

LEICESTER READERS IN MUSEUM STUDIES

INTERPRETING OBJECTS *and* COLLECTIONS



Edited by

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Collecting ourselves

J.Clifford

Clifford's book has also been extremely influential. The Predicament of Culture is a wide-ranging explanation of the context and implications of twentieth-century ethnography, literature and art. This extract is taken from the chapter which is concerned with collecting art and culture, particularly in the areas of tribal artefacts and cultural practice. It proposes a critical, historical approach to collecting which focuses on subjective, taxonomic and political processes. It offers an 'art-culture' system through which in the last century exotic objects have been contextualised and given value in the West, so contributing to western notions about 'Us' and 'the Other'.

Entering
 You will find yourself in a climate of nut castanets,
 A musical whip
 From the Torres Straits, from Mirzapur a sistrum
 Called Jumka, 'used by Aboriginal
 Tribes to attract small game
 On dark nights,' coolie cigarettes
 And mask of Saagga, the Devil Doctor,
 The eyelids worked by strings.

James Fenton's poem 'The Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford' (1984:81–4), from which this stanza is taken, rediscovers a place of fascination in the ethnographic collection. For this visitor even the museum's descriptive labels seem to increase the wonder ('...attract small game / on dark nights') and the fear. Fenton is an adult-child exploring territories of danger and desire, for to be a child in this collection ('Please sir, where's the withered / Hand?') is to ignore the serious admonitions about human evolution and cultural diversity posted in the entrance hall. It is to be interested instead by the claw of a condor, the jaw of a dolphin, the hair of a witch, or 'a jay's feather worn as a charm / in Buckinghamshire'. Fenton's ethnographic museum is a world of intimate encounters with inexplicably fascinating objects: personal fetishes. Here collecting is inescapably tied to obsession, to recollection. Visitors 'find the landscape of their childhood marked out / Here in the chaotic piles of souvenirs...boxroom of the forgotten or hardly possible'.

Go
 As a historian of ideas or a sex-offender,
 For the primitive art,
 As a dusty semiologist, equipped to unravel
 The seven components of that witch's curse

Or the syntax of the mutilated teeth. Go
In groups to giggle at curious finds.
But do not step into the kingdom of your promises
To yourself, like a child entering the forbidden
Woods of his lonely playtime.

Do not step in this tabooed zone 'laid with the snares of privacy and fiction / And the dangerous third wish'. Do not encounter these objects except as *curiosities* to giggle at, *art* to be admired or *evidence* to be understood scientifically. The tabooed way, followed by Fenton, is a path of too-intimate fantasy, recalling the dreams of the solitary child 'who wrestled with eagles for their feathers' or the fearful vision of a young girl, her turbulent lover seen as a hound with 'strange pretercanine eyes'. This path through the Pitt Rivers Museum ends with what seems to be a scrap of autobiography, the vision of a personal 'forbidden woods'—exotic, desired, savage and governed by the (paternal) law:

He had known what tortures the savages had prepared
For him there, as he calmly pushed open the gate
And entered the wood near the placard: 'TAKE NOTICE
MEN-TRAPS AND SPRING-GUNS ARE SET ON THESE
PREMISES.'
For his father had protected his good estate.

Fenton's journey into otherness leads to a forbidden area of the self. His intimate way of engaging the exotic collection finds an area of desire, marked off and policed. The law is preoccupied with *property*.

C.B. Macpherson's classic analysis of western 'possessive individualism' (1962) traces the seventeenth-century emergence of an ideal self as owner: the individual surrounded by accumulated property and goods. The same ideal can hold true for collectivities making and remaking their cultural 'selves'. For example Richard Handler (1985) analyses the making of a Québécois cultural *patrimoine*, drawing on Macpherson to unravel the assumptions and paradoxes involved in 'having a culture', selecting and cherishing an authentic collective 'properly'. His analysis suggests that this identity, whether cultural or personal, presupposes acts of collection, gathering up possessions in arbitrary systems of value and meaning. Such systems, always powerful and rule-governed, change historically. One cannot escape them. At best, Fenton suggests, one can transgress ('poach' in their tabooed zones) or make their self-evident orders seem strange. In Handler's subtly perverse analysis a system of retrospection—revealed by a Historic Monuments Commission's selection of ten sorts of 'cultural property'—appears as a taxonomy worthy of Borges's 'Chinese encyclopedia': '(1) commemorative monuments; (2) churches and chapels; (3) forts of the French Regime; (4) windmills; (5) roadside crosses; (6) commemorative inscriptions and plaques; (7) devotional monuments; (8) old houses and manors; (9) old furniture; (10) "les choses disparues"' (1985:199). In Handler's discussion the collection and preservation of an authentic domain of identity cannot be natural or innocent. It is tied up with nationalist politics, with restrictive law, and with contested encodings of past and future.

Some sort of 'gathering' around the self and the group—the assemblage of a material 'world', the marking-off of a subjective domain that is not 'other'—is probably universal. All such collections embody hierarchies of value, exclusions, rule-governed territories of the self. But the notion that this gathering involves the accumulation of possessions, the idea that identity is a kind of wealth (of objects, knowledge, memories, experience), is surely not universal. The

individualistic accumulation of Melanesian ‘big men’ is not possessive in Macpherson’s sense, for in Melanesia one accumulates not to hold objects as private goods but to give them away, to redistribute. In the West, however, collecting has long been a strategy for the deployment of a possessive self, culture and authenticity.

Children’s collections are revealing in this light: a boy’s accumulation of miniature cars, a girl’s dolls, a summer-vacation ‘nature museum’ (with labelled stones and shells, a hummingbird in a bottle), a treasured bowl filled with the bright shavings of crayons. In these small rituals we observe the channellings of obsession, an exercise in how to make the world one’s own, to gather things around oneself tastefully, appropriately. The inclusions in all collections reflect wider cultural rules—of rational taxonomy, of gender, of aesthetics. An excessive, sometimes even rapacious need to *have* is transformed into rule-governed, meaningful desire. Thus the self that must possess but cannot have it all learns to select, order, classify in hierarchies—to make ‘good’ collections.¹

Whether a child collects model dinosaurs or dolls, sooner or later she or he will be encouraged to keep the possessions on a shelf or in a special box or to set up a dollhouse. Personal treasures will be made public. If the passion is for Egyptian figurines, the collector will be expected to label them, to know their dynasty (it is not enough that they simply exude power or mystery), to tell ‘interesting’ things about them, to distinguish copies from originals. The good collector (as opposed to the obsessive, the miser) is tasteful and reflective.² Accumulation unfolds in a pedagogical, edifying manner. The collection itself—its taxonomic, aesthetic structure—is valued, and any private fixation on single objects is negatively marked as fetishism. Indeed a ‘proper’ relation with objects (rule-governed possession) presupposes a ‘savage’ or deviant relation (idolatry or erotic fixation).³ In Susan Stewart’s gloss, ‘The boundary between collection and fetishism is mediated by classification and display in tension with accumulation and secrecy’ (1984:163).

Stewart’s wide-ranging study *On Longing* traces a ‘structure of desire’ whose task is the repetitious and impossible one of closing the gap that separates language from the experience it encodes. She explores certain recurrent strategies pursued by westerners since the sixteenth century. In her analysis the miniature, whether a portrait or doll’s house, enacts a bourgeois longing for ‘inner’ experience. She also explores the strategy of gigantism (from Rabelais and Gulliver to earthworks and the billboard), the souvenir and the collection. She shows how collections, most notably museums, create the illusion of adequate representation of a world by first cutting objects out of specific contexts (whether cultural, historical or intersubjective) and making them ‘stand for’ abstract wholes—a ‘Bambara mask’, for example, becoming an ethnographic metonym for Bambara culture. Next a scheme of classification is elaborated for storing or displaying the object so that the reality of the collection itself, its coherent order, overrides specific histories of the object’s production and appropriation (pp. 162–5). Paralleling Marx’s account of the fantastic objectification of commodities, Stewart argues that in the modern western museum ‘an illusion of a relation between things takes the place of a social relation’ (p. 165). The collector discovers, acquires, salvages objects. The objective world is given, not produced, and thus historical relations of power in the work of acquisition are occulted. The *making* of meaning in museum classification and display is mystified as adequate *representation*. The time and order of the collection erase the concrete social labour of its making.

Stewart’s work, along with that of Phillip Fisher (1975), Krzysztof Pomian (1978), James Bunn (1980), Daniel Defert (1982), Johannes Fabian (1983), and Rémy Saisselin (1984), among others, brings collecting and display sharply into view as crucial processes of western identity formation. Gathered artefacts—whether they find their way into curio cabinets,

private living-rooms, museums of ethnography, folklore or fine art—function within a developing capitalist ‘system of objects’ (Baudrillard 1968). By virtue of this system a world of *value* is created and a meaningful deployment and circulation of artefacts maintained. For Baudrillard collected objects create a structured environment that substitutes its own temporality for the ‘real time’ of historical and productive processes: ‘The environment of private objects and their possession—of which collections are an extreme manifestation—is a dimension of our life that is both essential and imaginary. As essential as dreams’ (1968:135).

A history of anthropology and modern art needs to see in collecting both a form of western subjectivity and a changing set of powerful institutional practices. The history of collections (not limited to museums) is central to an understanding of how those social groups that invented anthropology and modern art have *appropriated* exotic things, facts and meanings. (*Appropriate*: ‘to make one’s own’, from the Latin *proprius*, ‘proper’, ‘property’). It is important to analyse how powerful discriminations made at particular moments constitute the general system of objects within which valued artefacts circulate and make sense. Far-reaching questions are thereby raised.

What criteria validate an authentic cultural or artistic product? What are the differential values placed on old and new creations? What moral and political criteria justify ‘good’, responsible, systematic collecting practices? Why, for example, do Leo Frobenius’s wholesale acquisitions of African objects around the turn of the century now seem excessive? (See also Cole 1985 and Pye 1987.) How is a ‘complete’ collection defined? What is the proper balance between scientific analysis and public display? (In Santa Fe a superb collection of Native American art is housed at the School of American Research in a building constructed, literally, as a vault, with access carefully restricted. The Musée de l’Homme exhibits less than a tenth of its collections; the rest is stored in steel cabinets or heaped in corners of the vast basement.) Why has it seemed obvious until recently that non-western objects should be preserved in European museums, even when this means that no fine specimens are visible in their country of origin? How are ‘antiquities’, ‘curiosities’, ‘art’, ‘souvenirs’, ‘monuments’ and ‘ethnographic artefacts’ distinguished—at different historical moments and in specific market conditions? Why have many anthropological museums in recent years begun to display certain of their objects as ‘masterpieces’? Why has tourist art only recently come to the serious attention of anthropologists? (See Graburn 1976; Jules-Rosette 1984.) What has been the changing interplay between natural-history collecting and the selection of anthropological artefacts for display and analysis? The list could be extended.

The critical history of collecting is concerned with what from the material world specific groups and individuals choose to preserve, value and exchange. Although this complex history, from at least the Age of Discovery, remains to be written, Baudrillard provides an initial framework for the deployment of objects in the recent capitalist West. In his account it is axiomatic that all categories of meaningful objects—including those marked off as scientific evidence and as great art—function within a ramified system of symbols and values.

To take just one example: the *New York Times* of 8 December 1984 reported the widespread illegal looting of Anasazi archaeological sites in the American Southwest. Painted pots and urns thus excavated in good condition could bring as much as \$30,000 on the market. Another article in the same issue contained a photograph of bronze age pots and jugs salvaged by archaeologists from a Phoenician shipwreck off the Coast of Turkey. One account featured clandestine collecting for profit, the other scientific collecting for knowledge. The moral evaluations of the two acts of salvage were sharply

opposed, but the pots recovered were all meaningful, beautiful and old. Commercial, aesthetic and scientific worth in both cases presupposed a given system of value. This system finds intrinsic interest and beauty in objects from a past time, and it assumes that collecting everyday objects from ancient (preferably vanished) civilizations will be more *rewarding* than collecting, for example, decorated thermoses from modern China or customized T-shirts from Oceania. Old objects are endowed with a sense of ‘depth’ by their historically minded collectors. Temporality is reified and salvaged as origin, beauty and knowledge.

This archaizing system has not always dominated western collecting. The curiosities of the New World gathered and appreciated in the sixteenth century were not necessarily valued as antiquities, the products of primitive or ‘past’ civilizations. They frequently occupied a category of the marvellous, of a present ‘Golden Age’ (Honour 1975; Mullaney 1983; Rabasa 1985). More recently the retrospective bias of western appropriations of the world’s cultures has come under scrutiny (Fabian 1983; Clifford 1986). Cultural or artistic ‘authenticity’ has as much to do with an inventive present as with a past, its objectification, preservation or revival.

Since the turn of the century objects collected from non-western sources have been classified in two major categories: as (scientific) cultural artefacts or as (aesthetic) works of art.⁴ Other collectables—mass-produced commodities, ‘tourist art’, curios, and so on—have been less systematically valued; at best they find a place in exhibits of ‘technology’ or ‘folklore’. These and other locations within what may be called the ‘modern art-culture system’ can be visualized with the help of a (somewhat procrustean) diagram.

A.J.Greimas’s ‘semiotic square’ (Greimas and Rastier 1968) shows us ‘that any initial binary opposition can, by the operation of negations and the appropriate syntheses, generate a much larger field of terms which, however, all necessarily remain locked in the closure of the initial system’ (Jameson 1981:62). Adapting Greimas for the purposes of cultural criticism, Fredric Jameson uses the semiotic square to reveal ‘the limits of a specific ideological consciousness, [marking] the conceptual points beyond which that consciousness cannot go, and between which it is condemned to oscillate’ (1981:47). Following his example, I offer the following map (see Fig 31.1) of a historically specific, contestable field of meanings and institutions.

Beginning with an initial opposition, by a process of negation four terms are generated. This establishes horizontal and vertical axes and between them four semantic zones: (1) the zone of authentic masterpieces, (2) the zone of authentic artefacts, (3) the zone of inauthentic masterpieces, (4) the zone of inauthentic artefacts. Most objects—old and new, rare and common, familiar and exotic—can be located in one of these zones or ambiguously, in traffic, between two zones.

The system classifies objects and assigns them relative value. It establishes the ‘contexts’ in which they properly belong and between which they circulate. Regular movements towards positive value proceed from bottom to top and from right to left. These movements select artefacts of enduring worth or rarity, their value normally guaranteed by a ‘vanishing’ cultural status or by the selection and pricing mechanisms of the art market. The value of Shaker crafts reflects the fact that Shaker society no longer exists: the stock is limited. In the art world work is recognized as ‘important’ by connoisseurs and collectors according to criteria that are more than simply aesthetic (see Becker 1982). Indeed, prevailing definitions of what is ‘beautiful’ or ‘interesting’ sometimes change quite rapidly.

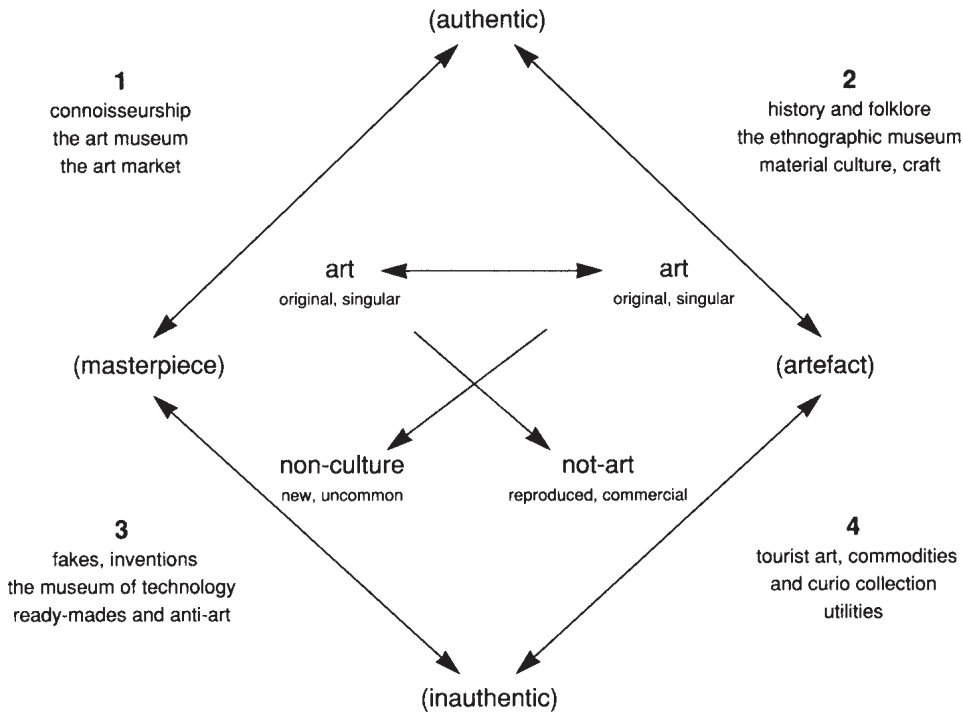


Fig. 31.1 The art-culture system: a machine for making authenticity

An area of frequent traffic in the system is that linking zones 1 and 2. Objects move in two directions along this path. Things of cultural or historical value may be promoted to the status of fine art. Examples of movement in this direction, from ethnographic 'culture' to fine 'art', are plentiful. Tribal objects located in art galleries (the Rockefeller Wing at the Metropolitan Museum in New York) or displayed anywhere according to 'formalist' rather than 'contextualist' protocols (Ames 1986:39–42) move in this way. Crafts (Shaker work collected at the Whitney Museum in 1986), 'folk art', certain antiques, 'naive' art all are subject to periodic promotions. Movement in the inverse direction occurs whenever art masterworks are culturally and historically 'contextualized', something that has been occurring more and more explicitly. Perhaps the most dramatic case has been the relocation of France's great Impressionist collection, formerly at the Jeu de Paume, to the new Museum of the Nineteenth Century at the Gare d'Orsay. Here art masterpieces take their place in the panorama of a historical-cultural 'period'. The panorama includes an emerging industrial urbanism and its triumphant technology, 'bad' as well as 'good' art. A less dramatic movement from zone 1 to zone 2 can be seen in the routine process within art galleries whereby objects become 'dated', of interest less as immediately powerful works of genius than as fine examples of a period style.

Movement also occurs between the lower and upper halves of the system, usually in an upward direction. Commodities in zone 4 regularly enter zone 2, becoming rare period pieces and thus collectables (old green glass Coke bottles). Much current non-western work migrates between the status of 'tourist art' and creative cultural-artistic strategy. Some current productions of Third World peoples have entirely shed the stigma of modern commercial inauthenticity. For example Haitian 'primitive' painting—commercial and of relatively recent, impure origin—has moved fully into the art-culture circuit. Significantly this work entered the art market by association with zone 2, becoming valued as the work not simply of individual artists but of *Haitians*. Haitian painting is surrounded by special

associations with the land of voodoo, magic and negritude. Though specific artists have come to be known and prized, the aura of 'cultural' production attaches to them much more than, say, to Picasso, who is not in any essential way valued as a 'Spanish artist'. The same is true, as we shall see, of many recent works of tribal art, whether from the Sepik or the American Northwest Coast. Such works have largely freed themselves from the tourist or commodity category to which, because of their modernity, purists had often relegated them; but they cannot move directly into zone 1, the art market, without trailing clouds of authentic (traditional) culture. There can be no direct movement from zone 4 to zone 1.

Occasional travel occurs between zones 4 and 3, for example when a commodity or technological artefact is perceived to be a case of special inventive creation. The object is selected out of commercial or mass culture, perhaps to be featured in a museum of technology. Sometimes such objects fully enter the realm of art: 'technological' innovations or commodities may be contextualized as modern 'design', thus passing through zone 3 into zone 1 (for example the furniture, household machines, cars, and so on displayed at the Museum of Modern Art in New York).

There is also regular traffic between zones 1 and 3. Exposed art forgeries are demoted (while nonetheless preserving something of their original aura). Conversely various forms of 'anti-art' and art parading its unoriginality or 'inauthenticity' are collected and valued (Warhol's soup can, Sherrie Levine's photo of a photo by Walker Evans, Duchamp's urinal, bottle rack or shovel). Objects in zone 3 are all potentially collectable within the general domain of art: they are uncommon, sharply, distinct from or blatantly cut out of culture. Once appropriated by the art world, like Duchamp's ready-mades, they circulate within zone 1.

The art-culture system I have diagrammed excludes and marginalizes various residual and emergent contexts. To mention only one: the categories of art and culture, technology and commodity are strongly secular. 'Religious' objects can be valued as great art (an altarpiece by Giotto), as folk art (the decorations on a Latin American popular saint's shrine), or as cultural artefact (an Indian rattle). Such objects have no individual 'power' or mystery—qualities once possessed by 'fetishes' before they were reclassified in the modern system as primitive art or cultural artefact. What 'value', however, is stripped from an altarpiece when it is moved out of a functioning church (or when its church begins to function as a museum)? Its specific power or sacredness is relocated to a general aesthetic realm.

It is important to stress the historicity of this art-culture system. It has not reached its final form: the positions and values assigned to collectable artefacts have changed and will continue to do so. Moreover a synchronic diagram cannot represent zones of contest and transgression except as movements or ambiguities among fixed poles. As we shall see at the end of this chapter, much current 'tribal art' participates in the regular art-culture traffic *and* in traditional spiritual contexts not accounted for by the system (Coe 1986). Whatever its contested domains, though, generally speaking the system still confronts any collected exotic object with a stark alternative between a second home in an ethnographic or an aesthetic milieu. The modern ethnographic museum and the art museum or private art collection have developed separate, complementary modes of classification. In the former a work of 'sculpture' is displayed along with other objects of similar function or in proximity to objects from the same cultural group, including utilitarian artefacts such as spoons, bowls or spears. A mask or statue may be grouped with formally dissimilar objects and explained as part of a ritual or institutional complex. The names of individual sculptors are unknown or suppressed. In art museums a sculpture is identified as the

creation of an individual: Rodin, Giacometti, Barbara Hepworth. Its place in everyday cultural practices (including the market) is irrelevant to its essential meaning. Whereas in the ethnographic museum the object is culturally or humanly 'interesting', in the art museum it is primarily 'beautiful' or 'original'. It was not always thus.

Elizabeth Williams (1985) has traced a revealing chapter in the shifting history of these discriminations. In nineteenth-century Paris it was difficult to conceive of pre-Columbian artefacts as fully 'beautiful'. A prevailing naturalist aesthetic saw *ars Americana* as grotesque or crude. At best pre-Columbian work could be assimilated into the category of the antiquity and appreciated through the filter of Viollet-le-duc's medievalism. Williams shows how Mayan and Incan artefacts, their status uncertain, migrated between the Louvre, the Bibliothèque Nationale, the Musée Guimet and (after 1878) the Trocadéro, where they seemed at last to find an ethnographic home in an institution that treated them as scientific evidence. The Trocadéro's first directors, Ernest-Theodore Hamy and Rémy Verneau, showed scant interest in their aesthetic qualities.

The 'beauty' of much non-western 'art' is a recent discovery. Before the twentieth century many of the same objects were collected and valued, but for different reasons. In the early modern period their rarity and strangeness were prized. The 'cabinet of curiosities' jumbled everything together, with each individual object standing metonymically for a whole region or population. The collection was a microcosm, a 'summary of the universe' (Pomian 1978). The eighteenth century introduced a more serious concern for taxonomy and for the elaboration of complete series. Collecting was increasingly the concern of scientific naturalists (Feest 1984:90), and objects were valued because they exemplified an array of systematic categories: food, clothing, building materials, agricultural tools, weapons (of war, of the hunt), and so forth. E.F.Jomard's ethnographic classifications and A.H.L. F.Pitt Rivers's typological displays were mid-nineteenth-century culminations of this taxonomic vision (Chapman 1985:24–5). Pitt Rivers's typologies featured developmental sequences. By the end of the century evolutionism had come to dominate arrangements of exotic artefacts. Whether objects were presented as antiquities, arranged geographically or by society, spread in panoplies, or arranged in realistic 'life groups' and dioramas, a story of human development was told. The object had ceased to be primarily an exotic 'curiosity' and was now a source of information entirely integrated in the universe of Western Man (Dias 1985:378–9). The value of exotic objects was their ability to testify to the concrete reality of an earlier stage of human Culture, a common past confirming Europe's triumphant present.

With Franz Boas and the emergence of relativist anthropology an emphasis on placing objects in specific lived contexts was consolidated. The 'cultures' thus represented could either be arranged in a modified evolutionary series or dispersed in synchronous 'ethnographic presents'. The latter were times neither of antiquity nor of the twentieth century but rather representing the 'authentic' context of the collected objects, often just prior to their collection or display. Both collector and salvage ethnographer could claim to be the last to rescue 'the real thing'. Authenticity, as we shall see, is produced by removing objects and customs from their current historical situation—a present-becoming-future.

With the consolidation of twentieth-century anthropology, artefacts contextualized ethnographically were valued because they served as objective 'witnesses' to the total multidimensional life of a culture (Jamin 1982:89–95; 1985). Simultaneously with new developments in art and literature, as Picasso and others began to visit the 'Troca' and to

accord its tribal objects a non-ethnographic admiration, the proper place of non-western objects was again thrown in question. In the eyes of a triumphant modernism some of these artefacts at least could be seen as universal masterpieces. The category of 'primitive art' emerged.

This development introduced new ambiguities and possibilities in a changing taxonomic system. In the mid-nineteenth century pre-Columbian or tribal objects were grotesques or antiquities. By 1920 they were cultural witnesses and aesthetic masterpieces. Since then a controlled migration has occurred between these two institutionalized domains. The boundaries of art and science, the aesthetic and the anthropological, are not permanently fixed. Indeed anthropology and fine arts museums have recently shown signs of interpenetration. For example the Hall of Asian Peoples at the New York Museum of Natural History reflects the 'boutique' style of display, whose objects could never seem out of place as 'art' on the walls or coffee-tables of middle-class living-rooms. In a complementary development downtown the Museum of Modern Art has expanded its permanent exhibit of cultural artefacts: furniture, automobiles, home appliances and utensils—even hanging from the ceiling, like a Northwest Coast war canoe, a much-admired bright green helicopter.

While the object systems of art and anthropology are institutionalized and powerful, they are not immutable. The categories of the beautiful, the cultural and the authentic have changed and are changing. Thus it is important to resist the tendency of collections to be self-sufficient, to suppress their own historical, economic and political processes of production (see Haacke 1975; Hiller 1979). Ideally the history of its own collection and display should be a visible aspect of any exhibition. It had been rumoured that the Boas Room of Northwest Coast artefacts in the American Museum of Natural History was to be refurbished, its style of display modernized. Apparently (or so one hopes) the plan has been abandoned, for this atmospheric, dated hall exhibits not merely a superb collection but a moment in the history of collecting. The widely publicized Museum of Modern Art show of 1984, "Primitivism" in Twentieth Century Art, made apparent (as it celebrated) the precise circumstance in which certain ethnographic objects suddenly became works of universal art. More historical self-consciousness in the display and viewing of non-western objects can at least jostle and set in motion the ways in which anthropologists, artists and their publics collect themselves and the world.

At a more intimate level, rather than grasping objects only as cultural signs and artistic icons (Guidieri and Pellizzi 1981), we can return to them, as James Fenton does, their lost status as fetishes—not specimens of a deviant or exotic 'fetishism' but *our own* fetishes.⁵ This tactic, necessarily personal, would accord to things in collections the power to fixate rather than simply the capacity to edify or inform. African and Oceanian artefacts could once again be *objets sauvages*, sources of fascination with the power to disconcert. Seen in their resistance to classification they could remind us of our *lack* of self-possession, of the artifices we employ to gather a world around us.

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NOTES

- 1 On collecting as a strategy of desire see the highly suggestive catalogue (Hainard and Kaehr 1982) of an exhibition entitled 'Collections Passion' at the Musée d'Ethnographie, Neuchâtel, June to December 1981. This analytic collection of collections was a *tour de force* of reflexive muscology. On collecting and desire see also Donna Haraway's brilliant analysis (1985) of the American Museum of Natural

History, American manhood, and the threat of decadence between 1908 and 1936. Her work suggests that the passion to collect, preserve and display is articulated in gendered ways that are historically specific. Beaucage, Gomilia and Vallée (1976) offer critical meditations on the ethnographer's complex experience of objects.

- 2 Walter Benjamin's essay 'Unpacking my library' (1969:59–68) provides the view of a reflective devotee. Collecting appears as an art of living intimately allied with memory, with obsession, with the salvaging of order from disorder. Benjamin sees (and takes a certain pleasure in) the precariousness of the subjective space attained by the collection. Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memories. More than that: the chance, the fate that suffuse the past before my eyes are conspicuously present in the accustomed confusion of these books. For what else is this collection but a disorder to which habit has accommodated itself to such an extent that it can appear as order? You have all heard of people whom the loss of their books has turned into invalids, of those who in order to acquire them became criminals. These are the very areas in which any order is a balancing act of extreme precariousness. (1969:60)
- 3 My understanding of the role of the fetish as a mark of otherness in western intellectual history—from DeBrosses to Marx, Freud and Deleuze—owes a great deal to the largely unpublished work of William Pietz; see 'The problem of the fetish, 1' (1985).
- 4 For 'hard' articulations of ethnographic culturalism and aesthetic formalism see Sieber 1971; Price and Price 1980; Vogel 1985; and Rubin 1984. The first two works argue that art can be understood (as opposed to merely appreciated) only in its original context. Vogel and Rubin assert that aesthetic qualities transcend their original local articulation, that 'masterpieces' appeal to universal or at least transcultural human sensibilities. For a glimpse of how the often incompatible categories of 'aesthetic excellence', 'use', 'rarity', 'age', and so on are debated in the exercise of assigning authentic value to tribal works, see the richly inconclusive symposium on 'Authenticity in African Art' organized by the journal *African Arts* (Willett *et al* 1976).
- 5 For a post-Freudian positive sense of the fetish see Leiris 1929, 1946; for fetish theory's radical possibilities see Pietz 1985, which draws on Deleuze; and for a repentant semiologist's perverse sense of the fetish (the 'punctum') as a place of strictly personal meaning unformed by cultural codes (the 'studium') see Barthes 1980. Gomila (1976) rethinks ethnographic material culture from some of these surrealist-psychoanalytic perspectives.

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