
Technologies of Interpretation: Design and Redesign of the Tahitian Marketplace at the Field Museum of Natural History

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Abstract: Museum exhibitions are a special genre of anthropological communication: one that offers unique creative opportunities for the practice of applied anthropology. This paper tells the story of one controversial exhibition and offers some lessons learned from the experience. Museums stand at a critical crossroads where innovation and risk taking can lead to a new age of museum participation in popular education and cultural enrichment. The author encourages museums to abandon the trend towards expensive and time-consuming renovations of outdated permanent exhibitions (they will always be out of date), and to look instead towards new technologies and approaches that allow a wider range of educators and artists to create more temporary exhibitions.

Résumé: Les expositions muséales constituent un genre particulier de communication anthropologique qui offre des possibilités créatives uniques pour la pratique de l'anthropologie appliquée. Cet article raconte l'histoire d'une exposition controversée et tire certaines leçons de cette expérience. Les musées se trouvent à un carrefour critique où innover et prendre des risques peuvent conduire à une nouvelle ère en ce qui a trait à l'implication des musées dans l'éducation populaire et dans l'enrichissement culturel. L'auteur encourage les musées à abandonner la tendance actuelle des rénovations d'expositions permanentes dépassées (elles seront toujours dépassées) qui coûtent cher en temps et en argent. L'auteur suggère d'explorer plutôt les nouvelles approches et technologies qui permettent à un plus grand nombre d'éducateurs et d'artistes de créer un nombre accru d'expositions temporaires.

Genre

Museum exhibitions are a special genre of anthropological communication. A number of recent commentaries have noted the potential of museums to perform an important part of the public education to which the discipline of anthropology is committed. I believe that museum exhibitions should be seen as popular media, not as an academic genre, as the audiences are (while overlapping) quite different. Recent controversies have highlighted the problems that arise when museum exhibits are conflated with textbooks, scholarly exegesis, or entertainment centers. The museum exhibit genre shares some features with these devices, but has important, unique qualities to contribute to the business of public education.

Consistent with this perspective, I hesitate to write the story of the production of a exhibition as a conference paper/journal article. The exhibit as public education/popular culture speaks for itself. However, I am now convinced that this example may provide some illumination for those of us who wonder what the future promise might be for anthropology in museums.

Story

As a graduate student in the field in Tahiti in the mid-1980s I was discovered by the Field Museum's Exhibit Developer, Phyllis Rabineau, at the Musée de Tahiti et des Iles where she had gone to meet with the museum's director, Manouche Lehartel. This began a decade of collaboration between Field Museum exhibit, design and education staff, the staff of the Musée de Tahiti et des Iles and a mediating, facilitating (not to say trouble-making) young anthropologist.

The installation, reinstallation and re-reinstallation of the contemporary Tahitian Marketplace recreation in the Traveling the Pacific hall at the Field Museum was an exhibit ahead of its time, and challenged traditional canons of museum practice: no curator in charge (he boy-



Field Museum Papeete Marketplace, 1990. Photo credit: Jeff Hoke.



Papeete Market entrance. Photo credit: Laura Jones



Chinese general store at Field Museum. Photo credit: Jeff Hoke.



Papeete storefronts. Photo credit: Laura Jones.

cotted the process when he was not actively attempting to sabotage it), no artifacts from the museum's collections, no labels, no curatorial voice explaining it all. Instead we launched a very successful evocation of a place in the Pacific for visitors to guide themselves through, hopefully having a good time while they were doing it.

In 1987-88 I produced, with assistance from Musée de Tahiti staff and a score of Tahitian merchants, market sellers and friends, documentation on the Papeete marketplace and surrounding Quartier du Marché. In classic ethnographic style I simply recorded everything for sale in the market and a number of small shops and how it was arranged and what it was called and how much it cost and who was buying it. I photographed and tape recorded the market and its neighbours morning, noon and night. I talked to the market director, the guards, fruit and flower and fish and vegetable and meat and handicraft sellers, and to the Chinese store owners

around the market. I spent long evenings back in my rural district home showing photos to my Tahitian host family and neighbours and getting them to identify the fruits and vegetables (in Tahitian, French and sometimes Chinese) and talk about gardening and cooking and eating.

I sent all of this information off to the Field Museum where they began to create replicas of breadfruit, yams, taro, bok choy, bonito, pig guts and, yes, watermelons to fill the market. Upon returning to the United States the Field Museum flew me to Chicago for a week of design and planning with the exhibit team. We had amazing discussions about representing colonialism (they wanted to put a poster of an atomic blast at the entrance to the market and talk about French nuclear colonialism). I successfully argued against this plan, knowing how upset some of my Tahitian colleagues would be; about representing Pacific Islanders positively but not romantically; and about how to get and keep museum visitors' attention.



Field Museum Papeete Marketplace, 1990. Photo credit: Jeff Hoke.



Chinese store, Papeete. Photo credit: Laura Jones.



Papeete market. Photo credit: Laura Jones.



Field Museum Papeete Market. Photo credit: Jeff Hoke

I was impressed at how creative, intellectually sophisticated, compassionate and open-minded these non-anthropologists were (I was the only professional anthropologist in the room and nary a curator in sight). I learned an incredible amount from their design and popular education experience and they squeezed insights about Tahitian culture out of me that I was totally unconscious of. This working week created a number of sketches (my first experience with people who can create images as fast as I can talk) for the Marketplace installation and a list of “exhibit properties” (not “artifacts”) to collect in Tahiti.

I returned to Tahiti in 1989 to collect objects (fish hooks and lures, hats, mats and baskets, promotional posters, flowered fabric, chewing gum—literally hundreds of pieces of contemporary material culture which the Field Museum’s curators refused to catalog as artifacts because they are not “traditional”). My Tahitian friends and colleagues participated in this small spending spree, suggesting objects, calling friends and family to

get me not-for-sale items, critiquing my choices (a very lively debate at the Musée de Tahiti about the ribbon hats for example) and helping me get them to Chicago.

Back in Chicago the exhibit staff was building the Marketplace (of concrete and asphalt and steel and wood) and collecting materials from Chicago’s junkyards and Chinatown to construct the Chinese stores. We installed the artifacts from Tahiti and I went wild at the last minute addressing problems with the architecture (I did not like the bare, rusty, sheet-metal wall and had a huge falling out with the carpenter who had pulled it off his family’s barn and loved its gritty texture—Tahitians would paint this metal, so I painted it and he never forgave me). The Marketplace was ready for the opening but it had a basic problem—while it was physically true to the original it had the atmosphere of a western ghost town.

The Traveling the Pacific hall attracted a great deal of criticism in the museum community after it opened, mainly as the abandonment of the museum’s great col-

lections in favour of a “Disney” approach. The exhibit staff toughed it out, but there were also problems with the visitor response to the exhibit—they saw it as representing Tahiti in the 1950s. So the Field Museum brought Musée de Tahiti’s director, Manouche Lehartel, from Tahiti and myself out to Chicago in 1991 to review the installation in depth and make recommendations for changes. Manouche brought some new materials with her from Papeete and she and I rearranged many of the exhibits. We sat on the airplane on the way west later and drafted a report suggesting more substantive changes to bring more images of Papeete’s residents into the Marketplace and to address the dated atmosphere by replacing the Chinese pharmacy with a modern snack bar.

In 1994 I was back in French Polynesia with a photographer and video artist from the Field Museum. With the assistance of my Tahitian friends we were able to take a number of portraits (which became life-size photo cutouts of merchants, sellers and high school kids on their way home from school) and videotaped interviews (which run on the TV in the snack bar). We also worked with Manouche and her staff on label copy to be added to “viewbooks” of my photographs and hired a local photographer to take shots for photomurals. These were installed in a re-renovated Marketplace in 1994 and 1995.

Response

Vigorous (internal) opposition to the Tahitian Marketplace concept began before I became involved with the Field Museum. Despite the fact that the idea originated with his colleague, Bishop Museum curator Roger Rose, Field Museum curator John Terrell refused to participate in exhibit planning and design. Terrell has published his views on the subject, starting with a newspaper article the week of the exhibit opening in the *Chicago Tribune* and continuing in his *American Anthropologist* piece and in the reviews published by his friends and colleagues (with his acknowledged encouragement) in the museum curator field.

Without going into a lengthy point-by-point refutation of these objections, I would like to enumerate them and then discuss an alternative reading of the exhibition process and product.

1. The mission of the museum should be to support scientific research, not “mounting fun, visitor-friendly interactive exhibitions” (Terrell, 1991: 149).
2. The exhibition marks the end of curatorial authority and spells doom for museum anthropology as a discipline (Rodman, 1993; Terrell, 1991: 149).

3. The exhibition marks the triumph of Art (exhibit design) over Science (curatorial authority) (Kaeppler, 1991; Terrell, 1991: 150).
4. The museum should have used the space to display objects from its collections (Kaeppler, 1991; Rodman, 1993; Terrell, 1991).
5. The exhibition was created without “native” participation (Kahn, 1995; Rodman, 1993).
6. There is a total “absence of Pacific peoples, their voices or images” (Kahn, 1995).
7. The market “specifically included to explain modernity no longer exists in this form on Tahiti” (ibid.).
8. The display creates the illusion of a timeless, utopian reality (ibid., she calls this “heterotopic dissonance”), or in slight variation, a “timeless, ethnographic present on the brink of dissipation” (Rodman, 1993: 255).
9. The exhibition “depicts Papeete, a modern city, as a seedy paradise out of a Somerset Maugham novel. It presents the Pacific in a way that allows Western museum visitors to dismiss the region as a quaint backwater” (ibid.).
10. The exhibition’s “travelogue” organization represents the “appropriation of other cultures . . . now such that the exhibition-as-world can be traveled” (ibid.: 256) and is a close relative of colonialism and tourism.

On the positive side the Marketplace was generally acknowledged to be powerfully evocative of contemporary Pacific island life (Kahn, 1995; Rodman, 1993). In addition, reviewers acknowledged that the exhibition was an influential, creative experiment that changed the course of anthropological exhibition design.

The most sensitive of the criticisms—that Pacific islanders had not been consulted or included in the exhibition—was never true (who knows why these curators did not practice good scholarship and ask someone who worked on the exhibit—not just the curator who boycotted it, or read the catalog where the “native” contributors were acknowledged—Field Museum, 1989) and the impression was corrected with the installation of the additional photographic and video materials in 1994. Hopefully the image of Papeete as a quaint backwater was also ameliorated.

The issues of the use of “postmodern pastiche” (Rodman, 1993) as a style of museum exhibition, of curatorial authority and of the role of collections will be discussed below.

Moral

Museums have moral obligations: most importantly the obligation of service to their communities and the obligation to represent outside communities responsibly. The repatriation movement has finally created an understanding of the role of indigenous communities in museum practice and has forced some radical rethinking of the museum's mission. As Jonathan Haas points out, these are more critical to the survival of museums than preservation of collections (1996: S8). However, collections are the source of the unique lure of museums in the electronic age and the ability of museums to compete with other genres of public education and entertainment depends on the use of collections and the physical spaces of museum architecture as attractions (see also Handler, 1993).

1. There is an alternative to traditional curatorial authori[tarianism]: enrolling young, sophisticated anthropologists from the academy as members of interdisciplinary teams of artists, designers, educators and community representatives. Breaking down the (elitist, classist, racist, colonialist, patronizing) hierarchy of "expert" control over "truth" extends beyond consulting "natives" to appreciating the contributions of non-anthropologist colleagues, coworkers and clients. I can imagine exhibits sponsored and conceptualized by nontraditional experts—jewelers, musicians, carpenters. And I can imagine a less cynical and sarcastic generation of anthropologists faced with the challenge of creating exhibitions that reflect current theoretical approaches rather than merely criticizing the work of others.
2. This approach, far from spelling the doom of museum anthropology, could be its saving grace—could bridge the gap between academic departments and museum departments, between generations of scholars (tenured versus underemployed) and between the public and anthropological theory and research. A younger, less conventional approach to interpretation (one that is not afraid to be fun, camp, shocking or polemical) will attract a new audience to museums (see, for example, Thomas, 1996 on playful, political, risk-taking exhibitions of contemporary Pacific materials).
3. Museum anthropology must simultaneously embrace new media and technologies of representation and assert the superior experience of in-person viewing (and touching, smelling, hearing, tasting) of real objects. Can this compare to in-person viewing of the actual Tahitian marketplace? Of course not. But international tourism is beyond the reach of most of the

1 million visitors to the Field Museum each year (and seems to be politically incorrect anyway). Electronic media, rather than replacing travel- and collections-based research and exhibits, should create a greater interest in museums and material culture by making this information accessible to the wider public.

4. The age of permanent installations should be over. Our experience was that the exhibit needed to change to address visitor and expert and native response. My experience with the evolving Papeete Marketplace exhibit revealed to me how quickly exhibitions become tired, dated and out-of-date. Furthermore, temporary installations would allow for greater circulation (exposure) of the museum's collections. This will require a change (compression) in the process of exhibit design and in approaches to exhibit installation. Exhibition halls can become theaters, concert halls, coffee houses, department stores, video arcades with a shifting content of events and artifacts rather than institutional palaces of Culture and Truth.
5. We should not let the new awareness of the radical responsibility for representing other cultures scare us away from taking risks (see Jones, 1993 on the risk of failure in representation). As a person who could not get a job as a curator (because of my enthusiasm for repatriation of almost anything) and chose not to follow the traditional academic career path (after eight years of grad school I had been there, done that), I would like to assure young anthropologists that there are incredible opportunities for professional and personal growth without tenure. Museum anthropology should be seen as a form of applied anthropology.
6. Museums, and museum anthropology, must face the fact of declining public tax support for scientific research and the arts. I see two choices: curry favour with wealthy donor/collectors and corporate sponsors, or move to wider popular appeal and bigger paying attendance. Elite patronage of the Culture Palace and its scribes, or popular culture (grubby, angry, tacky, fun). Or maybe, if you are really smarter than they are, you can have your cake and eat it too. The one thing you cannot do is go back to the "good old days."

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