

The Future of the Museum is Ethnographic

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1. Museums and Futures

For what is essentially a retrospective institution, the museum has provoked a great deal of discussion about its future. In the past ten years, innumerable institutions, projects, conferences and workshops have asked a variety of questions about various kinds of museums and their possible futures. Some of these anticipate the likely transformations of museums in the light of new technologies. Thus, we have books devoted to *Museums in the Information Age* (Keene, 1998), or *The Digital Museum* (Din et. al, 2007). Not just managing data, but *Collecting the New* (Altshuler, 2005) can raise new issues for the digital age.¹

Sometimes the focus is on the changing audience or community needs that might be served by museums in times to come. Thus, we may have a conference on *Inclusive Museums of the Future*, or a book on *The Future of Indigenous Museums* (Stanley, 2007), or a research paper on ‘Demographic Transformation and the Future of Museums’ (Farrell et. al., 2010). In the past five years, I myself have attended workshops titled *Museums of the Future/The Future of Museums, Towards the Museum of the Future, Museums in the New Millennium, Museums and the Future of Art History*, and *The Future of the Ethnographic Museum*. The conference that occasioned this paper, too, was part of an international project on *the Future of the Museum*.

¹ These are three almost randomly chosen titles, of dozens of books dealing with similar themes.

It is interesting to note that when ‘museums’ and ‘futures’ are yoked together, the combination tends to evoke more anxiety than euphoria. It is as though it is feared that this institution, so given to enshrining and memorializing the past, may have no relevance in times to come. So many museums seem subject to obsolescence: National Museums that canonise a ‘national’ that is irrelevant to the new demographics; Museums of Modern Art that begin to look quaint with the passage of time; vast stores ‘authentic’ objects, maintained at such labour and expense, that have no special purchase in the floating world of digital images. But no genre of museum has been as troubled, has questioned its own *raison d’etre*, has been ashamed of its past and pessimistic about its future, as the ethnographic museum.

In the past thirty years, ethnographic museums have acknowledged and examined their own roots in the exploitations of colonialism, and they have had to reckon with the troubling and sometimes horrifying circumstances under which their collections were amassed. They have been vocal about the complications of representing ‘others’ in the era of decolonization and globalization and have accepted the ineffectual tokenism of celebrating ‘other cultures’ in their own elegant buildings while the suburbs filled with immigrants erupt in flames. The ethnographic museum’s relentless self-examination has led many to see the institution as embarrassing legacy of a regrettable past. For some, the only way forward for the ethnographic museum is a disavowal: dismantle the museum and send the objects ‘home,’ or at least step back from custodial authority, and allow communities of origin to decide the display, narrative, and handling of objects. It is as though the ethnographic museum is an institution without a future.

Against the many predictions of the imminent death of the ethnographic museum, I wish here to take a contrarian view. Rather than debating the ‘future of ethnographic museums,’ I argue that *the future of the museum is ethnographic*. That is to say, to a greater or a lesser degree,

the ethnographic mode will soon underlie – if it does not already -- all major museal and exhibitory forms. This is because the issues faced by the ethnographic museum are not unique to that institution. Problems that are usually laid at the door of ethnographic museums have a much broader currency today, for the inequities that once defined the relationship between colonizers and their subjects, or between former colonizers and the newly decolonized, are today played out in another key in the era of immigration and multiculturalism and of globalization and neo-colonialism. As every place and every act becomes trans-cultural in our ever-more-interconnected world, the dilemmas of the ethnographic museum are also the dilemmas faced, to a greater or lesser degree, by all major museal and exhibitory forms. And since, over the past thirty years, the ethnographic museum has faced these issues and has devised responses to them, it is the ethnographic museum whose innovations and improvisations offer directions for other museums and exhibitions to follow. Rather than being an embarrassing residue from the past, then, I believe that in our era the ethnographic museum is the one that sets the terms for the museum of the future.

I choose to demonstrate this in this paper by discussing four features that are identified with past and present ethnographic museums. I will then show the ways in which these tactics and approaches have filtered through -- *leaked*, if you will -- into other sorts of museums and exhibitions not marked as ethnographic, and have informed the way in which they deal with their transcultural present.

Firstly, **The Ethnographic Museum is a Place for Collecting and Representing Others.**

With its earliest roots in the gathering of curiosities in the age of exploration, and its formal institution through the nexus of knowledge and power in colonial times, the ethnographic museum is a place that collects the things of others and then explains these others through their things. In times past, objects were not always collected because they were admired.

Instead, the collected objects might have been used as metonyms for the savagery and primitivism of those who had produced them. The artefacts may have been used in displays that demonstrated the makers' lowly position in an evolutionary scale, or to evidence their pagan beliefs or unpalatable social customs. Later, when the museum tried to use the same objects to make us appreciate the ingenuity or creativity of the source culture, the asymmetries in the power relations between the two sides remained visible through one side's exclusive ability to collect the objects of the other.

Secondly, **The Ethnographic Museum Has a Way of Showing**: Even as objects were wrenched away from their original contexts to be put in ethnographic museums, once there, they were embedded in a simulated contexts to recreate a sense of the place and people that had produced them. These simulated contexts might be constituted by dioramas or photographs, or by being staged alongside functionally or culturally related material – thus fish-nets and boats might be placed near each other, or masks and musical instruments might collectively represent a performed rite. To suggest context, the ethnographic museum developed its own exhibition language, a way of showing things that was very different from the exhibitionary modes developed by art museums for showing their things.

Thirdly, **Ethnographic Museums have become Places for the Reclamation of Tradition**. In recent years, the remarkable self-examination undergone by anthropology has led to the remaking of the ethnographic museum. As anthropology questions its own right to collect, interpret and speak for others, the very groups for whom previously the museum had been a site for the display of their disempowerment have now been invited into the museum and given agency there. The remade ethnographic museum now attempts to serve source communities, and museums become places for them to connect with traditions and heritages.

And finally, **Ethnographic Museums Displace the Enlightenment.** As the museum becomes a place that seeks to accommodate different value systems, a relativist world-view refrains from judging different social customs and beliefs. It questions the universal validity of Western science, and seeks to give space to the affective, spiritual or religious meanings that museum objects may have for source communities. As the museum takes on board the recommendations of source communities – to remove taboo objects from display, or to permit periodic rituals that will support the spirits inhabiting a figurine or a mask – the ‘scientific’ and ‘rational’ values derived ultimately from the Enlightenment become displaced within the ethnographic museum. No longer a universal, the Enlightenment itself becomes the relic of a cultural particular.

These features, associated with the ethnographic museum, are not confined to museums of that genre. Rather, all four of these features recur in a much broader terrain of exhibitions and museums of many kinds, in many places, seem to be grappling with the same problems and issues that confronted the ethnographic museum. So much has the ethnographic museum infiltrated other kinds of museums and exhibitions, that one might even say that they are haunted by the ethnographic museum. What are these hauntings, and where do I believe they occur? Let me count the ways.

2. Collecting Others (In the Name of Global Contemporary Art)

The eminent German art historian Hans Belting, best for his studies of medieval and early renaissance art, has recently been at the helm of an ambitious art project on the Global Art Museum that examines the formation and circulation of global contemporary art. In an essay

emerging from the project, Belting discusses the entry of artists from 'other' places into the international circuit of contemporary art. He asks:

Where do those non-Western artists belong who just recently were “included” in the art market?

To this, he supplies the answer:

I would venture to argue that contemporary art, in a global context, invades the place of former ethnic production. (Belting, 2007:20)

In this gnomic observation, Belting suggests that in today's art world, contemporary artists from the global “elsewheres” – the non-Western world -- serve in some measure the same function as the circulating ethnographic specimens did in the 19th c. worlds fairs. This is not a comfortable suggestion, nor is it one that can stand up to close scrutiny. We certainly cannot compare the circumstances and compulsions, the lack of choices available to the four hundred Africans brought to Paris to populate a *village nègre* in the Exposition Universelle of 1889, with the opportunities and rewards available to today's globally circulating contemporary artists, some of whom are superstars who command high prices at auction and are invited to show their work in prestigious museums across the West.

And yet paradoxically the literature in contemporary art that examines the recent and ever-quickening global circulation of art from more and more places to more and more places is wracked with discussion that seems entirely to be about ethnography. We hear about the way artists from ‘elsewhere’ are always marked by their origins and are always expected to represent the place they came from. There is criticism of the way in which ‘ museum exhibitions and ‘ biennales expect artists who are even nominally from non-Western loations to perform the function of native informants or cultural brokers in new age. Whether this

comes about as a result of an ethnologization imposed by the institutions or a self-ethnologization embraced by the artists, the phenomenon has been the subject of a great deal of criticism and self-scrutiny. One needs only a perfunctory knowledge of the writings of Olu Oguibe, Gerardo Mosquera or Rashid Araeen (to name just a few prominent critics writing on the inequities of the global contemporary art world) to know how widely this phenomenon is discussed.

It is also interesting to see the way successive waves of interest in art from certain places follow a pattern of rising, peaking and dying out. For a while, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the art of Eastern Europe was sought after everywhere, in biennales, exhibitions and on the art market. Later, Chinese contemporary art rode a much longer surge; through the 90's and well into the first decade of the 21st century it was the darling of the biennale circuit as well as auction houses. Today we seem to be on the cusp of a major vogue for contemporary art from Africa. Not coincidentally, this is happening at the same time that experts have identified Africa as offering the greatest potential for economic growth in the world today.

Clearly, the vectors of art-interest have a strong relationship with the opening out of formerly closed economies, and the arrival of art from Eastern Europe, China and Africa follows the growth of business opportunities there. (In a sense, the arrival of art objects from these elsewhere today, is – with caveats -- parallel to the logic of colonial flows which also were connected with a primarily economic exploration). When a particular zone or country of focus becomes prominent for economic, political or other strategic reasons, many institutions feel the need to mount exhibitions of its art. As a consequence, curators make visits to the area, artists are commissioned to make art for exhibitions, and critics begin to produce discourse about it. All of this does a lot of good. It genuinely expands the canon, encourages creativity and brings visibility to good artists, enriching the repertoire of global art. At the

same time many of these exhibitions are presented as though they were situation reports that were capable of revealing truths about whole countries or even continents. Consider the exhibition titles of these Africa-related exhibitions of recent years: *Africa Explores* (1991), *Africa Now* (1991) *Another Century: African Stepovers* (1994), *Seven Stories about Art in Africa* (1995), *An Inside Story: African Art of Our Time* (1995) *Africana* (1997), *Africa Africa: Vibrant New Art from a Dynamic Continent* (1998), *Africa by Africa* (1999), *Africa apart* (2001), *Africa Remix* (2004). The exhibitions are supposed to serve a diagnostic function into the ‘condition’ of a place. And more often than not the projects are given value and even urgency by being embedded in an overall narrative of crisis, by alluding to difficulties in the country or region’s recent past. When publicity material is prepared for exhibitions of art from both Eastern Europe and China, posters and catalogue covers are likely to display a great deal of red, and include hammers and sickles or stars, to remind us of the Communist past of these countries, whether or not these are significant features of the artworks of the exhibition themselves. Framed thus, the artists become ‘survivors’ who have emerged from an alien past, and function as native informants who are finally able to tell the world what it was really like, back then, out there.

After 9/11 there was a surge in exhibitions of Islamic art, and art was explicitly given the task of “rehumanizing ‘Islam’” for the West (Rabat: 2012). While several major museums including the Louvre and the Metropolitan Museum mounted ambitious reinstallations of their permanent collections of classical Islamic art, contemporary artists from what is described as the “Islamic world” also gained a new cachet. As they too were included in numerous expositions, they performed the function of giving the Islamic world a human face.

A prominent show of this post-9/11 genre was *Without Boundary – Seventeen Ways of Looking*. Mounted at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2006 by curator Fereshteh

Daftari, the exhibition brought together seventeen artists, all but two of whom (who were white male American artists who had been inspired by eastern mysticism) were diaspora artists from North Africa and West- and South-Asia.

In her note on the exhibition, curator Daftari observes that most of the artists included ‘have come from the Islamic world to live in Europe and the United States.’ But, she says, ‘The exhibition ... (intends) questioning the use of artists' origins as the sole determining factor in the consideration of their art. To examine the various ways in which these artists' works diverge from popular expectations, the exhibition and the accompanying catalogue examine the visual treatment of texts and miniature painting on one hand, and issues of identity and faith or spirituality on the other. The intention is not to imply uniformity based on a collective identity but rather to highlight complex, idiosyncratic approaches.’²

The curator wanted us to *not* see *Without Boundaries* as an exhibition of contemporary Islamic art. But apart from two white Americans, the show included the artists Shirin Neshat, Shadi Ghadarian, Shirazeh Houshiary, Marjane Satrapi, Shirana Shahbazi, Y Z Kami (Iranian-origin), Jananne Al-Ani (Iraqi-origin) Mona Hatoum, Emily Jacir (Palestinian-origin), Rachid Kouraichi (Algerian-origin), Raqib Shaw (Kashmiri-origin), Kutlug Ataman (Turkish-origin), Ghada Amer (Egyptian-origin), Walid Raad (Lebanese-origin) and Shahzia Sikander (Pakistani-origin) all of whom have the right ethnicity to be labelled 'Islamic'; many of the works chosen focussed on classic genres of Islamic art such as calligraphy, carpets, or miniature paintings, or addressed the evergreen theme of women and veils. Even as the title of the show coyly refused to use the word ‘Islamic,’ the contents of the show rehearsed every cliché associated with Islamic art. The curator’s statement was a classic case of *apophasis*, the rhetorical device of making something present through the act of denying it.

² <http://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/exhibitions/83>

The celebrated Iranian-origin artist Shirin Neshat was represented in the exhibition by photographs from her well-known *Women of Allah* (1993-97) series. The four large prints of close-cropped black and white photographs showed a veiled woman's lips, face, hands, feet. In two of the photographs the barrel of a gun was present – glinting beside a woman's cheek like an ominous earring; as an unmistakably phallic cylinder emerging from the crack between two feet. In each photograph, the woman's body was overlaid with lines of Persian text calligraphed by Neshat. The fragmentary views of heavily veiled faces and bodies, the guns that seemed to both seduce and violate the women who touched them, the Perso-Arabic script that covered the bodies as though the women were but pages to be 'written upon,' all suggested women without agency, trapped, sequestered and indoctrinated by a patriarchal theocracy.

Yet the images were more complex than they seemed. The text that was inscribed upon the women's bodies were not (as most audiences assume) religious. They were secular poems. And although they would be indistinguishable to audiences who could not read the words and did not know the literature, these were citations from the poems of two very different women poets: by Iran's most famous modernist-feminist rebel poet, Forough Farrokhzad who wrote of a woman's longings in pre-Revolutionary Iran (and whose works were banned after the Islamic Revolution); and by Tahereh Safarzadeh, supporter of the Islamic Revolution whose patriotic verses glorified the martyrs of the Iran-Iraq war. Neshat's works, then, refer to complex and contradictory places occupied by women in the history of 20th-century Iran.

Where in the exhibition would one come to understand this complexity? Viewers were supplied with audio-guides that were populated with the voices of the curator and the artists.

As one drew near the *Women of Allah*, curator Fareshteh Daftari's contextualised the photographs by telling us that "Neshat left Iran when she was still a teenager. On her first

visit back in 1990, she encountered a country that had been transformed by revolution that had replaced a secular regime with an Islamic one. The *Women of Allah* series embodies her reaction to this transformation..." Daftari's voice faded out and Neshat's soothing and slightly-accented voice faded in. She explained her views of veiled women:

"The more you're confined and you're oppressed, and the more you cover your body, the few parts that are exposed actually become very powerful in seducing the men. In the beginning, after the Revolution, men were not even able to make eye contact with the women and occasionally, when eye contacts were made by accident, even if you were not drawn to the man, it created an instant sexual tension. This whole idea of the veil and the situation that she lives in creates so much mystery about her body, that her body automatically becomes an object of desire. And this is in exact contradiction to what the government, the religion would like to see. But this is absolutely the truth about all Muslim women. They are the sexiest women I believe, on the planet." (Neshat: 2003)

Speaking about her experience of Iran after the Islamic Revolution, Neshat showed us her empathy with the women who live there, her ability to go beyond the first reaction to the veil and see subtleties in the signals that could still be exchanged between men and women, subverting the intentions of the government. We need Neshat to tell us this, because she is the insider who can bring us true stories about "Iran;" her accented voices signals the authenticity of her speech. Yet, when Neshat explains her work on this audio-guide, she elides the more complex, more specifically 'Iranian' meanings implicit in her choice of poetry. She chooses to focus instead on the exotic-erotic theme of sexuality under the veil, a classic trope of Orientalism if there ever was one.

This kind of over-simplification allows audiences to believe the work is about themes that already interest them; it does not ask them to invest time and effort in learning about a cultural context that would yield unexpected and unfamiliar insights. Perhaps this is what Olu Oguibe calls giving ‘Mungo what he wants:’ ‘the practice of producing to the tastes and specifications of colonialist desires’(Oguibe 2004:22).

As we can see, the complexities and perturbations of inter-cultural interaction, and the phenomena of one culture collecting another, the propagation of orientalist stereotypes, the iniquitous market forces and the willingness of native informants to produce the kinds of narratives about their ‘own’ culture that are easily digested, are not confined to ethnographic museums. Any site of cross-cultural encounter in which institutional and economic power lie on one side, and cultural difference and the capacity for cultural production lie on the other, is likely to replicate the complications of which the ethnographic museum is the *locus classicus* but not the *locus unicus*.

The audioguide used in *Without Boundaries* purported to bring visitors to a closer understanding of the works, by putting them in touch directly with the artists themselves. This sense of access to the ‘true’ Iran may be deceptive, as we have seen. But the use of the audioguide brings me also to the second feature I would like to discuss, that was normally associated with ethnographic museums, but has now become commonplace in museums of other kinds as well.

3. Ethnologized Displays and Invisible Dioramas

Each genre of museum develops its own modes of display. Through it, the museum stages its artefacts so as to highlight the aspects relevant to the museum’s disciplinary focus.

This is easily illustrated. Imagine a figurine made of wood that finds its way in turn into an art museum, an ethnographic museum, and a botanical museum. It would be displayed very differently in each. In a botanical museum, it might be used to illustrate the usefulness of a particular timber. It would be exhibited alongside photographs or drawings of living trees, samples of lumber, and other carved or partially worked pieces of wood that exhibit the strength or fragility of the material. Text panels and object labels might explain the occurrence of the tree and its special qualities.

In the ethnographic museum, objects are usually shown in association with other objects from the same culture, as though to build a picture of the context that it was taken from. Things that function are grouped together: so the masks used in a ritual dance might be clustered together with materially different but functionally related objects such as costumes, staffs or musical instruments. These might be supplemented with other contextual cues – photographs, film and video, or even dioramas where the artefacts are inserted into a three-dimensional plaster or fibreglass reconstruction of a context complete with faux architecture, vegetation and actors. Often, explanatory labels make even more information available to audience. In the ethnographic museum, the object is treated as evidence about a culture's way of doing things.

In an art museum, on the other hand, all evocation of context is eschewed. The gallery is 'Unshadowed, white, clean, artificial - the space is devoted to the technology of esthetic.' (O'Doherty: 15). Here, the artefact is isolated, placed in a vitrine, spotlit; it is presented as a purely visual object whose task it is to trigger an aesthetic response. The removal of all clutter and context creates the 'concentration necessary for the aesthetic experience to occur.' (Czikszenmihalyi et al: 17). Even if the object is not already an especially aesthetic one, the

art museum's special form of display aestheticizes it, for with nothing else to look at, the artworks become traps for the eye.

This kind of display is known as the White Cube. Here, the museum gallery becomes a neutral envelope that removes everything that might distract one from the artwork. As Brian O'Doherty wrote in his famous critique of the White Cube, in this kind of display 'the work is isolated from everything that would detract from its own evaluation of itself' as "art." (O'Doherty:15). The white cube display was invented by museums of modern art, and uncharitable critics have remarked that modern art needed the white cube -- indeed without the kind of aura that the white cube provides, it might not always be possible to recognize much of modern art as art at all.

It is of interest, however, to see how and when and why the white cube aesthetic began to be applied beyond modern art to other categories of artefacts. Since the white cube display was meant for "art," affirming that the objects so displayed were worthy of being seen primarily as aesthetic objects, the application of this display style to a category of objects that had not previously been granted the status of art became a museological gesture of approval. Through the shift in display, museums signalled that certain artefacts had been admitted into the hallowed portals of art.

Clearly, this transformation of "artefact" into "art" is political and there are specific circumstances under which such transformation takes place. This is well illustrated when we compare the way in the pre-eminent museum of Indian art – the V&A in London -- displayed its artefacts while India was still a British colony and how this display changed after India achieved independence. The ethnographic display of the colonial period that juxtaposed miniature paintings with shawls, swords and elephant-trappings abruptly changed into a White Cube display where serried ranks of paintings occupied pristine white walls. It seems that

with the arrival of Indian sovereignty, 'artifying' Indian artefacts had become a diplomatic necessity in London,

As decolonization proceeded, we see this process continue. Late in the 20th century, the White Cube display was extended to the galleries of Primitive Art in the Metropolitan Museum, New York (renamed the galleries of the Arts of Africa, Oceania and the Americas). At the turn of the 21st century this move reached its apogee in the installation of the 'Arts Premiers' in the Pavillon des Sessions at the Louvre (see Clifford 2007, Price 2007).

Exhibiting objects in White Cube space is now the norm. The lack of contextualization becomes a sign that the art does not need to be explained: it is transparently aesthetic, and has universal appeal. The distinction between the kind of art that needs textualization and that does not need textualization becomes a ranking system. That which is ethnographic is a curiosity, needing explanation; it is culture-bound and limited. That which is art is universally understood and needs no explication.

And yet objects need to be explained. In these times of globalization, with all our travel and migration and mobility, and with the febrile circulation of artists and art works, we are all strangers to one other. The museum becomes a stage for radical encounters produced by radical displacements – ours, as much as of the objects we contemplate. We want to know more about the things we see – indeed multiculturalism has told us that we need to know, to make these things comprehensible to ourselves. How then can we mediate between the contradictory pulls – one the one hand to dignify every kind of artefact with a White Cube display, and on the other hand to provide information about it and its context? The compromise comes through the transference of the contextual information to audioguides and podcasts which provide the contextualization without appearing to compete with the

masterpieces that can remain in solitary splendour in their cases. The audioguide and the podcast are, I believe, the invisible and unacknowledged diorama of our times.

If at one time it was obligatory to extend the aura of art to more and more of the objects produced by the non-West today there is a reverse trend. As the past becomes another country, and as the Western canon is no longer part of every education, audiences even in the West need the contextualization of periods and works from the Western canon. Thus, several major museums develop audioguides that put Leonardo and Michelangelo in the context of their time and place, explained in relation to their cultural context (see Antenna International, 2011). Again, the availability of the “invisible diorama” of the audioguide allows for an acceptable way to let us *hear* about the contexts of what we are obliged to *see* as art.

4. Returns

Not everybody sees the designation of art as the highest destiny for objects, however, and this brings me to the third aspect that I would like to consider in this paper. We know that the ethnographic museum has been the arena in which a number of communities have explicitly rejected the transformation of their artefacts into art. They have insisted that objects in the museum be regarded on terms that *they* set, for these things are part of *their* heritage. At stake here is the power to collect, to own, to assess and to interpret things. Who has the right to give meaning to an object? Who should decide whether something is to be subject to a reverential or a forensic gaze?

In recent years, the ethnographic museum has been the site for both physical and symbolic repatriations. Initiatives like NAGPRA in north America allow communities to physically claim sacred objects and human remains taken from their burial sites; these become

unavailable to 'science' and re-enter the ritual domain. Museums are also sites for projects of symbolic repatriation that have sought to give communities of origin rights over even the objects that are not returned to them. While the museum retains objects in its collection, community members are consulted on the interpretation, proper storage and appropriate handling, and exhibition - or removal from exhibition – of the objects that remain in the museum.

These initiatives have been taken in North America, in Australia and New Zealand, all of which we should note, are settler colonies in which indigenous populations suffered a terrible internal colonization. As the aboriginal groups gain full citizenship in these countries – something that came startlingly late in many cases – governments have sought to make amends, and the ethnographic museum becomes one of the arenas for this attempt to undo some of the past.

But the cue to take objects out of the museum, and to re-inscribe them in a former ritual life, is increasingly being taken up by others beyond these indigenous groups. “Don’t you feel bad when you see our gods in their museums?” an Indian living in the United States asked the Indian historian Tapati Guha Thakurta, prompting her to write a fine paper on the contradictions of the circulation and redesignation of Indian art as it moves in and out of temples and museums (Guha-Thakurta, 2007). If in the middle of the 20th century there many Indians were gratified to see Indian objects accepted as canonical art – to assert India's equivalence with others by saying Indian objects were “as good as” any other – today there is a contradictory move to stress difference, to refuse to be assimilated into Western categories. We may attribute this to multiculturalism, to identity politics, to the defensive reaction to globalization – but more and more groups that identify with "civilizations," and would earlier have been happy and proud to have their things spoken of as "art" now want them to be

reckoned as something else. Increasingly, these groups make the assertion that only communities of origin have the right to custody and interpretation of objects that issued from them. And these contestations are being staged not just in ethnographic museums but in art museums as well.

I could cite many examples of this process in India, a multicultural country where identity matters are vigorously alive and occasionally become viciously competitive. We have had different religious groups in conflict with each other, and we have seen religion in conflict with the secular institutions of the state. Since the museum is the institution that neutralises religious objects and presents them as secular works of “art,” museums and their exhibitions often become the site of argumentation between different groups who wish to accord different values to the same things. We have had Hindus and Buddhists insisting on performing rituals in front of sculptures in the galleries; we have seen attempts have been made to dress nude figures of goddesses; and orthodox Sunnis have attacked the exhibitions of manuscripts belonging to the Ismailis -- a Muslim subsect that orthodox Sunnis consider heretical. But let me illustrate these processes by taking an example from my own community, that of the Sikhs.

A religious minority that composes some 2% of India’s population, Sikhs follow a faith that arose in the 16th century as a bridge between Hindus and Muslims. For most of its history, Sikhism’s boundary with other faiths has been porous, with different members of the same family being brought up as ‘Hindu’ or as ‘Sikh.’ Scholars tell us that sharper distinctions were drawn only in the early 20th century when the community began to define itself as a separate religion. (Oberoi 1994)

In the past fifteen years or so, prominent figures from within the Sikh diaspora have tried to promote a distinct cultural identity for Sikhs by supporting the collection and display of

artefacts made for Sikh patrons in prestigious art museums. Through their efforts, a prominent exhibition of Sikh art – *Art of the Sikh Kingdoms* -- was held at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (1999), and travelled to the Royal Ontario Museum of Toronto (2000). Other exhibitions were held at the Natural History Museum of the Smithsonian (2004) and Rubin Museum in New York (2006). The Asian Art Museum of San Francisco inaugurated a permanent gallery of Sikh Art in 2003 through the benefaction of a Sikh collector.

Even as these diasporic groups have sought the acknowledgement of Sikh objects as art through the sanctified space of the art museum, in other places some Sikhs have expressed resentment over the ‘museumization’ of their sacred objects. Our story unfolds in 2003 in Chandigarh which is the capital of the Sikh-dominated province of Punjab. Here, the Museum is the proud possessor of a large collection of historic manuscripts of the Guru Granth Sahib, the sacred book of the Sikhs.

In the early 18th century, when the tenth and last guru of the Sikhs lay dying, his followers asked who would succeed him. ‘*Guru maniyo Granth,*’ he is reported to have said: ‘Let the Book be your Guru.’ He probably intended that his Sikhs (literally ‘pupils’) should be guided by the writings of the previous Gurus that had been compiled in a book. But Sikhs took him for his word both figuratively and literally. While most Sikhs read the book, they also call it the ‘Guru Granth Sahib,’ where ‘Guru’ means ‘spiritual leader,’ ‘Granth’ means ‘book’ and ‘Sahib’ means ‘Lord.’ Sikhs treat the book as a living entity, and have evolved a code of conduct that cares for the physical needs of their guru in ways that resemble Hindus’ treatment of consecrated idols in their shrines. The book is enthroned in the gurudwara or Sikh temple, it is woken in the morning and draped in splendid garments, and it is put to rest at night by being shut and wrapped in special nighttime clothes. All who enter its presence

must be barefoot and must cover their heads. When the Granth is open an attendant should wave a flywhisk over it, just as whisks were used to fan rulers of olden days. Ritual food is offered to the book first, before being distributed to the congregation. When the book becomes old and tattered, it is given a respectful funeral, which involves a seven-day ritual of first bathing it, then dressing it in new white clothes and then cremating the books with a ritual scattering of their ashes.

Given this traditional way of treating old Guru Granth Sahibs, historic copies of the book are hard to come by. One scholar in Chandigarh amassed a rare collection of manuscripts and he gifted these in 1999 to the Chandigarh museum, which displayed them in the Manuscripts Gallery. Four years passed without event, until a local politician burst into the museum - with attendant members of the press - and insisted that the museum's treatment of the Sikh holy book was sacrilegious. In gurudwaras, he said, the books were clothed and handled with reverence and only opened at religiously appropriate times. Here in the museum they were naked, propped open, laid bare to anybody's eyes.

The museum authorities were worried. The Sikhs are a majority in the province of Punjab where these events took place, and the government in power at the time was a Sikh right-wing party. Moreover, in the 1980s and '90s the region had been wracked by the Khalistani Sikh separatist movement that had sought to establish an independent country. The Khalistan movement was a violent campaign that was violently put down, but memories of its turbulence were still fresh in everybody's minds. So when the protesting politician led supporters on a march to the museum, the museum director called in a priest who ritually shut the manuscripts and swaddled them in cloths, putting these museum objects in the same position as sleeping Guru Granth Sahibs in gurudwaras.

Predictably enough, a few weeks later, representatives from the local Muslim community came to the museum and they objected. Why were the Sikh books being given this privilege, they asked, when their holy books, the Quran, were lying propped open in the museum's glass cases? The museum now shut the Qurans and wrapped them in cloth.

Today, before visitors enter this Manuscripts Gallery in the Chandigarh Museum, a noticeboard instructs them to take off their shoes and to cover their heads, as they would do before entering a temple or a mosque. Once inside the gallery, they walk past case after case in which all the exhibits are in plain sight, hidden from view.

What really happened in the Chandigarh museum, when the holy books of some communities were removed from the sight of unbelievers? It resembled some of the phenomena we see elsewhere at the intersection of aboriginal peoples and museums. As in those cases, here too, a 'community of origin' has asserted its right to determine how and by whom its sacred objects might be seen. It seems to me, however, that although this act presented itself as traditional, it was in fact profoundly contemporary. It took recourse to tradition to shore up political power in an era of identity politics. It was a refusal to submit to the museum's taxonomies, in order to demonstrate a community's power to claim exceptional status. And if the objects went off view as a result, let's not forget that the act of protest was performed for the media eye made the 'disappearance' of the object a hypervisible event.

Just in case the Sikh example makes us think that these kinds of contestations are still marginal, confined to aboriginal groups in advanced nations, or perhaps to religious fundamentalists in the third world, it would be well to consider the pervasiveness of precisely this phenomenon in Russia today. The many icons in Russian museums were taken there in the wake of the Revolution when they were seized from the Church. Today, the Church is

suing for the return of their property. These paintings, that have been displayed as precious works of art in Russian museums for many decades, are now being reclaimed by the Church as icons of faith.

The dismantling of the category of 'art' and the challenge to the authority of the museum is extraordinarily widespread, in a new mobilization and multiplication of a praxicological shift pioneered in the ethnographic museum. These concessions were initially demanded by aboriginal groups who were miniscule minorities. At that time, the process had one kind of resonance. Today, the right to determine the lives of museum objects is being demanded by much larger groups and eventually will be demanded by majorities. The ultimate consequences of the diffusion of this feature of ethnographic museums is one that remains to be seen.

5. Enlightenment, an ethnic particular

At the same time, in many places all over the world we also see the exactly contrary trend. Today, in many locations across the globe, museums are growing where there was not a strong presence of museums before. If the art museum which aestheticizes sacred artefacts is being rejected by some groups, it is being eagerly welcomed by others at the very same time.

For instance, new museums are being built in China on a tremendous scale. Two years before the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the Chinese government set the target for the country to have 1000 museums. In the next five-year plan, the government's set the target for 3,500 museums by 2015. This quota was met three years early. Not only is China initiating many museum projects, but it is announcing the ambition of these projects by sponsoring eye-catching museum architecture. The spectacular and insistently contemporary forms of these

buildings imprint many stories of arrival (economic, social, cosmopolitan) upon the terrain of the People's Republic.

Most of the museums in China will display art from China, whether historical or contemporary. But there are also ambitions that go beyond the national, as signalled by the Museum of World Cultures in Beijing which aims to collect examples from all the major civilizations of the world in the manner of Universal Survey Museums.

Another concentration of major art museums is arising now in the Arab world, in the United Arab Emirates and nearby Qatar. The centrepiece of the Emirates' ambitious museum project is the cultural district proposed for Saadiyat Island on Abu Dhabi with a Guggenheim designed by Frank Gehry, a Louvre by Jean Nouvel, a Maritime Museum by Tadao Ando, an Emirati National Museum by Norman Foster and a performing arts centre by Zaha Hadid. After the financial crisis of 2008, it is possible that the project may never be completed as announced, but the extraordinary scale of the proposals, the spread of publicity and marketing and the fever pitch of journalistic and academic discussion about it have made Saadiyat Island a spectacle with a real presence in the world even as while it remains physically unbuilt.

Since the announcement of the Saadiyat Island project in 2006, Zaha Hadid was also commissioned to develop a museum of Contemporary Art in Bahrain, the plans for which bear the mark of her signature style. The museums in Abu Dhabi and Bahrain are still plans at present; meanwhile at the turn of the millennium Saudi Arabia built a National Museum. Designed by Canadian architect Raymond Moriyama, it has 100,000 sq feet of galleries devoted exclusively to the archaeology and history of the kingdom. The presence of a museum like this has a social logic of its own; after the museum was made, the Saudi government introduced the category of tourist visas for the first time.

But the Arab thunder has been stolen by Qatar. Even as Abu Dhabi was announcing and then revising and announcing postponements of its grand plans, in Qatar's capital Doha in 2008 the Museum of Islamic Art opened in a building designed by I M Pei. Housing a staggeringly important and fine collection of Islamic art this museum is truly remarkable, not least because it shows that given the will and infinite funds, collections of the kind that seemed only possible under colonialism can still be built today. Two years later the Museum of Islamic Art at Doha was joined by Mathaf, the Arab Museum of Modern Art, a young museum that immediately made its mark with its audacious opening exhibition of the Chinese contemporary artist Cai Guo Qang— including the controlled explosions for which he is well known. This was followed by *Tea with Nefertiti*, a charming, difficult and challenging show that asked contemporary artists to engage with the history of archaeology in the middle east. Subsequent exhibitions have focussed on the works of Mona Hatoum, Adel Abdessemed, Shirin Neshat and Wael Shawky, all important artists from the 'Islamic' world.

Mathaf, the Museum of Islamic Art, the Saadiyat Island: all of these are attractive institutions, but the ambition to have such museums in these places should give us pause: rather than simply recounting the wonders that are rising from the soil, we should ask what it means, to have these museums there, now. Even if some of these museums invoke predecessors in Europe – through the genres of their collections, the protocols of their organizations, the origins of their curators and even through their very names as in the franchises of the Guggenheim or the Louvre -- these museums do not simply repeat what their ancestor museums did in Europe. Even an old form of museum (and indeed not all of these museums follow old forms) in a new location is a new proposition. It is after all inserted into another context, another history, another demography and another politics; a museum in a new place means something entirely new.

To my mind, as the global spread of art museums now inscribes the cultural form of *the museum* upon a new landscape, and as it does so, it sets up new chains of meaning that derive from the museum's very newness in the place in which it finds itself. As we learn to consume an old museum in a new location, we learn to savour not just the museum's contents, but the museum *itself* as artefact. In this context the museum becomes souvenir that itself represents a particular culture: the culture that made museums. What is collected, through this manoeuvre, then, is Europe's Enlightenment. And through this manoeuvre Enlightenment Europe begins to appear as an ethnic particular. The fact that Europe can now be collected by the Chinese or by the Arabs becomes a signal to anyone who cares to listen about the shifts that have occurred in power, in economy, in who has the capacity to collect, and which is the 'other' that it now collects.

But let me end by sharing with you a conversation that I had not long ago, which helped me understand this phenomenon from a more intimate perspective. Among all these 'other' locations where the museum has been so remarkably efflorescent in recent years is the little city state of Singapore. When I first visited it I was taken aback at the range and quality and sophistication of its museums. I was delighted to see its very up-to-date and lively Contemporary Art Museum, its ambitious Asian Civilizations Museum whose splendid collections trace high civilizations across all of Asia, and its high-tech Singapore National Museum that tells the history of Singapore through the most beguiling storytelling methods. Not only were these institutions remarkable but they all seemed to have come into being in about ten years' time, from the middle of the 1990s till about 2006.

To my delight, at a conference dinner I found myself seated next to Kenson Kwok, the brilliant founding-director of the Asian Civilizations Museum who had put that remarkable institution together in a few short years. I took the opportunity to ask him, 'Why is the

Singapore government investing so much in so many museums so suddenly?’ He gave me several answers of the kind one would expect –about culture, responsibility to heritage, the importance of education, tolerance and understanding across cultural difference. And then he said: ‘For us, these museums are important because they help us to hold on to a better quality of expatriate. ‘

I think about what he said, and what it suggests about the kinds of functions the museum is now expected to perform. It seems entirely logical. Ambitious plans for mega-museums are emerging in places of new wealth. As they play increasingly important roles in the global economy, these new metropolises have to be globally competitive as places to live in. They have to offer an infrastructure that goes beyond roads and airports and electricity; to hold on to the “better quality of expatriate” they have to offer good shopping, good schools and good cultural opportunities. The more each of these nodes in the global economy resembles all the other nodes, the better chance it has of keeping its Swedish engineers and Chinese entrepreneurs and British analysts in place. Think of the growing population of expatriates then, moving from Bucharest to Dubai to Shanghai, going everywhere to the jazz club after office, sending their children to international schools, their wives becoming Friends of the Museum wherever they go. The same cosmopolitan city repeats itself across the globe, complete with its shopping malls, parks, gyms and museums, and the same expatriates inhabit them, like little figures moving about in their own diorama of the global cosmopolis.

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