Everything is Relevant

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Art and Ethnology
A Relationship in Ironies

The train departs Linz for Vienna in fifty-four minutes and I am hungry. The only true restaurant in the Linz railway station is rather shabby-looking, a quality that somehow lends itself to the cabin-in-the-woods theme of its weathered, wood-panelled interior. Once I have seated myself, I scan the assortment of display boxes that are distributed on the walls throughout the room. There is a vintage-looking Joseph Cornell–type box showing off various types of paraffin.

On either side of this box, there are stuffed songbirds (presumably of the alpine forests) perched on tree boughs. There is another box displaying tresses of unrefined wool. The paraffin-and-wool displays remind me of the work and myth of Joseph Beuys. But the displays reference beyond the art museum to natural and social science museums. I recall visits to the Museum of Anthropology in my native city of Vancouver, with its many glass shelves of artifacts produced by the various Indigenous peoples of Canada’s western coast. I ask myself the question of the ethnographer: what is the language being spoken here by the displays, and to whom and why?

The menu offers typical Austrian fare, many meat and dumpling dishes with the one exception of spaghetti bolognaise. I note my watch again and opt for a bowl of soup, which arrives with forty-two minutes left before departure time. As I eat my soup, I again scan the room. Off to one side and near the bar, there is a gathering of burly men, mostly smokers and apparently big beer drinkers. They seem comfortable in this room; they are probably regulars of the bar—in this place where mythical signs and symbols of Austria abound. However, this being a train station restaurant, customers of all stripes can be found, including me. Time feels compressed here, the past of the burly men catching up with the present of the travellers who in turn attend the future arrival of their trains. There are so many contact zones in a train station. I am mindful of the time, as I do not want to miss my train while I indulge in a bit of fieldwork in the ethnographic present.

Is this the problem facing the museum, in particular the anthropologically defined museum? The deadness of the ethnological museum is somehow underlined by the vital extension of the application of ethnographic techniques that have given rise to new categories of adjectival anthropologies—in cinema, television, and now the Internet. The project of the ethnological museum, borne of nineteenth-century ideas of preeminent civilization and universalistic objectivism, has long become disconnected from the present. This is not a new view, as profound criticisms of social science museums have been exegetically performed under the coda of the “New Museology.”

The crisis of representation is a historical phenomenon encompassing all ideas associated with disciplining and consecrating acts, and this
A crisis of representation also confronts the art museum, but in ways that are surprisingly productive, at least for the production of art and the servicing of art museums by new art products. Crisis can serve as sustenance for art by providing art with its critical edge regarding the social environment or matters specific to art itself. The art museum is a beneficiary of this crisis as much as it is often a symbol or a target of this crisis. Recent developments of interest in ethnography on the part of artists, of what Hal Foster has called an “ethnographic turn,” are in a certain respect an extension of a longstanding and central dialectic of art since modernism—the question of the relationship of art to life. In contrast to ethnology, the crisis of representation in art does not signal either life or death for the art museum, but rather a stage in its ongoing history, albeit one that is frequently punctuated by spasms of self-doubt. Art also has a different hermeneutic understanding than a social science; artistic interpretation is not so identified with the causal importance of cultural understandings.
Thus, relative to the status of art, the historical contingencies
of autonomy and foundation have disabused the social sciences to a
far greater degree than art. Another reason for this has to do with the
status of art as being resolutely non-scientific, although paradigms of
science can be employed by art for producing artistic meaning. Art is
often motivated by a distance from paradigms and a non-subscription
to normative values. Ironically, it is worth noting that normative values
have themselves become the subjects of ethnographic analysis, particular-
ly in so-called museum studies.

Michel Foucault, calling attention to the special case of anthro-
pology, examined the discursive construction of differences between
observer and participant that were exercised in authority-producing
operations as they were applied to the study of other cultures. Binaries of
different ethnographic considerations would be enacted by ethnological
museums in the form of artifacts collected for aesthetic consumption
and circulation within the boundaries of its cultural totality. But it is no
new idea that the conceptual division of the world into a binary of dif-
fences—that between a West motivated by a Hegelian Spirit of Europe
and that of a rest-of-the-world periphery—can no longer be philosoph-
ically maintained. Like many other practices, including artistic practice,
ethnology must now reflect upon and cannibalize its own histories and
practices for study. The discursive and operational linkage between
the act of accumulating objects and the idea of preserving a past that is
broken from the present is no longer tenable.

The social science museum has had to confront its own epistemo-
logical, terminological, and representational crises in the context of
a disjunctive and yet ascendingly interactive global situation. In the
1920s, Siegfried Kracauer wrote of his times as increasingly defined by
modernity beset by anthropometry or the measuring of mankind in all
his details. While for Kracauer the surfeit of details in everyday life held
the danger that deeper reflections could be displaced by the fascination
with surfaces, ethnographic analysis has become, for better or worse,
an adaptive application of an everyday understanding in crisis. The
spread of ethnographic application to the category of the everyday is not
necessitated or even motivated by an end value such as self-knowledge,
although that may be a conclusion. Rather, it has become a relativiz-
ing exercise pushed to the horizons of the category of the Everyday. In
*Power/Knowledge*, Foucault wrote of the pervasiveness of modern-day
normalization processes on all relations within the Everyday. According
to Foucault, productive resistance must fight the dissipated conditions
of isolation and individuation. There is some irony in the fact that such
dissipation proves fertile for the application of ethnographic technique, and all the while that a crisis of doubt ravages the epistemological ground of the ethnological museum.

Many museums today have adopted a strategy of affirming their continuity with the circuit of information technology and the media. The purpose of such a strategy is to displace the problems of hierarchy and discursive condensation in terms of museum definition and practice. In a field such as ethnology, in which interest in all aspects of social identity is fundamental, the pervasiveness of information technology in all aspects of social life today needs to be acknowledged. Issues of what Clifford Geertz has called the “thick description” of signs that contribute to dialogue among different cultures have become continuous with Internet media and especially hypertext, with its nonlinear narrative and a central theme of informational interaction and intertextuality. While media is seen as the way for museums to re-engage with the present through the utopian technological vision of an open and shared humanity, there are also attendant risks—what Gianni Vattimo called the potential of mass media to produce a more chaotic society rather than a more transparent one. In other words, a chaotically conceived world is a function of a pluralism that does not lead to understanding while a transparently conceived world is a function of a diversity that does lead to understanding.

For progressive museums of ethnology, the impasse also represents a propitious ground from which new thinking about their purpose can emerge. What this means is not so much an occasion to re-imagine a new and impossible ethnological paradigm but an occasion for advancing the problematic status of the museum in extended procedures of ironic play. Having admitted mea culpa in its performative role as a disseminator of colonialist perspectives, the ethnological museum of today is eager to project an identity of itself which can be read contrapuntally to its own historical past. The museum of today places bold quotation marks around its own past. With a nudge and a wink, the irony is often so sly that there is often very little effective change in the way that the museum appears in its core epistemological operations. In a sense, the ethnological museum must project itself simultaneously as a meta-museum, a double-identity institution of present and former selves. The present self of the museum performs as a more enlightened but ironic version of its former self without having to cleave from its former self or to deconstruct its former self in a true sense. The strategic doubling of identity would present the spaces of the museum as renewed spaces riven with self-consciousness with reference to the problem of the historical memory of colonial transgressions. Despite this historical acknowledgement,
a tour of most ethnological museums, especially those bearing national
status, would likely reveal just how unblasted are the fundamental
moments of experience that Walter Benjamin excoriated.

The museum of ethnology continues, but it has become an impos-
sible place because the enterprise of ethnology has become impossible.
Paradoxically, its only recourse is to proceed ironically with quotations
about a curious nostalgia for the way things were but can never be again.
It is as though a visit to the museum should be like a visit to a haunted
alchemist's laboratory, forlorn and perhaps historically misguided, but
an experience resonating with the lost aura of alchemy that appealed
to science.

Even today, the world's myriad identities continue to be consumed
on the level of both cultural artifacts and as exotic sites for psychological
release from the pressures of Western modernity. In fact, it is even more
the case today than it has ever been before. The taxonomic framework
of ethnology continues to the present in the form of National Geographic
productions, travel and leisure industry promotional strategies, and
within cultural anthropology itself. (Ironically, the National Geographic
Society, begun as a men's club in the nineteenth century with the
purported aim of promoting geographic—and cultural—knowledge,
has transmogrified into a brand name not unlike lifestyle brand names.
National Geographic now serves as entertainment in pedagogic and scien-
tific forums and in various media.)

James Clifford has argued that a predominant tendency within
cultural anthropology has been a focus on “the ethnographic present,”
conceived of as a tradition in which a more natural past and a corrupting
present come together. Such a tendency identifies with what the late
Michel de Certeau wrote about the privileging of the anonymous and
the everyday as central categories of an increasingly sociologically ori-
ented society. Given such a situation, Certeau believes that resistances
and challenges to cultural representations constructed along race, class,
gender, and ethnic lines, can only be effective at the micro-political level.
Put another way, heterogeneous struggles are limited to the micro-
political—or worse, atomic—level; equally important is their non-
cumulative character. The fascination with the Everyday conjoined to
the dissipation of political consciousness on a general level may be a rea-
son why so many important art exhibitions, such as the Sydney Biennale
and Young British Art–type shows, have been devoted to the theme (or
non-theme) of everyday practices. A turn by artists toward ethnography
does not necessarily signal an artistic return to ethos-political attention,
despite the appearance of having done so. The Everyday may be a terrain
for artistic probity, but one enervated of actual “sociology.” For artist and
ethnologist alike, crisis is seen as little more than an intensification of
the experience of everyday life constituted by independent and overlapp-
ing partial and accidental forces of a bewildering quality. Today, crisis
is reflected by the ideology of Quotidianism.

Not surprisingly, photography has been important in the dis-
semination of Quotidianism. Much of the history of post–World War I
photographic discourse has focused on the idea that the photographer
exists within a Hobbesian world of order. Photographic discourse, from
Kodak advertisements to New York School photography, identifies the
Everyday (or “the street” as in so-called “street photography”) as a delim-
ited category of social experience from which metonymic truths can be
extracted in the form of images but which can never be expressed except
as partial notions exempt from critical analysis.

The “ethnographic turn” in art follows many passages, as interest in
contemporary art spreads globally and the negotiated production of art
from one point to another in the world becomes ever more rhizomic in
character. It is in the context of such a multiple and ironic set of dis-
cursive processes that artists have been asked to respond to the case of
the museum, especially those with a focus on either natural history or
ethnology. In so doing, artists have been asked to convert the historical
essentialisms and truths that motivated the quest of such museums into
another kind of truth which only art can furnish. Artists have been asked
to elucidate the complex interrelations or Cliffordian “contact zones”
during and after the colonial period, as congealed in museum objects.
In effect, artists have been asked to assist the museum in subjecting the
museum to ethnographic scrutiny, but without the scientific contamina-
tion of ethnological guidance.

Throughout the history of art, certainly since the nineteenth cen-
tury, there has been a close relationship between art and the cultural
productions of subaltern groups. The Impressionists adopted many
perspectival techniques of Japanese ink paintings. Picasso’s fascination
with and surrealism’s fetish of tribal artifacts were contingent on mod-
ernism’s reflexive cleaving of form from content and context, or at least
redirecting form toward the self-interested context of the artist/appro-
priator. In Toronto, artists have been asked to intervene in the Grange,
that city’s most important historical manor and now a museum. The
staff of the National Museum of Ethnology of the Netherlands has asked
a dozen-or-so artists, including myself, to respond to their institution on
the occasion of the museum’s sesquicentennial anniversary.

There is by now a long tradition of artists challenging the rela-
tionship of art to the exhibition space. The Surrealists often created
exhibitions that attempted to upset the understanding of art as a
category autonomous from the social. Duchamp’s *Boîte-en-valise*, Andrea Fraser’s performances as a museum docent, Komar and Melamid’s investigations on popular taste in art, Hans Haacke’s profile of museum attendees, and Fred Wilson’s museum interventions are just a few examples of artists fascinated by the dynamics of cultural artifacts and especially in relationship to the dynamics of the museum. Artists are called in to debunk the cult of the social science institution and to implicitly replace it with the cult of art. The artist performs the role of the court jester of the imperial Chinese court, a wise fool who used his position to make serious and illuminating jest while never having to be taken seriously.

The game of art today is rather like the case of Don Quixote; when seeming to regain his reason just before dying, the reader is unsure whether reason merely signals another relapse into madness. That is how an ethnology museum must function today, as a house divided, forced into schizophrenia by its own historical record and a deep eschatological fear. As a consequence, the ethnological museum now behaves more like an art museum, while museums in general are given over to entertainment and spectacular values. Such behaviour is a reflection of the collapse of a scientific paradigm with nothing to replace it but an “art” paradigm. Ironically, within art history, the art paradigm has now ceded more toward a social science in the form of various cultural or visual studies.

Ethnological analysis should be about how actual people make sense of their symbolic world, one in which madness is always a disruptive force. Ethnology should be open-structured and rhizomic, allowing people to interact with information in different ways. Ethnology should not be grandly judgmental and narrative-driven. This is what is happening within ethnology, as it becomes increasingly subjectively based and increasingly based in scientific social science research methods—and thus why it ironically signals its irrelevance. After all, in lieu of the question of whether theories of interpretation can be developed as a useful tool in the understanding of all symbolic events, what is there left of ethnology as an idea? Even so, it is worthy to note that the alternative of giving history back its capital “H” seems again on the rise. There is now a push among some social conservatives against what they perceive as the debilitating effects of relativism. Norman Rockwell has now opened at the Guggenheim Museum and been reevaluated by some as a worthy heir to the great Thomas Eakins and Winslow Homer. It is the return of *us* and *them*, or perhaps *us* versus *them*, or as some would have it, the impending “clash of civilizations.” Talk about madness. Talk about irony. Talk about a case study for ethnographic analysis.