Paideuma 60:231–245 (2014)

WHERE OBJECTS UNFOLD THEIR AURA*
New galleries at the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum

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> The very existence of a museum [...]
> carries a promise that the world can
> in principle be understood
> (Durrans 1994:127).

The renewal of the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum (RJM) was triggered by a near disaster. Having escaped serious problems during the Second World War, the flooding of its storage and basement areas in the 1990s caused a crisis which persuaded the city to provide the collection with a new, much upgraded location in its centre. The architectural result has a self-effacing quality. From the outside, it looks like a government or administrative office – a series of cubes with glass walkways – suited to Cologne's post-war architecture. It is imposing but neither grand (in the manner of nineteenth-century ethnographic museums) nor grandiose (in the way of more recent ones). This may mystify the visitor somewhat: the neutral façade clad with traditionally fired bricks divulges little, though a large window allows a peek of what is inside (Fig. 1). This window on the world works in both directions and, within, forms a well-judged architectural intervention for the gallery, whose theme is the museum as a showcase and cultural archive ("The world in a showcase: museum"). Structurally it allows visitors to look from the outside in (to a typological display and an 'exploded' Trobriand Islands yam house) and from the inside out (to the street and the traffic). It is a play on reflected perspectives, where you see 'others' as 'self' and 'self' as 'others'.

Projects such as the RJM are significant and complex undertakings with diverse participation, the given for any museum is the partial nature of its collections (using 'partial' to fully exploit its double meaning). Chris Gosden remarks '[c]olonial culture was a profoundly material culture' (2000:232). Colonial geopolitics and governmental rationalities are the usual pre-conditions of nineteenth- and twentieth-century ethno-

* This title refers to a quote from the catalogue of the new Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum: 'Each theme is developed in a room where the objects unfold their aura' (Engelhard 2010:12).

** I would like to thank Jutta Engelhard and Klaus Schneider for welcoming me to the redeveloped museum and extending all courtesies possible to me to facilitate this review. Jutta Engelhard and Larissa Förster took part in lengthy and animated conversations during its preparation, and both the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum and Larissa Förster provided photographs.

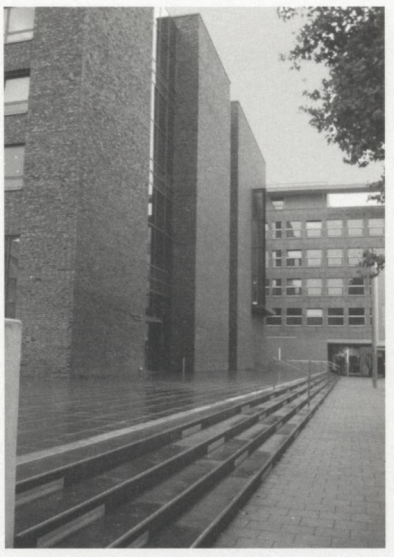

Figure 1: RJM from the outside (photo: H.L.)

graphic museum collections, their exhibitionary practices and earlier civilising missions (Bennett 1995, ter Keurs 2007). How anthropology museums introduce, explore and resolve the dilemmas and potentials arising from this history is a subject of great interest (Phillips 2011, Shelton 2006).

This review is a series of reflections on the manner in which the RJM has risen to the challenge. It is framed by a broad appreciation of the RJM's energetic and enthusiastic response. Brian Durrans (2012) argues that the logics of anthropology and museums are not always aligned. Anthropology is a 'loosely integrated, fuzzy-edged', generative discipline largely rooted in the academy but practised outside it, while museums are collecting institutions whose public expressions are concrete (though sometimes temporary) and ultimately syncretic (Durrans 2012:197). Museums generate knowledge but, not of the same kind nor in the same manner as anthropology and something of Durrans' suggestion of divergent agendas between the academy and the museum surfaces in the new RJM displays.

Parts to a whole

To create a series of quasi-permanent galleries in a new museum is in essence a holistic enterprise (Durrans 1994:125). In the anthropological field, this conventionally implies that the selection of objects will be used to evoke (and evidence) other systems of meaning, which though distant may, through well thought-out interpretation and translation, resemble those closer to the visitor. When addressing the range of cultural phenomena evident in humanity and present within museum collections, the question for anthropology museums is whether to follow a geographical or a thematic rationale. These are, in essence, equivalent forms of museological calculus used to establish a dynamic equilibrium between the potentially opposing forces of integration and differentiation, so that cross-cultural similarities and cultural differences ultimately combine to make an integrated representational whole.[1] Faced with this inevitable choice, RJM decided

[1] Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's observations are helpful here. She notes that exhibitions are the 'artifacts of our disciplines' (1991:434) and that the gamut of recognisable approaches have self-imposed codifications which serve to constitute objects and subjects (1991:434). The task is to understand how they operate and how they are deployed (Lidchi 1997).

to eschew a geographical ordering on the basis that this promises a comprehensiveness that is impossible, generally misleading and increasingly critiqued as confirmation that museums recreate the anthropological subject as unchanging, distant and localised.[2] The RJM opted for an overarching 'comparative cultural approach' entitled "Peoples in their worlds". This is carefully worded to allow for universality ('peoples') and relativism ('in their worlds'). It proposes 'the equality and validity of all cultures' while engendering a thoughtful view of the vantage point of the visiting Europeans (Engelhard 2010:11–13). This overarching idea allows for cultural juxtaposition, explorations of universal phenomena and considerations of interconnectedness and mutual influence. It transforms the museum into a 'place of encounter, dialogue and social participation' (Engelhard 2010:11–13).

The RJM has created galleries according to a multi-layered thematic structure. If "Peoples in their worlds" is the unifying concept overall, the suite of galleries is divided according to two sub-themes: "Comprehending the world" (a series of four galleries) and "Shaping the world" (a series of five galleries). The galleries are at times sub-divided into multiple spaces which gives the visitor experience a constrained fluidity. This is encapsulated by the idea of the *parcours*: the pathway devised by curators and scenographers for navigating galleries and ideas. The galleries unfold in a linear fashion over three floors: positioned in parallel corridors, with crossings at key points and access to two staircases. The galleries along the *parcours* are bookended by two spaces – the "Prologue" and the "Epilogue" – which introduce and recap on the thematic structure of the RJM re-display. There are also two transitional (liminal) spaces that announce significant changes of intellectual direction, one overt and one tacit. On the first floor, a small space (called "Doors") acts as a metaphorical and actual threshold. This ushers in a shift from galleries that consider 'ways of seeing' other cultures (collecting, anthropology, racism, art) to those that represent their lived reality (through domestic spaces, or clothing and adornment). On the second floor, another space – white, padded, sonorous – transfers the visitor from galleries dealing with the 'real' world to those dealing with 'other' worlds: death, the afterlife, religion, ritual masking and performance.

Scenography and experience

The RJM has a luxury of space (3,600 m^2): these are big galleries with high ceilings and few windows. There are large set pieces – either objects or multi-media installations – that are visually striking and, beyond this, appeal to the wider human sensorium. The visual is addressed in manifold ways: *mise-en-scène*, light, colour, photography and film. However, RJM does not solely privilege 'the modernist and colonial empowerment of visual inspection' (Edwards, Gosden and Phillips 2006:2) or ocular-centrism. The

[2] Engelhard (2010:11). See Phillips (2002, 2007).

RJM galleries use smell, touch and sound to create an active experience (Engelhard 2010:10–14). These techniques are at times so well integrated that you overlook the artifices innate to museum representation (Lidchi 2013). A few illustrations might make this clearer.

The three spaces that constitute the gallery "Encounter and appropriation: crossing borders" are dense in their collecting focus. The first space is interactively rich, designed to look like a small library. Here the centre-piece is a multi-media book whose pages trigger projections on collecting and museums. This is captivating and ingenious because each page augurs something new: from citations by post-colonial critics discussing (and largely supporting) the museum's role to a page on parallels between diasporas (those historically leaving Germany and those currently arriving).[3] The presence of the book and the theatrical presentation of the library, including further 'publications' (alphabetically arranged large pull-out features on explorers) and 'drawers' of transnational goods (oranges, ginger, violets etc.), represents an enlightened culture of collecting and exploration, and rationalizes its transnational effects. Immediately to the left is a room dedicated to Wilhelm Joest (1852–1897) the founding patron of the museum.[4] Here the presentation is striking: objects are positioned against large maps which seamlessly locate them and inform one of their date of collection; crate-like horizontal cases are stacked up, stamped with place of origin containing items labelled with vintage style tags; finally bilingual listening posts recite Joest's diary entries, adjacent to the items he described (Fig. 2). The visual plenitude, detailed exploration and collector's voice encourage a slippage of identity: one feels the presence of the collector and identifies with his curiosity and activities. The experience is enjoyable, although there is something double-edged about it. On the one hand, it focuses attention on well-provenanced collections, highlighting their uniqueness and the micro-histories of entanglement that surface through a particular kind of (biographical) research of object and subject (Phillips 2011:19). On the other hand, critical messages are neutralized because the greatest enthusiasm is reserved for the passion, knowledge and philanthropic instinct of collectors and explorers, examining how they have ultimately benefitted our lives.

A less ambivalently coded coming together of the varied technologies of display and interpretation occurs in the gallery "The staged farewell: death and the afterlife" (Fig. 3). This perfectly proportioned monochrome gallery about death and the afterlife is memorable for several reasons. Foremost are the two resplendent funerary sculptures from Bali. The recently commissioned four-metre high Balinese bull-shaped coffin and lotus throne (*padmasana*) are the gallery's icons which declare themselves boldly and

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3 The manner in which RJM addresses diasporas and belonging in the context of, and in response to, German discussions of multi-culturalism is intriguing and worthy of further analysis. The RJM's systematic inclusion of diasporas in Germany may be read as a genuine desire to widen its audience, as a means of signaling the greater relevance of anthropology and ways of increasing its impact in a city with a diverse population. See Huyssen (2003) on diaspora, also Durrans (2012) and Kreps (2003).

4 The third gallery looks at the collecting activities of Max von Oppenheim (1860–1946).

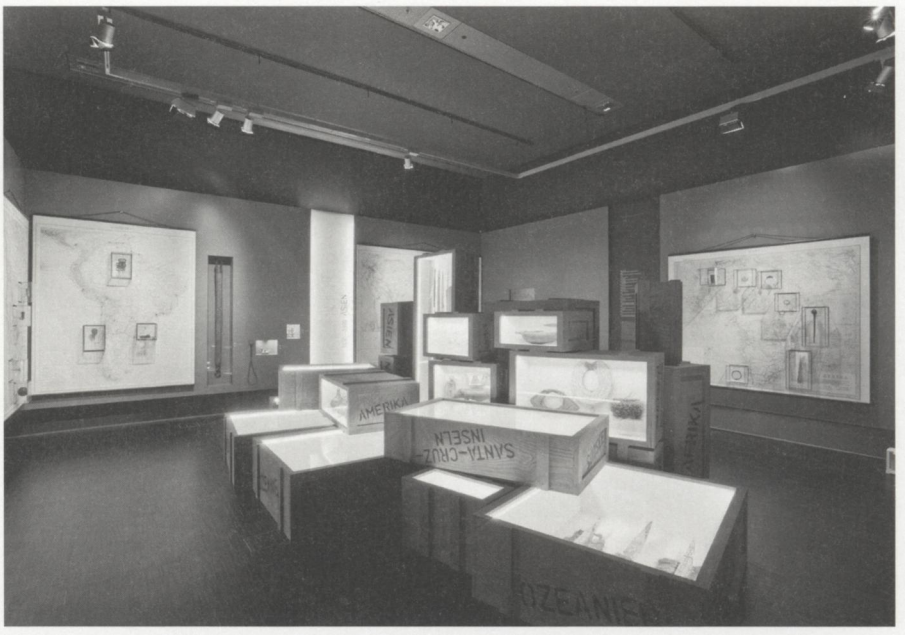

Figure 2: Gallery on the collector Wilhelm Joest (photo: Rheinisches Bildarchiv)

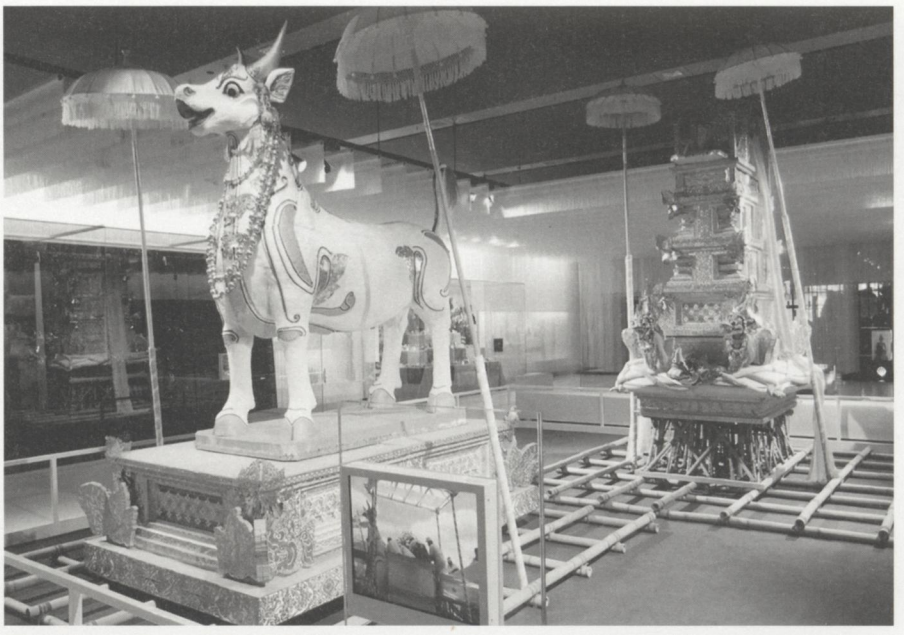

Figure 3: Balinese funerary sculptures in "The staged farewell: death and the afterlife" (photo: Larissa Förster)

actively. Such is their visual power that the visitor is inevitably drawn to watching the accompanying film explaining their meaning and use, which acts as a persuasive argument for why they are there. Walking from "The body as stage: clothes and adornment" galleries to "The staged farewell: death and the afterlife" entails a movement from darkness into light. The change of mood is prompted by the padded white floor and diaphanous curtains semi-obscuring ancestral figures. The floor alters the sense of walking and incorporates cases for Peruvian archaeology. There is a discomfort in having collections under one's feet, but these cases embed an understanding of the source of archaeological material and hint at the academic models used for their interpretation. That is, that the objects of archaeology are those placed by the living to accompany the dead, which subsequent generations have used, especially for non-literate cultures, to extrapolate the structures and processes of the living.

In each gallery the curators and scenographers have provided changing contexts for appreciation and manifold means of engagement, from the material to the digital. Modifications of light, tone and surroundings makes for a stimulating experience as visitors transit from one 'state' (space) to the other (something connoted by the use of 'passage', as in 'rites of passage'). Whether this constitutes, as might be hoped, an enlarging of visitor perception that includes a developing critical consciousness is an intriguing question.[5]

A PLAY OF PERSPECTIVES

In the twenty-first century ethnographic museums must address the criticisms of museum anthropology and the challenge of the 'new museology' of the 1980s, which advocates democratisation and participation for communities in all museums (Kreps 2003, Shelton 2006). The RJM displays and catalogue acknowledge the potential of these debates whose ultimate risk is debunking the idea of the museum entirely. The cluster of four galleries sitting under "Comprehending the world" is RJM's response. These acknowledge the processes by which objects come into museums and the manner in which they become part of academic knowledge formations: collecting, anthropology, racism/prejudice and art. They lay out distinct 'ways of seeing' as parallel propositions and their tone is explanatory.

In "The world in a showcase" the science of anthropology is represented as a relatively satisfactory means of knowing other cultures. The museum is shown to be research-focused; a scientific databank whose compendium of knowledge can legitimately hold aspirations to universality (Durrans 2012:204). Although the museum is referred to as a 'cultural archive', the use of archive has none of the ambivalent inflex-

[5] On the scenography of the RJM, see also the contribution by Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff in this collection.

Figure 4: Sisiu, figural headdress from Sulka, New Britain (ca. 1910) against its image with long contextual label (photo: Larissa Förster)

ions deriving from Foucauldian-inspired analyses (Bennett 1995) or Thomas Richards' (1993) writings on the Imperial archive. The fact that forms of classification have been repeatedly interpreted as methodologies of power is not quite dealt with. The large and impressive map which graphically accounts for the links between collecting and colonialism somewhat impassively illustrates an observation, made in the catalogue, that the 'period of intense ethnographic collecting is in the past' (Fenner 2010:76). The gallery "The distorted view: prejudices" is provocatively positioned between spaces dedicated to anthropology and art, but apparently n o t in order to create overt conceptual links between them (through evolutionary anthropology or Western perceptions of fetishism, for example). It is the most contained of all the galleries: a pod with small windows onto other galleries. Its source of evidence is visual and popular culture which though pervasive, is material and ephemeral, and a different category of object than that displayed elsewhere. Lastly, in the gallery "A matter of perception and opinion: art", there is clever technology that allows you to view figurative sculpture as a single object or (after pushing a button) against historical photographs with contextual interpretation (Fig. 4).[6] As a group the chosen sculptures are awe-inspiring, but the 'either/or' choice suggests objective equivalence between the paradigms of 'art' and 'artefact'. There is little hint of curatorial reflexivity on this point. Moreover, the choice of figurative sculpture tac-

6 On this gallery, see also the contribution by Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff in this collection.

itly confirms some of the primitivist fantasies (Phillips 2007:98) and preconceptions of Western collecting, that the authentic and the artistic in other cultures is necessarily inalienable and sacred (rather than the art of social function as discussed by Alfred Gell [1999]) with the corollary that a measure of its value as 'art' is its impact on Western Modernism. The gallery rehearses the different representational genres of anthropology and aesthetics, but it neither reflects on, nor presents the results of, the fertile intellectual terrain that has arisen as a result of the mutual engagement between anthropology and art history.[7]

The "Comprehending the world" galleries feel slightly abstract with the connections between them neither fully made nor ever resolved. The plural offering of perspectives operates in the spirit of deconstruction and self-examination. However, the result (with the very clear exception of the gallery on prejudice) is a gentle reification of the conventions being explicated: the importance of collecting, the authority of anthropology's discourse, the authenticity and inalienability of a work of art. Setting out the limiting conditions of knowledge is not the same as resolving to overcome them. Furthermore recreating them in a museum context may encourage a reconfirmation of the validity of the construct: to express a belief in its form, purpose and relevance. In the RJM it seems that, once Western perceptions are addressed, one can get on with the business of representing other cultures using more realistic techniques, including reconstruction. In the subsequent galleries (all sitting under "Shaping the world") it is not the collections but the multi-media installations – the dispersed 'current focus' (special media units) or 'Blickpunkte', the interactives and films – that critically engage revealing other ways of looking and understanding. In a significant way this de-materialises the museum's objects. Their role becomes primarily evidence or expression, a means to make 'real' the discourses and insights of anthropology as a diverse field. The "Comprehending the world" galleries could arm the visitor with a 'tool-kit' for critically understanding subsequent spaces. Instead they seem to stand on their own.

Pathways

An intriguing choice for the RJM is the use of the *parcours*. Some current thinking in the UK (where national museums are free) leans toward the argument that permanent galleries and temporary exhibitions invite distinctions in visiting behaviour.[8] In galleries visitors graze intellectually: they enter spaces, meander around, alight on particular objects or cases, read labels and move on. In exhibitions visitors find greater comfort in, and are more loyal to, the hierarchy of information and the imposed structure devised by the curators. They read information and look at objects according to the unfolding

7 See Phillips (2011) and Westermann (2005).

8 Mazda (2008), Slack, Francis and Edwards (2011)

elucidatory narrative. The RJM developed its displays with a view that they might be continuously renewed. Maybe a combination of the perceived lack of permanence, the thematic structure and the funnelling architecture favours a *parcours* as a directed technique of visitor exploration.

The *parcours* evinces the RJM's surety of its concept of comparative exposition, and the journey involves moments of sensory euphoria. A case in point are the wall-sized, slow-moving videos in the spaces that constitute the "Intermediary worlds: rituals" gallery. There is an echo of the work of the Glaswegian Turner Prize winner Douglas Gordon with film behaving like a series of atmospheric stills into which a fuller length video is embedded. These have a hypnotising effect, and visitors appear to dwell on them, even at the end of a long visit.[9] But there is a niggling tension between the pleasure of these moments and the regulated linear pathway of cultural comparison followed throughout the galleries. The restriction of the pre-determined sequence of galleries feels at odds with the view, sometimes expressed, that visitor's perceptions are being enlarged. Perhaps the *parcours* exemplifies some of the paradoxes of the RJM's comparative model. It is simultaneously a sensorial opening up and a channelling of critical consciousness: a pathway, initiated through deconstruction, which enchants but perhaps too frequently gives rise to the literal.

Presence, absence and voice

The clash between the experiential and the literal is especially marked in the "Shaping the world" gallery "Living spaces – ways of living: living places". This gallery is a cogitation in five parts which incorporates four domestic spaces (Tuareg, North American Plains (Sikisika), Rayseri, Asmat) off a grandly furnished nineteenth-century European 'parlour'.[10] Prominently situated in the parlour is an impressive multi-media table with chairs. Here visitors can open drawers and interact with content that traces maps of the synaptic connections generated by the flows of people, goods, information, or music across the globe. This sophisticated interactive stands in stark contrast to the spaces that surround it. In these spaces, there is straightforward ethnographic reconstruction, and one is reminded of the oddity of this representational genre and how artificial it feels.[11] In the Tuareg room the reconstruction is mimetic. Two motionless figures – a Tuareg man and woman – stand facing the visitor with their backs to the erected tent. There is some surprise in re-encountering this 'in situ display' (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1991:389–390): it makes one wonder whether it is a post-modern take on 'returning the

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9 The galleries on ritual performance, which are also the last three, were designed to be more experiential due to the expectation that visitors would be somewhat tired of reading at this point.

10 This gallery is accessed through the gallery that features the idea of 'crossing the threshold' through exhibiting doors.

11 See Durrans (1992).

anthropological gaze', though little else supports this conclusion. There are indicators of modernity (tourism, contemporary beadwork) and videos with ancillary cultural information which thankfully insert the perspectives of community representatives. These highlight important contemporary issues: the settlement of nomadic cultures (Tuareg), a relaxed attitude to German Powwows (Siksika), a concern for the demise of tradition (Asmat) and the movement of traditions of hospitality across continents (German Turks). As a whole "Living spaces, ways of living: living places" is perplexing, seeming to describe co-existent worlds which are not covalent, and from the parlour it is uncomfortably panoptic. The surrounding spaces are about people, but they are staged and starved of agency. This is not globalisation as 'modernity at large' (Phillips 2007:99), but people staying in their worlds, a form of polarised globalization where the global is one place (core) and the local another (periphery). Ultimately, the spaces do not engage with each other.

This provokes reflection on those techniques that anthropology museums deploy to make their subjects present (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1991, Lidchi 2013). Clearly the reconstructions, the videos, the multi-media installations, the interactives are all techniques the RJM uses to give presence. Anthropology museums seek to conjure other cultural worlds and importantly make people present. They do this habitually through photography and film. The RJM explicitly describes itself as a place of dialogue and encounter. This draws directly on the museums-as-contact-zones literature (Clifford 1997, Peers and Brown 2003) and refers to new museological practices forcefully developed in settler nations (USA, Canada, New Zealand, Australia). This literature recommends that attempts should be made to invite communities of source, or diasporic communities linked by ancestry, into the museums to comment, critically appraise and share their interpretation of collections (Peers and Brown 2003). It extends the concept of presence to that of voice, addressing questions of cultural autonomy and self-representation, but equally accepting that there is scope for intervention in museums from the outside (Shelton 2001, 2006). The RJM acknowledges the implications of this discourse, but reasons that the methodology is impractical given its resources.[12] This view is conveyed in the displays. People are featured in images and videos, and their life experiences are cited in multi-media presentations, but these devices speak about them, they are not of them (with some exceptions). Rarely do non-European participants provide critical and informed commentary, or narrate their activities and respond to the museum as an artefact in itself.

It is as if, in acknowledging the critiques of museum anthropology, the RJM has allocated specific representational roles to different technologies. The object is used to convey authenticity and aura. The photographs and videos codify presence. Interactive and multi-media installations do the transcultural, transnational and multi-cultural work. There is, of course, good logic behind this division of representational labour, but

12 Fenner (2010: 74). Durrans (2012: 201) comments on the practicalities of this paradigm.

it means that each technology operates in a distinct conceptual register, and there are missed connections. Furthermore, it constrains the potential and meaning of the RJM's collections.

Exciting recent developments in museum anthropology focus on 'materiality' and 'biography' highlighting the entanglements of collections in the shared histories of people.[13] The 'material turn' enlarges museum anthropology's analytical scope arguing that objects can speak to the spaces in between cultures. By accepting that colonial veneers cannot be expunged and that the colonial and the transcultural are historical facts, it opens up the nature of interpretation and the range of voices that can be authoritative. It advocates the invigorating intellectual impact of material culture, where objects act as counterpoints to canonical histories, and commends new kinds of brokerage and activity that can assure museum anthropology a positive and provocative future (Mathur 2000). The RJM downplays the materiality of its collections whilst simultaneously embracing the haptic possibilities of design and multi-media. From the point of view of museum anthropology this feels like the wrong kind of balance and intellectually self-limiting.

Conclusion: looking for material culture's in-between[14]

> Our intellectual and cultural world is now scarcely
> a simple, self-evident collection of expert discourses:
> it is rather a seething discordance of [...]
> endlessly ramifying and elaborated articulations of culture
> (Said 2004:28).

The point of devising museological encounters is to hope for, and envision, a change in visitor perspective, a broadening of sensibility and a development of enlarged critical consciousness. For several decades now museum anthropology has been the site of contestation but, understandably, not all museums wish to engage fully with this antagonistic discourse (Lidchi 2006, Shelton 2006). In response to these debates the RJM has set a determined and humanistic course through the vehicle of cultural comparison. The restored RJM offers visitors a range of experiences and presents them with anthropological ideas that are well-devised, thought-provoking and evidenced through wonderful collections. Nevertheless, in selecting a comparative approach, there is perhaps an opportunity cost: to emphasise universality over difference, difference itself must be conjured up somewhat rigidly and conventionally.

My closing thought is in the form of a counter-instance, an example where the RJM has tackled object and subject, presence and voice, making and knowing in an

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13 Legêne (2007), Phillips (2011), Shelton (2001)

14 The phrase 'Culture's in between' is taken from Homi Bhabha (1996).

inspired and concise way (albeit from a primarily European perspective). The instance is a seven-minute film in the gallery entitled "Intermediary worlds: rituals". The film "Between the Feuerbach guild of jesters and the Cameroon secret society" focuses on the personal experiences of a mask-maker from Feuerbach, Moritz Paysan. It links to specific physical masks that visitors can experience by putting their head in and observing themselves in through a mirrored reflection. Paysan's parents were collectors with close links to the Cameroon cultivated over decades. Their objects and travels fuelled Paysan's interest and prompted him, as a teenager, to carve masks from the Swabian-Allemanic Fastnacht (Shrovetide) tradition, later starting his own guild. Over time his developing interest, skill and knowledge made him more intriguing to his Cameroonian hosts, particularly the King of Babungo also a carver. As a consequence Paysan was initiated into a masking society, importing style and accoutrements from the Cameroonian tradition into Fastnacht mask-carving. Paysan compellingly narrates these evolving circumstances and draws the contrasts he perceives as maker, practitioner and observer. In the Fastnacht, he notes, even though masks may encourage lewd or deviant behaviour, neither the wearer nor the spectators are in any doubt as to the responsibility of the individual underneath. The transformation is partial. In Cameroon wearers become the masks: it is the mask that acts and is held responsible. The transformation is complete. This video is a quiet intervention which reveals the articulation between the global and the local. Paysan embodies how performance and making are ways of knowing, and he has a particular kind of authority born out of his position as a maker i n b e t w e e n. He is an eloquent cultural intermediary. Paysan speaks to questions of materiality, entanglement and historical agency, anthropological subjects that are riveting and relevant, but often absent elsewhere.

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