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Mismatches: Museums, Anthropology, and Amazonia

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This talk¹ will be about ethnographic museums and their interactions with various groups and their ideas, and it will sometimes take a critical view of museum policies. In our milieu, bashing museums has become a popular and facile occupation; I want to make it very clear from the outset that I am deeply attached to these institutions and to their mission. I also know from experience how difficult it is to change even minor things in museums, given the ocean of constraints, procedures, restrictions, and opposing claims from clamorous constituencies they must contend with on a daily basis. My comments are thus offered in a spirit of friendly concern and are meant to be constructive rather than merely critical. I hope those of you involved with museums will take them as such, and I seize this opportunity to address a fraternal and grateful salute to one of the great European museums, our host, Vienna's Weltmuseum.

This paper is about failed encounters, and in particular about the complex overlap of mismatches between museums, anthropology, and lowland South American (SA) indigenous peoples and cultures. I will argue that over the past decades the museum context has been uncongenial to SA lowland cultures, as it has been to anthropology as a discipline as well. I will also argue that if many, if not most, museums have trouble developing adequate presentations of Amazonian cultural productions, lowland indigenous people equally seem to have trouble with museums, and more precisely, with their aims and purposes. This presentation is essentially about veiled equivocations and the reasons for them. I will begin by dealing with the ways museums have represented Amazonian cultures, then I will turn to what has happened to anthropology in museums over the past twenty years. Finally, I will shift my focus to Amazonian people and try to elucidate some reasons for their largely tacit resistance to the idea of museums.

I am surely not the only one to have been, over these last years, dissatisfied with the way large ethnographic museums have typically presented Amazonian cultures, and to feel that they sadly fail to convey even a whiff of what makes up Amazonian worlds, more so than is the case for these institutions' African, Oceanic, or Asian sections. In these latter sections, you may get a sense of stylistic configurations and their variation, and perhaps a hint of understanding of the aesthetic principles that shape the exhibited artifacts. By contrast, the part dedicated to the South American lowlands in permanent collections is usually small, featuring a few pieces of spectacular featherwork—primarily headdresses—possibly some masks, a little basketry and pottery, and eventually some archaeological specimens of ancient pottery. Proximate documentary information is correspondingly scanty, limited to indicating provenance, date of collection, and, with luck, a few words about function (predictably, usually “ritual”). Amazonia is most often presented in a unitary way, as a single ensemble devoid both of internal variation and of history. This kind of presentation is particularly true of museums that favor showcasing their pieces as artworks, as do, for example, the Musée du Quai Branly, henceforth MQB, or the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. In those museums that prefer thematic rather than geographic or cultural area approaches, like many of the Northern European museums, presentations of Amazonia, when they exist, tend to revolve around issues Western visitors consider socially relevant, such as environmental change, forced acculturation, or economic and political disempowerment. Such displays do not usually aim at conveying any sense of Amazonian cultural stylistics, and they also rely more on text and photography than on the indigenous artifacts held in the museum's collections. As for temporary exhibitions, the first thing to note is that in Europe and the States, until the Ethnographic Museum of Geneva's recent and noteworthy show, there have been remarkably few large-scale exhibitions about Amazonia since the Museum of Mankind's justly fa-

mous *Unknown Amazon*. The MQB, for example, which has held well over a hundred exhibitions since its opening, has hosted none on Amazonia, though two notable shows were held elsewhere in Paris in 2001 and 2005. Whatever their merits, these few exhibitions remained pretty much in the same mold as the permanent displays, foregrounding visually pleasing pieces with little attention to regional diversity, neither providing visitors with sufficient keys to help them understand Amazonian visual culture.

Now, persons unfamiliar with the history of museum collecting might assume that the relative poverty of Amazonian permanent sections reflects the scarcity of Amazonian material, given that Amazonia was not subject to the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century wave of colonial conquest by European powers and its accompanying looting of indigenous artifacts, many of which ended up in museum collections. But this is not at all the case; in fact, large amounts of Amazonian objects were collected during this period in the course of scientific—or purportedly scientific—expeditions, and these collections used to be abundantly and lavishly exhibited. In the days when dioramas and life-size human figures were still in use, and when museums were not squeamish about showing human remains, Amazonian sections exhibiting spectacular displays of indigenous armaments, trophy heads (shrunken or otherwise), and effigies of Amazonian warriors were highly popular attractions. But now these large collections mostly lie dormant in museum storage spaces, and the spare, bloodless though usually elegant displays on show in their stead sadly seem to have much less pull on the public than the former ones, for all their blatant primitivism.

The relative demotion of Amazonian cultural worlds in contemporary museums is surely surprising, given both the salience of Amazonia in anthropological theorization and the general public's manifest interest in or preoccupation with this part of the world. So how can we account for it?

The very general trend toward artification—that is, the requalification of objects as works of art—followed by many ethnographic museums, not least the MQB, is clearly a factor in the downsizing of Amazonia in contemporary museums. To put it bluntly, Amazonian ways of producing culture are not soluble in the bath of “Art” as it is defined in and by these institutions. Artification meets its limits when dealing with cultural worlds that are spare in their production of objects, shun materialized anthropomorphic representation, and favor the decoration and performance of live human bodies over the production of carved or painted images, as is the case among many lowland societies but is also true of other groups, such as the Nilotic groups, the San bushmen, or the central African Aka, whose cultural productions are equally absent from these museums. A good indication of the difficulty in artifying this style of culture is the art market's low valuation of its productions, as compared to the astronomical prices fetched nowadays by African and Oceanian statuary, masks, reliquaries, etc. But artification is not the only reason for Amazonia's shrunken presence in museums, because Amazonia does not fare much better in museums that adopt a critical stance toward the aestheticization and presumed exoticization of other cultures, and that claim more contemporary and politically engaged modes of presentation. The public may get from the displays favored in such museums a far better understanding of the present predicament of Amazonian people caught up in the web of globalization, capitalist exploitation and climate change than is the case in arty museums; still, visitors are given no insight into the sensorial and conceptual world of indigenous Amazonians, and particularly into the reasons for the cultural survival such presentations pay automatic lip service to, in an uneasy combination with nostalgia.

It is true that in recent years, curators have come to realize that neither the language of art nor that of postcolonial critique are quite sufficient to fill the void of meaning visitors experience. Curators have taken to solving the problem by promoting shamanism as the Amazonian worldview. This trend has in fact become something of a mania in both Latin America and Europe, to the extent that just about any Amerindian object, whether pre- or post-Columbian, is now taken as an index of shamanic thought and practice—witness the presentation of archaeological pieces both at Bogota's Museo del Oro and Ecuador's Museo del Alabado, as well as the exhibition of pre-Columbian Ecuadorian material the MQB recently hosted. This move is seemingly popular with museum visitors. However, I personally find it problematic, on at least two counts: first, because the concept of shamanism is used so indiscriminately that it becomes meaningless; second, and more importantly, because it configures shamanism as a religion, a system of beliefs involving the sacred, which is a ques-

tionable view that is moreover reliant on a very ethnocentric understanding of what constitutes religion. In short, it seems clear that there is something wrong with the way museums connect their presentations of Amazonia to anthropological knowledge.

And here we come to the second clutch or layer of misunderstandings I mentioned at the outset: those embedded in the relations between museums and anthropology. To understand the way these relations have evolved, we have to take a step back, both in terms of time and of focus, and briefly consider the way anthropology and museums were connected up until, roughly, the middle of the twentieth century. To say they were intimately linked is an understatement that misses the vital point: ethnographic museums used to be anthropology writ large, both the primary and indispensable visual regime of the discipline and the place where its implicit ideological premises, whether evolutionist or, later, culturalist, were clearly set out for the instruction of the general public. It is often said that museums reflected anthropological thought, but it would be truer to say that anthropological practice and theorization actually reflected museums and their collecting and ordering practices. Indeed it could fairly be said that anthropology was driven by museums, as is made painfully clear in Leiris's *Afrique Fantôme* (1988 [1934]); speaking only of France, the Trocadéro Museum, as Delpuech and Laurière (2018) point out in their excellent history of this institution, organized well over a hundred collecting missions between the two world wars, of which the Dakar Djibouti expedition is only the most notorious. The Musée de l'Homme, which took over the Trocadéro's collections shortly before the Second World War kept up this tradition well into the 1960s.

However, for all sorts of reasons I cannot possibly deal with here, this intimate bond between museums and anthropology gradually dissolved as the discipline shifted to new paradigms increasingly at variance with museums' ways of envisioning and ordering cultural diversity. By the 1970s, those of you who are as old as me will recall that when we were students ethnographic museums had become something of a joke, with no possible relevance for the kind of anthropology we wanted to do; they were at best places of nostalgia we visited with fond derision for their evocation of childhood readings of *Tintin*. Part of their charm for us was also that they were deserted by the public: attendance at the Musée de l'Homme, for example, had dwindled by then to a few dozen visitors a day. So by the late '70s ethnographic museums, particularly the big institutions dependent on state or academic institutional funding, found themselves in a dire situation, having lost their public, scientific, and educational *raison d'être*. As a consequence, all major institutions with important ethnographic collections entered during the following decades into a process of self-critique and museographical renovation, a process in some cases that is still ongoing. The challenge for these museums was to find ways of reengaging the public and new ways of using their collections. This involved unpicking and recomposing the strands involved in ethnographic museums' DNA—to wit, as pointed out by Benoît de L'Estoile (2007), their double filiation on the one hand to museums of art and on the other to the tradition of museums or cabinets of natural history. As a result of this widespread process of refurbishing, big European and North American museums housing ethnographic collections eventually settled into one of three models, used either singly or in combination.

One option has been to historicize displays by framing them as illustrations of past (usually nineteenth or early twentieth century) scientific practice and ideology. Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum is a wonderful example of this strategy, but there are others, such as St. Petersburg's reconstituted *Kunstkamera* and the many other "*cabinet de curiosités*" that have been recently revamped and opened to the public. A second choice has been the so-called aestheticizing strategy, of which the MQB is often presented as a prime example; this model focuses, as I said, on the selection and presentation of ethnographic artifacts as works of art. There is nothing new in this, given that this way of displaying non-European artifacts has a long tradition both in France and Germany. Thus, the MQB's strategy, and that of other museums following its lead, is simply a reworking of a style of museography present almost since the inception of ethnographic museums and that has always been in tension with the presentation of ethnographic items as documents framed by a scientific discourse. The third major model is typical of museums that usually go under the name of *musée de société* or *musée de civilisation*—Quebec's Musée de Civilisation, Denmark's Museum of World Culture (Världskulturmuseet), and to some extent the new Musée des Civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée in Marseille are examples that spring to mind. The model adopted by such

institutions remains closer to the spirit of natural history museums than the aestheticizing ones, while incorporating the postcolonial critique of the scientific treatment of Others and more generally of the Western gaze. Consequently, rather than developing a discourse about other cultures, it focuses on the convergence of cultures faced with the same problems, from the spread of AIDS to climate change to poverty and land dispossession at the hands of multinational extractive firms and agribusiness.

What became of anthropology in all this? More generally, how has the notion of culture been reconfigured in this process of museum renovation? The first and most obvious point to make is that the former organic tie between ethnographic museums and the scientific discipline of anthropology has all but evaporated. Insofar as museums still have connections to anthropology, it is in a pick-and-choose mode—some bits of the discipline’s theorizing have been assimilated, others not. More precisely, museums have taken inspiration from generalized or popularized anthropological ideology rather than from current anthropological knowledge. Thus, most museums have recognized that it is no longer possible to represent cultures in the former panoramic manner as timeless, potted versions of separate substantive entities. They have also assimilated, in varying degrees, the critique of scientific language, including anthropology’s, as a hegemonic Western discourse.

Those museums that chose to follow the aestheticizing model have tried to solve the problem of how to handle their legacy by claiming to focus on the experience of cultural difference—as opposed to the representation of any given culture—by adopting a more multivocal approach to the presentation of their objects (for example, by deliberately playing temporary exhibitions against the style of display of permanent collections, or by bringing in non-Western curatorial perspectives), but mainly and above all by promoting Art instead of Science as the new language of universalism. And this is really where their involvement with anthropology stops, as these museums do not take the further step of exploring how a given people’s conceptualization of their creative acts, of how their productions are seen to act on others and on the world, differ from Western expectations, thereby inducing in visitors a reflexive take on their own ways of conceptualizing and experiencing things categorized as art. Instead, the notion of art is taken as an unquestioned given, a universal “impulse,” and since the objects displayed are Art, it is assumed they do not need (ethnological) contextualization to gain visitors’ appreciation. In fact, to the extent that these museums draw on academic knowledge, they rely primarily on art historians rather than anthropologists, and draw on the expertise, and the taste, of gallerists, collectors, and other actors of the art market world. Ethnocentric bias also seeps into their museography through the foregrounding of objects implicitly judged in terms of their compatibility with Euro-American notions about art and its history (for example, by focusing on African and Oceanic statuary due to its familiarity to Western visitors by virtue of its role in the development of modern art), thereby fueling accusations of primitivism and colonialist attitudes. Further problems lie ahead for the artifying museums, not least because the massive inflation in value of anything qualified as Art fuels the process of “patrimonialization,” which in turn fosters quarrels over property claims, along the lines of “by what right is *our* art in *your* museum?” Indeed, ethnographic art museums are now being confronted with a growing wave of repatriation claims.

What of anthropology and the notion of culture in museums of society, those museums that prefer dealing with issues considered more socially relevant? They too have generally forsaken the exhibition of potted versions of different cultures; and, to a greater extent than art-oriented museums, they have also assimilated anthropology’s view of culture as an effect of perspective—that is to say, something that emerges from the relations between differentially situated groups, as well as postcolonial critical discourse. But these museums’ involvement with anthropology also stops there because they shy away from the idea of cultural alterity and privilege convergence over difference. In fact, cultural diversity tends in such museums to be discretely transmuted into mere geographic diversity, a move that allows them to downplay the complexities of cultural translation. Yet commonality of predicament does not necessarily imply congruence of experience and of conceptualization, and this is where the style of museography I have alluded to fails to connect with anthropology. In short, this kind of museography takes on board the asymmetry of power but largely ignores asymmetries of epistemology. Beyond this issue, though such museums are less exposed than art museums to repatriation claims since they do not show valuable art pieces, the huge problem remains of what to do with the collections they have inherited; indeed, some of

them have simply given up on permanent displays of ethnographic material—pretty much the case of the British Museum—and use this material only sparingly in their temporary exhibitions.

Sometime after the launching of the large European and North American ethnographic museums remodelling projects, another type of museography, or more generally of curatorial practice, began to gain ground, namely museum displays of the “self” aiming at presenting, in terms chosen by the members of an indigenous group (or its representatives), the culture of the group concerned. And although anthropology and its understandings of what constitutes culture have largely gone out of the window both in arty museums and in *musées de société*, they have come back, but with a considerable time lag, to roost in museums of the self.

The scale of such “identity” museums varies from large, quasi-national institutions such as New Zealand’s Te Papa or Washington’s National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) to small community centers that try to instill pride in their cultural heritage among members of the group, to transmit cultural knowledge and values to the younger generations, and eventually to attract tourists. The success of this type of museum in achieving its goals is also highly variable, regardless of scale. Washington’s multimillion-dollar NMAI came in for heavy criticism after its opening (being viewed as too commercial, too flattening of tribal differences, too attuned to a decidedly Western stereotypic view of the generic “spiritual Indian”) and is now apparently struggling to keep public attendance at acceptable levels. Conversely, some at least of the small community museums of the Northwest Coast tribes seem to be flourishing, as is also the case of the Mashantucket Pequot Museum (a 300-million-dollar affair funded by the tribe’s casino revenues), while a great many other ventures of this kind have foundered over the past years for lack of public interest, both native and foreign. It worth noting that the success of such “museums of the self” seems to depend on two major factors: on the one hand, their capacity to draw in the nonnative public and thus to stand as flag carriers of indigenous identity and its political aims, and on the other hand, their ability to involve the native population in projects of cultural revitalization that may have little to do with the exhibits presented in the centers’ museums. In short, community museums usually involve a dual regime: the “museum” itself is geared mainly to the outside public, whereas the center’s activities are aimed primarily (and indeed often exclusively) at the local indigenous public. This points to a latent disjunction between the goals of museums and those of groups worried about cultural transmission, a point I will return to later. So how do these museums of the self, and more broadly the curatorial practices of people claiming an ethnic identity, configure the notion of culture and relate to current anthropological knowledge?

It must be acknowledged that it is now in such museums that one is most likely to encounter the old, Boasian view of culture that has been expelled from other kinds of ethnographic museums. Indeed, community museums often use the same organizing principles and analytic categories that were current in pre-1970 ethnographic museums (social organization, art, religion, subsistence or economic practices, daily life, life cycles, etc.), and many of them (providing they have the means) resuscitate styles of display now shunned by European curators, such as dioramas or live reenactments. Of course, these museums or curators claim that the way they present an indigenous culture is entirely distinct from the one formerly set out in Euro-American ethnographic institutions because it focuses on celebrating rather than (implicitly) denigrating native thought and practice, and stresses continuity and survival rather than primitivist nostalgia. Though one may understand indigenous minorities’ need to gain cultural recognition and visibility, and sympathize with the political aims underlying the creation of “auto-museums,” the fact remains that such museums’ style of museography is more radically at odds with current anthropological conceptualizations of culture than that of most new universalist ethnographic museums. It clearly feeds on UNESCO-style definitions of what constitutes acceptable “culture,” thereby strengthening the link between identity and cultural patrimony or heritage. More importantly, it rests on an assumption that is directly antithetical to the anthropological approach as it is usually defined—namely, the idea that only members of a given community or its representatives have the right to portray their “culture” and to develop a legitimate narrative about it. The widespread acceptance of, or at least tolerance for, this notion and its expression in the museum world is to my mind a disquieting phenomenon, because it promotes a kind of toothless, condescending ethnicism; it carries the implication that such manifestations of cultural essentialism

are, at heart, considered harmless because they do not contest or put at serious risk any of the basic tenets and sets of practices underpinning the present liberal capitalist world order.

The South American lowlands have not been immune to the trend toward ethnic museification. Indigenous groups are pressured by nongovernmental organizations—as well as by the tourist industry and its national relays—to set up *centros culturales* where they may exhibit and eventually sell their craftwork and perform the production of their artifacts. Museums, for their part, particularly those in Latin American countries, try hard to involve indigenous people in various museum practices, primarily in the identification and documentation of the items in their collections, even sometimes in the production of artifacts destined to enrich their collections. It is worth noting, however, that when indigenous groups collaborate with museums they rarely seek to appropriate museums' inside space and often choose instead to build a separate place on museum grounds—replicas of domestic or ceremonial houses—to house their artifacts. And here we come to the third knot of equivocations I mentioned at the outset: namely, Amazonian understandings of museums' aims. Given indigenous groups' deep and well-documented preoccupation with the continuity of tradition, their attitude toward museums seems curiously standoffish, particularly if it is set alongside their active embrace and appropriation of other Western devices of self-presentation, digital or otherwise. For example, Jivaroan people, or Chicham Aents as they now demand to be called, take little interest in museums and indeed view them with a degree of contempt. At the same time, they have taken enthusiastically to theatrical performances—mainly short, satiric skits often involving anthropologists—and increasingly to film, both documentary and fictional, as well as to autobiographical writing. In common with many other lowland groups, they have become excited about beauty contests and also happily have engaged in what we would call folkloric performances, usually tinged with a latent threat of violence. Turning to other Amazonian collectives, we know that Tukanoan people have a marked inclination for the narration of mythical lore in written form; and we are all aware that Central Brazilian and Xinguano groups are actively involved in the creation of an indigenous tradition of film production and digital archiving, primarily of their ritual practices.

So why are Amazonian people so wary of museums, while clearly recognizing that museification may be a useful tool for gaining or preserving recognition as bearers of a specific culture? An adequate answer to this question would require a focused ethnographic investigation, which to my knowledge has not yet been carried out. Therefore, any ideas we may have on this topic are for now largely speculative. But allow me to suggest a few possible reasons for Amazonians' reticence about museums. First, museums are by definition archives of objects that have been removed from their *umwelt*, their dwelling place; this is, in fact, the source of the feeling of melancholia museums have always induced, and indeed part of their pull for Western visitors as havens of nostalgia. This is to say that they are deeply saturated with a certain conceptualization of temporality and of our links to the past, and consequently of history. And one thing that is well documented ethnographically is Amazonian peoples' strong adherence to their own regimes of historicity and their resistance to allowing their history to be swallowed by ours. This, I would hypothesize, is a reason for indigenous peoples' wariness about museums; they are in effect the sites of a tacit competition between indigenous and largely subconscious Western premises concerning our connections to the past.

A second probable reason for their unease has to do with objectality. Museum objects are precisely that: objects—that is to say, detached things that stand on their own; attachment to them is secondary to their ontological status, and it is precisely this quality that allows them to be “possessed” in the Western sense of the term. The reverse holds true for man-made Amazonian artifacts: these are intrinsically attached and come into being as such, as essentially related entities; and the focus of indigenous interest in them lies in the attachments embedded in them. But these artifacts become meaningless for them once shorn of their relations by their transformation into “objects” in the Western sense.

A third possible reason for Amazonians' disquiet with museums may rest in the mismatch between museums' way of ordering items and their variation, most often in terms of function and style, and indigenous ideas about what constitutes a set and its internal variation. As we all know, indigenous people are keenly interested in certain kinds of collections—for example, in clanic treasures, emblems, ornaments, design copyrights, and so forth—as well as in variation, particularly chromatic or minute variation—for example, in

body painting, textiles, pottery, and basketry designs. However, these ways of conceiving sets and variation are very rarely highlighted or even displayed in museums. Another and probably important factor in Amazonians' relative disinterest in the museum context has to do with museums' blindness to the question of multimodality and co-indexation. As Isabel Peñoni (2018) has pointed out in a very interesting paper recently published in *Gradhiva*, one of the primary reasons for the Kuikuru's interest in film is the possibility for making present within a framed screen narrative reference to domains that are left off-screen; in other words, for embedding in an image reference to planes that are not simultaneously visible. This technique is a fundamental dimension of "traditional" ritual action, and its filmic use thus becomes a very effective means of activating and preserving the memory of ritual performance. In the same vein, the constitutive sensorial multimodality of Amazonian ritual practice, the fact that the actualization of tradition always involves the polyphonic play of visual, auditory, choreographic, and eventually tactile registers is not adequately assimilated in museographic displays; at best you get films, or even at times live performances, but you are given no clues about how multimodality actually works and what is at stake in it.

Thus, from an Amazonian point of view, museums appear to be noncontact zones, *pave* Clifford (1997) or more precisely, sites of the kind of contact that indigenous groups prefer to avoid. To put it briefly, museums are seen as good at and for advertising possession of "culture" in our sense, culture with brackets; but they are also perceived—rightly I think—as bad at fostering transmission of tradition in the indigenous sense. Hence the disjunction I mentioned between museum goals and those pursued in community centers implicit in the dual regime common to many museums of the self. And yet it would not be so difficult for museums sincerely interested in involving indigenous people to really become contact zones, provided these museums were willing to engage in negotiating acceptable common ground for the display of relations and perspectives invested in material and immaterial productions, such that all parties concerned would find the exhibits unexpected and interesting. But this can only be achieved if museums cease pandering to identity politics, treat indigenous knowledge more seriously, and really buckle down to the task of two-way cultural translation.

To be honest, I think museums are such quintessentially Western institutions, so imbued with our most deep-set cultural biases, that I doubt they can ever become truly symmetrical or fully decolonized. But surely they still have a wide margin for improvement in the matter of engaging the interest of people who are not familiar with these institutions and of developing a more fruitful articulation to academic knowledge and communities, particularly to anthropology. Considering only the Amazonian context, it should not be impossible for museums to imagine, for example, a display or an installation contraposing Amazonian ways of creating an attached artifact and Western ways of producing an object—"object" in every sense of the term—something that indigenous people are endlessly curious about. Nor should it be too difficult to invent a comparative display of Western and indigenous modes of constructing sets and their criteria of internal and external variation; it also would not be overly hard to install a device that would break down and reproduce effects of sensorial multimodality and of co-indexation, especially as museums can draw on an important resource for this, namely contemporary artists' eagerness to engage with ethnographic methods and the ethnographic gaze, as well as their cleverness at inventing complex installations. Since culture is primarily a matter of perspective from the anthropological point of view, getting back into the business of using optical devices invented by artists to produce new visual experiences would also be an effective way for museums to rebuild their connections to scientific practice.

By way of conclusion, allow me to raise, however briefly, two further points for discussion. Devising ways of conveying notions about cultural difference in a more symmetrical manner is not the only task that ethnographic museums need to engage in to justify the expense of maintaining them. They still have two other major challenges to face. The first is what to do with the vast collections they have inherited. Given the widening and probably irreversible gap between the extant collections and current museographical aims, museums must seek out adequate ways of opening their collections to research practices, whether for academic or artistic purposes. Digitizing the collections, beyond the huge cost of such an endeavor, is only a partial solution to the problem, because nothing replaces direct contact with the objects. But this kind of unmediated contact, as well as the panoramic visual em-

brace formerly offered by museum's reserves, is increasingly hampered by the new ways of organizing and optimizing storage space borrowed from industrial logistics, such as those used by Ikea or Amazon, not to mention security constraints and lack of adequate personnel. Yet clearly a more productive use of museum reserves must be found. Museums also need to allow objects to move around, to live outside the museum and to reconnect to other contexts. Some institutions already do this brilliantly—the University of British Columbia's museum in Vancouver is a justly famous example—but big national ethnographic museums resist this move, both for real or imagined conservancy reasons and because of current patrimonial legislation. This leads me to the other major challenge facing ethnographic museums. The present massive asymmetry between the West and Rest in terms of cultural patrimony is unacceptable and unsustainable. But repatriation, however justified, and indeed necessary, it may be in many cases, cannot be the general solution to this problem, as it fosters a logic of “to each his own” that still leaves the West with the lion's share—and incidentally signs the death warrant of universalist museums. The desirable aim should be instead to get everybody's cultural treasures to circulate; to get gothic statuary to Port Moresby, Ifé art to Calcutta, Tibetan scrolls to Lima, Sieneese Renaissance painting to Samarkand, and so forth. To counter the pressure of repatriation claims and avoid being gradually stripped of their masterpieces, museums must first acknowledge forthrightly that they are now in the business of diplomacy through objects and throw open the totality of their collections—and not just those clearly looted in colonial times—to permanent negotiation about the uses of their pieces and the kinds of narrative attached to them. Secondly and most importantly, they must take the lead in the move to establish a new legal regime for significant cultural objects, with the ultimate aim of transforming museum collections into commons, the shared property of all humanity rather than of this or that country or community. This means museums and nations should become the stewards or custodians of their collections rather than their owners; there is a world of difference between possession, which fosters a hoarding attitude, and custodianship, which carries an inbuilt obligation to share. This will not be easy to achieve; but recent examples, notably in France, prove that there is room for creative tinkering with current international and national patrimonial legislation in ways that may help to loosen the hold of museums over their collections and allow their pieces to move around more easily.

If ethnographic museums are seen to move on the various fronts I have mentioned—becoming better at conveying what is really at stake in cultural difference, finding innovative ways of using their collections, crusading for a radical reconceptualization of the notion of cultural property—they will be able to pursue their mission of celebrating the range of human creativity, of fostering cultural reflexivity, and thereby tolerance and understanding between different collectives. But if they fail to meet the challenges they now face, I fear they will eventually come to share the fate of dinosaurs.

Notes

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