

Preface

Culture/cohesion/compulsion: Museological artifice and its dilemmas

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The building of the nation is of necessity accompanied by the discovery and encouragement of universalizing values...It is at the heart of national consciousness that international consciousness lives and grows.

— Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 1961

Currently, two contending models for understanding culture and cultural property are being played out in academic writing, and these models are utilised widely to organise museum displays, to debate social issues in the media and even to establish government policies. One model is dependent on neo-liberal notions of diversity, hybridity and migratory and transitory identity; and the other, which might be termed a 'nativist' model, emphasises social cohesion and the permanence and persistence of individual and group identity. Judging from the repetitious nature of the debates, these two models of multiculturalism present mutually exclusive alternatives. Few people are aware of the oscillations between them: being wedded to one renders the other invisible. What is unclear, in being wedded to one to the exclusion of the other, is that the positions are co-constructed and mutually defining, each existing primarily in relation to its other—a romance of unknown siblings.

To take a case in point, well known beyond Australasia, a leading cultural anthropologist, Nicholas Thomas, endorses a nativist position, precisely for its political effectiveness in promoting cultural pride and civil rights. Arguing that the same anthropological theories are heard differently when they are used by First World or by Third and Fourth World peoples, Thomas describes the success of two travelling exhibitions of Maori culture. The exhibitions' 'radical aesthetic decontextualization' excludes European influences of all kinds, yet the theoretical interest of this self-presentation lies precisely in its reproduction of anthropological systematisations.¹ Thomas is sympathetic to the transformation of such discourses to suit native positions; nativist consciousness, he argues, cannot be deemed undesirable merely because it is ahistorical and uncritically reproduces colonialist stereotypes. Colonialist stereotypes and essential differences have different *meanings* at different times and for different audiences. By promoting the legitimacy of Aboriginal culture at a time when it was not widely respected by the dominant population, the exhibition *Te Maori* involved

'mobilisation': it capitalised on white society's idea of the primitive—that is, primitivism—and created for the Maori a degree of prestige and power that did not exist before the 1980s.²

In other words, in nativist discourse, essentialism plays a progressive role in forming a self-determined (or at least self-named) national identity that can be appreciated only in the *performative* realm. *Meaning* is always, necessarily, determined by context. In New Zealand today, more than two decades after the *Te Maori* exhibition, the Federal Government has adopted a bicultural model of national identity that recognises a certain synthetic Maori identity alongside that of settlers. This federal fabrication of the nation-state's indigenous heritage is presented to Maori as their own construction—but the representation is problematic. Meaning is indeed always determined by context—and strategic essentialism in the hands of the government becomes a disciplining instrument. To brand Maori presence today as unified and homogenous continues to impose settler perspectives of otherness that originated in the colonial era—European settler perspectives that erase, collapse or override palpable distinctions among native social and cultural communities. At stake for Maori, as for Australian Aboriginal groups, has been the maintenance of land and property rights (and maintenance and transmissibility of esoteric knowledge) in ways that might be effectively 'heard' by settler governmental powers. In New Zealand, at stake for the official governmental construction of a 'bicultural model' of national identity based on coherence and unity, longevity and persistence is control of Maori peoples in their own name.

Similar conditions have persisted elsewhere—for example, in the cooption of indigenous forms of self-representation in Central and South America during the Spanish vice-regal era. The *castas* paintings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries exemplify the way that colonists at the upper end of the social echelon reconfigured real cultural and ethnic diversities by picturing the daily lives of people of lower social status who differed from one another (and from their European and elite creole viewers) in terms of their shades of skin colour, costumes and domestic settings. The continuing thread from vice-regal Spain to contemporary New Zealand is the discounting of indigenous forms of self-representation in favour of a mega-category of 'otherness' within which differences are classified according to European taxonomies and epistemological underpinnings.³

The problems entailed in the bicultural paradigm at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa is perhaps most clearly apparent in its treatment of non-Maori 'others'—Scottish settlers wearing kilts, Italian settlers eating pasta, and so on—wherein national cultural stereotypes mirror the representation of Maori identity as a homogeneous culture with recognisable traits and traditions. Meanwhile, in the same museum, short shrift is given to mixed ethnic identities:

a small display is devoted to Pacific Islanders who have intermarried either before or after arriving in New Zealand. Asian immigrants—settlers of recent origin—are not represented at all, and issues of cultural hybridity are skirted. Clearly, this is biculturalism based on the nativist model that originated as the critical inversion of a Eurocentric understanding of cultural identity.

The lack of hybrid models of multiculturalism that typifies museums and popular culture in Australasia prevails against the historical backdrop of colonialist miscegenation policies, according to which the ‘native blood’ of ‘savages’ could be bred out of the population through intermarriage. Even without such a colonial policy, the idea of genetic survival translates differently in countries where Indigenous people have not been alienated from their lands and where people are trying to hold onto their cultural heritage—often by revitalising traditions effaced by colonial policies of assimilation in ways that fit the contemporary world. When the state-funded Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa features a documentary film about a red-haired, blue-eyed individual of Maori descent getting in touch with her Maori roots, however, much more is involved than acknowledgment of Indigenous ancestry and self-determination in contemporary society. There is also explicit erasure of an individual’s multicultural heritage. The same erasures exist elsewhere: in Australia, in the United States, in many formerly colonised parts of the world. Wherever Indigenous peoples are trying to advance their rights, the complexities of cultural heritage tend to be reduced to struggles between the nation-state and Indigenous groups seeking sovereignty.⁴

Neither the nativist model of ‘strategic essentialism’ nor the neo-liberal model of cultural hybridity works, however, to create what Homi Bhabha calls an ‘interstitial space’ that actively accommodates nativist resistance without romanticising or otherwise appropriating it. It is time to make visible the broader conceptual framework in which the debates about cultural identities and cultural properties are conducted. A compromise is not likely between what are broadly perceived as mutually exclusive models, as the Te Papa Tongarewa example suggests. Is there a way beyond the current impasse in cultural theory or are we doomed to keep orbiting around European ideas of art, culture and ethnicity forever?⁵ A great deal has been written recently about the shortcomings of creating Indigenous works of fine art in the Western arena, especially in Australia where contemporary Indigenous arts are framed within the Western perspective of high art without granting agency to Indigenous forms of cultural production in any other sense.⁶ It is not possible to move beyond such oppositional claims made in current debates about cultural property without considering the politics of knowledge production in mainstream scholarship. The categories and concepts used in arguments about ownership of intellectual property, including perceptions of the past, are inadequate to the task of revising ethnocentric

accounts of history if they conceive of cultural artefacts within a Western, patriarchal conceptual framework.

The two contending models of culture hold up poorly under close critical examination of the data, raising what we see as an underlying problem—indeed, the dilemma—of representational ‘adequacy’ itself, especially evident in museum displays of cultural artefacts. The underlying problem with which this volume’s essays implicitly and explicitly contend is the presumption that museums are representational artefacts to be critiqued on the basis of their presumed adequacies and inadequacies. Our aim here is to shift these discursive modalities to more fundamental epistemological and ethical levels.

So we would like to consider the fundamental problem of the artifice of museums and museology: the aims, functions, dilemmas and conundrums that have been an essential part of the institution’s nature. We use the term ‘artifice’ as referring, simultaneously, to two contradictory notions: 1) as fabrication or production in the most general sense; and 2) as falseness or deception. Objects or artefacts in museums—as well as museums themselves as artefacts or examples of artifice and artistry—are by nature inherently and essentially ambivalent for this reason. The implication here is that, as with social institutions more generally, museums function above all to manage ambivalence by masking it as cultural determinism. Or rather—and herein lies the paradox—as examples themselves of artifice, museums function so as to appear as if they are managing ambivalence, by disciplining visitors to see and understand in particular ways.

Museums commonly envision or stage a past from which we might wish to be descended (that is, that elicits a desire for descent), so as to understand our present as the product and effect of its supposed (and ‘re-presented’) past. In so doing, they include futures imagined as bringing to fulfilment the past we are envisioning. In other words, a past from which we might wish to be descended existing from the perspective of a future toward which we might wish to be headed—a future imagined as bringing to fulfilment the past we are envisioning as having in fact produced our present. The incorporation of projected futures is on occasion quite explicit, as in the Museum of the City of Shanghai, where, juxtaposed with a gigantic, finely detailed wooden model of present-day Shanghai, on the top floor of a six-storey building whose lower floors contain an extensive photo archive and documents of the older city, is an Imax Theatre with an imaginary fly-through of the city to come: the Shanghai of Tomorrow. The past, in this case quite explicitly, operates as future anterior of what the city shall have been for what it is in the process of becoming.

For a very long time, it has been a largely unquestioned assumption in cultural studies that museums are by nature representational artefacts; that in their forms and in the arrangement of their contents they mirror at a smaller or fragmentary scale the societies within which they are located, faithfully replicating or

reconstructing social or cultural histories that at the same time—and this is crucial—are presumed to actually pre-exist their ‘re-’presentation. This idea—that a museum, a collection or an archive is (or should be) an epitome or synecdoche of a fuller and pre-existing state of things (a microcosm of a pre-existing macrocosm)—has nevertheless long been deeply problematic, and is challenged not only by recent developments in art, technology and science, but equally by the spread of museums to societies and cultures outside the European world, where local and Indigenous ideas about the nature and functions of objects or artefacts, as well as ideas about production or fabrication and artistry itself, are often very different to those assumed as natural or universal within the dominant Western traditions in philosophy, science, art and religion.

It is commonly assumed that museums stage or contain artefacts whose significance appears to lie elsewhere: in absent times or places, in the hidden or lost ‘intentions’ of their producers or in a past that is the projective summation of its fragments and relics preserved here and now in museum space. Claims for the repatriation of cultural property are commonly grounded in such presumptions, projecting an originative ‘fullness’ of what currently remains only in pieces: relics that we are called on to restore, preserve, perpetuate and disseminate. It is made to seem that justice demands this. We assume that the chief function of historical or cultural museums has been to make literally and materially present the effects of causes that lie elsewhere. What is at stake is an ontological distinction separating formation and signification, ‘form’ and ‘content’, signification and its ‘ex-pression’ or ‘re-presentation’.

This is built into the semiotic structure of our languages and forms of social behaviour and discourse: we instinctively speak of the impact of certain events as having implications for the next stage of an individual or collective journey or struggle towards some form of enlightenment or social justice. It’s difficult to extricate ourselves from conflating or confusing teleology and effect. We are trained to make the visible legible, to read the ‘spirit’, ‘soul’ or physiognomy of things and events. Time is presumed (and not only by Hegel or pre-Columbian art historians such as George Kubler) to have a real ‘shape’ and things are believed to ‘have’ or ‘contain’ meanings that might be made explicit or revealed by careful reading and analysis.⁷ As archaeologists, anthropologists, art historians or museum personnel, we spend years or even lifetimes disciplining ourselves in the practice of a certain divination, a kind of augury in interpreting events as bearing traces not only of their past but of some likely future. Art-historical chronology is mis-perceived as a secular teleology.

Museums in early modern times and today are part of a network of institutions designed explicitly to illuminate, illustrate and promote supposedly important ‘truths’ about individuals, peoples, nations, genders, classes, races, species, times and places, as well as about historical events and objects, natural or artificial—in

short, about precisely those things that they are complicit in fabricating, factualising or naturalising in the first place. These include the modernist constructions of race, gender, nationality, ethnicity, periodicity, and so on. That is, constructions staged as separate from their expressions, as local 'manifestations' of a 'pan-human' artistry. These phantasms have for more than two centuries been key instruments of power and control in the massive enterprises of nationalism and imperial and global capitalisation.

Museology, art history, art criticism, aesthetic philosophy, archaeology, connoisseurship, curatorship, preservation, conservation, commodification and art making are genres in the theatres of nationalism and globalisation. Common to them is the enterprise of the modern corporate state in managing ambiguity, in defining and prescribing disciplined and predictable linkages between citizen-subjects and their object-worlds. This causal linkage of psychology and physiognomy is essentially connected to the necessity of delineating and articulating the individual citizen-consumer as the locus on and upon which, and for whom, meaning and purpose are constructed and inscribed. The citizen-consumer is thus both the product of and, through his or her use of the museum, productive of this experiential world—the core modernist fiction being that each person embodies a *genius loci*, a spirit of the place delineated by its own being.

It seems cogent to ask here 'What exactly lies beneath the ideologies of the museum, which became prominent in modern times?' Clearly, we are constrained by this very notion of seeing knowledge production in terms of spatial imagery. So, instead of imagining a 'place' free of the metaphors structurally built into language, it might be more useful to reconsider the assumption or belief that 'content' or meaning could exist independently and/or before its formal or material expression or 're-presentation'.

The idea of a museum as an instrument for envisioning a past and/or its conceivable alternatives invariably raises the fundamental conundrum of representation. Considered as a historical artefact and as an epistemological technology, the museum today is a social phenomenon reminiscent of a classic optical illusion, perpetually oscillating between one or another protocol of relating together objects and the subjects that seem to haunt them, subjects and the objects that appear to represent them: a double and doubly compounded fiction. Artefacts or artworks that themselves for more than two centuries have had a similarly anamorphic character, alternating between the two sides of the coin of modern fetishism: the aesthetic artefact ('art') and the commodity.

The objects of our museological attention—works of art or artefacts of material culture—also oscillate between being read as historical documents and as magically timeless aesthetic entities or specimens of fine art; between specimens in a class of like objects whose significance is a function of their place in time

and space and unique, mysterious and irreducible aesthetic entities. What sustains and perpetuates this system of anamorphoses is the global marketplace in commodities and its allomorph, identity politics. Studies of museology, art history or visual or material culture do not operate effectively in isolation from each other, since all of these are fundamentally invested in the maintenance of this phantasmic dualism.

The dilemma of artifice is that it is by nature multivalent, capable of signifying in multiple ways. To fail to see the connection between museology as we currently have it and the truly deadly identity politics exemplified in the bicultural stagecraft and dramaturgy of Te Papa Tongarewa and elsewhere is also consistent with believing in the modernist mythology of commodification wherein you 'are' essentially connected to your possessions or property, and that, in addition (but also as a consequence), the drive to acquire more and better stuff is fantasised and marketed as moving you closer and closer to your ideal 'real' self—the horizon that of course we never succeed in actually occupying. So, to end with a question: to what extent are the museological phantasms of Te Papa Tongarewa different in kind or in degree from modern museological praxis in general? The dilemma of the museum is more than merely technological, epistemological or a matter of degree. It is at its core an ethical problem of what we want museums (and ourselves) to be, how we wish to govern ourselves and others and how and in what manner we wish to exercise and submit to power. Our most general provocation, then, is to insist that these questions need to be addressed together rather than in abstract (and thus in politically expedient) isolation from each other, for ultimately they are the same question.

The central question is how to loosen the Gordian knot of identification ideologies and illusions of egalitarian status and of commensurability. Above all, we have pointed to the contradictions inherent in both multiculturalist models currently in use because, on the one hand, equalising the content of cultures perceived to be homogenous, independent historical trajectories cannot solve the underlying problem of a racial/ist theory of collective identity. And the hybrid model is not compelling to those who identify with their traditional cultural memories and places. The diaspora model of cultural identity is emphatically rejected by First World peoples whose collective identities are tied to ancestral territories, cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems and ethnic identities. The ethical question can be addressed only by taking into account the position of those (subjects) who receive/perceive their effects: the relationship between the museum and those it addresses always involves relations of power. Museums have traditionally been hierarchically structured; traditionally, the purpose of public museums has been to create citizens for the modern nation-state, perceived as being culturally unified. Currently, the 'new museum' wants to empower communities to represent themselves. How, then, are institutionalised structures of governing/being governed reconfigured? Once communities are recognised

as legitimate partners in the museum—however they define themselves—they seek control over their own cultural productions.⁸ Imagine a model of identity that recognises that individuals and groups can have several identities simultaneously. Such a model of identity as multiple, diverse and incommensurable questions the lingering essentialist assumptions in current museum display practices, social issues debated in the media and existing governmental policies, that each individual or collective identity has to be singular.

ENDNOTES

¹ Thomas, Nicholas 1994, *Colonialism's Culture: Anthropology, travel and government*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, p. 184.

² On the relationship of the civil rights movement with museum display, see Simpson, Moira 1996, 'Cultural reflections', *Making Representations: Museums in the postcolonial era*, Routledge, London and New York, pp. 7–13; and Simpson, Moira 2006, 'Revealing and concealing: museums, objects, and the transmission of knowledge in Aboriginal Australia', in Janet Marstine (ed.), *New Museum Theory and Practice*, Blackwell, London, pp. 152–77. On the history of the Maori cultural renaissance and Maori civil rights, see Maaka, Roger and Fleras, Augie 2005, *The Politics of Indigeneity: Challenging the state in Canada and Aotearoa New Zealand*, University of Otago Press, Dunedin, New Zealand.

³ These originated in classicising cultural geographies often printed with illustrations since the sixteenth century. See Hodgen, Margaret T. 1964, *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia; and, most recently, Leitch, Stephanie 2009, 'Burgkmair's Peoples of Africa and India (1508) and the origins of ethnography in print', *Art Bulletin*, vol. 91, no. 2 (June), pp. 134–59. Viceroy Fernando de Alencastre Noroña y Silva, Duke of Linares, commissioned the earliest sets of paintings representing different racial mixtures in the Spanish colony to send to the Spanish king and his court, who were already familiar with the European version of the cultural geography genre. See Ilona Katzew Casta (2004, *Painting: Images of race in eighteenth-century Mexico*, Yale University Press, London and New Haven), who suggests that Linares conceived the idea specifically from a cultural geography by Athanasius Kircher (*China Monumentis*, 1667), which had been bequeathed by Siguenza Gongora to the library of the Jesuit College of San Pedro y san Pablo in Mexico City, to which the viceroy had access.

⁴ In New Zealand, the bicultural model is criticised as an institutional accommodation of diversity that does not adequately address the possibility of Maori models of self-determining autonomy. Bi-nationalism, in contrast, entails constitutional changes and genuine power sharing. For an excellent history of the issues, see Maaka and Fleras, 'Sovereignty lost, Tino Rangatiratanga reclaimed, self-determination secured, partnership forged', in *The Politics of Indigeneity*, pp. 97–155, which also includes the UN Working Group on Indigenous Peoples' definition of Indigeneity (p. 29 ff), which is paraphrased above.

⁵ As asked by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1999, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge and London).

⁶ Morphy, Howard 2008, *Becoming Art: Exploring cross-cultural categories*, University of NSW Press, Sydney.

⁷ As famously posited by George Kubler (1962, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the history of things*, Yale University Press, New Haven). While sequences of objects might hold up locally when certain conditions are met, to establish such threads as the universal principle explaining artistic development is unwarranted, though Kubler's thesis remains very popular within certain circles of the discipline of art history.

⁸ While the administrative structure of Te Papa Tongarewa includes Maori administrators and advisors, as the museum's curator of art, Jonathan Mane Wheoke (who is Maori himself), told us, the structure is cumbersome: the separate departments of the museum operate like individual 'silos' (Personal communication, 30 September 2008). The innovative installation of the art collection is undermined by a lack of funding for the display, in stark contrast with the \$6 million interactive digital exhibition of New Zealand, complete with Google map, touch-screen ephemeral displays and amusement park rides. This museum prides itself on its shopping mall/infotainment mode of educating viewers.