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Ongoing Movements in the Museum Exhibition 2014

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Ongoing Movements in the Museum Exhibition 2014

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1 Introduction

This paper outlines recent movements in the field of museum exhibition.

At the turn of the last century and the millennium, major museums in the world refurbished or newly created their African Galleries one after another within a short period of one and a half years. In September 1999, the Ethnological Museum in Berlin opened its new African Gallery, entitled “Africa: Art and Culture.” In December of the same year, Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History renewed the African exhibition hall and opened it under the title of “African Voices.” And in April 2000, a new gallery dedicated to the arts of “Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas” was opened to the public in the Louvre in Paris, with the African exhibition occupying the largest space. And most recently, having incorporated the former Museum of Mankind, the British Museum created the Sainsbury African Galleries in the main building in March 2000.

The approaches adopted by each museum are somewhat different from each other. The Ethnological Museum in Berlin and the British Museum created their exhibitions based on their historical collections. The exhibition of the Smithsonian was based on newly collected materials. The Louvre’s exhibits comprise a part of the collections of the Musée de l’Homme and Musée national des Arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie, as well as some new national acquisitions. The exhibitions of the Ethnological Museum in Berlin and that of the British Museum are both entitled “Africa: Art and culture,” and actually focus on both areas of art and culture. As for the orientation towards art and culture, perhaps the exhibition of the Smithsonian and that of the Louvre are two extremes. While the Smithsonian’s exhibition is deeply ethnographic, the Louvre’s exhibition is purely aesthetic. They are also quite different from each other with regard to the involvement of African people.

The Smithsonian’s new African exhibition is a unique exhibition in that it was developed with substantial input from Africans and African Americans; it was developed in collaboration with a group called the Extended Team that was composed of more than 100 Africans and African-Americans. The new exhibition with the title “African Voices,” which was completed after six years of work, indeed resounds with the voices of Africans and African Americans.

By contrast, in the Louvre’s new “Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas” gallery, the “universal” aesthetic standards dominate the space. The gallery was a pre-figuration of a new Musée du quai Branly, which opened in June 2006 as a museum to display masterpieces of the arts of “Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the

Americas.” The Louvre has introduced African or Oceanic arts for the first time. In opening the new exhibition, the Louvre boasted of its achievement by stating “Their beauty is no longer judged solely by the aesthetic standards of the Western and Indo-European world. Arbitrary exclusion is no longer acceptable and what André Malraux called the ‘frame of reference for art’ has been upset.”

It should not be considered just a coincidence that those major museums renewed or newly established the African exhibitions as part of the national projects. Africa, which was once called “primitive,” and whose large population has been incorporated into Western societies, is posing the most challenging question on how best to deal with each others’ cultural differences in the new century/millennium. Representation of Africa is now the central issue especially in the museum world.

Our Museum, the National Museum of Ethnology, Japan (Minpaku), is also refurbishing the entire permanent exhibition at the moment. Although we are delayed slightly in starting the renewal, the project can be placed in the same category as the abovementioned movements among major world museums.

2 Renewal of permanent galleries at the National Museum of Ethnology, Japan (Minpaku)

Minpaku opened to the public in 1977 (Figure 1). More than 30 years have passed since then. During this period, the world has changed significantly. Academic paradigms as well as exhibition paradigms have also undergone major shifts. Under such circumstances, we had decided to refurbish the entire permanent exhibition at our museum, beginning with the Africa and West Asia Galleries, which opened in March 2009. Following these two galleries, we have been refurbishing basically two galleries every year; Music and Language galleries in 2010, Oceania and the Americas galleries in 2011, Europe gallery and Information Zone in 2012, Japan gallery in 2013, and the new China and Korea galleries opened in March 2014. The completion of the refurbishing project is scheduled to be in 2016, requiring a further



Figure 1 National Museum of Ethnology, Japan.

two years until completion.

In realizing the new exhibition, we clarified the basic or key concepts:

- While making much of cultural diversity, the exhibition should demonstrate the connection between the respective region and the other parts of the world, including Japan.
- The exhibition should demonstrate the contemporary situation as a result of historical development, rather than being based on the tradition / modernity, before / after axis.
- The exhibition should portray the contemporary life of people and create empathy that we are all living together in the same era.
- The exhibition should be realized through collaboration with those who are being exhibited (= owners of the culture represented).

As for the exhibition of the Africa Gallery, of which I was in charge, we invited museum professionals from 7 African countries to be advisors to our projects. While visiting those countries together and conducting on-site surveys of their cultural heritage, we gathered together in Japan every year to discuss the plan of the exhibition during the 3-year project between 2005 and 2008. The new exhibition can be considered as a platform of the academic network created through the Project.

Our new exhibition of Africa is composed of major five sections (Figure 2): Excavating History, Work, Rest, Adornment, and Prayer with an additional section called Africa Today. Among these exhibits, I put particular energy into realizing the “Work” section. In the past African exhibition at Minpaku, Africa was represented according to the type of subsistence economy of the societies such as hunters-and-gathers, pastoralists, and agricultural peoples. However, in contemporary Africa, even in the so-called agricultural society, most men go to town after the harvest and are engaged in wage labor for the sake of cash income. Otherwise they cannot sustain their family’s needs. So can we call their society simply “an agricultural society”? In the new exhibition, therefore, we focused on individuals with their names, and installed life-size panels that display each individual’s portrait, the tool with which he/she works, and a video or text message that tells us what he/she thinks about his/her occupation. The exhibits demonstrate the lives of the people who are living together with us in the same era. I am inwardly confident that this method of display will suggest a new direction for ethnographic exhibition that promotes empathy as we all are contemporaries.

3 Paradigm shift between the 1960s and 1980s

Apart from the renewal of permanent galleries, we have also been holding special or temporary exhibitions that are to be held twice or three times a year. Each special exhibition has its own theme, according to the agendas that academic staff members

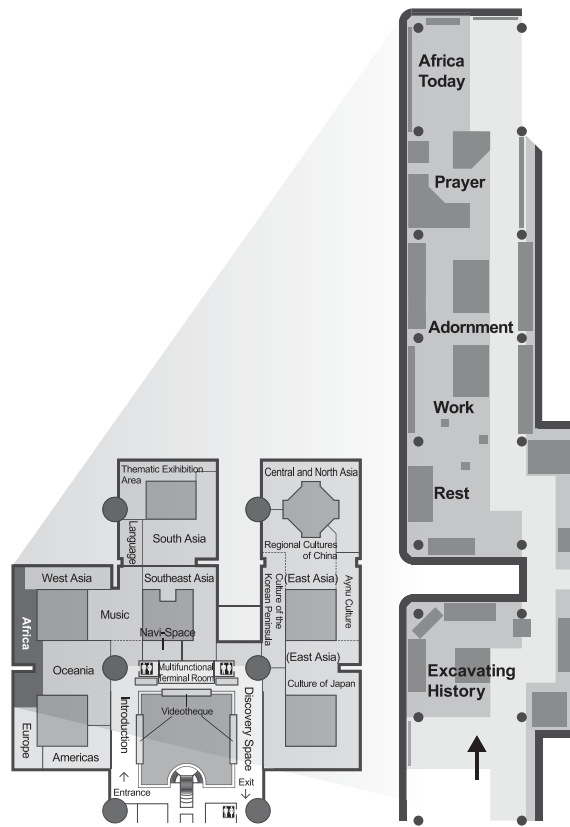


Figure 2 Exhibition Sections of the new exhibition of Africa.

of Minpaku have attempted to challenge. Personally I have been curating several exhibitions that try to question and overcome the existing walls or barriers built between art museums and ethnographic or cultural museums, art and culture, art history and anthropology. In fact, these trials parallel the ongoing movements that are now underway in the field of anthropology and art.

When we look back, for the most part of the 20th century, art has been considered something far removed from daily life and an autonomous entity. It is the art museum which is composed of white cubes that has been endorsing this notion of art. On the other hand, anthropology which defines itself as a discipline about people's life, being based on the idea of cultural relativism, either avoids applying the term "art," which is originated in western society, to other cultures or claims that there exist similar aesthetic values to those of Western societies. In both cases, as far as art is concerned, anthropology has been considering art and artistic phenomena within the framework of art created in Western societies.

However, after the big paradigm shift we experienced between the 1960s and

1980s, which some call the linguistic turn and others call the cultural turn, art is not considered a genre that is autonomous and backed up by universal aesthetic criteria any more, and it became clear that art is embedded deeply in its social and cultural setting, regardless of whether it is western or non-western. The idea that anthropology, or science in general, demonstrates the objective truth has been doubted and nowadays it is commonly held that science is a form of knowledge about the world from a certain viewpoint for a particular purpose determined by the condition of the society and the historical moment. Thus the distinction between art and anthropology, science and art, subjectivity and objectivity, the West and the non-West, has been blurred and invalidated.

It might well be said that art and anthropology share the same inclination in that it is a way of understanding the world and at the same time a way of expressing one's understanding of the world. The difference is simply in the media; in the case of anthropology, the media is ethnography, and in the case of art, art works.

Recently, in the field of anthropology there is a refreshed movement of studies of materiality which places art into social settings; among them are Appadurai's "The social life of things," Daniel Miller's various writings about commodities in mass consumption society, and Alfred Gell's discussion about the agency of art. In conjunction with these movements, there is a renewed interest in art among anthropological disciplines.

On the other hand, in the world of art, there has appeared a number of artists who create their work through fieldwork or community-based activities, and thus critically or uncritically adopt the methodology and approach of anthropology. Miwon Kwon calls these new trends the "ethnographic turn" of the artists.

Having gone through the hot debate about primitivism in 1980, now art and anthropology are growing closer as never before. Some of the special exhibitions at Minpaku, in which I was involved, have actually played leading roles in this trend through the media of exhibition.

4 Special or temporary exhibitions at the National Museum of Ethnology, Japan

4.1 Special exhibition "Image of Other Cultures"

The first challenge was made by a special exhibition held at our museum in 1997 under the title of "Image of Other Cultures" [Yoshida and Mack 1997]. It was a joint project with the British Museum, and I curated the exhibition with Dr. John Mack who was the keeper of the Ethnography Department at the British Museum. By means of this exhibition, which presented a number of objects mainly from the British Museum and the National Museum of Ethnology, Japan, we attempted to trace the "entanglement" of gazes as it had occurred in museum displays in modern times, by which I mean how the West, Africa, Oceania, and Japan have viewed one

another. To most people, this may have seemed an unusual combination. Africa and Oceania have often been described in terms of two contrasting images as Wilderness and Paradise. Cultures in these two areas have been regarded as “alien”, and the farthest removed from the culture of the West. It is from these regions that, commonly, ethnologists, anthropologists, and ethnographic museums have collected objects and information.

On reflection, Japan is similar to Africa and Oceania in having been seen by the West as an “alien” culture. However, the Japanese have come to see themselves as part of the Western world and they have adopted a Western viewpoint toward other cultures, regarding them as exotic or alien. The exhibition “Images of Other Cultures” was an attempt to shed some light on the Japanese view of “other cultures”, as well as to gain awareness of the gaze we direct at others. The exhibition was held at Minpaku and then at Setagaya Art museum. By holding the same exhibition at an art museum and at an ethnological museum, we also tried to review the distinction between art museums and ethnological museums, art and culture, art and artifact, and the West and the non-West.

The point of departure of this investigative exhibition was a reproduction of the ethnographic gallery of the British Museum as it was in 1910, represented with artifacts from Africa, Oceania and Japan (Figure 3). While the initial room showed how the West viewed other cultures, the second room presented aspects of other cultures from which the West deliberately averted its eyes. Presented here were the new cultures created in Africa, Oceania and Japan by incorporating Western elements. These two rooms represented an attempt to reassess the culture of Africa, Oceania, and Japan as cultures that have both observed the West and been observed by it. In the third room, we traced how Japan has adopted a Western view of African and Oceanic cultures as its own, through a variety of media such as newspaper reporting, books, cartoons, films, and television productions. The last room, Room 4, was entitled “Border Crossing Cultures Today”. While the peoples of the world share many of the same cultural elements, at the same time they are creating individualized cultures. This is an essential characteristic of the present era. In the last room, we introduced hybrid art forms to represent this. Kiosks from Africa, Oceania, Europe and Japan were also displayed as symbols of globally shared cultural elements. Together with Ghanaian coffins in the shape of a Mercedes Benz or a fish, both of which are made after the character of the dead, and battle-shields with the catchphrase for an all-night party “Six 2 Six,” we also displayed works of modern Western art. Since the “discovery of African art” by Picasso and Matisse at the beginning of the 20th century, the development of “modern” art, centered on the West, has incorporated both directly and indirectly non-Western forms, either as a motif or as a source of inspiration. The work by Rauschenberg displayed here, “ROCI Japan,” is an example using casual Japanese scenes as motifs. On the other



Figure 3 Reproduction of the ethnographic gallery (Oceania) of the British Museum as it was in 1910.

hand, in the works by Max Ernst, “Janus,” and by Joan Miro, “Bird Figure,” there are evident connections to African masks and carvings. However, this tendency to create one’s own world of expression while incorporating elements of other cultures is not something only seen in modern art. The same tendency can be recognized as something also shared by the contemporary designs of the African coffins, the Oceanic shields, presented here. Given this, we need to ask why we call only one side “art” and the other “ethnographic materials”. Why do we collect one in modern art museums and store the other in ethnological museums?

This exhibition was held at our Museum, Minpaku, an ethnological museum, in 1997, and at Seytagaya Art museum, an art museum in Tokyo, in 1998. The attempt to rethink our view of other cultures must question the conventional division between art museums that mainly contain “art” as defined by the West and ethnographic museums that contain non-Western “artifacts”. In fact, to break down the wall that has been constructed between ethnographic museums and art museums is an important condition of our project. Once we eliminate the distinction between modern art and ethnographic specimens or ethnic art, art and non-art, we can put into parentheses both the view that art is the expression of a genius separated from society and the view that products tied to social needs are not art. That would make it possible to encounter the world afresh, seeing the variety of connections between people living on the earth and the diversity of their expressive acts. As a whole, we tried to make ourselves more fully aware that we all co-exist in the present world, and that we have a shared future.

4.2 Special exhibition “Self & Other: Portraits from Asia and Europe”

Another exhibition that I curated in 2008-2009 under the title “Self & Other: Portraits from Asia and Europe” can be considered a project realized as an extension of the “Images of Other Cultures” exhibition [Yoshida and Durrans et al., 2008].

“Self & Other: Portraits from Asia and Europe” is a travelling exhibition, which has been created through a collaboration between museums and art museums in 18 countries in Asia and Europe, who are members of the Asia-Europe Museum Network (ASEMUS). I played the role of a co-coordinator on the Asian side, with Brian Durrans of the British Museum who did the same on the European side. This exhibition, ‘Portraits from Asia and Europe’, asked how people in Asia and Europe have understood the self and how they have accepted each other through the course of history. Shifts in such perception were traced through ‘portraits’, broadly understood. It was indeed a multi-vocal exhibition that contained various voices. The exhibition was held in 3 cities in Japan between 2008 and 2009, in London in 2011, and in Manila in 2012. In Japan, especially in Osaka and in Kanagawa near Tokyo, the exhibition was held at two venues, one at an art museum and the other at an ethnological or a historical museum, under the same title, at the same time, during the same period (Figures 4 and 5). The challenge was another trial to question



Figure 4 Exhibition held in Osaka at National Museum of Ethnology.



Figure 5 Exhibition held in Osaka at the National Museum of Art.

and overcome the differentiation between art museums and cultural museums, art and culture, art history and anthropology. Through the exhibition project, we tried to demonstrate that the distinction between art museums and cultural museums does not reside in the difference of objects on display but in the approach to objects.

4.3 Special exhibition “The Power of Images: The National Museum of Ethnology Collection”

Now, at this very moment, another trial is underway at our museum. It is an exhibition entitled “The Power of Images: The National Museum of Ethnology Collection.”

The history of the human being is a history of images. Images preceded writing and can also be seen as the origin of language. Visualizing the state of the world through shapes and colors is a basic human endowment.

Are there universal features of the creation and perception of images that can be appreciated by all human beings? This exhibition “The Power of Images” sets out to directly address this question. In the exhibition, we have carefully selected objects from the National Museum of Ethnology collection and attempted to join the viewer in experientially verifying whether or not there is a universal quality inherent in the sensations and effects that are aroused by images created by the human being.

The exhibition was jointly organized by Minpaku, and the National Art Center, Tokyo. It was held at the National Art Center, Tokyo, from 19 February 2014 to 9 June 2014. And the same exhibition was held at Minpaku in Osaka, from 11 September to 25 November, 2014.

As is clear from the organization or arrangement of the exhibition, the project again reconsiders some of the distinctions we take for granted, such as art and artifact, art museum and ethnology museum, art history and cultural anthropology, and Western and non-Western.

The exhibition starts with a corner called prologue where 100 masks from all corners of the world are on display (Figure 6). When we abruptly encounter a mask, our hearts begin to tremble and we become nearly frozen in place. Exposed to this overwhelming gaze, the image invariably seems to be pressing into our body. At this point, the gallery is transformed from a space to look at works (i.e., images) into an interactive place in which images and people see and are seen by each other.

Section 1 is entitled “Images of the Invisible.” People have long given forms to things that they cannot see, and attempted to control their power through these images. In this section, we examine the figures of gods and spirits that have arisen out of this human desire. People tend to make images of gods with forms that resemble their own bodies to establish a link between the gods and their own lives. The actions of those who possess invisible powers and the deeds of heroes and



Figure 6 100 masks from all corners of the world were on display in prologue section at the National Art Center, Tokyo.

ancestors from the past are recounted in our stories and also incorporated into images. Attempting to visualize a narrative is essentially an act of portraying time. In this section, we take a wide-ranging look at various methods of depicting time throughout the world, including an illustrated biography of Buddha, a Christian icon, and tree-bark paintings of the Aboriginal Australians.

In the next section, “The Dynamics of Images,” we turn our attention to the functions and effects of images. Radiant or brilliantly colored things accentuate the wealth or authority of the owner. Mirrors or metals that are attached to the surface of a container protect its contents in the same way that silver or gold accessories and clothing covered with silver- or gold-threaded embroidery protects the body of the wearer. In that sense, we see a shared response to light and color that transcends cultural boundaries. On the other hand, tall objects, effectively establishing a link between the “heavens” and the terrestrial world, can be found in many different cultures. Images that stress height are used to guide the viewer’s gaze upward and send off dead souls or spirits to another world, or by contacting places in which gods are believed to dwell, provide them with a way of descending to Earth.

Section 3 is “Playing with Images.” Thus far, we have seen objects with some universal features in their meaning or message. However, not only do human beings create things with a specific objective in mind, they also take pleasure in the act of creating and appreciating images. For example, the appliqués made by Kuba women in the Congo supersede the practical aim of patching up a hole. The women realize a succession of new designs and give a name to each of the appliqué patterns. If in looking at these light-hearted patterns, we imagine the enjoyment that must have

gone into creating them, the images can be said to have a common effect and the ability to transcend cultures. In this Section, we present objects from around the world that were both enjoyable for the creator to make and pleasant as images for the viewers.

Section 4 is entitled “The Translation of Images.” New customs and images that have emerged through movements, contact, and exchanges between people, objects, and information can be identified in every geographical area and historical period. In this Section, we focus on hybrid forms such as the patterns of Indonesian batiks and the designs of battle flags made by the Fante people of Ghana as a product of cultural exchange.

The last section of the exhibition, Epilogue is entitled “Found Images.” The images that people create are not necessarily accepted and interpreted in the same manner in every region or culture. Not only are they sometimes misunderstood or used in different ways, they are sometimes imbued with completely new meanings and values. In the Epilogue, we display various daily utensils using the installation method of contemporary art. Seen in this setting, objects that would normally be classified as “artifacts” are instantly transformed into “works of art.” The final section has been set as a place for the audience to re-examine the relationship between images and human beings.

As I mentioned before, this exhibition is an attempt to cross barriers set up between categories like the art museum and the ethnological museum, art and artifacts, the West and the non-West, and self and other. And it is significant in this context that the collection of the National Museum of Ethnology places pivotal importance on Japanese culture, the culture of the society of which it is a part, unlike Western museums, which specialize in “other cultures.” It is a collection with global scale, bringing all world cultures, including that of Europe, within its range of vision. This exhibition is not a display of images or forms created by “others” who are differentiated from “us.” Rather, it highlights the diversity and commonality of images and forms created by all “us” human beings. Expressing this viewpoint was our main concern in designing the exhibition. That is why we have consistently used the word images rather than the word art in developing the theme.

5 Conclusion

If we use the term coined by the art historian Duncan Cameron, the refurbishment project of the permanent exhibition and the development from “Images of Other Cultures” to “Self & Other: Portraits from Asia and Europe” and “The Power of Images” was indeed the process of realizing a museum as a “forum.” According to Cameron, museums have two options open to them, to become either a temple or a forum. The museum as a temple is a place where people come to worship “treasures” with pre-established value. The museum as a forum is a place where people can

encounter the unknown which generates discussion and debate. Cameron also writes, “The forum is where the battles are fought. The temple is where the victors rest. The former is process, the latter is product” [Cameron 1974: 199]. Museums in the world, including our museums, are now increasingly assuming the forum role: a role in which participants are not only the exhibitor and the audience, but also representatives of the culture that is being exhibited.

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