Museums of Anthropology or Museums as Anthropology?

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Abstract: During 1995 the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, marketed a postcard depicting 14 early handwritten labels from the museum's archive. This commercially orientated, self-reflexive museum production is taken as the starting point for an analysis of the relationship between the collection, the collector, the museum exhibition and the visiting public. The roles of documentation as an aspect of colonial appropriation, and that of artists in residence as parallel commentary are reviewed.

Résumé: En 1995, le musée Pitt Rivers de l'université d'Oxford a mis en marché une carte postale reproduisant 14 étiquettes écrites à la main, tirées des archives du musée. Cette production muséale, orientée vers le commerce et se mettant en valeur, est prise comme point de départ d'une analyse de la relation entre la collection, le collecteur, l'exposition et le public visiteur. Les fonctions de documentation comme aspect de l'appropriation coloniale et celles d'artistes en résidence sont analysées en tant que commentaire parallèle.

Introduction

During 1995 the Pitt Rivers Museum, one of the Oxford University museums, produced and marketed a surprising piece of merchandise. It sells in the ordinary way in the museum's gift shop and it costs only 25p (approx. 15¢). The object is a standard postcard, but it depicts a selection of 14 early handwritten museum labels from the Pitt Rivers' documentation archive. This represents an extraordinary piece of self-reflection, not least because it is cast in the form of a cheap commercial piece, intended either as a basic souvenir or as the medium for brief, open, interpersonal communication of the "please meet the 4:30" variety. This paper is devoted to teasing out the significance of the postcard.

The situation at the Pitt Rivers (and at every other museum) can be captured by the analysis given in Figure 1. This shows the sequence of events over the last century or so as a series of interrelated action sets, each of which stands in a relationship to all those which preceded it. There is a relationship between the sets, because in each segment of the sequence the objects themselves remain the same and continue to offer opportunities for re-appraisal. But each re-appraisal, numbered 2-4 in the figure, positions the objects differently in relation to each other and to other objects and so creates a new context with a new meaning. The relationship between the segments, following (one strand of) normal semiotic usage can be called metaphorical, in contrast to the perceived intrinsic relationship of the material within the sets.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider the colonial societies from which the objects whose labels are shown on the postcard were taken. We shall, however, need to look at the nature of collecting, particularly the collecting represented on the Pitt Rivers card. We shall need to consider how the material has been treated curatorially within the museum; and finally we must reflect upon the ironic, postmodernist, or postcolonial,

Figure 1
Diagram Representing the Metaphorical Relationships of the Process of Material Culture from Its Own Society to that of the Museum-visiting Public

1	2	3	4	5
Indigenous community at time when objects collected, with all its own complexities and ironies: colonial society	The collectors and their colonial (actual or implicit lifestyle	Collectors' donation to the Pitt Rivers Museums; the objects' accession, curation and display	Contemporary self-reflecting and parodying, ironic post-colonial museum activity postcard, artist's residence	Contemporary visitors who see the earlier displays and the contemporary irony in juxtaposition, and may buy the postcard

activity to which the postcard belongs, and how this may strike the visiting public, who come at the end of the long line of metaphors because their contact with the material is the final segment in what has already been a long and complex sequence of events. But first, we must put all these considerations into context by glancing at the genealogy of the museum.

The Genealogy of the Museum

Recent work based upon the social analysis of Foucault and his successors (Bennett, 1995; Hooper-Greenhill, 1992) has made us understand how the museum as an institution was part and parcel of each successive manifestation of modes of understanding, those modes which Foucault calls the episteme, during the period from about AD 1400 to the present postmodernism. This has the effect of taking special authority away from the museum, or any other institution, and replacing it with a rhetorical mode in which each museum is charged with the necessity to explain itself and make the public case for the value of whatever it thinks it has to offer. The truth of these assertions, however, does not detract from the "objective" fact of the weight of history which such institutions embody. Since we are, individually and collectively, endowed with the power to experience and to remember experience, no matter how much this is rewritten in the process, we cannot escape the accumulation of past context which creates present character.

For museums, the basis of authority is the power to arbitrate upon material culture, to decide what is "valuable" or "interesting" and what is not, to endeavour to add the former to the museum's holdings, and to construct it into meaningful patterns, which, of course, reinforce the estimable quality of the original decisions. We should not forget that "decide" carries the sense of "to cut out, or to cut away": the good is top-sliced and the dross finds it own level.

Overall, therefore, we can perceive a cycle of / material meaning / museum as institution / power / popular respect / power / ability to define material meaning / which is self-fulfilling, and which draws its strength from cultural traits of the long term. Most of the material objects within the system have arrived there either by inheritance from earlier comparable institutions, or (the majority) by gifts from those who see themselves as holding a particular relationship with the meaning-defining institution. In this network of significancies, the Pitt Rivers has an important, indeed almost excessive, place, but in essence what it is and does is repeated in every museum of anthropology and of everything else.

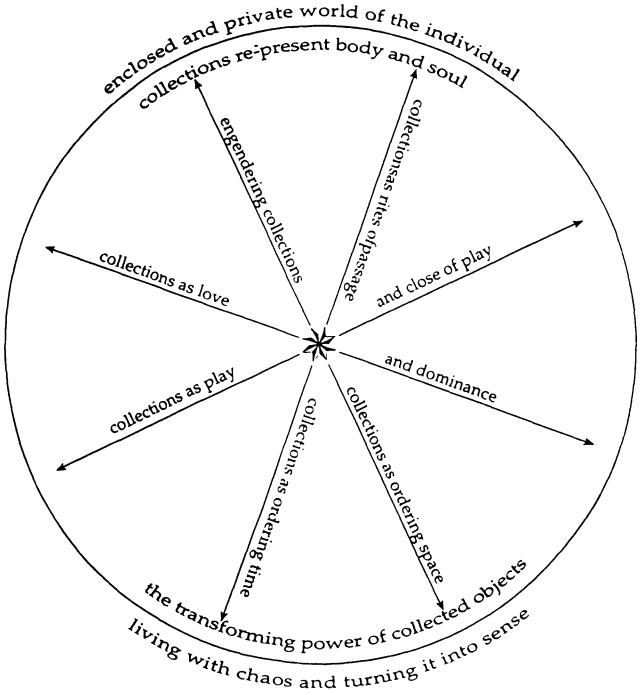
The Collectors

For some collectors happiness is a feeling of harmony between their private valuations of what they have gathered together and public perceptions of value, represented by exactly the cycle of institutional power which we have just outlined (although for other collectors, it is tension which provides the thrills). A range of surveys and studies (Pearce, 1995: 159-170; 1998) have shown how collectors privately regard their material as extensions, or even completions, of themselves. Within their inner lives they see their objects possessed of transforming power which can re-present themselves to themselves, and to the outer world; collections are a way of living with chaos and turning it into sense.

Figure 2 represents this process in schematic form by suggesting the major dimensions within which each individual life is led. Collections encapsulate memories and reconnect us to the momentous moments in our lives: travel, wedding, recovery from illness. Collections order space, both literally in our homes, and figuratively in our minds, through the spatial and intellectual patterns which they assume. We love our material, but sometimes "the collection takes over" as collectors say, and dominates our lives. We can play about with our own material as we can with few things in our lives, and decide for ourselves how to create closures. We can work through our notions of gender, and use our collections as a way of creating ourselves more as we would wish to be. Above all, for the purposes of this discussion, collectors can

hope to give, or bequeath, their collections to accredited museums, and so achieve a material immortality which is denied to humans. This, of course, is only possible if the material is deemed by curators as being of "museum quality," and so arises the importance of the coincidence of the public and private systems.

Figure 2



Schematic representation of the major parameters of life in relation to the collecting process.

Four named collectors are recorded in the labels on the Pitt Rivers postcard, with the dates of their donation: Dr. E.T. Wilson (1909), J.P. Mills (1928), Miss M.A. Murray (1926) and A. Combs (1907). Of the other labels, one tells us its object (the nose clip) was purchased in 1926, while the rest simply carry a description and a cultural location. Noticeably, if an object was purchased, rather than freely gifted, the original owner is not considered worthy of recall. The other collectorless objects were also, we presume, acquired in ways which deviated from the honourable norm of donation.

The collectors include one obvious professional man (the doctor) and one man (Combs), who is given the honorific suffix "Esq(uire)," still a meaningful distinction in 1907 when it is likely to imply a gentleman without a profession living on his own means. We have no direct clue to Mills's occupation although it is likely that he was a member of one of the colonial services. One of the four is a woman, a fairly probable proportion in such a company, but she is the only member of the group who made any mark on the broader history of anthropology.

Margaret Alice Murray gave much of her life to the study of European witchcraft, publishing her important *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* in 1921, and her notorious *The God of the Witches* and *The Divine King in England* in 1933 and 1936. Before and after this she was a serious Egyptologist as, as she herself says, W.M. Flinders Petrie's fellow-worker for many years at University College, London (Murray, 1949 [1962]: 255). In 1949 Sidgwick and Jackson published her *The Splendour that Was Egypt* as a volume in the famous series which included *The Glory that Was Greece* by J. Stodart. Her gift of the English witch bottle was a characteristic one.

The majority of the dates on the labels cluster in the 1900s and 1920s (1907, 1909, 1909, 1926, 1926, 1928). In spite of the fact that the watershed of the First World War lies between these two decades, the mind-set of the establishment, particularly of the middle-ranking members of its imperial services, remained relatively little changed. These generally subscribed wholeheartedly to the traditional value system and its institutions, without noticing the self-reference this involved. The inner psychology of their collecting, therefore, coincided with the overt judgments of their society, in ways which confirmed both men and institutions. They had maintained British standards in savage parts of the world (including the savagery of darkest Sussex from whence came the witch bottle) and the trophies which they brought back as evidence of battles fought and won were accepted into the permanent collections of the most important anthropological museum in one of the two most prestigious universities in the country.

Curation and Display

Once material has been received into the museum, it has achieved the official *imprimatur* of value and significance conveyed by the institution and its curatorial complement. It, and by inference its collectors, has joined the charmed circle of power and authority, and henceforth it will be treated in ways which make its meaning manifest, meaning which is thought of as "inherent" and "natural" but which is, in fact, a matter for deliberation and contrivance on the part of the curators.

The most intimate link between the object and the curator is the label, especially the handwritten label, which will remain physically tied to the piece as long as they both may live, and which bears the individual, and easily recognized, mark of its creator. Handwritten labels easily attain relic status, the museum's equivalent of the nail clippings or locks of hair through which past masters

in other sacred institutions are revered, and recognized as still living amongst us. Such labels become museum material in their own right, preserved as carefully as other specimens, ostensibly for the information which they contain, but in fact equally for the contact with the great men of the past which they offer and the sense of the chain of living continuity which they embody: such things are important in the construction of authority and bring consoling comfort and support to each latter-day generation of curators.

The labels on the Pitt Rivers postcard are all handwritten, and show at least seven different hands. All are written in black ink which has scarcely faded at all, witness to the dim and secure conditions in which they have been kept. All are written on white cards, which in some cases have turned biscuit-coloured and started to show traces of foxing, like a preserved water colour or artist's print might do. The labels are of various sizes and of two main shapes: round, and rectangular with the two front corners cut off to form a typical luggage label shape, redolent of the standard fittings of the contemporary pigskin suitcases which once travelled by P & O and the Blue Train. Each card is securely held within a silver-metal binding which is folded down on both sides of its edge, an operation obviously performed by one of those stamping machines which displayed its innards of rugged wheels and cogs. As Julian Walker, a museum installation artist, has so aptly remarked (personal communication), these label borders seem intended to keep the "goodness" in and infection out, a notion which the original owners of the pieces, as participants in societies where notions of purity and containment were the norm, would have understood and welcomed. Each card is also pierced with a small round hole, so that it may be secured to its object with a piece of string.

Together, the binary star of object and label sit on display, and together they make meaning. To the viewer, the label is not the lesser of the partnership. If the label tells us that this is the rifle with which Kennedy was shot, then it is telling us to invest our attention span and ask questions like: The only rifle? Who held it? If the label simply describes the same gun as a particular make of rifle, then it will not detain most of us. There clearly is a sense in which the object comes to illustrate the label and not the other way round, just as the history of curatorship is written in the labels which practitioners have left behind them. In other words, the label, as well as the specimen, has the status of museum artefact.

Of the 14 labels on the postcard, nine can be read in whole or large part. Three describe broadly medical practices in exotic parts; the rest describe witchcraft and magic and of these two are English and the rest exotic. This cultural stretch is an interesting intervention on the part of the card's editor, but it is justified by the museum's collection as a whole in which European material is better represented than many people suppose. One of the medical labels reads "CHINESE hypodermic syringe home-made from thimbles etc. Pres. by A. Combs Esq. 1907"; the second has "Protecting-cap for a sore toe MARING (OLD KUKI), LAMLONG village, MANIPUR, Dse., 1927 d.d. J.P. Mills 1928"; and the third "S. INDIA, MADRAS, TUTICORIN Nostril clip used by Arab pearl divers in India and Ceylon to stop breathing Purch. 1926". The texts have a staccato, dislocated feel, which appeal equally to low humour—sore toes, nostril clip, homemade from thimbles—and to a taste for the exotic—Chinese, pearl divers and MARING (OLD KUKI), LAMLONG, MANIPUR—faraway places with strange-sounding names, wherever they may be.

Three of the witchcraft and magic labels refer to "Charm used to cause death of enemy, Isabel Is, Solomon Islands," "Worn by traders in salt to avert sickness on the journey" and "ring given by Russian priest at Fort Wrangell to the uncle of Kootay, the first HAIDA devil-doctor at MASSET." We notice how specific these are in unhelpful ways, with their detailed record of individual and place and the complete lack of any serious exegesis of the object. This is demonstrated even more clearly by an English member of the group "'iron razor' used by sailors for the ceremony of 'crossing the line.' ENGLISH." This is quite incomprehensible if you do not know (as many of the younger generation do not) that English ships made a ritual of crossing the Equator which involved "King Neptune" and his sailors lathering up those men (including passengers) who had not crossed the line before with a filthy mixture of grease and oil and then shaving them with the "razor," in its way an interesting rite of passage which links together extensive sailing, the need to start shaving and male adulthood. Obviously, similar narratives lie behind the other, equally impenetrable, labels.

The remaining two witchcraft labels have much larger texts. The first, which does not credit a donor, reads, "Night-horse. By mounting this a member of the *Mbatsav* secret society gains invisibility and can travel far at night, kill an enemy and return. TIV (MUNSHI), WUKARI divisn. BENUE PROV. N. NIGERIA." The second reads "Silvered & stoppered bottle, said to contain a witch. Obtained about 1915 from an old lady living in a village near HOVE, SUSSEX. She remarked 'and they do say there be a witch in it, and if you let 'ur out there'll be a peck o' trouble.' Pres. by Miss M.A. Murray, 1926."

Both again concentrate on detailed anecdote and on the supposed consequences in primitive society which the use of the objects bring rather than upon their role in their society. The careful rendition of the Sussex dialect is interesting and points up a common mistake when the relationship of Europeans in general, and British in particular, to the exotic world is discussed. Frequently "us" does not mean *all* British in opposition to the rest (although sometimes it does); what it often means is "we who are middle-class, educated and travelled" in opposition to an "other" which includes both the rest of the world *and* the internal otherness, that is the deeply rural or industrial underclass. These two witchcraft labels are presented in exactly the same way and make the same points.

The stress on location is interesting, suggesting as it does a uniqueness in time and place, which leads to assumptions that culture is a static set of institutions and beliefs that are produced by tradition rather than historical process. As Ravenhill (1988: 5) has noted:

> Throughout colonial museography there was this type of assumption that the attribution of an object to the correct indigenous category constituted in itself an explanation. The enterprise of categorisation ultimately produced nice, neat lists of basic object types for . . . and restricted to . . . each ethnic. This packaging of material culture on an ethnic basis served in turn to reinforce the "reality" of colonially reified ethnicity. For material culture studies, the question of style became simply a matter of ethnic traits.

Shelton reinforces this point with his description of the old ethnographic display at Brighton, Southern England, which:

> combines a blackened, dimly-lit exhibition space with wall cases decorated by an assortment of dark cloths, animal print wallpaper and mirrored plinths. The gallery, due to be refurbished this year, suggests a subtle ranking of cultures by the use of backdrops. Connotations of savagery produced by the animal print papers used to display the African collections, reinforce the narrative classification of peoples. African and North American collections are divided by tribal affiliation, while Asian material is identified by nation. The exhibition therefore provokes a contrast between tribal and national cultures. Within this division, each African society is represented by specific and different manufactures—the Yoruba by sculpture, the Hausa by domestic clothing, South and East Africa by weapons and shields. Such an approach encourages the notion that material specialisation corresponds to specific psychological dispositions: the notion that some societies are made up of religiously devoted artists, while others have a settled, practical and decorative flair. (1992: 11-12)

Together, the labels present a range of related characteristics. They trivialize the object by their cool, anecdotal tone, and irony, superior and well-bred, is directed towards the specimen and its people. The object and its original owners are distanced away from "us" to become "them." As Julian Walker has put it, drawing on his own experience of galleries: "So do the specimen boxes with their glass tops, the display pins, the use of filler, and the accumulations of dust in the case corners" (personal communication).

The objects are wrenched out of their own social context, in which they would have made good but non-exotic sense, and recontextualized within an English early- to mid-20th-century middle-class sitting room, where they stick out like sore toes indeed. And this replacement works a sea change as profound as that dividing the northern and southern hemispheres. Distancing transmutes into objectifying, and the original owners are reified through the displacement of their things into the new setting. What is particularly true of labels is also true of the other elements in physical curation and display. Objects were often tied onto their display boards by crossover strings threaded through holes in the boards, suggesting capture and constraint, followed by exhibition in the worst sense with its obvious sado-masochist connotations. Frequently, now, the objects have been removed, but sometimes the boards still survive, like so many Turin Shrouds, with their ghostly presences visible. The boards, plinths, case manufacture, internal case layout, graphics and floor layout of cases all contribute to the making of knowledge and its protective control. The museum history of an object chronicles the construction of knowledge in which it has played a part, and the old labels, display boards, plinths and graphics are the fossils of the history of meanings. Meaning and understanding become a conglomeration of assorted biographies, of the collector, of the curator and of the object specimen itself.

Laying-out has a double meaning, and the biographies are those of the dead, an image which has been seized by critics and artists, whose notions we will soon explore. The lesson learned by the Spanish museum community through the Natural History Museum at Banyoles, whose display of a 104-year-old stuffed southern African caused a threatened African boycott of the Barcelona Olympics, is not just political, immensely significant although this is; it has a deeper resonance.

Theodor Adorno (1967: 24) described museums as "the family sepulchres of works of art." Robert Harrison (1977: 140) sees the museum as "its life, naturally ghost-like, meant for those more comfortable with ghosts, frightened by working life but not by the past." David Mellor, a British politician and briefly Secretary of State responsible for arts, museums and heritage, finds museums existing as "twilight zones" whose still life (a regular euphemism for "dead") displays combine worker with terror (1989: 16). The characteristic smell of the ethnographic museum, compounded of embalmed animal skins, old fabric and preserved wood, faintly spicy and faintly dusty, is the sweet stench of mummification, and curators become cemetery-haunting necrophiliacs compelled by a dubious romantic impulse to arrested time and decay.

Unfortunately, this has been particularly true of British anthropological collections, in a practical as well as a metaphysical sense. There are probably some 378 ethnographic collections in Britain (Gathercole and Clarke, 1979), almost all of them containing material of serious cultural significance (for if all objects are equal, some are certainly more equal than others). Many of these collections have remained in store for decades. Outside London, there are about 17 museum ethnography posts in the country as a whole. Equally significantly, ethnographic display galleries tend to be obvious afterthoughts, occupying the poorest back galleries and separated from other history-based displays (Shelton, 1992: 11). As Susan Vogel has put it:

> The museum communicates values in the types of programmes it chooses to present, and in the audiences it addresses, in the size of staff departments and the emphasis they are given, in the selection of objects for acquisition and more concretely in the location of displays in the building and the subtleties of lighting and label copy. None of these things is neutral. None is overt. All tell the audience what to think beyond what the museum ostensibly is teaching. The past neglect of ethnographic collections tells its own story. (1991: 47)

Artists in Residence

The Pitt Rivers postcard belongs within what is now recognized as a "museum scene," that is the desire (or fashion?) to create ironic comment upon the objects and the conventional way in which they are displayed by bringing some external influence to bear upon the exhibitions. Most of these outsiders have been artists, who view the collected materials as raw material for their own installations; some of the material has turned out to be very raw indeed. These artists are not old-speak iconoclasts, who think all museums should be burnt as the best way of coping with the corpses of dead yesterday; they are bricoleurs who are curious about the categories of received knowledge, which museums show more clearly perhaps than many other institutions by virtue of the physicality of their holdings and the concrete patterns into which it can be formed. They are piqued by the displayed complacency and wish to disturb settled convictions by their own individualist interventions.

The first artist to do this in Britain was Eduardo Paolozzi, whose exhibition, *Lost Magic Kingdoms*, was shown at the Museum of Mankind (the Ethnography Department of the British Museum) in 1987, and subsequently toured nationally. At the invitation of Malcolm McLeod, curator of the department, Paolozzi spent three years investigating the 300 000 objects in store, most of which had never been displayed. His exhibition created assemblages which mimicked typical ethnographic displays by mixing categories of objects which would not normally be combined, for, as he says "for an artist, the thing of little value can be seen as immensely significant" (Malbert, 1995: 26). In McLeod's words the mixture was "letting in previously neglected or despised areas and breaking down the division between museum objects and life" (ibid.: 25).

Paolozzi was ideally cast for this project. He is one of the best collage artists of his generation, and by applying the anarchic, free-spirited methods of collage, he produced a play on the material as material, which for him was the point of the endeavour. For this, he was taken to task by critics who would have preferred a more directly political turn to the exhibition: such critics should have given more care to the exhibit's title. *Lost Magic Kingdoms* has a nostalgic flavour (did Paolozzi mean "lost to the original makers and their successors" or did he mean "lost in the museum's storage vaults"? or both?). *Magic* suggests the conjuror's sleight of hand which produces surprises; and *Magic Kingdoms* has an unmistakable Disney ring.

Fred Wilson, a Black artist based in New York, did take a more directly political approach. In 1990 he was asked by the Museum for Contemporary Art, Baltimore, to organize an exhibition in the city, and he chose to position it in the Maryland Historical Society, an extremely conservative institution. Wilson says that before the project he would never have dreamt of going into the place, "but after spending some time there, I realized it was not so much the objects as the way the things were placed that really offended me" (Wilson, 1995: 27). The installation that emerged was *Mining the Museum* which, as Wilson says, could mean digging up something rich, or exploding myths and perceptions, or making it his (ibid.).

The opening display set the emotional tone of the exhibition, with its silver globe of 1870 juxtaposed beside empty plastic display mounts labelled "Plastic display mounts made ca 1960s, maker unknown," and its two sets of pedestals, one set with the busts of Maryland's acknowledged heroes and the other set empty, where the busts of important Maryland African-Americans should have been but are, of course, unavailable. This was also the exhibition which held the now-famous case with the label "Metalwork 1793-1880"; the case showed a group of elegant silver cups and flagons together with a pair of iron slave shackles. As Wilson says, the objects had a lot to do with each other because life does not operate in neat categories; the case has become one of those gestures which is obvious, but only after it has been made.

Wilson followed this with an exhibition at the Seattle Art Gallery, a museum with a broad sweep of collections, which juxtaposed traditional African clothing with a businessman's grey suit, and showed photographs of contemporary African architecture. Viewers did not realize that all the clothing was worn by Africans, or that what they took to be Los Angeles was actually Lagos. As he puts it:

> The interest of western museums in Africa and the Third World is only in "difference" (the exotic) and what it can offer as a way of seeing, in stark relief, the western self. Museums, it seems, are highly narcissistic institutions. They feel most comfortable either when mirroring their own values, ideas and aesthetics through western art, or when casting other cultures as dramatically different affairs. (Wilson, 1995)

In his re-dressing of the Seattle late 20th-century gallery, Wilson simply moved the furniture. He placed the museum's Mies van der Rohe tables and chairs in front of a Morris Louis painting, added a coffee table and some books and—presto—we had a diorama of "the collector's home" (29). The diorama was garnished with two videos running a tape that Wilson had made of various collectors' homes. As he points out, the recreation of an African compound or a Japanese tea-house are museum standards, and so are European period rooms "but the spaces where much 20th-century art resides are absent." Here, Wilson has progressed from the straightforwardly political perception of power and dominance which a group of related objects can be made to clarify, to a sense that we are all anthropology, that all human life can be viewed with the same gaze which, therefore, acknowledges its equality.

An enterprise which takes the same point, but from an even freer free-fall perspective, is the series of experiments at the Pitt Rivers in which, over the past decade, artist Chris Dorsett has been joined by some 100 artists who have brought artistic licence into a creative dialogue with curatorial responsibility in the museum. Dorsett believes that, while the results have sometimes been uncomfortable for all concerned, the general consensus is that they have initiated unexpected uses of humour, fantasy, factual information and political debate.

A principle motif in these artist experiences was to slip a piece of contemporary art in among the museum materials on show in order to add an element of surprise to the permanent displays. So, in 1990, Dorsett's limewood figure joined the exhibition called *Upturned Ark*. The piece showed an angel or foetus-like figure on either a long lead or a species of umbilical cord. From its back sprouted what might be wings or a giant key for winding up clockwork. The figure stood in close proximity to the display of model boats and to the huge Northwest coast totem pole towards the rear of the ground-floor gallery. The exhibition *Snares of Privacy* in 1992 included a huge block of wax by Elizabeth Rosser, placed so that it looked as if it were on legs as one of a sequence of similar-sized display cases, also on the ground floor. The wax "case" suggests notions about the impenetrability of the standard cases, and their readiness to take the imprint of whoever wishes to impose upon them. It is with this decade of experiment that the labels postcard belongs.

These British and American artistic endeavours belong within a continental context which runs back to the early 1970s. Around then a number of creative artists, including Christian Boltanski, Nikolaus Lang and Anne and Patrick Poirier, became interested in what is usually translated as "securing evidence," *Spurensichering*, which is a criminological term meaning "securing circumstantial evidence," and expresses their interest in examining what constitutes evidence and why: the first exhibition of this broad group, which took place at the Kunstverein, Hamburg, in 1974, was called *Spurensicherung*. Their criticism of museum dialectic was expressed through a *material* practice of ordering objects—the point is important—just as museums do for their own purposes, rather than by discursive writing (Schneider, 1993, to which article I am indebted for information about these events). The artists employ the devices of collection, rearrangement and *fictive production* of human activities in the widest sense, significant because a strong narrative element infuses their practice.

Around 1974-75 Nikolaus Lang, who himself comes from Oberammergau in Bavaria, arranged in boxes and labelled objects which he had found in one isolated farmstead in the countryside nearby, previously inhabited by an

immigrant Swiss family called Gotte. He had known the Gottes in his youth as marginal people, all dead by the time he "excavated" and collected the traces of their lives. In his *Box from the Gotte Siblings*, he prepared boxes in which were arranged animal bones, tools, old newspapers, household items and books, together with contemporary photographs, maps and geological diagrams. The inspiration of the work was the showcases in natural and human history museums but the scientific mimicry included field work collection as well as display (Metken, 1977: 108).

In the following years (1976-77) Lang took the idea of field work into the Tuscan countryside, classifying together Palaeolithic flint artefacts, earth colours in use since Etruscan times, and contemporary erotic graffiti he found on the walls of abandoned farm houses. The hallmarks of Lang's approach are searching, observing, recording and re-enacting traces of human activities, as part academic parody, part humanistic self-identification (Lang, 1978).

Christian Boltanski is more interested in depersonalizing individual traces and objects by serializing them into anonymity. As he says:

> At the beginning of January 1973 I wrote to the directors of sixty-two art, history and anthropology museums suggesting they arrange an exhibition which would consist of all the available objects that a given individual has had around him during his lifetime, from handkerchiefs to cupboards. I asked them to concern themselves with such things as classification and labelling, but not with the choice of the person. They were to acquire the objects through an auction or by borrowing them from some one living in their area (it is indeed necessary that the objects, on each occasion, be obtained from the district in which they are being shown). The person concerned should always remain anonymous. Pieces of furniture as well as small objects under glass should be carefully arranged to a certain order, or in some cases a photographic inventory could be compiled. (Boltanski, 1973: n.p.)

Boltanski has repeated these inventories of private belongings of anonymous people in a number of other places, including Paris, Oxford, Baden-Baden and Amsterdam and, as Schneider says:

> These individual and yet asceptically anonymous collections of personal belongings, convey the same kind of eerie feeling one might have in an imagined situation upon walking through the Victoria and Albert Museum's 20th-century collection, suddenly being confronted with a showcase containing one's own toothbrush, hair slide and dressing gown. (1993: 4)

All these endeavours, in their different ways, are intended to subvert the museum's dialectic by illuminating it with the beams of parody, irony and deliberate fiction. The museum is shown to be self-entranced, using "science" to create narcissistic images in which "keep off the grass" signs are more in evidence than flowers. It becomes one fiction among many possible.

Museum Visitors

And what of the last category in the metaphorical skein, the visiting and viewing public? Cases like Wilson's incorporating silver plate and iron slave shackles cannot fail to shock the consciousness of all who see them. Similarly, when Wilson redisplayed the early 20th-century gallery in the Seattle Art Museum, he pushed all the art into one corner so that a Matisse bronze was in front of a marble harp, a tall Giacometti in front of a de Kooning portrait and so on. This gallery was "the most disturbing, or the most engaging, to the visitors" (Wilson, 1995: 29). The clustering created a frenetic arrangement in which the individual works seemed to be struggling to breathe. When viewers asked the reason for this, says Wilson, the museum staff explained that this was the way the African and Native American collections were displayed on the floor below. We are not told what the visitors made of this explanation, but it is clearly something that they asked the question.

Questions are less in evidence through the now considerable history of the Pitt Rivers self-examination. The Pitt Rivers is, of course (among many other things), a museum of museums in which the displays exhibit a Victorian density within a wholly Victorian building and largely Victorian museum fittings. Moreover, following the typological exhibition regime laid down as a continuing condition in Pitt River's original agreement with Oxford University, the material is arranged according to categories of object, not cultural origin. For the visitor, this in itself creates an unexpected appearance in which European weaving equipment, for example, is juxtaposed in the same case with similar pieces from native Africa. It seems likely that most visitors lack the formal anthropological information to understand what they are looking at anyway, so the interpolation of modern pieces of commentary probably misfires; the whole thing looks so odd that the modern installations merge into the background without remark. It may also be that the labels postcard is generally purchased at its face value, and the two witchcraft labels in the centre of it, in particular, are accepted in much the same spirit as that in which they were written.

We clearly need to know more about what visitors make of such exhibitions and interventions. Do they see them as a breath of fresh air, which will be capable of

generating new interest and new audiences? Or are they upset and confused, unhappy to find that another supposed security has melted away? Or are they irritated by what they see as pretension on the part of self-loving poseurs, whom they would have no wish to take into their own lives? We do not know the answers to these questions, and shall not until the necessary information-gathering projects are put in hand. We may find that, in the publics' eyes, museums have simply offered special hospitality to yet one more privileged, self-elected group within the elitist club.

Conclusion

Like all museum artefacts, therefore, the Pitt Rivers postcard (and all its friends) offers a ambivalent message. Self-reflexive museum efforts, through artists and others, may invigorate collections by showing how much magic and powerful knowledge they hold, and how exhilarating their exhibition can be. Curators are transferring some power to named artists, which is liberating in itself, and may yet take the abandonment of anonymity—one of the easier pieces of mystification—to the point when named designers, researchers and writers can be acknowledged in displays (Arnold, 1995: 39). This would help the review of exhibitions to be more like that of a film or a stage play, and might help to bring museum work into the critical market places.

But, quite possibly, the visitors may reject much of what is done because they find it not powerfully ironic, but superficial, tinny and trivial. Moreover, as the Pitt Rivers installations showed all too well, museums and their material are very powerful, with an immense capacity for the absorption of aliens; after all to turn the problematic alien into the "Other" which supports "Us" is, *par excellence* "the museum's" art. When Wilson (1995: 29) created a set of head photographs from objects made at a time when contact between races was new, he realised that they showed a subtle blending of ethnic features, making it visibly apparent that when you depict another, you inevitably end up depicting yourself. Just so, it may turn out, are the artists and their supportive curators, for subversion can only exist by admitting the real presence of the values it endeavours to undermine. Wilson called his photographic exhibition *Mixed Metaphors* and says that "this is the perfect metaphor for the museum itself": we may agree with him.

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