldwork in the museum”⁴¹ presented their creations (as pictures, films, texts or objects) together with their ethnographic muses, as can be seen in the figure below.⁴²

³⁶ Förster 1999: 40 f.

³⁷ Förster 1999: 41. For a more in-depth discussion, see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2006.

³⁸ In 2001 the museum changed its name from *Museum für Völkerkunde* into *Museum der Weltkulturen / Museum of World Cultures*. Since then any suggested change to another name has been refused by the city councillors. (<http://www.stvv.frankfurt.de/parlis2/parlis.php>; consulted 10.03.2012).

³⁹ Zimmermann 2006: 279.

⁴⁰ Helke und Thomas Byerle, Marc Camille Chaimovicz, Sunah Choi, Antje Majewski, Otobong Nkanga and Simon Popper. In addition to the invited artists, drawings and photographs by Alf Bayerle (1982) were also shown.

⁴¹ From 25 January until 16 September 2012.

⁴² With regard to the chosen ethnographic objects the connection must not be the ethnic origin. It is mainly reduced to the form and /or the function in its former source community. I refer to the “Hummerfalle” (Trap for stupid cars) made by Tobias Bayerle, who was inspired by different fish traps from Indonesia and Papua New Guinea. Bayerle commented on his work as follows “There’s a lot of intelligence in these fish traps. They led me to a new development of my interest in motorways, hopefully with a touch of humour, those big fat American Hummer SUVs, huge battle chariots with four-wheel drives seemingly only used to pick up a pint of milk from the supermarket. I like the fact that in Germany the name Hummer means lobster – a marine delicacy. That’s what brought me to develop The Trap for Stupid Cars.” Booklet p. 14.



202

Fig. 2: Inter alia, the artist Simon Popper comments on his work in the museum: “Then again, a museum is like a supermarket. They move eggs and milk around, and there are objects from different part of the world that can have different ages and different prices. Some are luxurious, some are cheap. It’s the same as going to a shop. There are new products on display, and it is accessible to everyone. [...] I also focused on ceramic pots from Peru, which have pairings on the shapes and images that you could find on them. Both these objects are gifts. [...] The Moche pots from Peru are buried with the dead. Both (+Ibeji carvings)⁴³ have this unique quality of something that has to accompany an individual into their afterlife.”⁴⁴ (Foto: Museum of World Cultures, 2012)

This concept in Frankfurt am Main seemed to be a mixture of an art exhibition together with the engagement of the museum with its own past⁴⁵ or its own collection. The artists used the concept of anthropological fieldwork to study the historical objects with their “new” eyes and interpreted them according to their own imaginations. Ethnographic information is largely absent, voices of social anthropologists or collectors were excluded, and the history of the artefacts remained hidden. According to Wolfgang Leuschner and Mathis Bromberger, the output of the contemporary artists were in their subjectivity comparable with the answers to the pictures used in a Rorschach test by psychologists.⁴⁶

Whereas most of the ethnographic museums show **different types of exhibitions** at the same time, the *Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum. Kulturen der Welt* in Cologne chose for its new building, which opened in October 2010, a single approach embracing the permanent display.

As it says in the Museum leaflet, on 3,600 square metres are presented “People in their worlds. Outstanding exhibits from Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Americas”.⁴⁷ In this display any geographical systematization is excluded by a

⁴³ Addition by the author.

⁴⁴ Quote from the booklet p. 29.

⁴⁵ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2006: 363.

⁴⁶ Leuschner & Bromberger 2012: 27.

⁴⁷ http://www.museenkoeln.de/rautenstrauch-joest-museum/download/Hausflyer_engl.pdf (consulted 6.5.2012).

thematic one, which shall be exchanged regularly with a new thematic focus. For the first period, they decided to concentrate on “themes which move people all over the world, but which they address differently depending on regional and cultural influences. The comparative cultural approach emphasizes the equality and validity of all cultures and provides impulses for thought and stimulating dialogue. The inclusion of our own culture in this comparative approach goes some way towards relativising our viewpoint [...] The theme complex ‘Comprehending the World’ is devoted to four different kinds of encounters with other cultures from the **European point of view**. ‘Shaping the World’ which with five sub-themes provides a multitude of insights into different ways of life in different times and places.”⁴⁸

An impressive scenography⁴⁹ with manifold space images intensifies the experience of the different topics on display. In the space image “Ansichtssachen?! Kunst!” the museum shows objects as art objects as well as offering information about the ethnographic context on demand.



Fig. 3, 4: „Ansichtssachen?! Kunst!“ (A matter of perception)⁵⁰ (Photo Atelier Brückner, 2012)

⁴⁸ http://www.museenkoeln.de/rautenstrauch-joest-museum/download/Hausflyer_engl.pdf (consulted 13 May 2012). Emphasis by the author.

⁴⁹ Atelier Brückner Stuttgart http://www.atelier-brueckner.com/nc/projekte/museen/rautenstrauch-joest-museum-koeln.html?tx_photogals_elementid=238&tx_photogals_image=9 (consulted 6 May 2012)

⁵⁰ “Die ästhetische Wahrnehmung von Objekten ist eine der Möglichkeiten, sich außereuropäischen Kulturen zu nähern. Bei dieser vom westlichen Kunstverständnis geprägten Sicht tritt der funktionale Kontext, in dem das 12 Werk einst stand, in den Hintergrund. Im neuen Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum können Sieselbst entscheiden: Genießen Sie die pure Schönheit und Ästhetik unserer künstlerischen Highlights oder beleuchten Sie auf Knopfdruck die Geschichte hinter dem Objekt. Beides lohnt sich!” <http://www.museenkoeln.de/rautenstrauch-joest-museum/default.asp?s=110> (consulted 13 May 2012). Many thanks to Atelier Brückner for the two pictures.

Special display cases were created for this part of the exhibition, where visitors can decide whether to see an object as a pure art piece or, when pressing a button, to learn more about the context of each piece. The information is projected behind the object on the back board of the display case (s. fig. 3, 4). However, it remains unclear who identifies with the labels “us” or “European” mentioned in the museum’s leaflet. The big question: ‘who is speaking?’ is not a special theme of the whole exhibition. Taking the text seriously, it seems that the Rauthenstrauch-Joest Museum speaks on behalf of all Europeans with one voice (Director? Curator? Conservator? Designer?) vis-à-vis the Other(s).

204 ALTERNATIVE WAYS OF THINKING ABOUT ETHNOGRAPHIC ITEMS

The life story of a basket

Until today, what we have mainly seen in exhibitions are the single, static voices and interpretations of the curators which reduce the objects to only a few aspects. However, the life of any item is much more dynamic. Following the life story of any object, one has to recognize that each of it has its own *social biography*, connected with its own networks – as I will demonstrate with the following example of a yellow plastic basket from Thailand.



Fig. 5: My basket on its label

Becoming part of an art exhibition in 2002, this basket changed within a few days its roles from an ordinary basket for market purposes in Thailand, into an art object in a performance by the Thai artist Surasi Kusolwong in Frankfurt am Main, until being used as illustrative material in conferences or at universities for museological topics⁵¹ by a social anthropologist (myself). Within a few days, the basket met dozens of people who produced, touched, transported, sold, exhibited, admired, and learned through it.

With this example, I want to demonstrate some of the possible multidimensional social and relational perspectives connected with a single one

⁵¹ For a longer description of the life story of this basket, see Rein 2010: 45-47.

object. Following the definition of Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff, objects are biographical agents and therefore they are valued because of the associations they have acquired through time. This approach posits a fundamentally dynamic understanding of objects as Elizabeth Edwards, Chris Gosden, and Ruth B. Phillips emphasize in their book on *Sensible Objects*. "In a biographical model, objects cannot be understood in terms of a single, unchanging identity (such as *museum object*), but rather by tracing the succession of meanings attached to them as they move across space and time. This model emerged from a perceived need to develop methodologies which 'redirected' the unit of analysis [...] to multisided ethnographies."⁵²

Furthermore, it addresses the inherent instability of the meanings attached to objects as they become elided through their placement in the disembodied and thus limiting spaces of museums⁵³. The real importance of the objects does not lie in the objects themselves but in the way these objects embody the **physical manifestation of social relations**. As Alfred Gell and Marilyn Strathern⁵⁴ point out, the whole idea is that objects matter because they have agency and efficacy, and as such become a kind of identity unto themselves remark. According to Jeremy Pilcher and Saskia Vermeylen – By framing an object in a social network throughout its life cycle – we can avoid the recurrent pitfalls of judging objects in terms of their *primitive* or *traditional* (aesthetic) qualities and mystifying the identity of indigenous people as *noble savages*. "Focusing more on the social network that surrounds a particular object opens up new avenues of enquiry as to how, and to what extent museums can become more inclusive with regard to indigenous people. It allows us to move beyond the current discourse that approaches the history of the (ethnographic) museum from only one dominant perspective [...] it allows us to show a more complex narrative of the object itself. It gives us the space to counterweight some of the discourses that have steeped indigenous artworks in a 'postcolonial' framework of sacredness and mythical meaning."⁵⁵

Thus museums might be reconceived as a collection of social relationships, rather than as a collection of objects. Following the concept of the Pitt Rivers Museum, "Ethnographic museums used to be seen as 'us' studying 'them'. A more productive approach is to view museums as trans-cultural artefacts composed of relations between the museum and its source communities."⁵⁶ A mass of human relations lie behind these collections: the original makers and users of objects, those involved in their trades and circulation, missionaries, dealers, collectors, curators, directors, conservators, lecturers, administrators, friends of a museum and visitors. Together they comprise the museum's human community.⁵⁷ A

⁵² Steiner 2001: 209.

⁵³ Steiner 2001: 210.

⁵⁴ Pilcher und Vermeylen 2008: 3.

⁵⁵ Pilcher und Vermeylen 2008: 4.

⁵⁶ <http://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/RelationalMuseum.html> (consulted 10 April 2012).

⁵⁷ Basu & Alivizatou 2009: 27.

museum has multiple authors, who need not be aware of their role nor even necessarily act as willing contributors.

The relational approach

The term *relational* is used here as it is in Paul Basu's⁵⁸ lecture entitled "The Relational Museum". It expresses the variety of social relations concerning an (art) object and which should be included within the preliminary dialogue regarding museum collections and exhibitions. A relational approach does not work with categories of objects as fixed but, according to Gosden, in this approach "categories are temporary entities arising out of a network of connections between entities."⁵⁹

206

Referring to my basket, the entities art object, commodity, and historical object changed within a few days, depending on the people I met and the contexts in which the basket was moved around. The relational perspective offers the chance for looking at the mixture of intellectual, biographical, social and political motives for collection.

Following Gosden's explanations this approach of mapping communities, colonial and institutional connections of various kinds helps us to understand the past in a more concrete, vivid and personalized way. It will help to gain insights into the conditions which gave rise to collections and connections, "so that these can be used as sets of raw materials in the present for making new sets of relationships between all parties in a post-colonial world."⁶⁰ Since gender and postmodern theories have penetrated museum practice, we now know more about different voices and perspectives of items. Not only can gender related perspectives on the world be very different, but there are also great variations in perspectives from different generations. Every person can tell his or her own individual story about the objects they interact with. Let me illustrate this approach with examples of two recent displays. The first one⁶¹ from the Museum of World Cultures in Frankfurt am Main, shall illustrate the close connection between object and non-museum-people, and how these voices, being part of an exhibition, can either be ignored or regarded as a challenge for new worlds of museum knowledge.

Being Object – Being Art ⁶²

From 31 October 2009 until 31 October 2010 masterpieces of the collection were shown in an art style (isolated) and sorted according to their geographical origin. The chosen room colours, such as green for America and blue for Oceania, relied on Western conventional associations to separate the different geographical regions from each other. Only a few data about the contexts were given on two

⁵⁸ Id.

⁵⁹ Gosden 2009: 7.

⁶⁰ Id.

⁶¹ Rein 2010.

⁶² Id.

levels (in German and English; no author mentioned). The first text consisted of about five lines e.g. with the category/the name of the object, if possible in the vernacular language, then the tribe, area, and year specification/century. These texts were on the front of the display case or on the wall beside it. As a second level of information, large displays were attached at the wall and positioned close to the passages into the next room or continent. Here, abstract coloured maps of the chosen continent and texts in the style of the catalogue could be found – with a storage place for laminated texts that could be carried around by visitors.⁶³



Fig. 6, 7. (Photo: Anette Rein, 2010)

However, there was a further level of information proximal to some artefacts – mostly inside the display cases. These labels caught the visitor's eye not only because of the closeness to the object but because of the specific colour in which each label was printed. On these labels one found the names and the city of the person who sponsored the artefact. This concept of closeness/relational representation was part of the search for sponsors, as described on the museum homepage “Jeder Pate und jede Patin kann sich aus 80 Kunstwerken eines auswählen und wird - sofern gewünscht für die Laufzeit der Ausstellung [...] namentlich auf einer Tafel am ausgewählten Objekt [...] genannt“.⁶⁴

Following the question *Who is speaking?* in the above mentioned example, the sponsors definitely had one of the strongest voices in this show. And indeed,

⁶³ This very common presentation of different text formats in an exhibition demands from the visitors a typical motions sequences (back and forth, up and down, sideways) which Andreas Spiegl suggests to call *Info-Foxtrott*. (2005: 94).

⁶⁴ The same text appears on the homepage, http://www.mwk-frankfurt.de/Deutsch/Being_Object_Being_Art_-_Mit_80_Paten_um_die_Welt/Amerika/index.html (consulted 08.08.2010). “Every godparent/sponsor who chooses one of the 80 pieces of art to support can decide to have their name posted in proximity to the art work during the entire length of the exhibition.” Translated by the author.

they had very interesting stories to tell, as in the following example. Together with his wife Hanna Laura Klar, Jens Jakob Happ became godparent of the Mexican sculpture pictured above (Fig. 6, 7). He told me the following story about his special relationship with the chosen object. "In my childhood I saw many of those colourful artefacts and paintings in the house of the former ethnologist and curator of the Städtische Museum für Völkerkunde (City Museum for Ethnography)⁶⁵ in Frankfurt am Main, Karin Hahn-Hissink, who travelled together with her husband, the painter Albert Hahn, to Mexico in the 1960s. My parents were close friends with the couple and collectors of Albert Hahn paintings. In 1995 I visited Albert Hahn's house in Kronberg, shortly before his death.⁶⁶ I still remember very clearly the impressive beauty of the colourful collections. Unfortunately his excellent work seems to be largely forgotten. Because of my nice memories and my fascination about the combination of art and science in this special couple of anthropologist and artist, we chose this sculpture – which from an art market point of view seems to be of less value".⁶⁷

In this exhibition there were about 23 sponsors mentioned, together with their chosen objects. However, none of their personal stories talking about their special relationships were given.⁶⁸ The specific relationships of the sponsors were suppressed in favour of the formal aesthetic approach of the exhibition which strove to uphold the narrative of ethnographic artefacts as real art objects.⁶⁹ This aesthetic presentation creates a timelessness which would have been interrupted by the personal stories, grounding the artefacts in space and time. However, through the story of Jens J. Happ, the Mexican sculptural group could have become a strong medium connecting the past with the present and the future. Visitors would experience an impression of two professional people who worked together for the museum some years ago. The reader of the story would learn about a special method in anthropological fieldwork: the close cooperation between a scientist and an artist for the documentation and for a future research about the collected artefacts. A presentation of the stories would have illuminated that the connection between the sponsors and their objects cannot be reduced only to the financial aspect. Through these personal explanations, the visitors would have got emotionally involved with the artefacts as well as with the museum. They would start to have a story in common. The collected object, connected with the voice of the sponsor, would have created a different perspective on historical museum items. This different style of presentation would have encouraged the visitors to search for their own ideas and memories connected with objects – besides the official, seemingly neutral texts published by the museum.

⁶⁵ See FN 38.

⁶⁶ His wife had died in 1981. Gugel 2004: 154.

⁶⁷ Jens Jakob Happ interview 19 August 2010.

⁶⁸ There have been several very convincing examples recently of non-museum people presenting their local knowledge in exhibitions. Rein 2009/10: 14 f.

⁶⁹ In this show, the artists of the ethnographic artefacts remain unknown (their tribe/region/culture is mentioned as collective, anonymous authors) – a personal, vivid relationship is constituted only by means of the individual mentioned sponsors.

Whereas the last example shows a historical relational perspective, the second example from Switzerland illustrates the challenge of how to open in a museum display the former mentioned grand narrative. The desired results, besides presenting scientific data, are self-reflecting, contemporary personal stories concerning the topic of religion. This new approach focuses on the experiences of the individual and how subjects as specialists become integrated within a presentation of objects.

Glaubenssache für Gläubige und Ungläubige⁷⁰



209

Fig. 8: 100 people were asked to bring an object relating to their belief together with the story about their personal spiritual relationship with the chosen object.⁷¹ (Photo: Anette Rein, 2007)

In 2006/07 this exhibition was open in the Stapferhaus in Lenzburg⁷². Being a museum without its own collection, the Stapferhaus acts as a museum of the contemporary (Haus der Gegenwart).⁷³ Central to each exhibition is an orientation to the present time (Gegenwartsbezug), the significant absence of objects and extensive communication with visitors.⁷⁴ The conceptual starting point is the topic and the relevance of an issue which should relate to broad contemporary social values offering potential for discourse about a different orientation within society and connected with the everyday experiences of visitors⁷⁵. As contemporaries, all visitors are treated as specialists of exhibitions

⁷⁰ “Matter concerning faith for believers and non-believers”, translated by the author.

⁷¹ “Glaubenssachen. Glaubenssachen sind persönliche Dinge aus der eigenen Glaubensbiografie. 100 Personen zeigen ihre Glaubensobjekte und sagen, was ihr Ding zur Glaubenssache macht.” <http://www.stapferhaus.ch/ausstellungen/glaubenssache-lenzburg/rundgang.html> (consulted 13 May 2012) Thanks to Sybille Lichtensteiger for approving the publication of my picture.

⁷² From 28 October 2006 until 28 October 2007.

⁷³ Hächler 2007: 83. “Stätte der menschlichen Begegnung und geistigen Auseinandersetzung” Hächler 2007: 79.

⁷⁴ Hächler 2007: 77.

⁷⁵ Hächler 2007: 80. “Ausgangspunkt ist das Thema...[das] grundlegende gesellschaftliche (Werte)fragen der Gegenwart aufgreif[t], [das] von Natur aus breit und nicht eng angelegt [ist], [das] ein Diskurspotential [hat], und ein gesamtgesellschaftliches Orientierungsbedürfnis erkennen [lässt] und [das]nahe an den Alltagserfahrungen der Besucherinnen und Besucher [liegt].” Additions by the author.

at the Stapferhaus. There is no longer a big story e.g. of Christian belief. At the exhibition visitors were interviewed about their individual daily religious practices, their beliefs, their prayers, their hopes and what they think about death and the afterlife. Through the exhibition it became obvious that faith does not appear from nowhere but that it is developed over years through shared daily religious rituals, for instance within the family. The exhibition was characterised by contemporaneity and equivalency. All forms of belief were accepted and the believers were likewise integrated as being part of the whole display. This presentational approach is also called *social scenography*, a term created by Beat Hächler.

210

VISION FOR ETHNOGRAPHICAL MUSEUMS AS GLOBAL ACTORS

Ethnographical museums have a special mission within the museum scene. Their collections are generally a mixture that includes archaeological items, high-art objects (also from the perspective of their producers), items from daily life and religious objects. One principal duty of an ethnographical museum is to be a forum for the presentation of the concepts of different traditions, cultures and individual voices within different cultures/traditions and identities in different time periods. This means that, in addition to the study of objects, human beings themselves should be the focus of research and mediation.

Paul Goodwin highlights the fact “that in a global world, cultural identity is no longer limited to the singular categories of race, gender, sexuality, class or national identity. Instead, global technologies have inspired the non-stop flow of ideas and communication, whilst the social trends of exile, travel and migration have effected a wide-scale and constant movement of people across borders. Whereas the power relations of the modernist and post-colonial modes could be defined by the negotiation between two subjects: colonizer and colonized; oppressor and oppressed; museum and public; there is no such sense of centre and periphery in the culturally plural mode, where boundaries of nationhood, community and identity are called into question.” As Homi Bhabha points out, these notions of cultural fixity have been replaced by “a complex on-going negotiation – amongst minorities, against assimilation.”⁷⁶ The conventional Enlightenment subjectivities (national, imperial, modern) are refracted in multiple identities (local, regional, transnational, global, sexual, urban and so forth) and the Other becomes OtherS⁷⁷ “(differentiated by ‘race’, class, gender, national origin, lifestyle and so forth). The earlier idea that representation of others must either be exoticising or assimilating

⁷⁶ Goodwin 2009, interview with Silaja Suntharalingam; quoted in Suntharalingam 2009: 2. Bhabha quoted in Suntharalingam 2009: 2. “The emergence of an accompanying rhetoric for global culture is reflected by the proliferation of new terms such as ‘inter-cultural’, ‘trans-cultural’ and ‘cross-cultural’. These terms are increasingly being used to displace the well-known politicized terms of ‘cultural diversity’ and ‘multiculturalism’.”

⁷⁷ Referring to the concept from Jan Neverdeen Perterse, I would like to introduce a special notation for OtherS. The fragmenting aspects of each individual’s identity becomes more obvious in a big ‘O’ and a big ‘S’ instead of writing e.g. ‘others’ /‘Others’.

ignores other options – such as recognizing differences without exoticising, others as counterparts in dialogue, or oneself as an other.”⁷⁸

Following Silaja Suntharalingam,⁷⁹ “museums are increasingly moving away from the ‘notion of the curator as the sole interpreter, handing down wisdom to a passive public. Instead, a space is being created for dialogue, interaction and the ‘complex on-going negotiation’⁸⁰ between museum, visitor and artist. In terms of ‘play’, museums in a globalised world are increasingly becoming ‘intermediaries’ and laboratories for experimenting with new cultural combinations and encounters”⁸¹.” The new approach focuses of the experiences of the individual.⁸² We have reached a point within the museum sphere where we have to discover new voices in old collections. The museum as a social construct, a purveyor of ideologically charged notions of knowledge and historical truth must evolve into a reflective, exploratory cultural space where existing collections speak in new voices. According to Susan Pearce, this implies a major shift in museum management and attitudes.⁸³ One future challenge for museums will be to show cultural systematic and diversity knowledge.⁸⁴

211

Multiculturalism has brought the natives home and with the end of the grand narrative of modernity the other(s) became OtherS. This opens up a new field of cultural flux of “subjugated knowledges”, of nomadic knowledge and crosscultural translations.⁸⁵

Ethnographic museums have to abandon the discourse of the other(s) in favour of opening their archives and displays to the social network around the collections to be worked on in a participative / inclusive relational way as **the** one method of accepting the equivalency of intellectual contemporaneity (*Zeitgenossenschaft*) worldwide. There should be no limitation of the acknowledgment of OtherS as intellectual contemporary counterparts with their own item centred view about the basic questions of humans living together in one world. As James Clifford formulated it: “Gone are the days when cultural anthropologists could without contradiction, present ‘the Native point of view,’... ‘the anthropologist’ – broadly and sometimes stereotypically defined – has become a negative alter ego in contemporary indigenous discourse, invoked as the epitome of arrogant, intrusive colonial authority.”⁸⁶

⁷⁸ Neverden Pieterse 2005: 165.

⁷⁹ Suntharalingam 2009: 2 f.

⁸⁰ Bhaba *Beyond the pale: Art in the age of multicultural translation*, p. 22. Quoted in Suntharalingam 2009: 3.

⁸¹ Pietersee *Multiculturalism...*p. 178. Quoted in Suntharalingam 2009: 3.

⁸² Paine 2000: 157.

⁸³ Pearce 2002.

⁸⁴ Bush 2005: 17.

⁸⁵ Neverdeen Pietersee 2007: 130.

⁸⁶ Clifford 2004: 5.

Ethnographical museums seem to be in deep crisis. With regard to their collections, many of them are overwhelmed by an inability to speak. They have long since lost their authorised voices: those of the collectors, of colonialism and, furthermore, those of the scientists who do research on ethnographic artefacts. How long will ethnographic museums lick their wounds, cultivating the litany of trauma because of the loss of the ‘carte blanche’ for colonial and scientific authority? “Contemporary expectations are extremely high and no single museum could cover all aspects of centuries of colonization, adaptation, transformation, changing economic and governmental pressures, counterhistories of cultural ‘repatriation’ ... ongoing oral traditions and indigenous epistemologies.”⁸⁷ Ethnographic museums should see the obstacles and take their opportunities. They should become aware of the great treasure of knowledge and artefacts they have accumulated over recent centuries. Positioned between indigenous “myth” and Western “science”,⁸⁸ they have to embrace their politically responsible role, presenting a platform for contemporary diverse and cross-cultural dialogues about different knowledge systems and life concepts.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Look at the end of the Slovene translation of the article.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Studied Ethnology, Indigenous American Studies and Adult Education at the Freie Universität Berlin and Mainz. From 1985 to 1987 and in subsequent years until 1994, carried out field research in Bali (Indonesia) on traditional dances; gained a doctorate in 1994. From 1988-2000 she taught Ethnology at the Universities of Mainz, Kupang (Timor) and Leipzig. From 2000-2008 director of the Museum der Weltkulturen / Museum of World Cultures in Frankfurt am Main, where

she organized 60 exhibitions. Currently scientific curator, author and lecturer in ethnology, tangible and intangible heritage, and creative writing and scientific thinking. 2004-2010 Member of the board of the ICOM Germany, since 2007 member of the board of the ICOM/ICME and since 2012 president of the German Federal Association for freelance Ethnologists.. Over 100 papers and over 50 publications, national and international, on dance anthropology, museum studies, religion, gender, human rights and Indonesia.

⁸⁷ Clifford 2004: 27.

⁸⁸ Clifford 2004: 19.

SUMMARY:

The traditional pillars of museum work are collection, conservation, research and communication / exhibition / education. In this way, museums contribute to the safeguarding of the natural, cultural and scientific heritage. The traditional roles of ethnographic museums were to communicate the stories of “cultural tribal others”. However, since the 1970s this role has been reevaluated and at least since the 1990s is no longer accepted. Today, the crisis of ethnographic museums is reflected in Germany by the different museum concepts seen in the different ways of exhibiting ethnographic objects. Exhibitions now range from traditional geographical and tribal systematizations, presentations dominated by comparing categories, as well as presentations of ethnographic items as pieces of art, to exhibitions where the concept of ethnicity has vanished in favor of “world cultures”. Ethnographical museums seem to be in deep crisis. With regard to their collections, many of them are overwhelmed by an inability to speak. They feel helpless about the decision they have to make: which voices should be integrated into or excluded from an exhibition – who has still the right to speak after centuries of colonization, adaptation, transformation, changing economic and governmental pressure and counterhistories of cultural repatriation? While discussing the history of different concepts, the three steps of musealization, the relational approach, and the changing concepts from others to OtherS, my paper addresses the question of what should be the mission of ethnographic museums when they see themselves as global actors.