

11 Texts, objects and 'otherness'

Problems of historical process in writing and displaying cultures

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Introduction

This chapter explores relationships between texts and objects as configured in certain fields of academic research and in museum practices. The main focus of this discussion addresses possibilities and limitations in critical or reflexive approaches to cross-cultural encounters, particularly in anthropological writing and display. Both written and visual forms of representation have been analysed in terms of their authority and effects in the communication of 'otherness' (Clifford 1988; Karp and Levine 1991). Central to these debates are analyses of the cultural politics of ethnographic texts, the ways in which objects (both material and conceptual) are constituted and the relations of power that are conventionalised or institutionalised through textual and visual representations. As Cruikshank observes:

Museums and anthropology are undeniably part of a western philosophical tradition, embedded in a dualism which becomes problematic as a conceptual framework for addressing issues of representation. Entrenched oppositions between 'self/other', subject/object', 'us/them' inevitably leave power in the hands of the defining institution.

(Cruikshank 1992: 6)

Within the discipline of anthropology and in critical museum studies there is a growing body of work which seeks to explore the construction and reception of representations and to question the ideological implications of these processes, especially in terms of the reproduction of dominant Western concepts and perceptions. One of the prevailing strategies in this work is to provide *historical* analyses of the formation of academic disciplines and the consolidation of institutional authority through documentation, collection and display (see Clifford 1988). Attempts to address the problems associated with the construction and subordination of 'others' are couched in terms of the historical emergence of anthropology and the historical conditions within which museum collecting and exhibiting have taken shape. The making of ethnographic texts and the definition of ethnographic objects, as well as the relationships between these forms of representation, are

then interpreted within specific historical contexts. Representations of cross-cultural encounters are understood as part of processes unfolding within and structured by socio-political relations, dominant intellectual frameworks and established codes, conventions and values which work to constitute representational forms. The institutionalisation of cross-cultural understanding in the academic discipline of anthropology and in museums, together with associated assertions of authority through particular textual and visual representations, stand as central issues in critical approaches to 'otherness'.

This chapter examines aspects of this current critique of anthropological and museum representations, foregrounding issues of cultural and historical process, with reference to anthropological writing and exhibiting. It explores the construction of 'otherness' in relation to temporality and conceptions of history as embedded in anthropological writing and exhibition. Crucial here are the debates surrounding the cultural politics of representation in which the relationships between texts and images (as culturally constituted forms) are analysed to reveal ideologies which prioritise certain forms above others. Within these debates there is a distinct lack of consensus with regard to hierarchies of textual and visual representations as recent work on anthropological writing and display argues in both directions for a critique of, on the one hand, the use of visual images and material objects and, on the other, the prioritising of certain texts as a means to represent cultural difference. The studies discussed throughout this chapter point to the problems involved when either texts or visual/material forms are constituted as dominant within anthropological and museum discourses. More specifically, in identifying some of the ways in which the cultural politics of anthropology and museums proceed through the elevation of certain representations as modes of access to cultural difference, we often find an ideology of 'otherness'. In seeking to address this particular operation of cultural dominance, reflexive strategies in anthropological writing and display seek to represent cultural processes which expose the historical nuances of cultural encounters. Anthropologies of cultural representation which trace the relationships between the textual and the visual in social and historical contexts are a positive move in this direction.

For Fabian, a central problem in cross-cultural understanding is 'anthropology's allochronism (its inclination to constitute the Other as a scientific object through the denial of co-temporaneity)' which, he argues, is tied to an emphasis on 'visualism' as a dominant mode of knowledge (Fabian 1991 [1985]: 201). As Jenks notes, there are relationships between modernity and 'ocularcentrism', the elevation of sight as a primary sense, evidenced in commonplace assumptions about seeing and knowing as well as in institutionalised discourses (Jenks 1995). With regard to sociological understanding he states that:

'self' and 'other' in sociological work has subsequently settled into the sanitised methodological form of 'observation'. 'Observation' has become a root metaphor within social and cultural research, and an extensive vocabulary of 'visuality', applied in an almost wholly unreflexive manner, has become

instrumental in our manoeuvres for gaining access to and understanding the concerted practices of human communities.

(Jenks 1995: 3)

The predominance of observation within social theory is problematic not simply in that it reduces social experience to what is visually perceived, but conceptually in that it relies upon the notion of a distanced, disengaged vision which is brought to bear upon, and indeed contributes to the definition of 'others' as though they were the objects of visual perception. The asymmetrical relations of power implied through such encounters have been critically addressed in anthropological work which argues for a shift from a visual to a discursive paradigm: 'from the observing eye and toward expressive speech (and gesture)' (Clifford 1986: 12). This is apparent in reflexive studies which situate anthropological texts themselves as objects of analysis. As later sections of this chapter show, the interrogation of text is part of an attempt to historicise the discipline of anthropology, as well as to disrupt the problematic self/other hierarchy.

Representations of different cultures, in the form of written accounts tend to deploy concepts of time and history that reinforce non-Western 'otherness'. As Fabian demonstrates, anthropological studies have assumed the temporal distance of the 'other' and similar problems of temporality are also present in the exhibition of 'others' in museums. Clifford identifies these problems in the institutionalised writing *and* display of cultures:

The two domains [museums and anthropology] have excluded and confirmed each other, inventively disputing the right to contextualise, to represent these objects. [...] Both discourses assume a primitive world in need of preservation, redemption and representation. The concrete, inventive existence of tribal cultures and artists is suppressed in the process of either constituting authentic 'traditional' worlds or appreciating their products in the timeless category of 'art'.

(Clifford 1988: 200)

While anthropology has largely relied upon writing practices as its main form of communication, museums are understood to be primarily concerned with three-dimensional material objects and their visual display in exhibitions. Following Clifford, textual and visual modes of representation, come into play within anthropological and museum discourses. Both are similarly implicated in processes of othering in that they relocate different cultures in time either through an implicit allusion to the past or through concepts which deny temporality. Stocking also points to the temporal dimensions of museum collecting and exhibiting practice. Objects are taken out of their 'original contexts in space and time' and held in museums where curators attempt to preserve them. Furthermore, museum visitors will view objects as 'survivals' from the past and this leads Stocking to highlight 'forces of historical inertia' which are difficult to resist in museum institutions (Stocking 1985: 4).

There are, therefore, complex relationships between anthropological and museum representations, dimensions of temporality, history and the problem of 'otherness'. These relationships are, themselves linked to wider historical processes:

Whatever the contingencies of their specific histories, the three-dimensional objects thrown in the way of museum observers from out of the past are not placed there by historical accident. Their placement in museums, their problematic character and, indeed, their 'otherness', are the outcome of large-scale historical processes.

(Stocking 1985: 4)

Inadequacies in anthropological and museum representations, including their conceptual bases and methodological apparatus which misconstrue temporal dimensions, are linked to longer term historical processes including European economic, industrial and political developments, especially those relating to projects of colonial power, emerging from the nineteenth century onwards (*ibid.*). Emphasis on this historical process, as an analytical focus, is, then, crucial in cross-cultural understanding and interpretation, a perspective that is central to many of the chapters in this volume.

This chapter examines histories of anthropology as well as the ways in which dimensions of time and history have been marginalised within this academic discourse. In the work of Fabian and Thomas there is a critique of anthropology's emphasis on the visual and a shift of focus towards textual forms. The prioritising of anthropological texts as objects of analysis is then examined, especially in the work of Clifford and Sanjek. The chapter moves into a discussion of the relationships between visual and textual materials in museums before considering the ways in which critical exhibition strategies have attempted to address issues of 'otherness', history and cultural representation. This discussion provides a framework for the interpretation of one particular exhibition, *Cultural Encounters*, co-curated by Elizabeth Hallam at Brighton Museum and Art Gallery in 1996. Through a case study based on this exhibition, this chapter traces some of the possibilities and limitations of critical, reflexive analysis and display.

Histories of/in anthropology

The construction of 'otherness' in anthropology, understood as an emergent set of politically implicated concepts and practices, has been analysed as a deeply rooted historical issue. Notably, Fabian and Thomas explore dimensions of time and historical process in the production of anthropological knowledge. These authors argue that the denial or marginalisation of these dimensions gives rise to problematic, hierarchical relations with 'others' as expressed within anthropological projects. In addressing the inequalities of power and the problems of cross-cultural understanding that follow from these, Fabian and Thomas address the historical formation of the discipline of anthropology and the need for

thorough discussions of historical processes in anthropological analyses. Their critical approach to 'otherness' then becomes an exercise in the contextualisation of anthropology in longer term intellectual history and an interrogation of the ways in which concepts of history and time are (inadequately) deployed within anthropological studies.

With reference to the intellectual history of anthropology, Fabian notes that during the later nineteenth century there was an awareness of the 'pragmatic and, indeed the political nature of anthropological "knowledge"' (Fabian 1991 [1985]: 194). For instance, he cites Adolf Bastian's public pamphlet (1881) that, during the early stages of German colonial activity, made a 'necessary connection between knowledge, domination and, ultimately, destruction' (*ibid.*). Bastian's argument, identifies 'primitive societies' as 'ephemeral' in that 'At the very moment they become known to us they are doomed' (quoted in Fabian, *ibid.*). Here Fabian shows how Bastian made public claims in support of the founding of ethnographic museums as institutions with an important role in research: 'Not observation of primitives alive [. . .] but documentation of primitive societies dead or dying, deserved priority in the ethnological enterprise' (*ibid.*). Such arguments articulated a particular conception of culture which was primarily focused on the past. Fabian points out that although histories of anthropology have tended to disregard this 'archival, museal orientation' in the emergence of the discipline, it needs to be addressed as part of an underlying conceptual structure within anthropology of civilised/savage, present/past, subject/object which has persisted since the eighteenth century (Fabian 1991 [1985]: 194–5).

It seems strange and certainly counter-intuitive, but remains a historical fact: in anthropology, a set of theoretical problems had congealed into a 'science', and an object for that science had been constituted by means of antithetical oppositions (see above) *before* field research became institutionalised as a requirement for professional certification and as a criterion validating knowledge of other societies.

(Fabian 1991 [1985]: 197)

Crucial to Fabian's argument is the assertion that the oppositions 'civilised/savage, present/past, subject/object' were based upon assumptions of spatio-temporal distance:

Generally speaking, anthropology appears to have been a field of knowledge whose discourse requires that its object – other societies, some of them belonging to the past, but most of them existing contemporaneously in the present – be removed from its subject not only in space but also in time. Put more concretely, to belong to the past, to be not yet what We are, is what makes Them the object of our 'explanations' and 'generalizations'.

(Fabian 1991 [1985]: 198)

Fabian refers to 'temporal distancing' as an effect of 'conceptual and rhetorical

devices' which disregard process in the formation of social relations, actions and knowledge. Furthermore, he associates this with the predominance of visualism defined as 'a cultural bias towards vision as the "noblest sense" and toward geometry qua graphic-spatial conceptualisation as the most "exact" way of communicating knowledge' (1983: 106). The persistence of a visual-spatial 'logic' within anthropology can be traced back through the long-term development of Western science out of Greek and Roman arts of rhetoric and memory. Visualisation and spatialisation were foundational in the discipline of anthropology informing, in the nineteenth century, the exhibition of 'exotic others' in illustrated travel books and museums. With the professionalisation of anthropology and the requirement of field research, the practice of observing was further reinforced as a mode of access to knowledge of 'others'. Furthermore, in Fabian's analysis, the 'hegemony of the visual' also resides in anthropological writing: 'whereby writing should include everything from prose to the use of illustrations, tables, diagrams, but also rhetoric, the choice of expressions, analogies, metaphors, and so on, has been dominated by sight' (1991 [1985]: 202). Detrimental effects emerge as reductive, objectified perspectives. In this respect, Fabian refers to Ong:

Persons, who alone speak (and in whom alone knowledge and science exist), will be eclipsed insofar as the world is thought of as an assemblage of the sort of things which vision apprehends – objects and surfaces.

(Ong 1958: 9, quoted in Fabian 1983: 119)

The construction of 'otherness' within anthropological discourse is approached here as part of theory of knowledge which tends to privilege the visual and the spatial, leading to an objectification of persons. Attempting to address this politically damaging construct then becomes an agenda which aims to build time into the production of anthropological knowledge: 'to recognise subjectivity and intersubjectivity as epistemological prerequisites results in "temporalization" [. . .] as an emphasis on events occurring in con-subjective time frames' (Fabian 1991 [1985]: 200). Solutions to these problems are presented through the definition of fieldwork as a 'communicative praxis' together with the exploration of different textual strategies in anthropological writing, including 'dialogical accounts' which 'acknowledge that Self and Other are inextricably involved in a dialectical process' (Fabian, 1991 [1985]: 204–5).

While Fabian explores the formation of anthropology's object (the 'other') through an historical study of the discipline, Thomas conducts his examination of the anthropology/history conjuncture, and the continuity of ahistorical anthropological work, through a consideration of 'what it means for anthropological texts and comparative discussions to be "out of time"' (Thomas 1989: 1).

Failure to address this question can only lead to an implicit perpetuation of the flaws of earlier work. It is apparent that history is often introduced in order to deny its significance. History has not been neglected simply through

an oversight, but for complex conceptual and discursive reasons. Only an analysis of the conditions of anthropological writing which set the discourses out of time can enable us to transcend these constraints.

(*ibid.*)

The 'flaws of earlier work' are here understood as 'theoretical errors' as well as 'substantive misinterpretations' of social, cultural and political relations (Thomas 1989: 9). Thomas' project amounts to more than an analysis of the subjective involvement of the ethnographer in the production of ethnographic knowledge as it draws wider social, cultural and ideological factors into the account (Thomas 1989: 3). He is concerned with

the absence of historical time, and with the explicit or implicit negation of the notion that history has any constitutive effect in the social situation under consideration. It is possible for marginal reference to be made to history or the 'historical context' [. . .] without there being any interest in the significance of historical processes in the system being examined.

(Thomas 1989: 5)

This is a direct critique of the ways in which certain anthropological studies have deployed the concept of history, particularly in their allusion to 'historical context' without a systematic incorporation of time and change into analyses. Instead Thomas calls for forms of historical understanding which

raise fundamental issues about the nature of the standard objects for anthropological discussion, as well as the research and writing practice which keeps these studied things in intellectual circulation.

(Thomas 1989: 10)

Necessary steps within this reorientation include not only ahistorical analysis of anthropology, but also the valuing of 'other' forms of evidence, namely those produced by persons 'lacking professional ethnographic credentials' (Thomas 1989: 15). Archival sources, for instance those written by explorers, missionaries and colonial administrators have often been 'derided and rejected' as 'biased' in comparison to 'data' compiled by anthropologists for whom 'personal ethnographic understanding' provides the basis for 'satisfactory description' (Thomas 1989: 10, 14). Such an emphasis on particular categories of evidence leads to the marginalisation of patterns of longer term change and the privileging of certain (dominant) views within the fieldwork setting rather than an 'assessment of the development of particular interpretations' within historically specific settings (Thomas 1989: 10, 13). For Thomas, the integration of historical processes into anthropological accounts requires shifts in methods and analysis, particularly in terms of an emphasis on historical context, the uses of historical evidence and, most significantly, the decentring of ethnographic fieldwork as the source of anthropological knowledge (Thomas 1989: 17).

Such a shift would place greater emphasis on the critical interpretation of archival, museum and library sources, drawing these materials into the centre of the analysis alongside the texts produced by anthropologists themselves. Thomas calls for the revaluing of archival sources and studies which 'situate their objects of discussion as outcomes of historical process' (Thomas 1989: 6–7). Both Fabian and Thomas identify the historical analysis of texts, produced within and beyond the fieldwork setting, as key in critical anthropological approaches to 'otherness'. This would involve a reconsideration of anthropology's objects of analysis, shifting the focus to forms of textual production and dissemination.

Ethnographic texts as objects

Reflection on the practice of writing and the production of texts has come to occupy a significant position in analyses of the formation of anthropology as a distinct and authoritative discipline. Clifford argues that writing during ethnographic fieldwork and in the presentation of anthropological accounts is central to the work of anthropologists. The recognition of such writing practices has emerged through anthropological reflexivity and critical analyses of 'an ideology claiming transparency of representation and immediacy of experience' (Clifford 1986: 2). By examining the involvement of the anthropologist in the shaping of images of 'others', Clifford asserts that a 'focus on text making and rhetoric serves to highlight the constructed artificial nature of cultural accounts' (*ibid.*). Furthermore, the production of such texts is always culturally embedded and historically specific.

Ethnographic writing practices which lead to particular representations of cultures should be interpreted in relation to cultural and, more specifically, literary processes: 'metaphor, figuration, narrative – affect the ways cultural phenomena are registered, from the first jotted "observations" to the completed book, to the ways these figurations "make sense" in determined acts of reading' (Clifford 1986: 4). Through analysis of the production of cultural accounts, Clifford highlights context, rhetoric, institution, genre, politics and history as they impinge on ethnographic writing (Clifford 1986: 6). Alongside this emphasis on the construction of anthropological texts is the argument that

'culture' is not an object to be described, neither is it a unified corpus of symbols and meanings that can be definitively interpreted. Culture is contested, temporal, and emergent. Representation and explanation – both by insiders and outsiders – is implicated in this emergence.

(Clifford 1986: 19)

In this formulation of culture as process (cf. Street 1993), there is also a recognition of relations of power and how they operate in the textual representation of 'otherness'.

writing includes, minimally, a translation of experience into textual form. The

process is complicated by the action of multiple subjectivities and political constraints beyond the control of the writer. In response to these forces ethnographic writing enacts a specific strategy of authority. This strategy has classically involved an unquestioned claim to appear as the purveyor of truth in the text.

(Clifford 1988: 25)

The notion of the trained 'professional ethnographer', practising participant observation and claiming direct experience, constituted an authority which was reinforced through particular textual strategies:¹ '[a]n experiential "I was there" element establishes the unique authority of the anthropologist; its suppression in the text establishes the anthropologist's scientific authority' (Rabinow 1986: 244; see also Karp and Kratz, this volume). Despite the specificities of encounter and dialogical interpretation in the field, the ethnographic account is afterwards presented in the form of a monologue – an assertion of control over the representation of 'others'.

Further exploration of ethnographic writing, for example that involved in the production of fieldnotes, reveals the centrality of texts in the work of anthropologists. Sanjek identifies a 'vocabulary for fieldnotes' which encompasses scratch notes, fieldnotes, fieldnote records, head notes, texts, journals, diaries, letters, reports and papers (Sanjek 1990: 92–121). These are produced and used in different social settings, for a range of research purposes at different stages of the research process. Through an examination of various anthropologists' uses of such texts, Sanjek aims to render ethnographic method 'visible' (Sanjek 1990: 385). To expose such texts to scrutiny reveals something of the complexities of interpretation and negotiations of meaning which are part of the process of cross-cultural representation. It also situates ethnographic writing at the interplay between the ethnographer, the social/historical contexts in which she works and the production of histories to which her interpretations give rise. As Bond argues:

Fieldnotes are an anthropologist's most sacred possession. They are personal property, part of a world of private memories and experiences, failures and successes, insecurities and indecisions. They are usually tucked away in a safe place. To allow a colleague to examine them would be to open a Pandora's box. They are, however, an important key to understanding the nature of what anthropologists do; they are records of our findings, if not our own self-discovery as artists, scientists and – more accurately – *bricoleurs*, assembling cultures from the bits and pieces of past occurrences.

(Bond 1990: 273)

These studies of text making thus acknowledge subjective involvement in the representation of 'others' and the historical processes through which representations emerge. The positioning of 'others' within these texts is complex given that, in the case of fieldnotes, '[t]hey are the products of multivocality, the creation of a number of voices' (Bond 1990: 286). Sanjek also shows how fieldnotes 'as

objects' are sometimes read by a diversity of 'others' including anthropologists, the people whom they describe, and 'other "others" in the society studied but outside the immediate ethnographic range' (Sanjek 1990: 324). The interpretation of these texts is then dependent upon the social relations within which they are circulated and read. Texts, within reflexive anthropological studies, become meaningful as objects of analysis. They form a crucial part of the research process, an investigation of which is seen as necessary in tracking the cultural politics of anthropological representations. Texts are then viewed as constructions shaped by cultural codes and conventions with material and visual dimensions. Furthermore, the materiality of written documents including, for instance, paper, which possesses its own signifying properties, is emphasised in material culture studies (see Pellegrin 1998).

Texts in museum spaces

This analysis of texts can be applied to museum representations – firstly in terms of the uses of texts in museums, but also in the uses of material objects to convey notions of 'otherness'. Here the representation of 'otherness' in museums can be explored through analysis of the relationships between texts and objects in particular exhibitions. With regard to ethnographic museums in the later twentieth century, Lidchi states that '[e]xhibitions are discrete events which articulate objects, texts, visual representations, reconstructions and sounds to create an intricate and bounded representational system' (Lidchi 1997: 168).² While the relationships between texts, objects and visual images, such as photographs, work to produce specific cultural meanings in the context of exhibiting, it is often the textual components which predominate in the communication of the displays' aims and themes. Within museum spaces texts have been deployed in the form of introductory text panels, labels, captions, leaflets and catalogues all of which guide the viewer in their interpretation of the objects and images on display. Text panels make authoritative statements regarding the exhibition with the function of establishing the 'parameters of representation' in terms of its narrative and sequence, while labels make claims on the identification and description of particular objects (Lidchi 1997: 170, 175). Clifford makes a similar point in demonstrating that the central messages of an exhibition are conveyed through introductory text panels, the selection of particular objects for display and the 'maintenance of a specific angle of vision' through the juxtaposition of images (Clifford 1988: 193).³ So, despite the explicitly critical approaches to colonial ideologies within certain museum exhibitions, the effect is often to reinforce dominant concepts and histories.

The uses of texts in museum spaces tend to function as part of a cultural politics which reproduces certain forms of power relations with regard to 'others'. Texts are central to the cultural translation involved in museum discourse. Lidchi claims that such texts 'impart information' as well as forming 'economies of meaning, selecting what they would ideally like the visitor to know – what is important' (Lidchi 1997: 176). The predominance of text, in imparting information and knowledge, again appears to have been established within Western epistemology:

Contemporary Western common sense, building on various traditions in philosophy, law, and natural science, has a strong tendency to oppose 'words' and 'things.' Though this was not always the case even in the West [. . .] the powerful contemporary tendency is to regard the world of things as inert and mute, set in motion and animated, indeed knowable, only by persons in their words.

(Appadurai 1986: 4)

The current politics of representation are conceived in terms of a hierarchical relationship between texts and material objects where texts dominate in the constitution of knowledge. It is worth exploring Appadurai's allusion to a historical moment in which this text/object hierarchy was not so pronounced. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries there was a significant expansion in European *musei* (rooms dedicated to the display of objects), archives, libraries and academies which were largely undifferentiated in that they were all intended as repositories of 'curious' objects, including manuscripts and books (Stagl 1995). Alongside the emergence of *musei* were compendia, books containing collections of written material which made similar claims to represent the world in microcosm. Here words and material objects were of equal importance and, as Stagl notes, 'both forms of collection could, moreover, be "translated" into each other': *musei* became books when they were described in catalogues, and, conversely, books became *musei* with the incorporation of extensive illustrations (Stagl 1995: 115). Similarly in Dutch Renaissance art, texts were placed in an equal position to images. Texts were often incorporated into paintings and, as Alpers argues, 'Rather than supplying underlying meanings, they give us more to look at' (Alpers 1983: 187), i.e. the relation of text and image appears to have been complementary. Furthermore, texts such as letters appeared in paintings, and it was not their content which was emphasised but their visual, material dimensions: a text 'as an object of visual attention, a surface to be looked at' (Alpers, 1983: 196). These relationships of equality and continuity between textual and visual forms appear, however to have been reconfigured with the development of Enlightenment thought which attempted to effect, in the context of museums, a 'shift from sensory impact to rationalising nomenclature' (Stafford 1994: 266). Material objects came to be defined through textual forms such as catalogues and this contributed to the 'reification of print-based language as the master paradigm for all serious signification' (Stafford 1994: 284).

The dominance of textual forms in the ordering of material objects acts as a means through which concepts and categories rooted in post-Enlightenment rationality and scientism are reinforced. The text/object hierarchy has a number of implications for the ways in which texts are deployed in museum exhibitions. They tend to appear as 'neutral', objective information in the form of exhibition titles, text panels, object labels and captions. This renders their visual and material dimensions 'invisible' – they are not part of the display, rather they structure the interpretation of it although, again, their ideological dimensions remain hidden. Again, issues of temporality come into play. Recalling Fabian's discussion of time

in anthropological studies, Clifford notes the 'temporal incoherence' of museum captions. Small texts, used to describe images of non-Western peoples and their material objects scramble past and present with the inconsistent uses of tense:

Beyond such questions of accuracy is an issue of systematic ideological coding. To locate "tribal" peoples in a nonhistorical time and ourselves in a different, historical time is clearly tendentious and no longer credible.

(Clifford 1988: 202)

Recent approaches to cultural encounters that see them as embedded in historical processes have attempted to challenge a politics of representation that reinforce certain forms (in this case texts) over others, and instead have rethought the organisation and content of museum spaces. The following sections of this chapter examine recent attempts to bring historical perspectives into the visual order of anthropological exhibitions, through the 'opening' of archives (including the collections of institutions and individuals), and the critical reflection upon relationships between texts and material objects.

Critical exhibitions: opening archives

Within critical museum studies, a re-evaluation of 'what constitutes an object' in the context of museum collection and display has taken place (Cruikshank 1992: 7). This has been necessary in addressing the ways in which museum exhibitions reinforce conceptions of 'otherness' as exotic, primitive and subordinate. In the analysis of the politics of museums and in studies of material culture, attention has been directed towards collecting practices, the social relationships involved in the circulation and display of objects, as well as processes of commodification (*ibid.*). Academic work in these areas has had an impact on exhibition strategies in museums, as Lidchi claims:

We have seen that changes in the academic discipline, itself affected by larger cultural movements (such as post-modernism), have created new boundaries for exhibiting: to name but three, the inclusion of self-reflexivity, or dialogue or polyvocality (many voices, interpretations of objects); the move towards incorporating hybrid and syncretic objects; and a right for those represented to have a say in exhibition construction.

(Lidchi 1997: 201)

Such exhibition strategies aim to reconfigure the hierarchical relationships between 'self' and 'other' that were characteristic of colonial encounters. To this end, exhibitions which explicitly attempt to expose these inequalities of power often aim to interject historical approaches which contextualise ethnographic materials within longer term processes of colonisation and Western exploitation. This necessarily involves the reconsideration of display techniques, especially a renegotiation of what constitutes appropriate 'objects' for visual contemplation

within museum spaces. Acute problems in ethnographic display emerge through tensions between the need to address the complicity of museums in the politics of othering whilst maintaining the contemporary relevance of, and public interest in, their collections.

As one instance of these changing approaches within museum exhibiting, 'The Impossible Science of Being. Dialogues between Anthropology and Photography', provided an exploration of anthropological representations which were contextualised through their historical relationships with other technologies of visual production. This touring exhibition opened in London, Leeds and then at Brighton Museum and Art Gallery in August 1996. Its aims were at once critical and creative, tracing the links between early anthropology and photography, questioning the representational capacity of these practices and highlighting the relations of power involved in their development. As one review of the exhibition stated, 'the curators bounce questions of representation between the parallax of anthropology and photography, between the interstices of image and writing, and in what they call "a dialogue"' (Hughes-Freeland 1996: 17).

In the accompanying exhibition publication, Jonathan Benthall, Director of the Royal Anthropological Institute, emphasises the importance of anthropology in enhancing the 'understanding of human societies', whilst alluding to the 'errors of anthropology' in reinforcing 'inhuman ideologies' (Charity *et al.* 1995: 4). Furthermore, he notes that 'Contemporary anthropologists see academic enquiry as inseparable from a commitment to critical examination of the history and current role of their discipline' (*ibid.*). Exploring the history of anthropology and engaging the public in assessments of the 'role' of this discipline are foregrounded. The historicising of anthropology, through textual accounts and visual images in the public space of the museum, is pursued as a means to address the cultural politics of academic production. Such a project requires the public exposure of the formerly secluded archival collections generated in the practice of anthropology. Thus Benthall describes the archive of the Royal Anthropological Institute as a place of 'dust and silence' which then becomes a source of 'inspiration' and 'reflection' (*ibid.*). Archives holding historical documents and photographic images (mostly from 1860–1920) become repositories of hope containing materials which will allow critical reflection on the politics of early anthropology, and thus a means to openly confront the problematic values and assumptions which are part of the discipline's history. They also provide historical materials which can be used to mark the difference (distance?) between earlier as opposed to contemporary anthropology. As Pinney, Wright and Pognant claim in the exhibition publication: 'The critical and interpretative anthropology of the late twentieth century is the antithesis of the nineteenth century concern with the play of light over the surfaces of bodies and objects' (Pinney *et al.* 1995: 7).

'The Impossible Science of Being' aimed to trace relationships between an anthropological archive, museum exhibition and installation. Within this Pinney, Wright and Pognant identify a continuity between visual image and written text in early anthropology. Once central to the documentation of other societies, the photographic images, produced by late nineteenth- and early twentieth-

century travellers and missionaries and stored in the archive, were displaced by ethnographic fieldwork. However, Pinney *et al.* argue that anthropologists had internalised the 'idiom of photography within the production of its texts' (Pinney *et al.* 1995: 8). In the field, the anthropologist became the 'negative' through exposure to data which was then 'processed' into the 'positive' through the writing and publication of the monograph:

It is in this sense that photography and a metaphorisation of its technical and ritual procedures have, perhaps, informed the nature of written texts which anthropologists now often privilege over visual documentation.

(*ibid.*)

The exhibition thus suggests continuities, as well as hierarchies in the mobilisation of word and image that structure the representation of 'otherness'. Early visual technologies persist in the processes of textual production which then become the predominant means to represent 'others'. The exhibition's use of the anthropological archive is further elucidated in Davis' contribution to the exhibition publication, drawing attention to the act of confronting both early photography and anthropology in terms of their involvement in colonial and racist ideologies:

In opening the archive, we may encounter a past brought too directly and vividly into the present. [. . .] The shock that we feel when we encounter the ethnographic archive is the zero-degree of photography's dangerousness; its disturbance of civilisation. In this instance, it is also ethnography's willingness to be disturbed in itself.

(Davis 1995: 41)

To provide interpretations of this archive from different perspectives, contemporary artists from the Association of Black Photographers were commissioned to create work in response to it. Faisal Abdu' Allah, Zarina Bhimji and Dave Lewis provided work which addressed issues of knowledge, experience and power linked to race, colonialism and anthropology. Here, problems in the uses of historical materials within the exhibition emerge. As Dave Lewis states in his interview, provided as part of the exhibition publication, he was denied access to aspects of the collection and refused permission to photograph them (Bhimji 1995). As Hughes-Freeland notes, this difficulty arising from restricted access to historical documents and images was not represented within the exhibition (Hughes-Freeland 1996: 19). There are dimensions of institutional control here which limit access to historical materials and therefore define boundaries of historical research. Hughes-Freeland has suggested that, in this case, the artist was denied access because of the taboos surrounding historical images with potentially pornographic connotations (*ibid.*). Whilst claiming to explore the related histories of anthropology and photography, and to provide contemporary, critical responses to anthropological archives, the exhibition moved up against the

limitations of display. These limitations are related to the difficulties involved in the visual display of historical process, including the practice of historical interpretation with the use of institutionalised archival material. The dialogue between the contemporary artists and the archival material is structured through institutional relations of power which extend control over the archives' materials. Further problems are raised through attempts to convey responses to historical documents through the display of visual images. In this respect, Hughes-Freeland considers the display of the artists' images without extended textual commentary to be insufficient in providing them with a voice in the 'exhibition-as-event' (*ibid.*). With reference to these images she asks:

is it enough to simply show them? Or are the photographers being imprisoned in their images and denied a voice? was it their choice? or the organizer's? The criticism could be made that their eyes have been appropriated, their skills patronized to produce useful goods, but they too have been muted, confined to images.

(*ibid.*)

Such questions point to central problems in display strategies within museum spaces. From the various critical anthropological perspectives presented here it appears that when any form of representation predominates (whether textual or visual) there is a corresponding marginalisation of 'other' perspectives. Tracing the parallel histories of anthropology and photography by opening the archive is an admirable, but not an unproblematic solution – the practice of historical interpretation carries its own problems rooted in the politics of the archive.

Displaying process: a case study

Some of the pressing concerns within critical approaches to the writing and display of cultures tend to focus around several interrelated problems in the representation of cultural (understood as necessarily historical and political) processes. Following from the framework of anthropological and museum debates outlined above, the present case study provides an analysis of one particular exhibition which aimed to address aspects of 'otherness' as understood in current research and display practices.⁴ The 'Cultural Encounters' exhibition, curated by Elizabeth Hallam and Nicki Levell, opened at Brighton Museum and Gallery in February 1996.⁵ The exhibition was a collaborative project involving Sussex University, Brighton University and Brighton Museum. As noted in the Preface to this volume, the exhibition was conceived and organised as part of a series of research lectures, seminars and events based in the Graduate Research Centre for Culture and Communication (CulCom). Central to these activities were debates about cultural representations, including visual materials and written texts, together with the ways in which these are produced and received in different social and historical contexts. The discussions extended across geographical areas, academic disciplines and institutional locations. Throughout the planning and in the view-

ing of the 'Cultural Encounters' exhibition, a particular set of concerns regarding relationships between the university and the museum as sites which supported the production and collection of cultural representations, came into focus. The exhibition was conceived partly as a response to the writing culture debate within anthropology and formed an attempt to bring these issues into some relation with the problems in the display of culture noted in the previous sections of this chapter.

The exhibition specifically centred around issues relating to the research process and the representations which are collected, manipulated and disseminated throughout. Five researchers from the School of Cultural and Community Studies at the University of Sussex were asked to contribute some of their research materials which had been generated and collected through encounters with cultural difference during fieldwork, in museums and in archives. The exhibition consisted of the research materials of two anthropologists, an art historian, a geographer and a media studies lecturer which were displayed in the Cultures Gallery at Brighton Museum. Mounted in five cabinets, the materials included a wide range of texts (manuscript and printed) and visual images (photographs, prints, diagrams, tables, graphs, maps) as well as material objects.

Susan Wright, an anthropologist, contributed research materials from her study of Iranian politics and social relations. The cabinet displaying her collection, entitled 'Patterns and representations', contained fieldwork notes, a diagram of a village, a genealogy of kin relations and photographs of the village and local weaving practices (Figure 11.1). Craig Clunas, an art historian, selected material objects from the collection of Sir Alan Barlow together with a photograph of the collector for the 'Collecting china' cabinet (Figure 11.1). Elizabeth Hallam provided the research materials displayed in 'The archive's others' cabinet (Figure 11.2). These were collected during anthropological research on gender and ritual in an archive based in South East England. Here materials included copies of seventeenth-century manuscripts, a woodcut from the same period, maps and copies of the archive's catalogue. The cabinet entitled 'Listening in as a form of cultural encounter' contained a selection of Christina Brink's research materials providing insights from a media studies perspective on political propaganda and communication (Figure 11.2). Photographs and transcripts of programmes broadcast worldwide and received by the BBC in the 1930s and 1940s were included in the display. Finally, Brian Short provided materials relating to his research in historical geography for the cabinet 'Encountering the land of Edwardian England' (Figure 11.2). Copies of historical documents from the Public Record Office, maps, political cartoons and speeches relating to land and property in the early twentieth century figured in Short's contributions. Displayed within each cabinet were materials generated in particular historical contexts through cultural encounters involving diverse local and national bodies and institutions as well as personal social interactions.

Such research materials are not usually open to public scrutiny. They accumulate in filing cabinets, offices, drawers and book shelves. They might pass through various stages such as indexing and cataloguing, as they are written, read and



Figure 11.1 'Cultural Encounters' exhibition, Brighton Museum and Gallery, 1996. The cabinet on the far right of the Cultures Gallery contained the research materials of Susan Wright ('Patterns and representations'). The cabinet on the left ('Collecting china') shows material collected by Sir Alan Barlow and a photograph of the collector, selected by Craig Clunas. The text panels describing each cabinet were mounted on the opposite walls (see Figure 11.3).

Source: University of Sussex.

rewritten into research papers, lectures, teaching materials, reports and books. They are an essential part of research practices and, although they are valued and known intimately by their owners, they usually remain secluded within private spaces. They remain hidden behind the apparently accomplished and seamless final product – the book, the article, the research report. Opening these collections to the possibility of visual display in a public arena involved negotiations between the university and museum. The resilience of notions about what constitutes a visually interesting object, appropriate for display within a museum,



Figure 11.2 'Cultural Encounters' exhibition, Brighton Museum and Gallery, 1996.

The photograph shows three cabinets. On the right ('The archive's others'), the research materials of Elizabeth Hallam, including copies of a seventeenth-century manuscript and a printed image, were mounted on transparent sheets and enlarged on embossed paper. Fragments of the archive's codes used to catalogue manuscripts were enlarged and printed onto the background sheeting. The central cabinet ('Listening as a form of cultural encounter') contained copies of Christina Brink's research materials, including visual and written documentation of radio broadcasting. The cabinet to the far left of the gallery ('Encountering the land of Edwardian England') displayed Brian Short's collection, including a copy of an historical document printed onto the glass cabinet. Museum visitors were invited to look at the objects through the document, for example, a map on the back of the case (represented here in fabric). Slides of Short's research material were also mounted and displayed in a light-box outside the cabinet. Again, the corresponding text panels, in the same format as the one shown in Figure 11.3, were displayed on the gallery wall opposite the cabinets.

Source: University of Sussex.

led into discussions about how to install research materials. There was a need to convey a sense of the ways in which these objects had acquired value and meanings from the point of view of the researchers as well as providing a visually engaging display from the point of view of the visiting public.

The researchers' written and printed texts (either collected from archives or produced by the researchers themselves) became particularly problematic. Although highly valued by university researchers, in the context of a museum exhibition, they seemed to fail to meet conventional display criteria. Not only were these objects free from pictorial content, they were flat and apparently resistant to museum installation. The conventions inherent within the organisation of museum space tends to ensure that text is confined to certain locations as noted above, on exhibition title signs, on text panels outside the display cabinets, on small explanatory object labels, and within exhibition catalogues. Museum discourse seemed to divide and separate text and the object to be displayed and this tended to reinforce their location, both conceptually and spatially, in different categories.⁶ The exhibition aimed to move away from the use of text as providing 'objective' information towards an exploration of text as a process through which cultural ideas and representations are constituted and made meaningful within particular social contexts. This was reflected in the text panels which were written by the researchers to accompany and describe each cabinet – the researchers' names were also included on the text panels to signal their subjective involvement in both the collecting process and the making of the exhibition. These texts were divided into different sections and printed onto three layers of perspex (Figure 11.3). The text was legible from the front view but from the side angles the text fragmented rendering it difficult to read and thus visible primarily as a material object. The purpose of this was to highlight the material dimensions of the writing process and the written document.

All of the researchers presented their materials to the curators and described the ways in which they had been collected and interpreted. This was important in the incorporation of the researchers' intentions, and their readings of the materials, into the display. So the organisation of the objects within the display cabinets was dependent upon productive interaction between curators and researchers. The researchers understood their materials as part of a wider research process so the interrelationships between the various texts and images were particularly significant. For example photographs were related to notes and diagrams and maps to historical documents. Display styles, which were able to visually represent interconnected objects, were required. Trying to exhibit the research process within museum cabinets entailed consideration of the visual qualities of the research materials. The shape, texture, weight, size and colour of objects as well as the different manuscript, typescript and printed texts were important visual dimensions relating to conventions of cultural production. The relocation of the objects from the university to the museum tended to highlight the constructed meanings of the objects – they were transformed from university text to museum object. This foregrounded the importance of institutional location in the formation of their meanings.

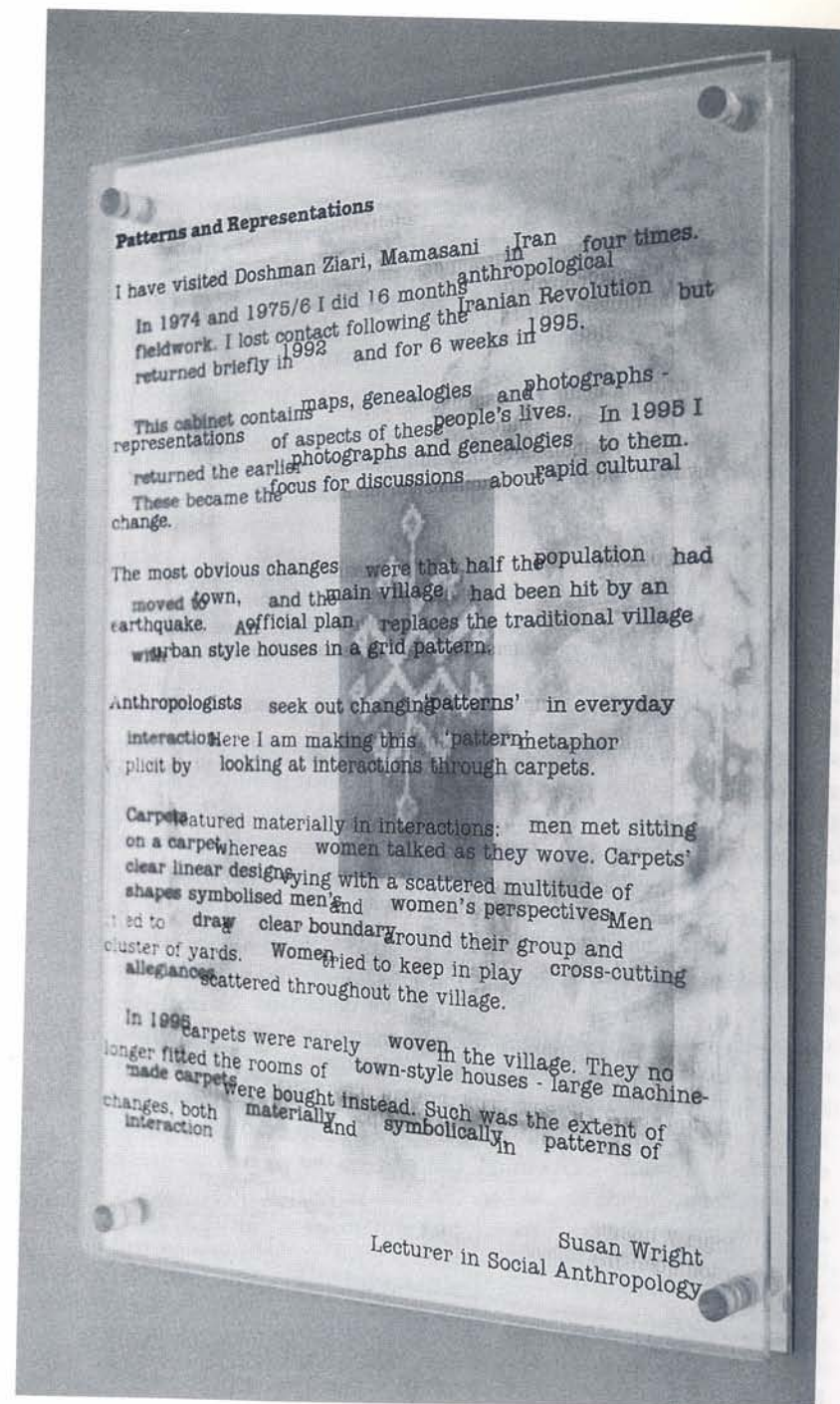


Figure 11.3 'Cultural Encounters' exhibition, Brighton Museum and Gallery, 1996. An example of the text panels, each written by the researchers/collectors to comment on the research process involving the gathering and interpretation of their materials.

In order to communicate the researchers' perceptions of their research in visual form special display styles were devised. A primary consideration was how to convey the relationships between text and image which are formed throughout the research process. This was facilitated through the intervention of a design group from the University of Brighton who devised the presentation and installation of the five sets of materials. The designers became familiar with the interests of the researchers to ensure that the designs for the displays were consistent with the researchers' main intentions. Text panels were written by the researchers and then used by the designers to help place the objects in appropriate ways within the cabinets. We hoped that the continued communication between researchers, curators and artists would help to produce a display which brought to the surface meanings attributed to objects by their collectors. Communicating the research process to the viewing public involved the manipulation of the materials to render visible the relationships between text and image. The research materials did not on their own possess the conventional 'authenticity' usually associated with museum objects. They consisted primarily of copies of documents held in archives or notes and images produced by the researchers themselves. The photographs, photocopies, slides, transcriptions and written accounts were not static objects to be preserved in their 'original' form. They had been produced, used and made meaningful through an interpretative process and as such they were open to manipulation in the practice of research. The visual content of the cabinets was required to convey something of this process. So the design group transformed texts by, for example, altering their size or exaggerating certain features, printing them onto the glass cabinets and displaying them on enlarged transparencies (Figure 11.2).

The exhibition aimed to visually highlight the complex layers of production, reception and interpretation that are always embedded within the institutional and social contexts in which representations are brought into play. Rather than an invitation to access 'another' society directly, museum visitors were encouraged to examine the processes of construction (via research, collecting and writing) that bring 'others' into view. Attempts were made to displace the fixed or essentialised category of 'the other' and to explore, instead, a range of cultural, social and historical differences. The exhibition aimed to raise questions about what constitutes 'otherness', the ways in which this category might shift over time, the problems and politics involved in representation of others. The project explored a diversity of cultural encounters: between the university and the museum, between the researchers and their objects of study, between the displays and the museum visitors, between text and image as culturally defined.

Conclusions

The 'Cultural Encounters' exhibition aimed to display cultural processes, foregrounding the practice of interpretation within academic research. The materials on display were drawn from the personal collections of researchers and related to different geographical regions and historical periods. The exhibition attempted to visually represent the interpretation of 'others' as a historically grounded practice

which involved the linkage of texts, visual images and material objects. This resituated texts as cultural objects, rather than carriers of 'objective' information. In the writing and display of the texts panels the researcher/collector was brought into the frame, indicating their subjective involvement in the formation of their collections and in the devising of the exhibition. To evaluate this project more fully would involve an anthropological study of the display to include museum visitor's interpretations. As Marcus points out, in this volume, the critical intentions of curators and the visual codes used in exhibitions which problematise their own foundations are often inaccessible to wider social groups. Furthermore, as Jordanova observes in her chapter, the interpretative work of historians is difficult to convey through visual displays. Developing a means to represent cultural and historical process in anthropological and museum discourses remains a difficult problem. The 'Cultural Encounters' exhibition attempted to address this through the display of text and image as interrelated processes involved in the constitution of social and cultural relations in different cultural/historical settings and within academic interpretation.

In order to develop critical perspectives on the question of 'otherness', reflexive strategies in both anthropological writing and display have attempted to reveal the ways in which cultural authority is consolidated through the politics of cultural representation. This has involved the interrogation of both textual and visual forms as problematic within discourses on cross-cultural encounters. While this anthropological critique has variously addressed the dominance of either the visual or the textual, both forms of representation are problematised in terms of the categories of 'otherness' that they construct. To analyse the shifting hierarchies of representational forms requires attention to historical context and process – attending to the particular social and political relations which configure the relationships between knowledge, text, visual image and material object. The writing and display of cultural processes, which acknowledges the complex power relations between 'self' and 'other' can be facilitated through anthropologies of cultural representations – including those 'held' in archives, museums, university and academic collections. Revealing the relationships between text and image and exposing the epistemological and political factors which shape these relations, involves critical and creative anthropologies of cultural representation which confront the question of 'otherness'.

Notes

- 1 Here Clifford is referring to anthropological work, approximately 1900–60, though, of course, during this period anthropological practices, methods and writing varied (Clifford 1988: 24).
- 2 Lidchi makes specific reference to the exhibition 'Paradise: change and continuity in the New Guinea highlands', Museum of Mankind, British Museum, London, July 1993–July 1995.
- 3 Here, Clifford's analysis is based upon the exhibition '“Primitivism” in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern', Museum of Modern Art, New York, December 1984.
- 4 This case study is based on a revised version of the author's Introduction to the

- 'Cultural Encounters' exhibition catalogue: E. Hallam and N. Levell (eds) 1996, *Communicating Otherness: Cultural Encounters*, University of Sussex: Graduate Research Centre in Culture and Communication.
- 5 Further analysis of the 'Cultural Encounters' exhibition is also available in N. Levell and A. Shelton (1998) 'Text, illustration and reverie: some thoughts on museums, education and technologies', in *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, no. 10, 1998.
- 6 There were, however, points at which this museum classification dissolved. It seemed that certain texts were sometimes shuffled into the 'object for display' category. The museum would often exhibit diaries, newspaper items, books, magazines, historical documents, and so on. We began to explore the differences between the display of these apparently acceptable texts and those which we were proposing to exhibit. The main differences seemed to be marked through value judgements as to what counts as a significant historical document. This clearly depends on definitions of history and its making (see Jordanova, this volume).

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