

Race for Sale

Narratives of Possession in Two “Ethnic” Museums

Patricia Penn Hilden

I

For Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, East Africa’s greatest writer and political thinker who lives in exile from the neocolonialist Kenyan state, the role of intellectuals among the once colonized peoples of the world demands that they work to “move the center” from Europe to their own centers. He dates the beginnings of such moves to the 1960s, when

the centre of the universe was moving from Europe [...] when many countries, particularly in Asia and Africa, were demanding and asserting their right to define themselves and their relationship to the universe from their own centres in Africa and Asia. (1993:2)

This movement is complicated, not least because moving centers demands that previously colonized people undertake lengthy and sometimes painful “decolonization processes” in order to relocate to their own centers. At the same time, as Ngũgĩ explains, “It [is] not a question of substituting one centre for the other. The problem [arises] only when people [try] to use the vision from any one centre and generalize it as the universal reality” (2).¹

Both processes remain incomplete—both decolonizing minds occupied by the colonizers’ various cultural presumptions *and* persuading those who occupy the Euro-center to allow for the existence of other, equally legitimate centers rather than simply extending their center outward until the whole world is sucked into a universalist void. Here I shall use two sites of contemporary cultural contestation, the Museum for African Art (formerly the Center for African Art) and the George Gustav Heye Center of the National Museum of the American Indian, to examine some aspects of both problems. I shall explore the Museum for African Art first, beginning with its texts, including catalogues produced both before and after the opening of the present Museum space. These include *Perspectives: Angles on African Art* (Baldwin et al. 1987), the record of the Center for African Art’s traveling exhibit; *ART/artifact: African Art in Anthropology Collections* (Vogel 1988a); and the provocative catalogue

of the subsequent exhibit, *The Art of Collecting African Art* (Vogel 1988b). I shall then look carefully at a publication that is both a catalogue and a critical work, *Exhibition-ism: Museums and African Art* (Nooter Roberts and Vogel 1994), published to celebrate 10 years of exhibitions in conjunction with a 1992 symposium, "Africa By Design: Designing a Museum for the 21st Century." I shall conclude by touring a 1998 exhibition, *African Faces, African Figures: The Arman Collection*.

From the Museum for African Art I shall then move downtown, to one of this museum's sister institutions, the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), which opened its Manhattan doors in 1994. The first two of the three linked inaugural exhibitions (*Creation's Journey and All Roads Are Good*) borrowed some of the same curatorial techniques employed by the pioneering African art museum. The second half of this essay compares the two museums by analyzing the Heye Center's inaugural exhibitions, its published texts as well as its constructed narrative. Throughout, I shall consider the extent to which these museums "move the center," from the overculture's national history of the United States, in one case, or from Europe to Africa, or even the African diaspora, in the other.

In recent years, museum curators and others have quite thoroughly deconstructed the once obscure practices of museum exhibitions so that their collective complicity in the "invention," celebration, and dissemination of national identities is by now well established. Others have theorized space and the ways in which museum space has been "produced," to use Henri Lefebvre's terms (1974), as a venue for what Aimé Césaire called "the [Europeans'] forgetting machine" (1972:9–10).

The racialized (and gendered) nature of such "exhibitionary complexes" (Bennett 1995) have also received considerable scholarly attention. I think, however, that two problems remain: first, museologists have not succeeded in moving the center, not least because their well-intentioned efforts to "deconstruct" and thereby "deracialize" their museum practices have remained mired in a "universalist" discourse that remains hopelessly Euro-centered, despite the fact that their "universalism" and practices *have* assumed fresh shapes, as Richard Schechner has noted:

These "new museums" are not new in their underlying assumptions, but they offer "performative experience" that replaces the "I brought them back alive, or stuffed" [...] dioramas of older-style museums [...]. What these "new museums" do, in fact, is combine approaches of the American Museum of Natural History, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Disney. In other words, the strategies of hegemony have shifted toward the experiential and the performed. (1999)

A second dilemma in these "new museums" emerges from the fact that some communities of color, the purported objects of such museological good intentions, have themselves sometimes ignored the ways in which participation with such museums collaborates in their own continuing colonization. Of course, how Native Americans and other "others" are convinced to join tourists in enacting the narratives of what might be called (with some exaggeration) their "reconquest" by a new, equally hegemonic "pluralist" Euroculture poses a complicated problem, one that deserves more attention than I can give it here. Simplifying madly, I am arguing that one problem—identified so long ago by Frantz Fanon (1986)—stems from practices grounded in cultural essentialism. Many involved in purveying such messages argue that

overcoming Eurocentric practices of all kinds, moving the Euro-center if you will, requires little more than a simple inversion of hitherto negative ethnic stereotypes. “Bad,” in other words, simply becomes “good.” In the case of ethnic museums, objects once called “artifacts,” representations of “the primitive” or “the savage” other, are now designated ART, described by European aesthetic criteria, and, by the by, assigned a more profitable niche in the museum marketplace. The Martiniquan surrealist René Ménéil, writing in the 1930s, issued a warning:

If we think we can recapture the image of us that has resulted from colonial culture and use it for our own benefit simply by reversing its colours and qualities, we are making an error. The fact is that if we are not what the white man, in his colonial delirium, would like to think us, we are no more the contrary of his idea of us. We are not the “opposite” of our colonial image, we are *other* than this image. (1996:181)

But it is something other than Ménéil’s clear recognition of genuine otherness that links these two museums. Instead, both triumph a new “universalist” aesthetic, couched in the seductive words of “multiculturalism.” In other words, both museums attempt to show that there is room for all at the art table, and both therefore exhibit their works insistently as “great art,” defined in European aesthetic terms—terms that, of course bear considerable commodity value. Although a certain overstatement lends a defensive tone to both museums’ efforts to include African or Native American objects in the Western canon, neither interrogates the canon itself. No one in these museums questions the truth of Western absolutes upon which all such aesthetic judgments depend.²

And yet many scholars have delineated the extent to which all such “universal” aesthetic judgments rest squarely within a history of profoundly racialized practices. David Dabydeen, poet, story writer, and lecturer in Caribbean Studies at the University of Warwick, has made a television documentary which, following Eric Williams’s earlier *Capitalism and Slavery* ([1944] 1994), uncovers some of these practices. *Art of Darkness* (1987) explores the extent to which all the “high art” and “high architecture” (England’s “stately homes” so beloved of American tourists) that characterized 17th- and 18th-century British high culture were materially *and* aesthetically embedded in the slave trade and in the practices of racialized “forgetting” that long predate “modernity,” the condition with which such racism is more usually associated in ethnic art criticism.

(A word about such forgetting: The publicity brochure for the Museum for African Art features a figure from Zaire [plate 1], loaned by Mr. and Mrs. J.P. DePannemaeker-Simplelaere. The photographed figure hides a terrible history. Belgian conquest and imperial rule, the cruelest in Africa, made these collections of Zairean art possible, as the Belgian name of the owners of this figure would tell museum visitors if only they could read beyond the brochure’s silences.)

II

The Center for African Art was founded in the early 1980s by a group of wealthy collectors who served as the first board of directors. The Center was quasi-private, supported by a combination of public and corporate funding, but, unlike the National Museum of the American Indian, it was privately governed. Like the NMAI, however, this Center (later Museum) also originated in a muddle of identities and purposes that continue to trouble it today.

1. Double Bowl Figure was loaned to the Museum for African Art by Mr. and Mrs. J.P. DePannemaeker-Simplelaere and featured in a publicity brochure for the museum. The photographed figure hides a terrible history. Belgian imperialism made these collections of Zairean art possible—as the Belgian name of the owners of the figure could tell museum visitors, if only they could read beyond the brochure’s silences. (Photo courtesy of the Museum for African Art)



First, its original location. In two side-by-side mansions on the Upper East Side of Manhattan (some of the most expensive real estate in the world), the Center readily represented those on its board of directors, collectors for whom African (and Native American) art offered both an outlet for their commodity fetishism and a route out of modernity—personal escape from the urban, cold, competitive capitalist world which provided them their art-buying fortunes. These collectors, together with a staff of ethno-art curators, intended that the museum would “increase the understanding and appreciation of African art.” To that end, the Center held several exhibits, each of which, “explored facets of the art itself.” An early statement by Susan Vogel, one of the founding directors, underscores the extent to which this Center intended to re-make African art, hitherto the domain of ethnographers, anthropologists, or collector/visitors to what Vogel called “the nightmare-dream of dark otherness,” into “real art.” “The time has come,” Vogel insisted, “to accept what Africa really is [...] to look at African art the way we look at all art” (in Baldwin et al. 1987:10). Despite this universalizing determination, however, some of the early exhibitions mixed this “new” art appreciation with familiar “old” anthropology (*Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos* 1985) and others made no pretense of engaging the former at all, eagerly embracing the world of “folk” ethnography (*The Essential Gourd: From the Obvious to the Ingenious* 1986).

By 1987, however, museum directors found this mixture unsatisfying. Led by Vogel, prompted by new work in critical museology, the Center announced that it would add to its initial “art appreciation” methods those of a “forum,” a place in which challenges to traditional ethnographic museum practices, including the Center’s own, might unfold. That year’s second exhibition, *Perspectives:*

Angles on African Art, launched the Center into a new arena, “invit[ing] the public to look at African art anew” (Baldwin et al. 1987:frontispiece).

Here is where ethnic art entered the arena of performance. As visitors moved around various exhibits, invited to look from many angles, their experience of objects—once limited to that of the viewer peering through a glass at carefully posed, captioned artifacts—shifted. “Action” became “interaction” as seeing demanded that viewers fracture their usual museum viewing practices by looking from above, from below, behind, around, *and* by seeing objects as art, as artifact, as object, as cooking pot. Schechner’s analysis of such new practices is cogent:

I have a feeling that this shift is part of the “market economy” ideology: it is necessary to create in the museum-goer a desire to touch, be in, be included, to perform along with—all as part of arousing the “need to own” that drives a market economy. (1999)

So what were, in the last century, public expressions of a collective bourgeois consciousness—celebrations by Europe’s new, mass ruling class of their accession to power that remodeled the old private, aristocratic *cabinets de curiosité* into publicly owned collections of imperial exotica—now assumed a fresh form. This allowed the sensation (if not the experience) of a re-privatized, re-individualized ownership of still-imperial commodities. Thus in these two museums, a new need, born from the excessive private wealth of late-20th-century United States capitalism, is emerging: to own for oneself what were (and here still are) the stuff of public museums.

These overt and covert critical projects continued, gaining momentum through five years of experimental exhibitions³ and culminating, in 1992, when the Center changed its name to the Museum for African Art and sponsored a symposium, “Africa by Design: Designing a Museum for the 21st Century.” This event was followed by the move from uptown to downtown into a new location. A highly self-critical exhibition soon followed: *Exhibition-ism: Museums and African Art* opened in 1994. A “heteroglossic” text accompanied the show, featuring not only the exhibition’s internal narratives but also comments made by symposium participants and several other notable ethnographers and cultural studies scholars later interviewed by Susan Vogel (Nooter Roberts and Vogel 1994).

All these texts (the catalogs from *Perspectives* and subsequent exhibitions, as well as the book *Exhibition-ism*) raise several intriguing and troubling questions. The most important of these stem from the ways various commentators consistently elided “African art” (and, by implication, the material cultures that produced that art) and the cultural identities of people of the African diaspora. The collected remarks from both *Perspectives* and *Exhibition-ism*—uttered almost exclusively in the passive voice, e.g., “It was discussed mainly...” “It was certainly not seen...”⁴—suggest the extent to which the Museum for African Art continued to see itself as representing and exhibiting what might be described as a white version of the much-debated decades-old African assertion of *négritude*, here called merely “blackness,” a quality neither geographically nor historically African. Here, for example, are words from the Museum’s founding manifesto (again, note the passive voice): “The Center is founded in the belief that traditional African art, an eloquent testimony to the richness of Black culture, is one of mankind’s highest achievements” (Baldwin et al., 1987:11).

Although indicative of the Museum’s laudable intention to shift African art-work out of its longtime Western role as primitive objects of voyeuristic anthropologists, these remarks are nonetheless replete with difficulties. One need only ask Lenin’s questions: “who? whom?” Who is speaking here and to

whom? Who, in other words, needs to be convinced of the “richness of black culture”? On what scale are “mankind’s highest achievements” measured? Who does the measuring? And—perhaps most important of all—what constitutes the “traditional African art” that represents “blackness”?

These kinds of questions had similarly troubled the Center’s 1987 exhibit, *Perspectives: Angles on African Art*, problems reflected in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition. The catalogue tells us that the Center for African Art began its curatorial task by choosing 10 guest “co-curators,” each fitting into one of 10 categories Vogel and her team had identified as those characterizing African art. They were also selected, Vogel tells us in the catalogue, because they were “individuals who are far from the old stereotypes about Africa as obscure and unknowable.” How have they defied this pervasive Western stereotype? All “have made African art part of their *intellectual* and *aesthetic* lives” (in Baldwin et al. 1987:11; emphasis added). A prime difficulty, though unrecognized by the Museum’s officials, was thus immediately explicit. To know Africa, the exhibit implied, one need only know—aesthetically and intellectually—African art. And therein lay one of many problems.

The 10 co-curators included white Americans—Nancy Graves, Ivan Karp, David Rockefeller, William Rubin, Robert Farris Thompson—and black Americans—James Baldwin and Romare Bearden. Two Western-trained African museum professionals, Ekpo Eyo and Iba N’Diaye, together with one African artist, Lela Kouakou, filled out this nearly all-male and heavily North American assemblage. The Center’s director, Susan Vogel, treated nine of the ten “curators” identically, offering each a set of 100 photographs of objects from which they were asked to choose a few for exhibition. Strikingly, however, the 10th curator, Lela Kouakou, a sculptor from the Côte d’Ivoire, was treated differently. Vogel’s own words explain: this Baulé artist, though not the only African, or the only artist, was the only one, in Vogel’s judgment, “familiar only with the art of his own people.” In her eyes this meant that he could not select any but Baulé objects. Why? Here is Vogel’s explanation:

Field aesthetic studies, my own and others, have shown that African informants will criticize sculptures from other ethnic groups in terms of their own traditional criteria, often assuming that such works are simply inept carvings of their own aesthetic tradition. (in Baldwin et al. 1987:17)

I am not the only one to be startled by such arrogance. This selection process—and the resulting exhibition, which he visited—drew an immediate, hostile reaction from Anthony Appiah, published in *In My Father’s House* (1992). It is not necessary to recount the whole of Appiah’s very sophisticated argument, but suffice it to note here that what most offended him was Vogel’s “Eurocentrism.” He does a lovely job of satirizing the words recorded above—by quoting David Rockefeller and others who, needless to say, always and everywhere “criticize sculptures from other ethnic groups” without the least concern that their criteria are drawn from “their own traditions.” As “we” all know, *these* criteria are “universal”!

This abbreviated version of Appiah’s much more complicated reactions exposes some of the power relations present within this center from the start. Another example comes from the symposium, “Africa By Design,” some of its deliberations recorded in an accompanying text, *Exhibition-ism*. Although I saw the subsequent exhibition, and was troubled by the problems of perspective I saw reflected there, I visited only as a tourist, not then involved in writing about ethnic art museums. I shall therefore restrict my remarks here to the published text.

Marking the planned move from the Upper East Side to the Museum’s present SoHo location, the symposium drew several participants, including

some who had been co-curators in 1987—Ekpo Eyo, Robert Farris Thompson—as well as three new African voices: Ayuko Babu, dele jegede, and Jean-Aimé Rakotoarisoa. Other United States museum professionals (this time including more than one woman)—Carol Duncan, Labelle Prussin, Enid Schildkrout, and Fred Wilson—joined in the project to delineate a collective version of the “ideal” “Black” museum. Shortly after, Vogel and Mary Nooter Roberts produced a text describing these discussions, adding a handful of new voices to the symposium’s “dialogue.” Taken from interviews conducted by Vogel, fragments of the ideas of Michael Brenson, James Clifford, John Conklin, Arthur Danto, Maureen Healy, Ivan Karp, and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett formed a counter-dialogue, printed in bold type alongside the main text. All were the voices of well-known museum critics or professionals with the exception of that of Maya Lin, the architect chosen to design the new location’s interior spaces.⁵

Despite the intention to provide readers with a provocatively multivocal conversation, between white and black, African (and Asian?) and American, the project evidently proved untenable. Throughout the text, African scholars and critics contested the textual siting of the Museum’s “Euro-center,” while its representatives reiterated its “universality.” Here, for example, is an African commentary. Jean-Aimé Rakotoarisoa:

The problem is, who decides that such and such an object is a good object and is representative of African art? [...] There is very little effort given to ask *Africans* what they might think of such displays. [...] We have to rethink our vocabulary—for example, the opposition between what is religious and what is secular. [...] As a matter of fact, this ratio could be inverted. For example, for me a Christian would be a secular person as far as my religion is concerned. (Nooter Roberts and Vogel 1994:38)

Carol Duncan, an American art historian specializing in the period of the French Revolution, replied, patronizingly, “You’re talking about a museum in New York City and not a museum in Africa. [...] In our culture,” she explained as though to a child, “when you build a big building and call it a museum and you put things in it, that means you [?] respect those things a lot” (Nooter Roberts and Vogel 1994:53).

Here’s another, similarly pointless, exchange in which James Clifford, trapped in his own cultural predicament, declared himself part of another Euro-space, that of universal aesthetic experience: “Everyone,” he announced, “has a dream of being alone with a great show [...]. Take all the other people out and encounter a kind of sublime response.” Ayuko Babu tried again, tactfully, to shift *his* center:

Well, there’s always a struggle, you know, between cultural consumption and cultural experience. You want to make sure that you give experience as opposed to cultural consumption, because the people with guidebooks are into cultural consumption. You want to be able to stop them so they have the cultural experience. (Nooter Roberts and Vogel 1994:48)

But his words, too, fell on deaf ears. Throughout the symposium, white participants and black participants, Americans and Africans, continued to dance around every single issue, one side trying to suggest that there *are* other ways of seeing, the other trying to explain that “we” all really see the same.

In the same period, a much less slickly produced work offered an alternative to claims about African art’s “universality.” *Museums and the Community in West Africa* (1995), a collection of reports from the West African Museums

Programme, includes a compelling essay by Alpha Oumar Konare which pleads for the maintenance of ties between objects and their worlds, as well as between museums and their communities. “To conserve an object,” writes Konare, “means to preserve it, but it also means keeping the language that surrounds it. An object is conserved when its continued use is assured” (1995:8).

There are other, similarly problematic exchanges and statements throughout the catalogue. Ivan Karp (anthropologist and long-time curator of African art at the Smithsonian Institution) joined his voice to Carol Duncan’s to describe what he believed to be a common experience of contemporary “shock” museum exhibits. Both had previously visited an exhibition held at the American History Museum, a narrative “about black migration from the South to the North.” Karp recalled:

At one point, in order to go from one room to another, you have to go through a door marked “Colored” or a door marked “White.” You have to. And people back up, they pause, they hesitate. They don’t know whether to make a gesture or obey the rule—they have to confront “Why am I doing this?” (in Nooter Roberts and Vogel 1994:52)

Duncan agreed, adding, “I have never been more moved in any exhibition anywhere than by that exhibition.” Her subsequent remarks suggest, however, that it was less the choice of doors that affected her than it was another scene in the exhibit:

There was a cutaway of an actual train from the ’teens or ’20s, and in that train was a mannequin of a single young woman asleep. [...] It got very, very quiet. There was just one figure and I suddenly got scared—I felt frightened. I realized that, God, I just did this. [...] The exhibit] made me live an experience of traveling, of being alone, of there not being any noise. [...] I have never had such a real experience before in a museum. (in Nooter Roberts and Vogel 1994:53)

Such fatuity, lying there naked for all who can see, is surely far more painful than either of these moments experienced by two highly privileged people in a national museum in their nation’s capital! Does Karp *really* believe that “we” all hesitate before such doors? What statement would any person of color be making by not walking through the door marked for their forbears? Could Karp imagine, too, that *some* people of color would much rather walk through a door marked “colored” than one marked “white” (not to mention “anthropologist”)? And does Duncan really consider her 1990s journey from New Jersey to a Washington, DC, museum to be even remotely similar to that employment-seeking trip undertaken by the isolated young black female figure depicted in this diorama of segregation’s truths? Did no one interviewing these museum scholars notice these articulations of North America’s vast racial divide? Evidently not. Both lengthy quotations are printed without comment on facing pages of *Exhibition-ism*.

The main text is similarly fraught. Mary Nooter Roberts’s long essay includes a discussion of a 1993 Museum exhibit curated by Robert Farris Thompson. *Face of the Gods: Art and Altars of Africa and the African Americas* offered “twenty or so [!] altars, from diverse centers of Afro-Atlantic worship.” Some, she explains, were “real”—“originally made for use and transported from their sites”—while others were commissioned by the Museum “from artist practitioners of the religions in question,” and still others were “re-creations of both historical and contemporary but untransportable altars,

designed and fabricated, from photographs, by the museum's exhibition team" (Nooter Roberts and Vogel 1994:52).

The curators anticipated two problems, that of displaying publicly objects of religious practice and that of juxtaposing widely differing religions. Pre-exhibition debates apparently raged among Museum staff, debates about "authenticity," about "the aesthetic and ethical implications of activation and desacralization, and about the presentation of living religious works for museum presentation." In the end, however, curators satisfied themselves that presenting religious artifacts from religions such as Santería and Candomblé was acceptable since both were highly syncretic religions anyway.

Curators soon discovered (to their evident relief) that the exhibition altars were quickly transformed from "dead" museum exhibits into "living" altars by museum visitors who made offerings to all three kinds of altars indiscriminately, thus giving them, in the curators' words, "life" (plate 2). Of course Nooter Roberts could not leave it at that, respecting practices of which she had only a remote understanding. Instead, she had to bring these gestures into her world, making all this *art*. Hers is the familiar language of art gallery sale catalogues: "These offerings were not merely visible signs of engagement," she concluded, smugly, "but also acts of innovation—contributions to the creative process" (Nooter Roberts and Vogel 1994:53). But were the people who added coins and objects to the altars *really* "contributing to the creative process"? Or were their acts those of believers whose god (unlike the god of New York's Upper East Side) manifests everywhere, even inside the Museum for African Art? Even more chillingly Eurocentric were the similar misapprehensions of Robert Farris Thompson, the exhibit's main curator. According to Nooter Roberts, Thompson agreed with her observation that in Africa

2. *Museum visitors transformed the altars exhibited in Face of the Gods (1993). According to Susan Vogel and Mary Nooter Roberts these altars "were treated by their public as if they were sanctified—indeed they had been. The interactions of visitors with the works on display added a new spiritual dimension to the museum experience of African art" (Nooter Roberts and Vogel 1994:50). (Photo from Nooter Roberts and Vogel 1994:50; courtesy of the Museum for African Art)*



such “‘exhibitions’ [*sic*] [...] are staged in the spaces of everyday existence, of which they are often a part. [...] This practice,” Thompson assured Roberts, “extends to the African-Americas where altars can be found in laundry bins, closets, beaches, yards, and vehicles—a range of sites different from but no less startling than that on the African continent” (in Nooter Roberts and Vogel 1994:58, 77 n2).

“To whom, to whom?” cries Minerva’s owl, hovering over Broadway.

Still, despite the Euro-blinders worn by its officials, the Museum for African Art *has* succeeded in some of its projects. Vogel and her co-curators have disturbed the comfortable world of African art collecting and display, challenging the “exhibitionary complex” of most African art museums. One traveling exhibit, *ART/artifact*—designed by Vogel to demonstrate “how the installation makes the African artwork,” and how “where you stand influences what you see” (Vogel 1988a:111)—aroused considerable hostility from Dallas museumgoers and newspaper critics because its “contrived purposes” “hid” beauty from would-be beholders. Vogel is right to be proud of having elicited such a strong response with an exhibit aimed to do just that although this readily caricatured “Dallas aesthetic” was perhaps an easy target. But interestingly, Vogel has published nothing critical about the next exhibition’s strikingly revealing catalogue. *The Art of Collecting African Art* (Vogel 1988b), unveils the stories of the weird and, to my mind, perverse relationships between wealthy collectors and “their” African artifacts, individual pieces which they possess (and display in their home galleries, neo-aristocratic cabinets de curiosités), detached completely from African people, African time, and African place. In the process of preparing this exhibition, Vogel encouraged the lenders to accompany their chosen objects with narratives of possession, which she then edited and published at the time of the exhibit. These testimonies document an extraordinary degree of commodity worship. George and Gail Feher confessed their “obsession.” Over the years of their collecting, they tell us, “the objects themselves [became] the ultimate satisfaction! The discovery of new objects in unexpected places is continually a high!” Daniel and Marian Malcolm admitted that “It was insidious—somewhere around 1963 we realized that seeing and getting pieces was very meaningful for us—we began to look forward to the next piece” (in Vogel 1988b:16, 22).⁶

(I am reminded of one Native American’s response to this shopping-mall ethos: “Americans,” said Robert Thomas, “confuse consumption with experience” [Thomas 1994].)

This compulsive desire to own *things* underlays all the collectors’ remarks. More tellingly, each of their statements underscored the extent of their appropriation of African material culture, an appropriation which the Center, at least according to much of its publicity, intended to challenge. These collectors’ African possessions, as many photographs accompanying various catalogues show, inhabit their Upper East Side–New York world, completely isolated from origins. Nowhere in these testimonies did any of the collectors so much as imply that a knowledge of Africa, of the realities of the people who made *their* objects, mattered. Ernst Anspach, for example, blithely admitted that he had “never been to Africa.” He explained that he didn’t think “going is very important to collecting.” “For Mr. Anspach,” Vogel explained, “the African context is not important at all for an understanding of the objects *except where it helps inform him about the probable authenticity* [read ‘market value’] of an object” (Vogel 1988b:40).

Is it hopeless? Is the Euro-center unmovable? Well, the Museum's oft-repeated claim to a diasporic identity is not entirely unjustified. Despite the foci of its many exhibitions, despite the behind-the-scenes control of the space and its contents, despite its many Euro-centered texts, the Museum for African Art, like the altars displayed in *Faces of the Gods*, has, to some extent at least, been re-appropriated by the African diasporic communities of New York City. These communities use the Museum to see, discuss, and experience some of the material cultures of Africa. Many black New Yorkers, as well as tourists visiting from elsewhere, come to use the space, often in ways Vogel and the other founding directors probably did not anticipate.

Some of these (mildly) counterhegemonic practices come about because of the nature of the SoHo space to which the Museum moved in the early 1990s. Although not designed by someone from the "rich black culture" of the Center's universalist dreams, the long, wide vestibule space holds—scattered about on benches and on floor mats—dozens of African objects for touching and close observation (and purchase: everything here is for sale at modest prices). (I should note that things have changed. By 1998, the open displays of goods for sale had been joined by locked cases, where more valuable goods are now kept.) There is also a space where books—for children and adults—are for sale, or for reading on the comfortable chairs provided. I have been there when African American parents were reading African storybooks to their children, when children by themselves were choosing and buying books. The last time I visited, a small boy, Haitian, I judged from his very shy French, had spread out his drawings of Haitian scenes, of birds and trees and people, portrayed, I thought anyway, with considerable subtlety and sophistication. I was moved by his presence there—and more by the fact that the four people "in charge," two African American women, one African American man, and an African man, did not do what the guards (almost all African American) at the National Museum of the American Indian would without question have done and have done very very quickly: that is, throw him out.⁷ Instead they let him use the small space among the children's books to roll out his drawings and attract buyers.

To some extent, then, *people* have recreated this space into a kind of "counter space" that defies the control of the wealthy collectors and scholars who sit on its board and create its exhibitions. But a problem remains here, shared, though in a slightly different way, by the National Museum of the American Indian. Those of the African diasporic community who come to the Museum of African Art seeking "roots," seeking identity, those who bring their children to see black culture, to buy black books and artifacts participate, whatever their intentions, in the "timeless, a-political Africa" decried by Jean-Aimé Rakotoarisoa (Nooter Roberts and Vogel 1994:53). To oversimplify, an Afrocentric appropriation of Eurocentric displays of African art ignores, I think, what Manthia Diawara calls "the texts [...] the lived experiences of black people." Without such texts, all objects, every representation, stand isolated from history, symbols only of a romanticized, uncomplicated, and, most importantly to Diawara, hopelessly *a-historical* Africa. Such appropriations Diawara sees as just another twist on ethnocentrism, and this he calls "Americocentricity" (Diawara 1992:289).

This Africa, then, is not very different from the Africa "collected" by rich white collectors, ethnographers, modernist artists. It serves not to transform, not to transgress, the marginalized identity of "otherness." Rather, as Diawara and others argue, it merely perpetuates the cafeteria approach that characterizes contemporary United States "multiculturalism." Here, the gazes of diasporic black people, as well as those of white museumgoers, fix an Africa as invented as that created long ago by European imperialists. So Gina Dent asks,

“Do we, peoples of the African diaspora, any longer have the right to invent an Africa?” (1992:7). Coco Fusco adds: “For black peoples [and, as I’ll observe shortly, for Native American peoples], at this historical moment, the postmodern fetishizing of the exchange of cultural property seems less like emancipation and more like intensified alienation” (in Dent 1992:7). Or, as Schechner might put it, more like a leap into a *global* turn-of-the-20th-century market economy (Schechner 1999).

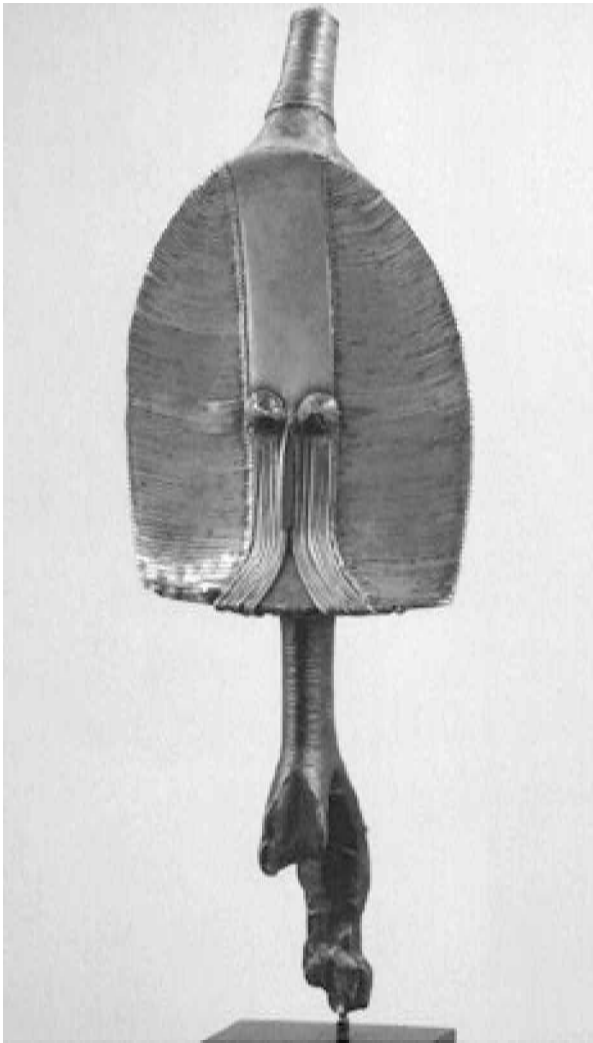
III

One exhibit:

All these aspects of the Museum for African Art’s exhibitionary complexes cry out for a more thoroughgoing deconstruction. But there is space for but one more analysis, this focused on the Museum’s spring 1998 exhibit, *African Faces, African Figures: The Arman Collection*,⁸ an exhibition that postdates Susan Vogel’s 1994 departure from the Museum. Here is the *New York Times*’s review:

The excellent collection [...] that the French artist Arman has amassed and carefully culled during the last 40 years is one of the season’s best exhibitions. High points among the 180 works from Central and West Africa include dense accumulations of nearly identical objects, creating a revealing dialogue between tradition and individual interpretation.” (*New York Times* 1998:E10)

3. This reliquary guardian from Mahongwe, Bagon was featured in a 1990 exhibition at the Center for African Art. (Photo from Thompson and Vogel 1990:100; courtesy of the Museum for African Art)



This “clustering” of many objects of the same kind is meant to allow viewers to perceive the “universal” aesthetic pleasures embodied in them. But such an exhibition plan not only replicates that mark of contemporary capitalist culture, the plethora of similar commodities available to avid shoppers, but it also reproduces all the dozens of “timeless Africa” exhibits I have already mentioned. How could it be otherwise when objects from all over sub-Saharan Africa, “typed” by anthropological categories, are “massed” into a single case, a single room? Still, I was curious so I paid my money and went in...

In the entryway hung a vast, 12-foot glass case full of brass faces. They were identical: round, wearing crowns and earrings, standing on triangular “bodies.” Some were very large: three or four feet, some smaller. Each pair of eyes—“clustered” for aesthetic effect—stared from the case at the viewer, supposedly crying “we are beautiful,” “we represent Africa,” or some similar claim from the exhibit’s brochure. But not every museum visitor heard these words. Some knew, some others, surely, read the signs mounted next to this first case: these were *reliquary objects*, faces made to live in homes, commemorating and honoring ancestors. They once belonged to (were made by) “ancestral societies.”

Vogel Responds to Hilden

To the Editor:

Patricia Penn Hilden advocates “decolonizing minds occupied by the colonizers’ various cultural presumptions *and* persuading those who occupy the Euro-center to allow for the existence of other, equally legitimate centers rather than simply extending their center outward until the whole world is sucked into a universalist void.” Great idea! She should run with it.

I would advise her to establish a museum dedicated to this ideal, find a supportive Board, sufficient funding, and a building, then hire a staff, and produce about three exhibitions and publications each year—curating them herself if possible. Ideally, she should create exhibitions that will continue to irritate the body politic and provoke controversy 13 years after they are produced. Go Hilden!

—Susan M. Vogel
*Founding Director of
 The Museum for African Art*

So how did Arman “collect” them? No word here, or in the following “clusters,” though more wall placards explained, in familiar ethno-speak, the origins, the meanings, and the “universal” qualities of the objects. From all over “sub-Saharan Africa,” the placards tell us, four kinds of objects had been seized, sold, and then massed, initially in Arman’s home, now, temporarily, in the Museum for African Art (where they are “massed” to reflect not their African contexts but rather the site of their current possession). First are more funerary objects, all once belonging either to ancestor societies or to family memorials or graves (plate 3); second, sacred masks made and used by secret women’s and men’s societies; third, divination figures; fourth, power figures. These latter included fecundity sculptures plus stools and other objects, each of which, we were duly informed, (formerly?) legitimated the authority of chiefs, elders, and so on.

Many questions are begged here: how and why were so many sacred objects sold to Arman or his predecessors? By what right, beyond the naked right of victorious conquest, were they removed from their time and place? Where were the members of those bereaved families, those no-longer-secret societies, those ruling elites whose ceremonial objects no longer lived in Africa? What effects had such a significant loss of material culture had on those people all over Africa commemorated in this funeral procession, this parade of “victor’s spoils”? (I overheard only one visitor’s comment during this visit: an African woman, peering into a case full of ceremonial masks from a formerly secret women’s society, exclaimed to her companion, “How did they *get* these?”) But what an irony, too. This Arman show unselfconsciously opened and closed with its own damning visual commentary: the final case, too, held “reliquary objects,” clearly marking, at least for some of us, the funereal character of Arman’s “obsession.”

IV

The rather subtle narrative of death told through the Arman exhibit brings me, finally, to the National Museum of the American Indian, first named, significantly, the National *Memorial* Museum of the American Indian. Here death

wears no disguises. At the George Gustav Heye Center in lower Manhattan, the museum seizes *its* role in the funeral procession, indeed, much more straightforwardly. In no way a site of resistance, a counter-space, or even a place where Native people come seeking roots, this “national” museum is little more than a vast mausoleum. Its spatial and ideological narratives are the story of the murder, burial, and resurrection of survivors—now “our” Indians, America’s quaint and exotic past. As in the Museum for African Art’s many exhibitions, hundreds of artifacts assume many roles in a vast performance, though here the stage set is less like a mall and more like Disneyland. Rather than evoking the desire to possess commodities, this museum’s exhibits let visitors experience ethnicity. In a mockery of decades of Hollywood’s white Cochises and Geronimos, “braves” and “squaws,” non-Native visitors come to the NMAI to spend a few hours playing “Indian.”

I’d like to demonstrate this part of my argument by taking a brief tour of the inaugural exhibitions, linked together in a metaphor of movement. *Creation’s Journey: Masterworks of Native American Identity and Belief* is first, followed by *All Roads Are Good*, and *This Path We Travel: Celebrations of Contemporary Native American Creativity*. (Each exhibit is further divided; visitors move from one exhibition to another, one set of spaces to another, without always realizing it.) I begin outside the building. In stark contrast to the SoHo space that holds the Museum for African Art, the Heye Center’s building *began* as a monument, one celebrating the high capitalism of the gilded age. Opened in 1904, the Alexander Hamilton Customs House sits, appropriately enough, just behind the three-quarters life-sized Wall Street bull. The neo-classical building’s friezes, its vast sculptures of the four continents, its heavily ornamented and painted central dome, all celebrate the “discovery,” the conquest, and the resulting profits. Male Indians, all alike in their half-nakedness, their feathers and paint, decorate both the outside and the interior spaces of this turn-of-the-20th-century building.

The Heye Center itself is a result of the 1989 merging of two Indian collections: that of the quasi-private Museum of the American Indian—which housed George Heye’s vast personal collection of art, artifacts, and human “remains”—and that of “America’s Museum,” the Smithsonian, which had long owned a considerable Indian collection also including some 20,000 Indian skeletons. Both bones and millions of symbols of cultural destruction thus lie at the heart of this “new,” this “Indian,” this “American” museum. Here in the Heye Center the objects (no one mentions the bones) inhabit a spatio-temporal tale of conquest and recuperation, a spectacle of death and reincarnation. In this museum, Native people emerge from their historical graves as Indians, denizens of America’s historic theme park, essential cogs in the vast machine of forgetting that here, like Kafka’s penal colony punishment mechanism, inscribes the master narrative of “our” United States on the bodies of tribal people.⁹

Briefly, then, here are the stages in this museum’s narrative.

First, monuments to mark the dead. (A bitter irony: Many of the artifacts here are, in fact, *from* graves, stolen by grave robbers who continue to pillage Native burial sites wherever objects of market value—including bones, which are still collected on a black market—are thought to lie.) The opening exhibit, *Creation’s Journey: Masterworks of Native American Identity and Belief*, lays out a vast cemetery of exquisite objects, what the Museum calls its “Masterworks”: a Crow war shield; a stunning Pomo basket; an exquisitely beaded bandolier bag; an intriguing Zuni bird figure, two beaded buckskin moccasins. (The accompanying catalogue, in the glossy style of the most expensive coffee-table art books, illustrates many of these “masterworks” in exquisite, large-scale photographs; plate 4.) Who selected *these* objects? Although the curatorial machinations of this museum are considerably less transparent than those be-

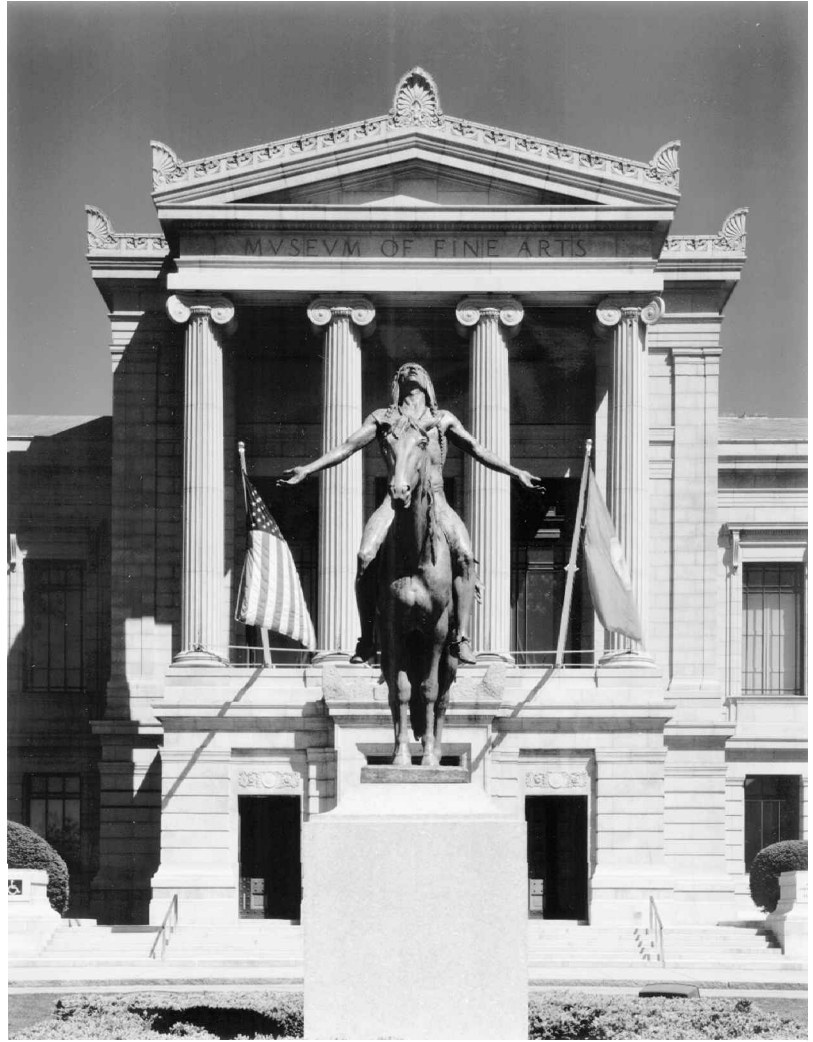


4. This photograph, captioned “Beaded moccasins, ca. 1860. Upper Missouri River,” appears in the Creation’s Journey catalogue. (Photo from Hill and Hill 1994:7; courtesy of the National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution)

hind the much smaller MAA’s exhibits, visitors to “Masterworks” are told that many Native people were involved in choosing and annotating exhibits. As is the case throughout the Museum, each such person is authenticated by tribal identity, marked in the parentheses familiar to every Native American. Despite such obvious efforts to lend the exhibition (and the Museum) a clear “Native” identity (the stated *raison d’être* of this “new museum”), most of those involved here bear no such authenticating markers and are, in fact, non-Native.

Each selected object, each “masterwork,” sits isolated inside a heavy glass case, background draped with expensive fabric, lighting focused “boutique” fashion. Every design element cries commodity value—and tells of the utter isolation of each object from its own time and place. These rooms constitute a vast monument to the murder of Native peoples, to their bodies, their cultures, and their worldviews. “We” killed them, reads the subtext, and now look at us recuperating them as Art. In other words, “we” have rescued, collected, and preserved all that was valuable of “theirs.” (When I walk through these rooms I cannot help thinking of the invasion as a great neutron bomb, that dream weapon of the Cold War, technological teleology of the Cartesian revolution, a device that kills all living things but leaves everything else untouched and ready for collection.)

After traversing many such “masterworks,” we encounter the ideological justification for the conquest, an exhibit titled “Growing Up Indian.” This



5. The Appeal to the Great Spirit (1909), by Cyrus Dallin stands in front of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. (Photo courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston © 2000 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. All Rights Reserved)

display is set in a long, narrow, dark hallway. Here stand six human-sized glass cases, each containing, at eye level, “Indian” toys. Behind loom huge twice-human size photographs of tribal children: an Apache adolescent, a pair of Comanche girls, an Osage child, and so on. In contrast to the carefully posed “beautiful” Edward Curtis photographs familiar to most Americans these are “before” pictures. Individuals here are unkempt, still “wild.” These are savages. But the fact that such children played with these crude little dolls and teepees and toy ponies just as white children play with *their* toys shows that inside all the savagery they possessed “universals,” the capacity to become “us” once “we” gave them our civilization.

Beyond this “before” exhibit lies another problematic stage. Here is Indian resistance, represented by its most famous manifestation, the Ghost Dance. Of course here this movement, which swept the Plains and much of the West and Southwest (though in different forms) in the final quarter of the 19th century, takes the form created by anthropologists.¹⁰

It is not a vast, organized movement of pan-tribal political resistance but rather a quaint and atavistic manifestation of despair, the feelings “we” think In-

dians *must* have been feeling as they watched the destruction (by whom?) of their world (feelings constantly represented in the public art of the period in sculptures like the huge bronze, *Appeal to the Great Spirit* [1909] that stands today outside Boston's Museum of Fine Art; plate 5). The Ghost Dance itself, I learned in an obligatory anthropology class in the early 1960s, was a slightly mad dance of "near-ghosts," a collective expression of the utter despair Plains Indians felt once they became aware of their complete defeat at the hands of the whites. This version of Ghost Dancers' stupidity explained why all those poor hapless Indians died in the Army massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890. The ignorant Indians, according to subsequent ethnographers and historians, believed that if they danced, white bullets couldn't kill them. If they danced, and kept dancing, the white invaders would disappear while the buffalo returned. Thus all those nearly 300 unarmed women, children, and old men, whose bodies were first stripped of saleable artifacts and then photographed before being dumped into hiding beneath the earth, had refused to surrender to the cavalry because they foolishly thought they could not be killed. By killing them all, the cavalry demonstrated to other Ghost Dancers that this primitive superstition did not work. What was it about this Ghost Dancing that so threatened the United States government that they sent the cavalry to kill old people and children suspected of participating? A few recognized that the dancing was not merely the pathetic attempt of a broken people to resume their old "savage" ways. Some Army and a few Indian agents understood that its practice constituted a pan-Indian rebellion against the invading whites. As most Natives knew, Ghost Dancers were combining religion, ceremonies, and theatre with politics, just as Native people had done before the invasion (see Schechner 1993:35). By dancing, by worshipping in an intensely *Indian* way—and in public in the face of white agents, white cavalry soldiers, and white invaders ("settlers")—Ghost Dancers were challenging both the invasion and its consequent white hegemony which on the Great Plains in the 1870s and '80s showed itself in constant government-issued, Indian agent-enforced prohibitions. Trapped on reservations, Native people were forbidden their holy people, their ceremonies, their religious objects, and even the rearing of their own children, as this was the era when attendance at federal boarding schools became compulsory, as "memorialized" at NMAI and discussed below. The Ghost Dance rituals, which drew together hundreds and sometimes thousands of related Indian bands and nations for days-long public ceremonies, were as "in your face" as possible, evoking the sort of terror of masses of "wild savages" Laura Ingalls Wilder and dozens of other white female writers were depicting in their hundreds of best-selling, pioneer-celebrating narratives (Hilden 1994:59–63). These ceremonies were not merely confrontational, however. Native people believed then, and believe now, that painstaking attention to one's ceremonial life always accompanies the kind of careful attention to one's political and moral life that constitutes a good journey through this world. By dancing and undertaking the other essential ceremonies, they were *creating* an *Indian* world, an Indian self, a Native people, a Native politics (see Ostler 1995).

The version of the Ghost Dance presented here, in the "Indians' Museum" makes no mention of the political nature of the Ghost Dance, or of the facts of the government's bloody suppression of its practice.¹¹ What *is* here is a carefully gendered grave: gray-colored cement figures of two girls, one an adolescent, one a child stand facing one another, smiling. Behind, looming over their gray cement braids, hangs a ghostly symbol of masculinity: America's favorite Indian, the Plains warrior, represented by a large, elaborate eagle feather war bonnet. It is empty, its noble owner now, no doubt, "vanished."

A burglar-proof plexiglass box shields this diorama of death—from thieves, but also from viewers who might want to look through the beads and quills and feathers of the Ghost Dance dresses for bullet holes (plate 6).



6. This image shows a girl's dress (ca. 1850, Northern Plains) exhibited at the National Museum of the American Indian, though here without its cement occupant. (Photo from Hill and Hill 1994:39; courtesy of the National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution)

(One German visitor, an internet designer from Dusseldorf, was less moved by the Museum than his fellow tourists. "I miss something about the destruction of Indians by the European conquerors," he wrote guardedly on his visitors' questionnaire.)

So much for resistance, then, in "our" museum. Here, visitors pause to mourn just another "famous last stand." The Ghost Dance movement thus becomes yet another marker of the tragic passing of America's "wild" past. Thus these gray cement figures, together with the empty Ghost Dancer's war bonnet, mark another tomb in this cemetery of Native America.¹²

Just around the next corner lies another stage, this a transition from "blanket Indian" to "progressive," assimilated capitalist Indian. There are two representations: first another gray cement figure, an adult female, clad in traditional Osage clothing and blanket and carrying a traditional Osage cradleboard. This figure is dead. Surrounding her are others, however. Some 150 people are presented "live" in a vast wall-mural photograph from the 1920s which encircles the diorama. Here are white people as well as both "blanket" and "progressive" Osages, the latter marked by modernity: bobbed hair and cloche hats for the women, three-piece suits, wing collars and fedoras for the men. The people are engaged in some commercial transaction—probably the buying and selling of the Osage's oil. These Indians, then, belong to the "modern" capitalist world. Still, the forgetting machine operates here, too. There are the assimilated Osages who led the tribal council in the 1920s, who made the oil deals with white corporations, who accumulated vast personal fortunes infamous across the white Oklahoma of the time. But here are also those traditional Osages whose oil and land and, too often, lives, were stolen by some of these same white people in a rampage of murder and fraud that ultimately drove Washington bureaucrats to send in the FBI. However, as both John Joseph Mathews and Linda Hogan have suggested in their novels, this intervention was not ordered in time to bring the murderers and thieves to justice (Mathews 1932; Hogan 1990).

The second exhibition marking this inaugural event is *All Roads Are Good*. Museum visitors learn that the things they are seeing were selected by 23 prominent Native Americans invited to New York by the museum directors. These selectors were taken to the Bronx warehouses storing George Heye's vast collection from which they chose those objects they wanted exhibited in the first displays. These selectors are listed in the inaugural brochures and catalogues. Their names, together with edited clips taken from the videotapes of their Bronx visits, appear throughout the museum, their tribal identities again "legitimizing" both the exhibits and the museum itself. The variety of their origins (Gerald McMaster, Cree, from Canada; Edgar Perry, White Mountain Apache, from Arizona; Miguel Puwainchir, Shuar, from Bolivia) testifies to the Museum's inclusiveness, its commitment to, in the words of the founding director, Richard West Jr., "the many voices that are Native America" (1994). One voice is not heard, however. Victor Masayesva, Hopi filmmaker, was in fact one of the original invitees, the 24th selector. He had accepted the invitation and come to New York. He had gone to the Bronx. While in the warehouses, however, he had failed to select any objects for exhibit. Frustrated, his "minders" (each Native was accompanied by at least one non-Native museum curator as well as a video team) had asked him why he was not choosing. He had replied: "Oh, I'm not here to select things to show in your museum. I'm here to find out what you have so we can get them back" (Huhndorf 1994).

Nowhere does the Museum tell *this* story, the fearful possibility of repatriation—now prescribed by law—that threatens this and every Indian show with the loss of all ceremonial and sacred objects (as well as the seldom-acknowledged

edged bones). Thus the disappearance of repatriation-minded Victor Masayeva's voice from most museum texts is not surprising.¹³

So behind this National Museum of the American Indian monument to the triumph of capitalism over tribalism lies yet another hidden tale, another story of death, another notice that when Indians die (even metaphorically, as we shall see) it will be whites who take over.

Another stage continues this saga of death, though here it is the death not of peoples or cultures but rather of "Mother Earth," here altered to suit more Western ideas into "Father Earth." A great Plains burial scaffolding divides one exhibition space from the next. Atop lies what at first looks like an Indian man's body. Non-Indian museum visitors may "read," may grasp the intentions of, this display more quickly since they are not shocked by what the scaffolding or the invitation to walk under it represent to Indians. They may see that the body is meant to represent capitalism. They may quickly see that this body does not wear traditional Plains clothing but rather is covered in bits of the U.S. flag, in dollar bills, in gas masks, and so on. They may recognize the message: What capitalist white America now needs from its dead, its vanished indigenous people is drawn from the Indians of positive stereotype. It is their lack of materialism, their spirituality, their ability to live *with* the earth that have once again made Indians popular in America's *fin-de-siècle* distress. (Of course here, too, Native America offers much willing acquiescence, many tribal people claiming a special relationship with "Mother Earth," and embracing those New Age tourists who venture into Indian Country seeking solace and solutions.)

Just in case anyone passing beneath this burial scaffolding (or beside it, since the Museum offers an alternative route for squeamish Native people or their friends) wonders, the next displays carry the viewer straight through a death and spiritual rebirth of white capitalist America (which reshapes itself around Indian spiritual traditions) while at the same time narrating the successful rebirth of the Indian as a white man. The final exhibition, *This Path We Travel*, in other words, offers a universalist rebirth created by Indians for their non-Native friends. Here, the market value of Indian spirituality is on show, exhibiting the value of Indians as New Age tourist destination. These spaces comprise the metaphysical side of the artifact coin—the side inviting non-Indians to take whatever they like of the Native spirituality they so admired during the course of the conquest.

(Tourists are glad to possess this, too. Here are samples of visitors' comments left recently at the Heye Center. A professor from Amsterdam: "we could feel/hear the heartbeat." A New York actress: "entrancing, a little sad." A businessperson from Silicon Valley was "left with a sense of peacefulness," while a New York social worker gushed, "wonderful, peaceful, serene, enlightening, spiritual." Having read all the museum's propaganda about how this was an "Indian" museum, she added, "Thank you for sharing!")

Native artists, three women and three men, all chosen, assembled, and paid by the Museum's directors, here offer the results of their year-long collaboration. The women give us birth, represented as though they had all spent too much time at Judy Chicago's infamous *Dinner Party*. Wombs are everywhere in the "women's space": in the circles of text surrounding each portrait of an "important Indian woman"; in the little cave structures through which visitors pass as they follow a long sinuous snake figure winding along the floor; in the spider webs of light that form sacred circles on the floor and through which each visitor must pass; in the endless procession of big round clay pots, tilted on their sides, spilling fake food and water onto this women's floor, in the "eco-feminist" goddess shrine. A caption reads: "*Deep within our souls/ the*

*Goddess awakens/ Changing, Shifting/ a new time nigh/ Now the Sister rebirths/
and our hearts/ know the story unfolding...*"

Once reborn, bodily and spiritually (flute music, brought to life by a step on the floor snake's large, glittering glass eye, sounds this latter moment), we then enter the male world. It is a forest of vast, more-than-life-sized phalluses, some marked at eye level by the clichéd detritus that signaled "Indianness" in the late 20th century. Tied on with rawhide are dream catchers, feathers and beads, bits of bone, and so on. This space is Donna Haraway's nightmare patriarchy. In the context of the contemporary U.S., the exhibit celebrates the rebirth of the Indian as a multicultural Euro-patriarch, a gigantic phallic presence clothed in the kitsch of the New Age. What *is* left of "Indian," then, here in this resurrection scene, is a male cartoon Indian, tellingly provided by Native artists trapped in their own colonized minds.

Stage six brings us at last to the final victory wherein "the Indian" is the multicultural modern subject. The exhibit walks visitors through two sites of celebration: first, a turn-of-the-20th-century schoolroom. Individual slanted-top wooden desks, lined up in neat rows open to reveal schoolbooks and paper, pencils and pens. Inkwells sit empty on desktops carved with initials, hearts and arrows, and other such *universal* childish symbols. In front is a familiar set: teacher's desk, chalkboard, U.S. flag.

Still, this *is* an Indian museum. Some tourists may even know that few Indians (of the 250,000 remaining in 1900) attended local public schools. There were strict segregation laws in some places, bigoted school boards in others. So the exhibit bows in two directions: tourism and truth. The room, wall placards explain, is a reproduction not of an ordinary public school but rather of a "typical" Indian boarding school classroom. Oh. But the sunny McGuffey Reader design of this space is a disguise, hiding what only a fraction of the museum's audiences know: the terrible history of the compulsory education of Indian children, wrenched from parents and home and shipped hundreds, sometimes thousands of miles to federal Indian boarding schools where they either died of white diseases or survived by becoming white (though some only temporarily). The motto of the most famous of these schools, Carlisle Indian School, opened in 1879, tells the missing story: "Kill the Indian and Save the Man."

The second marker of the victory celebration is another interior, this of a "traditional" late-20th-century Indian house, popularly known as HUD houses after the agency which built thousands of identical gray concrete-block squares all over Indian reservations. Here, though with a sparsity that accurately reflects contemporary reservation poverty (though pre-reservation casinos, in many cases), lie all the appurtenances of modern American life: a comfortable sofa and chairs facing a TV, a kitchen complete with stove and refrigerator, pantries and bookshelves, rag rugs and carelessly scattered Pendleton blankets in the faux-Indian designs popular with American consumers. Many symbols of late-capitalist life are here, in fact, including the most trivial: cola cans and Mickey Mouse toys; wall clocks and cereal boxes, baseball banners and cooking powders. But here, too, is an Indian kicker: most of the commodities selected to represent modern America *also* represent the final reincarnation of a reified Indian subject. Calumet baking powder, Mazola margarine, Atlanta Braves baseball team, Sioux Bee Honey...each bears an Indian "logo," evidence, finally, that "Indians 'R' Us."

So this is "our" museum. Some hoped it would be revolutionary. Tom Hill, Seneca, and one of the Museum's guest curators, insists that the museum is "no longer [a] monument [...] to colonialism" but rather "a truly new world in which cultures have genuine equality and creators and creations [will] be seen whole" (Hill and Hill 1994:19). But to me and many others, this

statement seems little more than an expression of the false consciousness René Ménéil warned against decades ago (Ménéil 1996). Far from detonating history's buried bombs, far from exploding myths or rewriting narratives, this National Museum of the American Indian in reality just sings another, very long, very elaborate death song for American Indian people.

So both venues for the playing out of contemporary racial politics are little more than elaborate theme parks, Disneylands where members of a hegemonic overculture can perform, can play "Indian," or play "Africa" (see below).¹⁴ Both museums are, as well, sites for liberal white redemption, though the NMAI is more visibly so. Indeed, NMAI officials are quite open about it. Here is a letter from the Secretary of the Smithsonian, pleading for donations to support the new museum:

Handle this letter carefully. Because you may be holding a powerful spirit in your hands. The spirit of brotherhood. The spirit of compassion. The spirit of understanding among all the peoples of the earth. According to the traditional religions of many American Indian tribes, human beings aren't the only ones who have spirits inside them. Animals, physical objects, and even the forces of nature are imbued with spirits as well. [...] Is it possible the letter you are holding in your hand is imbued with just such a spirit? And if you believe sufficiently in the moral rightness of the project [...] is it possible you can make it come true?

He concludes with even more shamelessly New Age rhetoric:

Is there a voice inside you telling you it is only right and fitting that the American people build this Museum? [...] Release that spirit. Let it mingle with those of thousands of other people throughout our nation. And let it further the momentum already begun to create the first national museum dedicated to Native Americans. Become a Charter Member today. (Smithsonian Institution n.d.)

Richard West Jr., the museum's Southern Cheyenne founding director, is no less dependent on New Age stereotypes, and no less embarrassed to offer white salvation for white donations:

When the Museum on the Mall [...] opens [...], you'll understand why we've been calling it "the Museum Different." From the moment you walk through its doors, you'll hear the sound of drums. Smell the scent of sweetgrass. Feel the warmth of ceremonial fires on your face and the cool mist of falling water on your skin. [...] It's exciting, isn't it? And you can take pride in knowing you were among the first Americans to step forward and say that such a Museum was long overdue. (NMAI n.d.)

V

I shall close by returning us briefly to Africa. *Parade Magazine* recently headlined the news that Disney's new Animal Kingdom is now open in Florida, a 500-acre theme park where visitors can "Step Into the African Wild," where "on safaris, riverboat rides and jungle trails, visitors can observe animals in natural settings." No people, of course, no Africans, just Mickey, dressed up like the hegemonic little mouse he is, here a Great White Hunter, the Bwana who is going to escort you and your children through the "wild." Like Mickey, the park is only "modeled on" something else, a place, Africa, all dressed up in its

requisite representational gear. Mickey gets his “authenticity” from his “real mouse ears.” Safari Village, in its turn, wears “real” “Africanesque” figures on “its many facades,” carved, the magazine assures us, “by real Balinese woodworkers” (Ciabattari 1990).¹⁵

And so we have it: postmodern muddles dressed up in global disguises. But underneath the postcolonial, globalized skin breathes the same old Euro-body carrying the same old Euro-defined ethnicity through familiar Euro-designed spaces, where history is rewritten into scripts for the untroubled performance of the neoliberal (neocolonial?), multicultural project.

Notes

1. The phrase “decolonising the mind,” is the title of an earlier book by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, 1986.
2. Of course such an aestheticizing of African art came in reaction to its earlier rendering as object of anthropological study, artifact of “primitiveness” and “otherness.” Nevertheless, though a move “forward,” the move remains fraught with “first world” difficulties.
3. Some of these were mainly traditional in form and conception, some were among the museum world’s most critical exhibitions. Among the former were *Africa and the Renaissance: Art in Ivory* (1988), *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought* (1989), *Likeness and Beyond: Portraits from Africa and the World* (1990), *Africa Explores: 20th Century African Art* (1991). The latter included *ART/artifact: African Art in Anthropological Collections* (1988), *Secrecy: African Art That Conceals and Reveals* (1991), and *Face of the Gods: Art and Altars of Africa and the African Americas* (1991).
4. Vogel is particularly addicted to this grammatical form (see for example Baldwin et al. 1987:11).
5. Timothy Reiss commented on this: “Were there no *African* architects who could design this space for the display of *African* art?” Mary Nooter Roberts answers:

Lin is not African, and has never been to Africa. But her previous works, notably the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, demonstrate a sensitivity to space, and an interest in a performative, journey-like experience of it, that seemed conducive to the presentation of African art in regularly changing exhibitions. [...] She accents color, lighting, pattern, and materials, and hers is a handcrafted space, its asymmetry and human scale suggestive—though not imitative—of African uses of line, space, and design. (Nooter Roberts and Vogel 1994:65)

Presumably, an African architect would only have succeeded in “imitating” African uses of asymmetry, color, lighting, and so on?

6. The Malcolms were lenders of many of the objects chosen for the *Perspectives* exhibit, including a Fang Reliquary Guardian, chosen by William Rubin (a curator at the Museum of Modern Art), a Kongo Female Figure of ivory, chosen by Ivan Karp, a Mumuye figure, chosen by Nancy Graves (a New York artist), and Kongo Mother and Child, chosen by Robert Farris Thompson (Professor of African and African American art history at Yale University). Thompson explains that he became “taken” by African art by his exposure to the “diaspora,” the “mambo music of Mexico in the 1950s.” He adds, “Cuba was my entrée. Cuba gave me a kind of intellectual head start in Kongo, Yoruba, Dahomean and especially Cross River—Ejagham—art” (in Baldwin et al. 1987:179).
7. The National Museum of the American Indian’s officials are deeply concerned with maintaining a particular image for visitors. When I have begun reading through the stacks of questionnaires left behind by tourists each day I have been challenged by “volunteers.” When three of us annotated the visitors book (now replaced by questionnaires), “writing back” to those whose comments were offensive to us, our annotations quickly disappeared—along with the pages with the offending remarks. So carefully were the pages excised from the book that we had trouble locating where they had been when we returned to the museum two weeks later. I and others have had many similar experiences with the Museum’s officials (mostly non-Native) who keep a tight control over every aspect of the Museum’s functioning. In other words, despite all the rhetoric about the NMAI “belonging” to “us,” it only belongs to “some of us” and only if we behave ourselves while within its marble precincts.

8. Armand Arman was a regular lender to exhibits at the Center and later the Museum. He loaned a Shona neckrest (selected by Ivan Karp) for the 1987 *Perspectives* show. A photograph of Arman's home shows a large floor-to-ceiling book case along one wall. A small, very modern sofa sits before it. Two end tables and what appears to be a coffee table hold vases, lamps, papers, and books. The caption reads, "This interior shows African art alongside various sorts of contemporary art, found objects [two Tiffany lamps? or the mounted conch shell in one of the case's cubicles?] and ordinary household items [books, stereo speakers]" (Nooter Roberts and Vogel 1994:47).
9. Franz Kafka's short story, "In the Penal Settlement," includes a punishment machine which inscribes its illegible, incomprehensible message on the body of the "prisoner," selected, like most of Kafka's protagonists, at random. Only the author of the story—or the executioner—understands the meaning of the marks.
10. The White Mountain Apaches followed another prophet who preached a similar message of resistance to white invasion and colonization. One of the Museum's original selectors, Edgar Perry, spent a good portion of his videotaped interview talking about this movement and its importance both to him and to the Apache people living in the early years of the 20th century. The museum, however, has effectively silenced his message by fragmenting his comments into little short films, each of which can be viewed by tourists who choose to press the categories on a screen. There is also one placard describing the movement, though it does it in deadly "anthro-speak"—a language that always, and everywhere reduces politics to quaint and hopeless cultural manifestations.
11. The government, represented by its corps of corrupt, Washington-appointed "Indian agents," each responsible for one reservation or a group of reservations in one region, was well aware of the political dangers posed by Ghost Dancing and other resistance practices. These practices were outlawed by the federal government, beginning with the Ghost Dance. It was its illegality that justified the massacre of unarmed people at Wounded Knee in 1890, as well as the arrest and murder of dozens of other Indian resisters. Still, the anthropologists, led by James Mooney (who published what remains the most-read version of the Ghost Dance in 1896), shifted the historical landscape entirely, portraying Ghost Dancing as I have described it. Thus was yet another Native movement effectively de-historicized so that it need not be taught in U.S. history courses but could rather be assigned to the historical and apolitical oblivion of anthropology departments.
12. It is important to note that the museum has since altered this and many other exhibits so that now the link between the diorama and the Ghost Dance movement is much less visible. Only one caption makes reference to the Ghost Dance, here in reference to one of the dresses.
13. The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act was passed in 1990, implementing the return of "funerary and sacred objects and objects of cultural patrimony," though the Smithsonian was specifically excluded from the act. With the merger of the Smithsonian with the old Museum of the American Indian, bones and other remains were to be returned for reburial. Other items were not mentioned, however, although the Museum's many discussions of this issue insist that it will comply with demands for objects covered by NAGPRA (Greenfield 1995:179). Richard West Jr. does add Masayesva's name to a long list of people who "helped" with the inaugural exhibits at the museum (see West in Hill and Hill 1994:12).
14. Playing African is, in the contemporary U.S., an option usually reserved for people identified as possessing African descent, though playing African American is increasingly common among European American kids.
15. This echoes the Museum for African Art's decision to choose Maya Lin as architect of the interior of the SoHo site. Culture, and seemingly constructions of race, have become completely interchangeable in this global world, *unless, of course, the culture is Western and the race is white.*

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Patricia Penn Hilden was educated at the University of California, Berkeley, in the early 1960s. After a decade working in various War on Poverty programs in the San Francisco Bay Area, she returned to school, earning her PhD at the University of Cambridge in 1981. She has published in the areas of European labor, women's history, Native American history, and politics. She is a professor of comparative ethnic studies at the University of California, Berkeley, where she is researching North American Natives sold into the Caribbean slave trade, 1630–1750.