

The Museum, from a Colonial Institution to an Alter/Native Space: The Construction of the Globalised Subject

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Abstract: This paper contends that, since the 2000s, contemporary Aboriginal artists have redefined their identities from subjects to agents and used the space of the museum to reclaim their Indigeneity. One step in this process was taken when museums, thanks to new curatorial practices, became one the main ‘sites of passage’ from subjectivity to agency. This redefinition of the role of museums, considered originally as colonial institutions, in combination with the integration of contemporary art pieces into ethnographic exhibits, led to a redefinition of authenticity as well. In this case, authenticity has shifted from what was at first described and considered as “native”—following exoticized, “Occidental” representations of Indigenous populations—to a notion based on empowerment and performance. Using Michael Cook’s work as an example, this article focuses on the process of developing intersubjectivity thanks to new practices based on a redefinition of space, whereby the subject in the museum becomes globalized, recontextualized and repositioned on a global scale. In the museum the subject does not exist *per se*, but rather evolves in a world of relations, linking for example the artists to the audience. The museum, as it becomes the place where intersubjectivity reigns, best embodies this evolution.

Keywords: museums; contemporary Indigenous art; ethnographic exhibitions; intersubjectivity; authenticity; performance

Introduction

From the beginning, museums have not only been places where cultures meet, but also where certain visions of the Orient were generated through the construction of knowledge concerning the native populations whose cultures and artefacts they displayed. The “ethnographic” museum is not only a place where the Other is represented and displayed, thus following the principles of ethnography, but it also becomes an *other* place within the Occident. Michel Foucault calls these places “heterotopias” and defines them as:

... real and effective spaces which are outlined in the very institution of society, but which constitute a sort of counter-arrangement, of effectively realized utopia, in which all the real arrangements, all the other real arrangements that can be found within society, are at one and the same time represented, challenged and overturned: a sort of place that lies outside all places and yet is actually localizable. In contrast to the utopias, these places which are absolutely *other* with respect to all the arrangements that they reflect and of which they speak might be described as heterotopias. (Foucault 332, original emphasis)

The museum is the epitome of this other place that exhibits the Other, as many juxtaposed bodies, the place where different places and temporal layers coalesce. Foucault underlines that “heterotopias” often go with “heterochronia”; the space of the museum is as much a spatial palimpsest as a temporal one, born from:

... the desire to enclose all times, all eras, forms and styles within a single place, the concept of making all times into one place, and yet a place that is outside time, inaccessible to the wear and tear of the years, according to a plan of almost perpetual and unlimited accumulation within an irremovable place, all this belongs entirely to our modern outlook. Museums and libraries are heterotopias typical of nineteenth-century Western culture. (Foucault 334-335)

Cultures are displayed in this fixed place, while it encapsulates different places which are absent but represented. Moreover, the “counter-arrangement,” described as an “effectively realized utopia, in which all the real arrangements, all the other real arrangements that can be found within society, are at one and the same time represented, challenged and overturned” (Foucault 332), recalls a mirror in which the reflection represents an object without being the tangible object itself. That is exactly what happens in ethnographic museums, especially since the beginning of the 2000s which mark the new curatorial approaches to representing Indigenous populations: the audience reach a level of self-awareness and self-reflexivity when it comes to their perception of the Other. Some museums display artworks which exhibit and expose the epistemological system in which they partake, following a kind of “scientific imperialism:” in Europe, the museums were “cultural place[s] where [epistemological] history begins ... in the act of [collecting]”¹ (Carter xxiv).

At first, the idea of cultures and populations going extinct led museums to undertake a mostly conservatory mission² to prevent those cultures from disappearing. Museums redefined their role according to worldly changes, especially as the development of exchanges contributed to a sharing of knowledge and an expansion of the relations between communities,—be it on an economic, political or cultural level. The study of Indigeneity as constructed in Australia, especially the evolution in terms of perception and reclaiming, shows that endogenous and exogenous movements have always existed. As a consequence, it would be more relevant to speak of an alter-Indigeneity—going beyond the category created by the Occident—completely separated from the artefacts and ethnographic objects displayed in museums. Rather, this alter-Indigeneity could be considered from its rites of passage, where “passage” already presupposes an idea of movement. Those rites are not only considered as cultural ceremonies but also as ‘sites of passage,’ where culture relies on representation defined as practice, as a ‘site’ where those constant movements take place. The museum itself becomes one of those sites, just like the contemporary Indigenous works of art it tends to include in its ethnographic exhibitions. Within those sites, subjectivities can finally meet, since movement is free in this in-between cultural space. In attempting to decolonize, museums have had to reinvent themselves. Consequently, the museum as a colonial institution *par excellence* paved the way for the museum of the relation, where subjectivities are confronted and dialogue with each other and where intersubjectivity can finally occur.

¹ In *Road to Botany Bay*, Carter describes Australia as: “a cultural place where spatial history begins ... in the act of naming” (xxiv).

² One recalls the dispute between British authorities and Greece over the Parthenon Marbles: this ongoing debate over the return and restitution of artefacts unlawfully acquired by European powers and displayed in colonial institutions such as museums relied mostly on controversial conservation claims on the European part. In the Pacific region, other European countries also faced similar repatriation claims and some of them have already returned artefacts: for instance, in 2008, Rouen Museum returned Maori heads (*toi moko*) to Te Papa Tongarewa, the national museum of New Zealand. However, such repatriations are also part of non-European museums’ concerns: on July 9th 2020, Te Papa Tongarewa advertised the permanent return of artefacts (a feather cloak and helmet) from Hawai’i which were gifted to Captain Cook in 1779 and which had been part of the museum’s collection since 1912. They will now permanently remain in the Bishop Museum in Honolulu.

Contemporary Indigenous art has taken up the role of reflecting and calling for this change in perception and representations as it gains momentum internationally. Contemporary pieces are used to show another way of seeing or thinking about not only Indigeneity but the unfolding relations between the former colonizers and the colonized. As a case study in this paper, Indigenous photographer Michael Cook's artworks³ have been chosen because they are not only displayed in art galleries but also in museums, such as the Tasmanian Museum & Art Gallery in Hobart, the Australian National Maritime Museum in Sydney, the South Australian Maritime Museum in Adelaide, the Museum and Art Gallery of Northern Territory in Darwin, the Museum of Australian Democracy in Canberra, and the British Museum. But maybe because of its name, the most telling example of an institution displaying Cook's art is the MEG, *Musée d'ethnographie de Genève* (the Ethnography Museum of Geneva), in which his works were displayed next to others' in the 2017 exhibition entitled *L'effet Boomerang* ("The Boomerang Effect"). Apart from museums, Cook's works have also been displayed in places which epitomize cognitive power and the rule of law, such as the Supreme Court Library in Brisbane or La Trobe University in Melbourne. More subtle than a mere denunciation or opposition, Cook's works of art expose world relations as relying on colonial domination while calling for another definition of that space of the museum. As a consequence, this article demonstrates that the changes in curatorial practices are not only aiming at constructing an alter/native subject but also at developing agency and intersubjectivity thanks to the very redefinition of the space of the museum. First, museum epistemologies have seen their curatorial practices shift from the stress on authenticity to a new interest in agency and performativity. This has led to the contemporary Indigenous artworks being displayed at ethnographic exhibitions: they operate as meta-representations since they offer a reflexion on those first representations of Indigenous populations—the exhibitions become self-reflexive. Finally, the whole cognitive process is redefined in the space of the museum which becomes inherently intersubjective.

Performing Culture: From Occidental Definitions of Authenticity toward Indigenous Practice and Performance

Ethnographic museums have always been considered a colonial institution *par excellence*: it was indeed created to exhibit the artefacts that were brought home by explorers who bought them off or stole them from the native communities they encountered on their trips. Those institutions and objects fuelled the craving to write and to develop knowledge about those communities while deciding on a hierarchy between peoples, which also found its justification in Social Darwinism of the late 19th century. This knowledge was constructed both from what was seen and understood on the field, and from the study of such objects in order to display and preserve those cultures which at the time of the foundation of the museum were thought to be going extinct. This fear found its epitome in the case of the Tasmanian people, whose last full-blood representative, Truganini, died in 1876, after what was considered a genocide⁴. Georges Didi-Huberman expresses similar regrets in *Peuples exposés, peuples figurants*: "the peoples are exposed in that they actually are threatened in their representation—political or aesthetic—or, as what happens too often, in their very existence. The peoples are always

³ For more details on exhibits, projects, and pictures of artworks, visit <https://www.michaelcook.net.au>.

⁴ If the Tasmanian wars had been considered a "genocide," Truganini would not be "the last of the Tasmanians:" this was a myth used as another way of defining Tasmania as an "empty land" or a *terra nullius*. Thus, *Palawa*, the people of Tasmania, reject the idea of genocide since they never were "extinct," as the colonizers may have said. For further reading, please refer to the latest addition to research on Truganini's story by Cassandra Pybus (*Truganini: Journey through the Apocalypse*, 2020).

exposed to disappear” (Didi-Huberman 11).⁵ Those peoples are also “exposed to disappear” because their culture was said to be fixed in time and objectified in as much as the cultural elements put on display are solely material objects, an approach which does not take into account the “intangible heritage” of such populations.⁶ In *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, Graham Huggan, while defining “exoticism,” states that culture has taken up the status of “commodity” and can accordingly be sold or used by its owner (Huggan 18). The image of “the Indigenous” that is spread by those objects is built up and consumed, not only by the owner but also the audience. As a consequence, the museums’ ethnographic exhibitions and collections shared exactly the same mechanisms and strategies as anthropology when they represented Indigenous populations: if those people were indeed “exposed to disappear” it was also first and foremost because those objects testify less to native than to European identity.

According to James Clifford in *The Predicament of Culture*, the expansion of museums has been made possible by the growing interest in the collection “[which] has long been a strategy for the deployment of a possessive self, culture, and authenticity” (60). The interpretation of such objects and the knowledge that was then constructed were all the more subjective in that they helped to reassert one’s own culture as the dominant one. Collection legitimized power relations and epistemological ascendance, as Susan Pearce explains in *On Collecting*: “As collections, that is, as cultural assemblages in their own right, what they tell us about their communities of origin, though very important, is outweighed by what they tell us about the communities of their collectors” (Pearce 330). The collections are also used to legitimate the power relations that have led to the collection of such objects, while reflecting the image of the collector, or of the collector’s community, and of course that image was supposedly as laudatory as possible. Susan Pearce continues:

[collections are a] construction of material narratives drawn from Western ideas of the exotic and ... support European notions of themselves: [they are] either superstructures of Western intellectual ideas as a cultural explanation of perceived differences or reflections of aspirations towards cultural and ideological dominance. (Pearce 330)

This shift of paradigms from the populations who produced the cultural objects to the community of collectors is evident in the labelling which traditionally gives information about how the object was collected and not its production. A second shift takes place from the context of material production in the community of origin to that of the production of knowledge about the object in the collectors’ community, since more often than not only the previous owner’s name and the date of the donation are mentioned. At best, the community of production appears in a reference to the place where the object was collected from. The identity of the Indigenous

⁵ My translation from: “... les peuples sont exposés en ce qu’ils sont justement menacés dans leur représentation—politique, esthétique—, voire, comme cela arrive trop souvent, dans leur existence même. Les peuples sont toujours exposés à disparaître.”

⁶ The recognition of “intangible heritage” of Indigenous populations has been written in The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in 2007. Though Australia was first amongst the countries that refused to sign the declaration, it finally did in April 2009. Article 31 states: “Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions, as well as the manifestations of their sciences, technologies and cultures, including human and genetic resources, seeds, medicines, knowledge of the properties of fauna and flora, oral traditions, literatures, designs, sports and traditional games and visual and performing arts. They also have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their intellectual property over such cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and traditional cultural expressions” (United Nations).

population is relegated to a mention of the territory on which they appeared to stay when they were dispossessed of the cultural object.

The exhibition of such objects aims at constructing anthropological knowledge about those populations, as Henrietta Lidchi explains while revealing the link between the “ethnographic” exhibitions and the discipline usually associated with them, anthropology:

So, in referring to ‘ethnographic museums’ or ‘ethnographic exhibitions,’ one is identifying institutions or exhibitions which feature objects as the ‘material culture’ of peoples who have been considered, since the mid-nineteenth century, to have been the appropriate target for anthropological research. ... Ethnographic museums ... do not simply reflect natural distinctions but serve to create cultural ones, which acquire their cogency when viewed through the filtering lens of a particular discipline. (Lidchi 161)

Museums spread anthropological knowledge and this process relies on the same strategies as those used during the production of such knowledge. Indeed, the “rhetoric of vision” and “visualism,” as theorized by Johannes Fabian in *Time and the Other* are a constitutive process at the core of curatorial practices and exhibitions, since every space in the museum is dedicated to a specific time, place and community. The audience look at what is displayed and read the explanatory notes: knowledge is mostly spread by the sense of vision. The process of acquiring knowledge itself is detemporalized, separated from all contemporary context, and becomes artificial, while presented as authentic.

However, displaying contemporary Indigenous art pieces within such exhibitions displaces the question of authenticity to that of performativity, which could be defined as representation as practice, engaging the world. Barbara Bolt argues that:

... there is the potential for a mutual reflection between imaging and reality. In this monstrous performativity, the body becomes language rather than merely inscribed by language. I argue that it is through process or practice that the outside world enters the work and the work casts its effects back into the world. In the dynamic productivity of the performative act, the work of art produces ontological effects. (Bolt 10)

During performance, the body as in the materiality that can be embodied by the work of art, introduces reflexivity in the representation. The audience become part of the reflexive process, questioning the representations that led to the creation of the art piece, or even the curatorial practices that led to the display of such representations. Those “ontological effects” also enable the individual to redefine her/his subjectivity into agency when she or he creates an artwork. In ethnographic exhibitions showcasing Indigenous artworks, the artwork is accompanied by a reflexion on the very status of this artwork within such an exhibit, and its journey from production to display. Consequently, Barbara Bolt goes even further and writes about the “ontology of the work of art”: “The material performativity of [the work of art] suggests the possibility of a materialist ontology of the work of art. The performative power of images and imaging goes beyond its capacity to reveal” (Bolt 10). As a consequence, the ethnographic object, originally an object of contemplation, gives way to the contemporary artwork, which becomes the place where an epistemological reflexion can take place, going, in Bolt’s words above, “beyond its capacity to reveal.”

In Michael Cook’s works, one can perceive this ontological trend and the “capacity to reveal” of the work of art since, to rephrase Didi-Huberman’s statement, his own people are in fact

“exposed to [re-]appear” through art. For example, Cook’s *Undiscovered* project, which was exhibited in Geneva (2017) but also displayed as part of the exhibition *Indigenous Australia* at the British Museum (2015), obviously questions the issue of Australia having been ‘discovered’ by the British as well as the legal concept of *Terra Nullius*. Most of Cook’s works rely on a role-reversal, as can be seen in *Undiscovered#4* in which the Aboriginal man happens to have taken the role of a British soldier with his recognizable red coat: it questions that very part of history which erased the Aboriginal population from the beginning. In one picture, Cook makes Indigenous characters reappear in an Occidentalised, though foreign context (that of the discovery or the conquest of unknown shores in *Undiscovered*) where history and law had rendered them invisible. He re-imagines Australian history by displacing perspectives and by creating not necessarily fictitious situations but rather *alter/native* ones: native people are positioned in Occidental situations or *loci*, dressed up as Occidentals, questioning not only history as a European construct but its whole epistemological system. This is also the case with Cook’s project *Broken Dreams*, in which an Indigenous woman discovers Victorian England, or in the *Majority Rule* series, where the same model (here an Aboriginal man) is multiplied indefinitely until his figure pervades the whole image, literally saturating Western places of power with his overwhelming presence. By showing the audience a new way of understanding history, of rendering visible the people who were erased from non-Indigenous history books until the 1980s, Cook’s works of art convey a political dimension that still echoes in today’s society.

Indeed, performances and works of art inform and engage with claims that are not only cultural but that also become tinged with politics because of their consequences and impact. According to Judith Butler in *Bodies That Matter*, they create fissures and oppose the norm, or come to create alternative forms: “gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such constructions, as that which escapes or exceeds the norm, as that which cannot be wholly defined or fixed by the repetitive labor of that norm” (Butler 10). Political discourse relies on those “constitutive instabilities,” and this expression could be read, for example, as the debunking of the imperial hegemonic world order. However, far from destroying or annihilating those power relations by directly questioning them, the works of art show their “instability,” fathoming the interstices and recalling the black holes where subjectivity is built up according to Levinas⁷. It is this poetics of the interstice that contributes to “the productive crisis” (Butler 10), which will impact the world, transform it, and produce new forms and relations—hence the political dimension of artworks as well.

The Purpose of Contemporary Art in Ethnographic Exhibits

In exhibitions, ethnographic objects are juxtaposed and their relation to each other is created and emphasized: this leads to the creation of another kind of context. Even if at first they are decontextualized, detached from their original context of production, they are recontextualized within the museum, as Michael Ames explains:

Museums—and also scholars, collectors, and others—certainly remove objects from their earlier contexts (not always with full respect for local laws and customs, one might add); but through this removal they place those objects into new contexts, the contexts of our own history and culture. This *recontextualization* or redefinition should interest anthropology, for it not only informs us about ourselves but also

⁷ For more details, see Deleuze and Guatarri’s reflection and elaboration on Levinas in *A Thousand Plateaux*, pp. 167-168.

about recurring features of culture contact, culture domination, and culture change.
(Ames 46, original emphasis)

As a consequence, this change in curatorial and epistemological practices could allow the Indigenous populations to reintegrate European history, potentially responding to Maori writer Witi Ihimaera's criticism: "we haven't become part of Pakeha history but it has become part of ours" (qtd. in Williams 284). Such a recontextualization of the ethnographic object in the museum also blurs the line between the artefact and the artwork: displaying contemporary artworks can also be a way to shift the focus from authenticity to creation and production.

From the end of the 1990s, exhibitions in ethnographic museums have taken a reflexive turn when it comes to the curatorial practices, and most specifically to the notion of authenticity. According to James Clifford, authenticity can either be cultural or artistic: "[it] has as much to do with an inventive present as with a past, its objectification, preservation or revival" (Clifford, "On Collecting" 62). That link with the present and with representation as performance lies at the core of artistic practice: contemporary Indigenous visual art, which is included in such ethnographic exhibitions, helps bridge the gap between the ethnographic objects which are fixed in the past, and the contemplation and creation of meaning by the audience in the present. As a consequence, those works of art help recontextualize the ethnographic objects. The Indigenous subject becomes an agent, when recognized as an artist.

Contemporary Indigenous art shares a few characteristics with ethnographic artefacts: they rely on practice, techniques or even symbols and themes which are Indigenous, and contextualize them in that debate about cultural authenticity. Nonetheless, authenticity no longer corresponds to the essentialist ideal at the core of Occidental thought, when it went hand in hand with tradition and pre-contact cultural practices. On the contrary, authenticity, as redefined by contemporary art, introduces a reflexion on epistemological systems prevalent in museums until then, and on the representation of the relation between two different cultures. As a consequence, using cultural markers in contemporary art pieces questions that original hegemonic world order and epistemological system. It is not about the opposition between "primitive" populations and the Occident anymore but rather it is focused on the encounter between different cultural movements.⁸ Contemporary Indigenous artworks operate as the site of such encounters, especially when they are in dialogue with ethnographic pieces.

For instance, Michael Cook's work shows ethnographic imagery, while equally referring back to the first descriptions of Indigenous people made by explorers such as James Cook—whose logbooks are even quoted in his *Undiscovered* series. In Cook's piece entitled *Undiscovered#4*, different elements from Western paintings inspired by those very expeditions of discovery recur, such as Emmanuel Phillips Fox's *Captain Cook landing at Botany Bay* (1902). Common features include the ship in the background, the English soldier, solitary on the beach, with his very identifiable red uniform and his attitude of conquest, which is remindful of that of Napoleon. However, the interpretation of such a picture also clearly depends on the beholder's initial knowledge of such ethnographic practices and representations. Cook's photograph also recalls the ethnographic trend of taking pictures of Indigenous people wearing European outfits as a kind of "sartorial Occidentalism." What first comes to mind on viewing Cook's work is the

⁸ For instance, the wish to make cultures meet in a dialogue was the politics behind the creation of the Quai Branly museum in Paris, to such an extent that it has in fact become its motto ("*là où dialoguent les cultures*"). For further reading on the epistemological shift from "primitive" art to another aesthetic conception of artefacts and resulting ethical issues, please see Sally Price's *Paris Primitive: Jacques Chirac's Museum on the Quai Branly* (2007).

trend of taking formal pictures of Aboriginal dignitaries, such as the picture of King Mickey Johnson (born c. 1896, Illawarra) held at the National Library of Australia. Apart from his European outfit made of a fitted coat and a top hat, this Indigenous character is wearing a brass plate, meaning he is an Elder who has been recognized as such by Europeans and made the “King.” The use of such European attire and uniforms recalls another historical fact: native police was formed in Australian states, and its members wore European uniforms, as in Edward B. Kennedy’s picture, *The Black Police of Queensland* (London, 1902). To further the comparison between Michael Cook’s work and ethnographic pictures, another work of art from the same series, *Undiscovered#5*, could be also mentioned: on the beach, the same Aboriginal man wearing a British soldier’s attire is looking into a spyglass, while a crocodile lazily lingers at his feet. The same codes are repeated and others taken from ethnographic photography are added. “Specimens” of native populations were often photographed in natural surroundings, with one of their native, “primitive” tools and with another kind of specimen of fauna. In the *Portrait of an Aboriginal* (c. 1875) held at John Oxley Library (Brisbane), the boomerang and the snake at the feet of the Aboriginal man are repeated in the guise of the spyglass and the crocodile in Cook’s picture. As a consequence, Cook’s works of art are to be positioned at the crossroads of diverse constructions of knowledge--from scientific knowledge, as encapsulated in ethnographic practices, to one’s individual interpretation, that of the viewer.

In this manner, the first representations of native populations (including ethnographic pictures), which helped legitimate Occidental hegemony, are now contrasted with the use of cultural elements in contemporary artworks which critique this worldly order. For instance, in *Possessions, Indigenous Art/Colonial Culture*, Australian anthropologist Nicholas Thomas describes those two different effects: “Sometimes denigrations of indigenous peoples have transparently legitimated imperial domination. In other cases, more affirmative evocations animate critiques of Western culture, economics and technology” (Thomas 259). Art encapsulates the evolution of the globalised world: cultural relations can now shift from dominant/dominee to endogenous and exogenous cultural movements, placed on an equal footing. However, Thomas mentions that, to be recognized on the international artistic stage, Polynesian artists often have had to display visually their cultural heritage in their artworks: “[Artists] were prompted to take their work in a specific direction. Several of these individuals acknowledge retrospectively that they were working essentially in a European idiom, inspired by one modernist or another, until they were encouraged to make their art a vehicle for their cultural identity” (Thomas 262). Going back to authenticity as a tradition has shown its limits and has been criticized, especially because of its essentialist dimension. Displaying one’s cultural origins in one’s work and inscribing them in new artistic practices contributes to the cultural emergence of the whole community. Artistic creation takes on an emancipatory and self-defining dimension, which native populations could not claim with the production of ethnographic objects only. Indigenous artists claim their own representations back, but also respond to former practices and patterns, instilling their cultural identity in their artwork. Because they are tangible objects, art pieces also help presence and representation to coincide, which coalesces during the performance.

What such museums try to do while exhibiting artworks such as Michael Cook’s is to offer an “enlargement of knowledges,” while redefining themselves thanks to the cultural re-negotiation they place at the core of their exhibitions. While questioning Eurocentric historical discourse, such works redefine not only epistemological systems but reality itself, as Boaventura de Sousa Santos writes: “... reality cannot be reduced to what exists. It amounts to an ample version of realism that includes the realities rendered absent by silence, suppression, and marginalization—in a word, realities that are actively produced as non-existent” (Sousa Santos

181). One of those realities suppressed or produced as non-existent was the presence of Indigenous people in Australia when the British arrived, which is exactly what the collection *Undiscovered* underlines. Thus, there is a change in perception, from the hegemonic conception of reality, or what Sousa Santos terms “knowledge-as-a-representation-of-reality,” to what he calls “knowledge-as-intervention-in-reality” (Sousa Santos 201), which refers back once more to the ideas of agency and performance. Such knowledge comes from “innovative and rebellious ways of knowing based on the constant reconstruction of both identity discourses and repertoires of social emancipation” (Sousa Santos 200) and relies on the recognition of a cultural diversity which can lead to emancipation from European epistemological systems. Sousa Santos explains that “Emancipatory interculturality presupposes recognition of a plurality of knowledges and distinct conceptions of the world and human dignity. The validity of the different knowledges and conceptions must obviously be assessed, but not on the basis of the abstract disqualification of some” (Sousa Santos 200). That “disqualification” would be the sheer negation of or opposition to that former epistemological system, which would be of no use since it would not rest on any tangible argument, and would more likely resemble an opinion. As these artworks open the way to new knowledges, they also open up the space of the museum: other visions, literal alter/natives emerge in the space of the ethnographic exhibitions and redefine the museum as a space where inter-subjectivity happens.

Intersubjectivity: Opening up the Space of the Museum

In *The Predicament of Culture*, James Clifford offers an explanation for this shift in curatorial practices: “The boundaries of art and science (especially the human sciences) are ideological and shifting, and intellectual history is enmeshed in these shifts. Its genres do not remain firmly anchored. Changing definitions of art or science must provoke new retrospective unities, new ideal types for historical description” (118-119). Those evolutions are associated with changes in the perception of art, the appearance of contemporary Indigenous art pieces, and in human sciences such as anthropology. According to Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett in *Museum Frictions*, this leads to the “critical shift from an informing museology (the exhibit as a neutral vehicle for the transmission of information) to a performing museology (the museum itself is on display)” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 41). Museums are not a place for mere cognition or knowledge anymore but rather become a space of re-cognition and production.

In *Museum Frictions*, Gustavo Buntinx and Ivan Karp argue that “in the course of moving from one context to another and from one geographic space to another, [the museums] become ‘contact zones’, ... in which diverse and sometimes conflicting relations are enacted” (Buntinx and Karp 208). However, one can argue that the museum, as it has redefined its practices, is no longer a “contact zone” (Pratt 7), like the beach where explorers and native people meet in Pratt’s example, but rather what I call a “relation zone.” Indeed, the term “contact” presupposes two separate entities, two wholes which come to meet, without referring to the prevalent idea of exchanges and movements that the term “relation” entails. This encounter between cultures is not bi-focal anymore (between Europe and the former colonies) but integrates another element—the audience. From a formerly vertical relation, in which a sense of hierarchy was prevalent, the relation becomes triangular, and indefinitely deploys itself, following all the different subjectivities that coalesce and meet in the space of the museum—the subjectivities become globalized since they exist through those very relations. Consequently, the museum could embody a Third Space which “constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew” (Bhabha 55). Artists as well as the audience can renegotiate identities, and recreate and reinterpret meanings according to their own subjectivity and knowledge. In Bhabha’s words, “[The people] are now free to negotiate and translate their cultural identities in a discontinuous intertextual temporality

of cultural difference” (55). This space becomes an in-between space, where intersubjectivity and cultural relations take over, as Bhabha claims: “it may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based ... on the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity” (Bhabha 56). Bhabha concludes by showing how it operates as the locus of intersubjectivity, underlining this interstitial dimension which gives enough room or space for intersubjectivity to happen: “we should remember that it is the ‘inter’—the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *in-between* space—that carries the burden of the meaning of culture” (Bhabha 56, original emphasis). Here, the meaning of culture is deeply linked to the construction of identities, since they exist through their relation to each other. Each defines and positions themselves on the web of relations they weave together, which, on an international scale, represents an infinity of constructions and cultural renegotiations. This politics of the interstice in which intersubjectivity expands also becomes an aesthetics and a poetics, since the construction of cultural identities follow the movements that unfold.

Cook’s art may be termed not “intertextual” but rather “inter-visual,” since it refers back to a long history of representing “the Other”: at the heart of this contemporary image, there lies an implied network of references to pre-existing representations, which ends up forming a visual genealogy. However, this “inter-visibility” comes also with the fact that his pieces are multi-layered, as they rely on the technique of “assemblage,” becoming one visual palimpsest in which different temporalities, histories and bodies coexist. Indeed, it seems that it is not so much an “assemblage” as an “*ensemble*”⁹: in one same visual frame, different cultures coalesce, without any impression of there being a hierarchical order. Michael Cook explains his creative process: “I normally layer up. ... My creation is starting with an idea and then building on that idea. I layer and layer until I get the finished product that I want. ... Most of the works are layered up to create a finished project that usually has anywhere between 5-30 layers” (Cook). On the contrary, the audience are left with their own thoughts and interpretations, as an infinity of constructions and cultural renegotiations, trying to make sense of those seemingly incongruous images, before their significance is literally pieced together from the different layers of images, objects, animals, landscapes and characters. What matters is what keeps those layers together, the in-betweenness that holds them like glue: first the artist’s will and vision, and then the renegotiation of those elements through interpretation by the audience. The art piece becomes a dialogue between different subjectivities and a space for intersubjectivity as well, hence the fact that they are deeply relational, just like museums.

Thus museums as “relation zones” feed on the interstice to produce meaning, knowledge and cultural identities. As François Jullien states, this interstice that he calls “gap” or “interval” (like George Didi-Huberman), “opens, while separating cultures and thoughts, a space of reflexivity between them where thought unfolds. Thus, it is a figure not of ordering, but of disordering, aiming at exploration: the gap lends the cultures and thoughts a sense of fertility” (Jullien 7).¹⁰ Curatorial practices are redefined according to the new space that reaches beyond the museum’s corridors and between its glass cases: the ordering principles of the *cabinets de curiosités*, such as racial hierarchy for example, are debunked by this disordering, which represents an utter refusal to create that very hierarchy. Every single element is placed and considered on an equal footing with the others, delimitating an infinite horizontal and relational space. The original geographical exploration that led to cultural differentiation and European hegemony is replaced

⁹ In French, “ensemble” means “together,” referring to togetherness, or coexisting in one same space.

¹⁰ My translation of: “ouvre, en séparant les cultures et les pensées, un espace de réflexivité entre elles où se déploie la pensée. C’est, de ce fait, une figure, non de rangement, mais de dérangement, à vocation exploratoire: l’écart fait paraître les cultures et les pensées comme autant de fécondités.”

with the exploration of this interval, the journey that explores the interstices in which cultural identities multiply.

Conclusion:

The museum as the space where relations are interwoven and become entangled feeds on the interstice to produce meaning and cultural identities, relying more on co-presence and co-temporality, as George Didi-Huberman (104) and Johannes Fabian (24; 30-31) would have it, rather than on confrontation. Artworks rely both on the performative and the reflexive, recalling what Sousa Santos writes about social sciences: "... some social sciences—which we may call performative—emphasize the contemporaneity, that is to say the uniqueness, of the encounter, while others—which we may call self-reflexive—emphasize the non-contemporaneous roots of what is brought together" (Sousa Santos 162). It can be said that those art works belong to a cultural continuum since they are definitely anchored in the present because of their materiality, while looking back to the past of their production. It is precisely this ambivalence that enables them to become simultaneously self-reflexive and performative. Indeed, they stage a reflexion on the modes of representation or epistemological systems which are used in museums. The performative dimension takes place in the constant re-actualization which occurs when the audience meet the work, leading to the production of different knowledges. In ethnographic museums, this comes to create what John E. Stanton refers to as "whole constellations of knowledge, knowledge that is shared, knowledge that might be segregated, knowledge that follows different paths" (Stanton 53).

As demonstrated, contemporary visual artists navigate those same issues and highlight the questioning that informs the curatorial practices and epistemological transitions that museums have had to undergo since their creation. This is notably the case in Michael Cook's work, which perfectly reflects those changes while referring back to the former imagery and representations of native populations—whether artistic or ethnographic—denouncing the limits of such first images as displayed in museums. To rephrase Didi-Huberman's first quote in this paper, "peoples are exposed to [re]appear" through art. In Cook's work, this revealing becomes effective thanks to different visual strategies: the multiple layers that do not conceal but rather reveal thanks to a play on transparency, and the *re-presenting*, or rather *re-presencing*, of the Aboriginal subject in place of the European. This finally enables the artist to create a work which demonstrates a specific way of re-imag(in)ing different histories taking place on one and the same territory, wrongly assessed as a *terra nullius* in the first place.

Finally, it is interesting to note that this reflexive turn is as necessary for Europe as it is for the Indigenous artists and populations. The emphasis is put on the distance taken with previous modes of knowledge, and on the importance of reflecting upon our own epistemological practices, especially in museums, "[to] estrange ourselves from ourselves to see ourselves," as Michael Ames writes in *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes* (45). This distance, or estrangement, operates as the prerequisite for the Occident to become aware of their own epistemological prejudice. Self-reflexivity not only leads to emancipation from former epistemological systems for the Indigenous populations but also for the European audience, as Michael Ames explains:

If knowledge of the self passes through others, then equal attention needs to be given to what returns: there lies a direction for reconstituting scholarly and curatorial relationships along more democratic, responsive, reciprocal, and critical lines. [...] Museums [are] artefacts of society, [...] exhibits in their own right, [it is necessary] to see what can be learnt about them and, through them, about ourselves. (Ames 14-15)

This kind of self-awareness about one's own system of representation paves the way for an effective and efficient decolonization of curatorial practices: museums become spaces in Thanks to what museums tell about one's society, it is possible to reflect on formerly biased curatorial practices and make them evolve with their times. Consequently, acquiring and advocating which the subjects successfully become globalized, that is to say that they exist and thrive through those intersubjective encounters.

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