

# Art, anthropology, and museums: Post-colonial directions in the United States

By Sally Price

Images: works by Marcel Pinas. Courtesy of the artist

***“BEFORE 1980 MOST MUSEUMS WERE RATHER STODGY PLACES WHERE LITTLE HAPPENED BUT SINCE THEN THEY HAVE BECOME HOTBEDS OF CONTROVERSY AND LIGHTNING RODS FOR CULTURAL CRITIQUE.”***

(Shepard Krech III, “Museums, Voices, Representations”)

Over the past half-century, changes in political, cultural, demographic, and academic realities in the United States have contributed to a significant reorientation in the museological representation of difference. This essay weaves in and out of these different contexts in order to explore some of the ways in which anthropology and art history have been nudged in new directions, with important consequences for museums and their publics.<sup>1</sup> I begin in the 1960s, a pivotal moment that, as George Stocking has argued, marked the

<sup>1</sup> Much of relevance is inevitably left out of this reflection on fifty years of political, cultural, and academic developments. Jim Clifford describes his essay on the past 25 years since *Writing Culture* as “painting with a broom” (2012:423); my wrap-up here might better be likened to tracing a few selected pieces of the painting with a toothpick. Parts of this paper were originally presented at an international conference, “Beyond Modernity: Do Ethnography Museums Need Ethnography?” (Rome, Museo Nazionale Preistorico Etnografico L. Pigorini. 18-20 April 2012).

end of anthropology’s “classical period” (1992:342-72).

In terms of the larger picture, the United States was bristling with embryonic indications of what were to become modest shifts away from the country’s long-standing practice of publicly privileging Euro-Americans, men, heterosexuals, the physically able, and the economically privileged. The demands of the Civil Rights movement were inching forward, most notably by the 1963 March on Washington and the Civil Rights Act of 1965; the Black Power movement was making headlines on a daily basis; the feminist movement was passing beyond its earlier focus on voting rights to a broader demand for the reassessment of women’s roles in society; protests against the Vietnam War, and the imperialist agenda that was seen as driving it, were getting off the ground; and the struggle for gay rights and the rights of the handicapped was beginning to heat up. The increasing visibility and activism of “counter-cultures” of various stripes could not help but have important implications both for the practice of anthropology and for the depiction of the mainstream’s “Others” in museums.

Against the background of these developments, anthropologists were experiencing a growing sense of malaise over traditional practices in their discipline. Fieldwork, once “the study of dark-skinned ‘others’ by light-skinned Euro-Americans [aimed at] the recovery of pure, uncontaminated ‘otherness’” (Stocking 1992:358), was gradually being seen as no longer viable in that form, as its principal subjects assumed new post-colonial identities. Anthropologists (at least many of them) were beginning to realize that the image of their research as “objective science” needed to be seriously re-thought in order to take the new perspectives into account. One of a multitude of contributing factors was the Central Intelligence Agency’s recruitment of anthropologists (sometimes real, sometimes imagined), which came to a head in 1964-65 with the exposure of “Project Camelot” (putting a new face on the old discomfort about ties between anthropology and colonialism) and furthered a strengthening sense of obligation toward the peoples whose lives were being studied.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> A half-century later, debates about the military’s use of “Human Terrain Teams” in Iraq and Afghanistan brought these same issues back into discussion. See Gonzalez 2008 and D. Price 2011.



Marcel Pinas, Afaka. Courtesy of the artist

At the same time, some of the intellectual energy that had been directed to anthropological field studies and their findings was being siphoned off by the emergent field of “cultural studies.” Originating in Britain, this new, highly interdisciplinary amalgam shared anthropology’s interest in social and cultural issues, but set them in a new environment, far from the study of “dark-skinned 'others' by light-skinned Euro-Americans,” by attracting scholars from a wide variety of ethnic and national origins and bringing in global power relations, literary theory, film studies, ethnic studies, popular culture, political economy, and much more.<sup>3</sup>

By the early 1970s, proposals for the “reinvention” of anthropology (Hymes 1969) were inspiring visions of the discipline that gave increased agency to the people whose lives were being explored, and some of the formerly unquestioned approaches to anthropological research were being scrutinized for their compatibility with the newly configured field. Take, for example, the longstanding practice of making secret field notes, recordings, and photographs – a standard part of the ethnographer’s tool kit well into the 1960s. One rather complexly worked out technique for documenting a long ceremony without revealing to the natives that their activities were being recorded, for example, was published by the discipline’s flagship journal, the *American Anthropologist*, and constituted recommended reading for graduate students

<sup>3</sup> Cultural studies originated as a named field in 1964 in Britain. In the United States the first doctoral program in Cultural Studies was inaugurated in 1994 (at George Mason University).

about to undertake field work throughout the 1960s (Sturtevant 1959). But as sensitivities to the people who were being studied moved center-stage, such clandestine documentation was cast in a newly negative light, as the folks once routinely depicted as “informants” became recognized as individuals with rights to transparency by the people investigating their lives.

Key to all this was a diminished focus on cultural isolates, as anthropologists began to set the societies and cultures they studied into broader settings than did their predecessors of the mid-twentieth century. Eric Wolf’s 1982 critique of a vision in which nations, societies, or cultures were depicted as homogeneous and externally distinctive and bounded objects, spinning off each other like so many hard and round billiard balls (1982:6-7) set the scene. Unlike earlier attempts to discern the cultural traits that would distinguish one people’s lifeways from those of another, anthropologists began directing their gaze more frequently toward the doorways where social and cultural ideas jostled each other in their passage from one social or cultural setting to the next. And while the emphasis in ethnographic research had once been on abstracting back from an overlay of modernity to discover uncorrupted cultural traditions<sup>4</sup>, modernization came to be seen as lying at the heart of the enterprise, providing a springboard for explorations of cultural creativity and selfaffirmation.

<sup>4</sup> Think of Franz Boas holding up a blanket to block out the modern two-story houses behind the Kwakiutl natives he was filming for the anthropological record, as captured in the *Odyssey* series video devoted to this father of American anthropology.

One consequence of this general reorientation was a vigorous rejection of the long-standard form and substance of ethnographic monographs, which began to give way to a variety of experimental texts. For example, Paul Rabinow’s writing on Morocco (1977) humanized the fieldwork experience through reflections on the relationships between the anthropologist and those whose culture was being studied; Renato Rosaldo’s on the Ilongot (1980) showed the relevance of history to the kinds of people once imagined to be “timeless primitives”; Richard Price’s on the Saamaka (1983) used page design and distinctive typefaces to emphasize perspectivalty in oral history, colonial archives, and ethnography; and Michael Taussig’s on Colombia (1987) mixed genres to underscore an awareness that facts cannot exist outside of their interpretation or truth outside of its representation. Books like these were actively dismantling and complicating ethnographic authority, and they were rejecting the timeless anthropological concept known as the “ethnographic present” in favor of careful attention to change over time. These shifts foreshadowed the demise of the traditional ethnographic monograph and its claims to uncontested truth. Support for the new turn – most importantly James Clifford and George Marcus’s *Writing Culture* in 1986 and James Clifford’s *The Predicament of Culture* in 1988 – assured that there was no turning back. As one commentator put it, *Writing Culture* introduced a new “skepticism about neat explanation and model-building in favor of a more mobile, open-ended

view of culture and society as a terrain of hybridization, disjuncture, and heteroglossia” (Starn 2012: 412). Talk of objective science was losing ground, and in its place was talk of poetics and politics, talk of fragments and partial truths, talk of subalterns, reflexivity, and subject positions.

Museums were not (yet) particularly active participants in the newly configured vision of anthropology, but rumblings of change in the art world were laying the groundwork for a more collaborative (if sometimes confrontational) relationship between anthropological and art critical approaches to the exhibition of objects from beyond the Euro-American orbit. The early to mid-1980s were a moment of explosive interest in public presentations of what we might call “ethnographic art.” A few signposts from the city of New York can serve to illustrate the trend. The Metropolitan Museum of Art opened its Rockefeller Wing, devoted to the arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, in 1982; the Museum for African Art opened in 1984; and during 1984-85 New York hosted a staggering series of blockbuster exhibitions focused on non-Western art. “Primitivism in 20th-century art. Affinities of the Tribal and the Modern” at the Museum of Modern Art was launched with six thousand people in attendance; in connection with that exhibition, an impressive roster of anthropologists and art historians participated in a lively two-day seminar at the museum intended to open a new interdisciplinary dialogue on the

relationship between Western and non-Western art.<sup>5</sup> The “Te Maori” exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art was inaugurated by rituals in which sixty Maori dignitaries in full regalia engaged in chants, songs, dances, and war cries, and greeted the mayor of New York City by rubbing noses. For the “Asante: Kingdom of Gold” exhibition at the American Museum of Natural History, the Asantahene (King Otumfuo Opoku Ware II) made the trip from Ghana to participate in opening ceremonies, marching through Central Park with the city’s mayor under a large silk umbrella, accompanied by a procession of several thousand participants. The IBM Gallery of Science and Art exhibited the largest assemblage of Northwest Coast Indian artworks ever put on view. The African American Institute offered an exhibition called “Beauty by Design: the Aesthetics of African Adornment.” The list could go on and on.

**SETTING ART OBJECTS, ARTISTS’ BIOGRAPHIES, AND THE EVOLUTION OF STYLISTIC SEQUENCES MORE FORCEFULLY IN THE CONTEXT OF PERCEPTIONS CONDITIONED BY SOCIAL AND CULTURAL FACTORS BROUGHT THEM CLOSER TO LONG-STANDING ANTHROPOLOGICAL CONCERNS AND INTERESTS**

5 The exhibit, curated by historians of Western art with little in the way of ethnographic knowledge or anthropological sensitivities, inspired a barrage of critical reactions that helped shape approaches to ethnographic art for the ensuing decades. See, for example, Clifford 1985 and Foster 1985.

Just as anthropologists were moving beyond their traditional stomping ground of small-scale, “tribal,” or otherwise “primitive” societies, art historians were showing less reluctance to take on materials outside of the usual areas of their discipline, and doing it with an increasingly sophisticated mastery of anthropological concepts, as publications of the UCLA Museum of Cultural History (later the Fowler Museum) or important studies of African art by such scholars as Henry and Margaret Drewal, can attest. Writings by art critic Lucy Lippard were particularly important in opening up the field of art criticism by calling attention to the scope and vitality of the country’s multicultural art scene; for example, her 1990 book, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America*, provided a veritable “Who’s Who” of artists from the entire spectrum. As a result of the expanded field, the complex workings – social, cultural, economic, political – that give structure, texture, and (contested or uncontested) meaning to the more traditional matter of art objects and their collective history began moving into greater prominence. At the same time, increased attention began to be given to scrutiny of museum ethics, curatorial strategies, auction politics, market dynamics, and collecting agendas. Even the very sensitive possibility that ethnocentrism lurked in the foundations of the edifice of connoisseurship became more widely recognized. Setting art objects, artists’ biographies, and the evolution of stylistic sequences more forcefully in the context of perceptions conditioned by social and

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cultural factors brought them closer to long-standing anthropological concerns and interests, and began eroding the lingering temptation (stronger in some commentators than others) to view art history as the pristine, apolitical study of aesthetic forms.

In 1985, in recognition of this trend, the Johns Hopkins University established an innovative Ph.D. program, generously funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, that was designed to train students in the intersection of anthropology and art history.<sup>6</sup> And that same year the gathering of art historians at the annual meeting of the College Art Association hosted, for the very first time in its history, panels on what it was calling "ethnographic art" – a move considered so revolutionary that the participants in these panels, myself included, were all flown out to the Getty Foundation in California for several days of discussion about how best to make our momentous entry.<sup>7</sup>

As ethnographic arts began to be accepted as a legitimate field of art historical interest, dialogue between

6 I was named director of the program, but for reasons too complex and too personal to go into here I resigned from the university after the first year. The program, with insufficient support from the two departments, was dismantled a few years later.

7 My presentation at this meeting of the CAA, entitled "Primitive Art in Civilized Places," was expanded into a book of the same name in 1989 and published in seven languages (see S. Price 2012).

anthropologists and art historians increased, and studies of tourist art, copies, fakes, appropriations, and derivative forms began to attract increased attention. Unpacking Culture, the fruit of collaboration between art historian Ruth Phillips and anthropologist Christopher Steiner, elaborated on a point that I believe should have particularly important implications for museums, in that it forces recognition of the influential role of collectors and art dealers in the choices made by museums that present ethnographic art. Arguing that the classic vision in which objects could be categorized as either "art" or as "ethnography" was long overdue for revision, they wrote:

*For the past century or so, the objects of cultural Others have been appropriated primarily into two ... categories: the artifact or ethnographic specimen and the work of art, [fitting them into] scholarly domains defined in the late nineteenth century when anthropology and art history were formally established as academic disciplines. As a construction, however, this binary pair has almost always been unstable, for both classifications masked what had, by the late eighteenth century, become one of the most important features of objects: their operation as commodities circulating in the discursive space of an emergent capitalist economy.*

(1999: 3)

In the museum world, the growing interest of art historians in non-Western art inevitably brought with it hints of a (tentative, partial, ambivalent) openness to the idea of including direct participation by members of the cultures represented in exhibitions of ethnographic art. While mainstream museums of the 1980s had begun opening their doors more readily to the art objects of other cultures, they were still showing reluctance toward the idea of welcoming the discourses and aesthetic sensibilities of the people who had created them. That is, regardless of whose art objects were being shown in museum cases or illustrated in catalogues, the decisions about how to display them and the texts that authenticated and interpreted them were still being kept in the hands of Euro-American curators – a practice that, as Cuban critic Gerardo Mosquera has pointed out, strongly favored "universal values" based on "Eurocentric and even Manhattan-centric criteria" (1994:134).

But by the 1990s cracks began to appear in the wall separating the representers and the represented. The change was first evident in temporary exhibitions: as early as 1991, for example, the American Museum of Natural History took pains to make its exhibit of Northwest Coast

Indian art (“Chiefly Feasts: The Enduring Kwakiutl Potlatch”) a collaborative affair between New York curators and members of Northwest Coast societies (Jonaitis 1991). But it has been moving into more general areas, as museums of various stripes (the Smithsonian in Washington, the American Museum of Natural History in New York, Brown University’s Haffenreffer Museum, and others) have convened advisory committees in order to integrate participation by native representatives in decision-making about their exhibition galleries and issues that have impact on their overall functioning (see, for example, Arnoldi 2005, Krech 1994). The most striking evidence of this move toward native voices, of course, was the establishment in 2004 of the National Museum of the American Indian, which is run by members of American Indian cultures. Indeed, the growing trend toward “collaborative anthropology” has had an important influence on the way museums are handling their collections; for just one example, see the “10,000 Kwentos” project, in which the Filipino community is collaborating with the Field Museum in Chicago to document objects in storage (<http://10000kwentos.org/> –accessed 20 February 2015).

The museum world’s embrace of materials that questioned traditional

hierarchies was not without virulent opposition, and the heated battles over attempts to promote multicultural or canon-challenging efforts in the United States became a prominent part of what became known as the Culture Wars. On the academic front, Harold Bloom, a distinguished professor of Humanities at Yale, lashed out at the new embrace of literature that reflected feminist, Marxist, or multicultural agendas, making a plea (1994) for a return to the traditional western canon centering on such authors as Chaucer, Shakespeare, Freud, and Beckett. On the political front, conservative groups such as the Christian Coalition fought against the use of tax dollars to support the arts and advocated the elimination of both the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities. And they were empowered by the fact that Lynn Cheney (wife of Dick Cheney, later the country’s vice president under the second George Bush) was directing the National Endowment for the Humanities (1986–1993), with strong support first from President Ronald Reagan and then from President George Bush-senior. Under their watch, government support for museum exhibitions suffered a severe setback, with particularly draconian consequences for anything that failed to toe the line set by a Christian, heterosexual, ethni-

cally Euro-American canon.<sup>8</sup> Within the larger battle, variant sexualities became the most mediatized target, with racial, ethnic, and religious differences following close behind.<sup>9</sup>

Government funding was at the heart of the matter “as both preachers and politicians decried some art as sinful, blasphemous, or unpatriotic [and] sought to reduce or eliminate public funding for art in general (Yenawine 1999:9). Left-leaning activists, working with little more than the strength of their convictions, fought back, putting together non-profit groups that promoted socially conscious art; the “Art Matters” collective, for example, offered fellowships to artists whose work was endangered by the chilling effects of the culture wars and gave seed money to a number of organized efforts that directly challenged the government’s position on cultural funding and AIDS.<sup>10</sup>

8 For a detailed rundown on the political firestorm over government support for the arts and humanities, see Koch 1998. For a relatively exhaustive collection of statements by politicians, journalists, artists, and others, see Bolton 1992.

9 One particularly prominent lightning rod was an exhibition of photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe, including depictions of black men in homoerotic poses. Accusations of pornography and attempts at censorship fought against the defenders of artistic freedom, and the battle was front-page news, as the Corcoran Gallery in Washington cancelled the show and the Cincinnati Art Museum’s right to exhibit Mapplethorpe’s photographs was debated in a highly mediatized obscenity trial. The outcry over Andres Serrano’s “Piss Christ” ignited another heated confrontation between conservative and liberal views, one that turned on religion rather than sexuality; one of my students in the United States, a devout Christian, refused to read an article on censorship in the arts that I had assigned because it mentioned this artwork – indication of how deep feelings run on these sorts of issues.

10 In spite of well organized collectives of art activists who pushed

But in spite of their power, politicians like Lynn Cheney were unable to squash the increasing eagerness of many academics, critics, museum workers, and others of a non-conservative bent to question, and then reject, elitist hierarchies, to reject the view of societies as static cultural isolates, to reject the idea that external contacts compromised cultural “authenticity” and to direct their attention instead toward a fluid global context in which ideas and practices passed from one cultural setting to the next. Even standard vocabulary reflected these trends, and the metaphor of travel, borderlands, and contact zones was everywhere. Chicano performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña captured the flavor of this intently itinerating artworld when he wrote: “I write in airplanes, trains, and cafés. I travel from city to city, coast to coast, country to country, smuggling my work and the work and ideas of my colleagues. . . . Home is both ‘here’ and ‘there’ or somewhere in between. Sometimes it’s nowhere. . . . Here/there, homelessness, border culture, and deterritorialization are the dominant experience” (2001:5-6). Book titles also tell the story: *The Traffic in Culture* (Marcus & Myers 1995), *Routes* (Clifford 1997), *Destination Culture* (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998), and *Unpacking Culture* (Phillips & Steiner 1999), to name just a few. In the same spirit, James Clifford soundly rejected the idea that culture was centered in circumscribed places, arguing that “displacement” should be

their agenda with passion and determination, the obstacles were daunting and feelings of deep frustration, even among the most dedicated warriors, were unavoidable (see Lippard 1999). “Art Matters” (formed in the early 1980s) ran out of funds in 1996, but was reignited in 2007, and has again been supporting a broad range of artists who are pushing aesthetic and social boundaries, this time with a specific focus on communication and collaboration across national borders (Yenawine 1999).

seen as “constitutive of cultural meanings” (Clifford 1991, 1997:3). Picking up on writing by Amitav Ghosh he evoked the airport transit lounge (or other spaces of transient cultural crossings such as hotel lobbies, train stations, or hospitals) as a replacement for the villages that had provided the conventional field site for an earlier era.<sup>11</sup> One consequence of this new vision was for both tourism and airport art to shed their former reputations as trivial or inauthentic subject matter for researchers and be upgraded to respectable fields of study in both anthropology and art history.

Two monumental seminars at the Smithsonian Institution, masterminded by Ivan Karp and his colleagues in 1988 and 1990, explored every nook and cranny of the newly conceptualized field as it concerned the museum world.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, a pair of wide-ranging seminars organized by the Association of Art Museum Directors in 1990 and 1991 convened an impressive slate of commentators to hash out ways of dealing with a situation in which, as the organizers put it, the most visible people of color in a majority of art museums are either the guards or Education Department staff working in the basement with inner-city school children (Tucker

11 While Stocking is generally considered anthropology’s foremost historian, Clifford is its equally preeminent critic. Part of his persuasiveness in arguing for a fragmentary, de-centered vision of the field is carried by a writing style he has characterized as “snapshots.” He “tips the balance” of dialectics, “struggles, never quite successfully” to free terms from past connotations, peppers his prose with “hesitations,” and offers “questions, not conclusions” – “approaching warily,” “wandering around,” “wondering if,” “peering into,” and “worrying about” ideas, and in the end “troubling” or “complicating” interpretations, carefully avoiding any claim to have arrived at final truths.

12 These seminars were published as *Exhibiting Cultures* in 1991 and *Museums and Communities* in 1992, with a third carrying on the momentum under the title *Museum Frictions* in 2006 (see Karp et al. 1991, 1992, 2006).

1992:9-10).

Concern about respecting the rights of sovereign nations concerning cultural property had been animating lively debates about the very delicate issue of repatriation for decades, resulting in several international agreements. The 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property was the first worldwide treaty on illicit traffic in cultural property. A Code of Ethics for Museums was adopted by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) in 1986 (and revised in 2004). And in 1995 the International Institute for the Unification of Private Law (UNIDROIT) met in Rome to draw up its convention on stolen or illegally exported cultural objects. In the United States, passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) of 1990 was a key endorsement of native agency, but there were also countless smaller moves in the same direction. Respect for native objections to the display of a Zuni kachina in the MoMA’s 1984 “Primitivism” exhibition was just one of many early indications of the trend.<sup>13</sup>

Although the move toward a new vision of the relationship between Western observers and the people whose lives they were studying was taking on steam in the anthropological community, it should be noted that members of the discipline were far from unanimous.

Recognizing the ostensibly inevitable

13 For a thoughtful piece about the complexities (and ironies) of attempts to return museum objects to their original owners, see Appiah 2006. The essays in Brown 2003 explore cases of material and immaterial property rights from the United States and other parts of the world, making clear the thorny trade-offs involved in cultural property legislation.

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demise of anthropology-as-usual in a "decentered, fragmented, compressed, flexible, refractive, post-modern world," some anthropologists reacted by launching vehemently anti-postmodern attempts to "recapture anthropology's authority," thus saving it from what they saw as the "fuzzy populism and reverse snobbery" of the postmodernists (see Fox 1991:1-16). A tipping point came when anthropologists Barbara and Dennis Tedlock, researchers in the verbal and visual arts, became editors of the discipline's flagship journal, the *American Anthropologist*. Their opening editorial called for "new forms of field research and new forms of representation," and addressed the debate within anthropology head-on.

*In the work of our younger colleagues, especially, we see more and more signs that the traditional architecture of the discipline is obsolete. We hope they will have the courage to ignore the cries of those who say they are not doing "real" this or "real" that, and carry on with the work of remodeling our discipline. ... Some may even try to predict whether anthropologists will stop their gatekeeping, name calling, and rumor mongering in time*

*to get on with their business, or whether they will continue their destructive social practices until the discipline collapses into the tiny warring camps of its subfields.*

*Others may envision an entirely new direction for our unique discipline amid the worldwide demographic shifts that we and our students will be facing in our research, our writing, and our very lives. What are our human and anthropological futures? (1995)*

The journal's format was enlarged to allow for the inclusion of visual materials, and the content shifted perceptibly toward essays that included more on the arts and literature, with a concomitant decrease in "hard science." All this caused outrage among anthropologists working in more traditional "scientific" modes, from componential analysis to ethnoscience, who nearly came to blows with the "postmodernists" during a fiery confrontation in the plenary meeting of the American Anthropological Association of 1995. At the same time, the Tedlocks received anonymous death threats.

Meanwhile, empathetic attention to the country's rising multiculturalism was

palpable in the larger society, and the media were quick to respond. Between 1990 and 1993 National Public Radio, in cooperation with the Mexican Museum of San Francisco, sponsored a series of lavishly-supported meetings of what it was calling the "Working Group on a New American Sensibility," aimed at broadening radio programming to include voices from every segment of the country's increasingly multicultural population. Prominent members of the whole range of African American, Native American, Asian American, Caribbean American, and Chicano communities, joined by a token White minority, met to hash out ideas about ways to integrate their fellows more fully in American media – radio and beyond.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, the format of television news coverage sheered away from centralized one-man authorities – best epitomized (until 1980) by Walter Cronkite – and began recounting events more frequently through a patchwork of ethnically, culturally, and regionally diverse voices.

<sup>14</sup> This initiative was organized by Peter Pennekamp (Vice President for Cultural Programming, NPR) and Virginia Fields (Los Angeles County Museum of Art). Participants included: Marie Acosta-Colon, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Suzan Harjo, Steven Lavine, Lawrence Levine, Mari Matsuda, Raymund Paredes, Richard Price, Sally Price, Bernice Johnson Reagon, Jack (John Kuo Wei) Tchen, Trinh Minh-ha, Marta Vega, Jim West, and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto.

These interlocking developments in national, cultural, and academic politics (whether seen as “postcolonial,” “postmodern,” “counter-hegemonic,” “reflexive,” or some other characterization) have fueled dialogues on every aspect of life in the United States, from (for example) university admissions, welfare programs, immigration laws, and gay rights legislation to the three domains (art, anthropology, museums) that have formed the focus of this essay. In an academic context, this has meant the demise (or at least partial abandonment) of an earlier tendency to view art history (and art criticism) as the pristine, apolitical study of aesthetic forms, and anthropology as the equally pristine, apolitical study of cultural isolates. But the developments in question have roots quite separate from the halls of academia in which these disciplines are molded and passed on to new generations. It’s safe to generalize that developments in both the United States and the global arena mean that the privilege once enjoyed by Euro-Americans as spokespeople for distant cultures has been diluted. As a result, the museum world has experienced a (partial) breakdown in the divide that Gerardo Mosquera pointed to between “curated cultures” and “curating cultures” (1994:135). In anthropology, the once-clear separation between the home populations of “the ethnographers and the ethnographized” (Marcel Maget, cited in Sherman 2011:24) no longer holds as clearly as it once did. And more generally we can talk of an incipient blurring of the distinction between what novelist Toni Morrison ironized as “the

definers and the defined” (1987:190). The embrace of new voices has been particularly game-changing for public culture, for art history, for anthropology, and for museums, as the people whose lives they represent, whether in books or buildings, have begun to speak more frequently for themselves. Individuals once anonymized into generic representatives of their respective cultures are now being named.<sup>15</sup> Global travel, educational opportunities, identitarian politics, immigration patterns, and new technologies for communication have created a world in which the people whose lives are featured in ethnographic museum exhibits are increasingly well positioned to explain their history, their cultural practices, their artistic traditions, and more in their own way, without always passing through the intervention of Western interlocutors. In much of the U.S. museum world, they now participate in decision making of all kinds, from modes of exhibition and the substance of interpretation to acquisition policies and debates about repatriation. None of which is to say that the glass is more than half full in terms of the relationship of art, anthropology, and cultural difference in the United States.<sup>16</sup> Since 2009, “Tea Party” politics have emboldened and empowered growing numbers of fundamentalist (often evangelical) conservatives, with the result that people who do not share their views of everything from education and sexuality to health care, gun control,

15 As one commentator put it in 1994, “Anonymous has a Name” (Walker 1994).

16 As Ruth Phillips notes: “To identify oneself as an art historian of ‘tribal’ art is even now considered an oxymoron by many ‘mainstream’ art historians” (2011:107).

and the environment are up against formidable and intransigent opponents. (We don’t need to go as far as the Arab world to understand the potentially destructive consequences for culture of a coalescence of religious fervor and political power.) Inevitably, and at unforeseeable moments, these kinds of leanings in national politics cast their shadow on the art world and museums, thrusting a bundle of religious, legal, and art critical arguments into public debate.<sup>17</sup>

Although this essay has focused exclusively on the United States, it’s worth noting that other parts of the world have been experiencing many of the same debates concerning museum handling of cultural difference. I conclude this essay with very brief remarks on a few of the museums environments with which I’ve had at least passing contact to give some sense of the variety of forms this can take.<sup>18</sup>

Canada has been even more pro-active than the United States in terms of giving voice to its native populations.<sup>19</sup> Prompted partly by a 1992 task force report, “Turning the page – forcing new partnerships between museums and First Peoples,” collaborative research and indigenous curatorship (some

17 In 1999, the mayor of New York tried to close the Brooklyn Museum of Art because he took one of the artworks on exhibit as blasphemous to his Catholic faith. See Rothfield 2001 for an excellent collection of reflections on this highly mediatized case.

18 My thanks to colleagues who provided help with the final paragraphs of this paper: Ivan Bargna, Olivia Gomes da Cunha, Marc-Olivier Gonseth, Guido Gryseels, Lotten Gustafsson Reinius, Clare Harris, Paola Ivanov, Maria Camilla De Palma, Giovanna da Passano, and Solen Roth. See also the recent overview of European ethnographic museums by Clare Harris and Michael O’Hanlon (2013).

19 For discussion of the situation in Canada by two key participants, see Ames 1992 and Phillips 2011.

of it concentrated in an “Aboriginal Curatorial Collective”) have been on the rise. Increasing numbers of exhibits are addressing contemporary (including urban) Aboriginal life. In addition, the Native American Art Association (founded in 1981) reflects growing emphasis on interdisciplinary dialogue between art history, museum studies, indigenous studies, and anthropology. In Brazil, the Instituto Brasileiro de Museus (IBRAM), created under Gilberto Gil’s tenure as minister of culture (2003-2008), has worked to revitalize popular social groups interested in preserving their own culture by offering government support to a network of Pontos de Cultura – grass roots organizations from carnival groups and museums located in favelas to a range of other local collectives. And mainstream museums have been experimenting with intercultural curating; São Paulo’s Museu de Arqueologia e Etnologia, for example, brought Kayapo Indians (chosen by their community) to the museum to collaborate on the documentation of its collection, which led to interesting insights about the openness of cultural context to changes over time (Gordon & Silva 2005). In the Netherlands, Amsterdam’s Tropenmuseum has undergone a fundamental reorientation, begun in the 1960s, partly in response to an initiative by the Dutch Ministry of the Exterior to encourage social consciousness of problems such as poverty and discrimination. A major vehicle for its activist turn was the creation of “living environments” for what it was calling “the South” (Africa, South America, Southeast Asia, etc.). Exhibitions have

addressed homelessness, the distribution of water supplies, the position of women, health, rural development, the rise of new urban cultures, and various dimensions of popular culture, all of which has moved the institution’s identity very far away from its origins as a late nineteenth-century colonial museum.

In Sweden, Stockholm’s Museum of Ethnography has been mounting exhibitions focused on such issues as Scandinavian participation in the Congo Free State, the presence of human remains in Swedish collections, and current repatriation debates.

In Belgium, the once-stodgy Royal Museum of Central Africa in Tervuren is actively redefining itself from a classical colonial museum to a model of post-colonial sensitivities, including critical attention to colonialism, the recruitment of African input, partnerships with more than twenty countries in Africa, and close collaboration with the African diaspora in Belgium.

In Switzerland, the Ethnographic Museum of Neuchâtel has for decades been mounting innovative exhibitions that decenter anthropological authority and interrogate the ethical, philosophical, and political foundations of field collecting, art collecting, museum strategies, and more. The catalogues for a staggering parade of exhibitions, from “Collections Passion” (1982) to “Le Musée Cannibale (2003) and beyond, constitute a veritable library of insightful reflections on the issues addressed in the present

essay, opening up and fueling crucial debates on every aspect of visions of cultural difference.<sup>20</sup>

In England, the venerable Pitt Rivers Museum has mounted an active “artist-in-residence” program and is making a special effort to include contemporary materials that contest the authenticity/traditionalism modes of past exhibits. It has also inaugurated a research project that will return digital copies of photographs currently housed in Europe to their Australian Aboriginal subjects’ descendants, providing a major Indigenous heritage resource. And it has collaborated with the British Museum on a project to put online over 6000 photographs taken in Tibet over a thirty-year period, with user-friendly functions that invite participation of various kinds from Tibetans (comments on the photos, identification of individuals, etc.).

In Germany, collections of Berlin’s Ethnological Museum are being readied for their new home in the Humboldt Forum which will in a few years be housed in the re-erected Prussian palace in the city’s center. There, curators have expressed their goal as a focus on the colonial past (including violence) and the history of the collections, as well as a deconstruction of the concept of “authenticity” and a rejection of the idea of non-historical “traditional” cultures. They also point to ongoing exchanges concerning human remains and collaborative exhibition projects with source communities.

<sup>20</sup> An introduction to the MEN’s publications, each of which includes essays from a large number of contributors, can be found at <http://www.men.ch/expositions> (accessed 20 February 2015).

In Italy, the Luigi Pigorini museum in Rome has been encouraging various stakeholder communities to participate actively in the conceptualization and realization of exhibitions and organizing international colloquia designed to explore cutting-edge thinking about ethnographic museums. And the Castello d'Albertis Museum in Genoa has been inviting the participation of American Indians (Hopi, Cree, Bororo) in its permanent exhibitions, incorporating contemporary materials that challenge traditional notions of authenticity, mounting exhibitions focused on critical approaches to the colonial past, and encouraging collaboration between anthropologists and art historians. At the same time, efforts by museums like these to move beyond traditional "primitivizing" tendencies in their country's museum world are facing a daunting uphill battle; as Giovanna da Passano makes clear in her evaluation of the state of Italian approaches to African art and culture (2010), many Italian museums are (like many of those in France<sup>21</sup>) still largely out of synch with the kinds of developments in other parts of the world that have been the subject of this essay.

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<sup>21</sup> See de l'Estoile 2007, Murphy 2009:14-15, and S. Price 2011. As recently as 2011, a catalogue published by the Quai Branly Museum depicted French colonialism as a largely generous effort to lift Africans out of a state of chaos and brutality (Leloup 2011:65). James Clifford holds out a tentative sliver of hope that "perhaps" France will eventually come around (2012:418-419).

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Marcel Pinas, Libi\_ II. Courtesy of the artist



Marcel Pinas, A Ja Ude. Courtesy of the artist