

## **Exhibiting Cultures Through Multimedia**

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*African Art, African Voices* is a museum exhibit that opened at the Seattle Art Museum in 2002 and has since traveled nationwide. The exhibit incorporates audio recordings of native and diaspora informants as well as video and cultural objects to offer a multimedia experience. The design of Websites and DVDs as exhibition space is a common trope for the development of interactive web works and can be viewed in sites such as Susan Meiselas' *Kurdistan: In The Shadow Of History* and Burton Bledstein's *Urban Experience In Chicago: Hull House And Its Neighborhoods, 1889-1963*. The overlap between the gallery and a virtual site is not only in the similarities of the browsing experience, but also in their common embrace of dominant features of contemporary cross-cultural representation. Although technically less complex than some of its digital, virtual counterparts, *African Art, African Voices* offers lessons and challenges for the development of exhibitions and cross-cultural sites, both actual and virtual.

Two of these dominant features of multimedia cultural research and documentary exhibition are polyvocality – the use of multiple voices that describe actualities through differing and personalized contexts or vantage points, and syneesthesia – the conveying of information through differing senses. Uses of polyvocality and syneesthesia in cross-cultural research and representation are promoted through a broad range of anthropological texts, (i.e. V. Turner & E. Bruner 1986 and G. Marcus 1998). For Marcus, polyvocality is of many strategies as outlined in a theory of multisite

ethnography – the development of methods of cultural interpretation based on comparative discourse and exchange. Discursive and comparative modes of interpretive research have had wide ranging influence in the representation arts, from gallery exhibitions to Websites.

*African Art, African Voices* provided an interesting example of incorporating polyvocality and syneesthesia through the use of differing media but it also raised new challenges that might perhaps be answered through rethinking how multimedia is used. The exhibit was developed at the Seattle Museum of Art (2002) by curator Pamela McClusky and was later mounted at the Philadelphia Art Museum (2004) by curator John Zorabell, before traveling on to further venues. Through a low-tech multimedia approach (viewers listen to audio recordings on headphones while looking at exhibited works and walking about the museum), this show proposed a polyvocal approach to the representation of art objects from the African continent.

The show presents traditional cultural objects from various communities and cultures of the African continent. Many of the objects are from the holdings of the Seattle Art Museum. In the exhibition hall, these objects are grouped by cultural origin, in a series of cases and wall displays. The key feature of the exhibit is the inclusion of guest curators for each sub-collection of material; these guests have their origins in the culture being represented – whether as ongoing residents or diaspora members of their communities. Their voices on the portable headphones help describe the objects and give them personal and cultural context, and a placard introducing each speaker is placed alongside the collection they are talking about. The speakers describe their cultural memories and the uses of some

of the objects, providing them with cultural context. The approach might be a considered an antedote to Chris Marker and Alan Resnais' 1953 cinematic critique of African Art, *Les Statues Meurent Aussi (Statues Also Die)*, in which they contend that African objects shown out of context are essentially robbed of meaning, and instead function mostly for the benefit of French post-colonial fantasy and bourgeois, an argument similarly found in P. Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984). The audio descriptions of cultural practices provide dimension and insight into one or another cultural practice, however they also raised interesting questions about the effectiveness of polyvocality as a mode of documentary representation.

The discourse around polyvocal works is based on theories that fragmentary combinations of many voices and viewpoints can function as linking devices that are both revealing and concealing of meaning – that is, that the meanings of cultural objects and events in themselves are ambiguous, just as are photographs when viewed out of context (J Berger & J Mohr, 1982). In the exhibit, *African Art African Voices*, this was achieved by relating the objects to the personal life experiences of the speakers. Voices, like images, provide contexts for interpretation; and, as informants inevitably have differing interests and perspectives, a combination of voices provides a reader-viewer with a range by which to judge information to build a new (and also individual) interpretations. The past is not a single event, fixed in history; it is in flux and continually reinterpreted through the changing contexts of whomever comes into contact with its signs and signifiers. The greater the ambiguity in what is being heard, touched, tasted, smelled or viewed, the greater the need for multiple processes of interpretation (Turner & Bruner 1986, Fernandez 1986, Coover 2003). How can one learn to

understand the local and personal meanings of a gesture, action, image or spoken line in another culture when those of a reader-viewer's own culture is derived from differing experiences and contexts?

Syneesthesia is another means of locating meaning through the expression of cultural memory by emphasizing relationships between differing modes of expression. Whether it is the smell of one's grandmother (Seremetakis 1994) or the taste of a particular wine (Coover 2004), the reading of sensory experience is learned through time and based in personal context. Further, it is not always conscious. While language can help organize synesthetic experience, it is a personally adapted product of cultural memory and shaped by context, as William Gass (1975) articulates in his exploration of the interpretation of the word "blue" in English. Blue images, sounds, and words may be attached to ideas or provoke emotions that may be as diverse as blues music, blue movies and blue jeans. In documentary media, synesthesia ranges from interactivity with actual objects (touching, smelling tasting) to media representations that display culture through sound, images and other sensory information. Synesthetic presentations therefore maximize the "multi" of multimedia, although in reality almost all media and media experiences are to some degree multi-sensory – as is almost any waking moment of life itself. To lesser degree, the exhibit *African Art, African Voices* attempted this through the inclusion of the audio recordings as well as videos, such as one of a street procession. As with polyvocal representations, synesthetic works and exhibits are inevitably subjective and require personal interpretation, judgment, and memory-building; the reader viewer makes cognitive connections across the senses in a process of worldmaking (Goodman 1978). However cultural meanings of

sensory expression are often inchoate and as difficult to reach in cross-cultural conditions as they are in one's own culture in that some there are aspects of the human condition expressed through poetry, music, or dance that are simply more difficult to define through expository language.

Syneesthetic sources of information, and particularly time-based audio-visual information add important aspects to this interpretive process in that can be interpreted on both through spontaneous cognition and reflection, that is through both synthesis and analysis (Flusser 1973). Theories concerning the physiognomic condition of time-based media reception are widespread (i.e. Münsterberg 1916, Eisenstein 1949). In the representation of cultures, visual anthropologists may use differing forms of media to provide reader-viewers with elements by which to construct a sense of the whole from the fragments of representation – to engage in the spontaneous process of worldmaking through the provocation of internal choice-making processes (Coover 2001, 2003).

*African Art, African Voices* did not use juxtapositions to illustrate connections between the exhibited object such as through the practice of aesthetic comparison found in anthropological works such as J. Maquet 1988 and C. Schuster & E. Carpenter 1996. Each of the selected objects from differing communities were presented as a small and separate units in the common museum environment. While this provided integrity to the cultural groupings, there were few means by which to create meaningful connections between objects, a lack surprising true in many Web collections, such as those mentioned earlier. Visually, the tenuous connection forged between the objects was their common predicament of being conscribed under the Western geo-political terminology of "continents".

Any informed link between the pieces therefore would need to come from the voices. The cultural stories and descriptions were at times personal and compelling but they too lacked points of interconnection: the format offered polyvocality without offering interaction and dialog. Nor were the positions of any one speaker challenged by having an alternative speaker discuss the same objects from a differing point of view. Each speaker talked only to the interviewer, and to some unknown and abstract person: "the museum visitor" (a creature with no origin, face, or history). The explanation of each set of materials was still determined by the voice of a single authority; the exhibition's gesture toward polyvocality did not embrace dialog, differing views about the same objects, or discourse about the show as a whole. In this way voices – sound objects in age of electronic media – become objects placed in connection with the objects, but it may be similarly objectified in the non-time specific representations of so-called "traditional" cultural objects, disconnected from the living present(s) with contested views, personal rivalries, political struggles, and so forth.

In works such as *Naked Spaces: Living is Round* (1985), *Language Of Wine* (2005), a reader-viewer is asked to construct a sense of the whole from these various views, vantage points, and visual fragments rather than through a single and all-embracing over-view. Knowledge is built from the ground up through the movement between places, through comparison and through dialog. In such a ground-up approach, the construction of abstract concepts occurs through discourse between the individuals implicated in any abstract model.

This is one of a number of features of what Marcus (1998) promotes in his treatise on multisite ethnography. He writes:

*The most common construction of holism in contemporary realist ethnography... is the situation of the ethnographic subject and scene as a knowable, fully probed micro-world with reference to an encompassing macro-world –the "system"– which, presumably, is not knowable or describable in the same terms that the local world of the ethnographic subject can be.*

The political discourse of multisite ethnography is built partly on an awareness that the tools of research and representation can be used to impose authority; uses of multiple views and voices and of syneesthesia return agency and individuality to the subject of research and to the viewer-reader as well. The methods parallel a number of other politically oriented discussions of culture, language, and power (i.e. DeCerteau 1984, Deleuze & Guattari 1987, Rabinow 2003) that also explore relationships between power and modes of discourse.

If there were dialogs in the exhibit to be uncovered, they were not in the relation between cultures or between the speaker and viewers but rather between the dozen or so participants and the primary museum curator. In this relationship, the curator remained the authority; there was little room for an alternative structure to emerge through collaboration and interaction and few ways to gauge the exchange between cultures. It was a picture of how a museum negotiates its relationship to the process of exhibition in the context of contemporary cultural debates about presentation. As the Philadelphia curator, John Zarobell, explained to me, whatever you see out here in the exhibition hall is not what happens in the offices up stairs where all these materials are put together in fixed structures because, "that's what we do in museums; like it or not, we are in the business of categorizing." The

voices did provide a way of contextualizing some of the presented objects and, synaesthetically, of relating them to a voice. The use of multiple voices fell short in providing dialog and counterpoints to the expression of the meanings of objects; the problem is no less a problem for websites that offer definitions of the meanings of cultural objects without juxtaposing views or placing them in evolving associative structures – or juxtapositions – and dialog. And, the same is true of synaesthetic aspects of the presentation.

In *African Art, African Voices*, voices helped to describe the objects. In turn, and more interestingly perhaps, the objects help describe the speakers by functioning as catalysts in the memory-recall and storytelling process. Where there grew gaps between the storytelling and the objects, the viewer is implicated in the linking process. Departing from the object to hear about a person and place, then returning to the object now reframed. But what of the sensorium of which both the objects and speakers were at sometime a part? Doesn't it also have a temporally evolving character? Sounds of traditional music are only a fragment of the audible experience of cultural life in an African – or any – community. This was related partly through the videos included in the show. Websites driven by text and HTML or Macromedia design tools and by the agenda of conveying information share this dilemma of the exhibit; presenting the sensorium risks muddying the neat presentation of objects, the categorizations, and spatializing of works out of time. A sensorium, one for example, alive with the mixing sounds of the street blends the sounds of differing times and cultures showing how they living in actuality. They are not distinguished by terms such as "tradition" and "modernity" except through convention. And what do those terms



distinguish; aren't they artificial categories themselves introduced by the West?

*African Art, African Voices* aimed for polyvocality and syneesthesia but reenforced authority, excluding exhibition materials from positions of flux and discourse, while also reenforcing geopolitical categorizations; missing were the characteristics of time – of objects and events and people's lives changing meaning through dialog, shifting contexts, and time itself, such as through growth and decay. The nature of a hidden authority such as the curator is no less present in Webworks, where the hand of the designer is concealed in code, spatializing link structures, and categorizing indexes. The challenge for the use of polyvocality whether in the physical museum exhibit, or virtual ones, is a challenge of time: creating interactive works that integrate flux, genuine dialog, and a discourse that does not subject ongoing cultural practices to the objectifying timelessness of the "traditional".

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