

From The Museum of the Spectacle to a Museography of Scission

An interview between Jacques Hainard and Patrick Ferla

Patrick Ferla, journalist and attaché to the Programme Director at RSR (Radio Suisse romande), has been keenly following the output of the Ethnographic Museum at Neufchatel (hereafter MEN) since 1980. Over the course of numerous interviews with Jacques Hainard, notably on *le petit déjeuner* (Breakfast) and *Presque rien sur presque tout* (Nearly nothing on nearly everything), Ferla has avidly followed the curator's trajectory.

A deep friendship developed between them and, on the occasion of the centenary of the MEN, Ferla wished to have Hainard speak of his thoughts on museums and ethnography, in the hope of underlining a few key points in the curator's career.

On the 1st of October, 1980, you became the director of the MEN, succeeding Jean Gabus. What are your perspectives and opinions on the role of ethnography?

I belong to a generation of ethnographers that predominantly conducted their research in other parts of the world than our own. In the 60s you had to "cover land" to experience the other. We only knew one way to practice in the field, and that was to leave home. I was initiated into this tradition by living in the Congo for two years. Here I conducted fieldwork in the midst of the "zairisation" of the country. However, before departing for Africa, I worked at the Ethnographic Museum of Bale. As the curator for European collections, I was immediately drawn into a consideration of the relationship between here and elsewhere: I asked myself, which types of ethnography should we highlight? Upon which premises should I base my work? With which perspectives? Should the MEN seek to integrate the reality of the society we live in, for example? Should it display Western society?

And what about the public, what do they say on the subject? What do they expect from ethnographers?

I don't think the public poses itself these types of questions. Ethnography has until recently been confined to the world outside of Europe. That is, ethnography has only recently taken our own society into account. This had previously been the domain of folklorists and those interested in popular arts and traditions. Although ethnography has been restricted to societies without developed writing systems, without history (in our sense of the word), we have begun to ask ourselves if we should continue to systematically collect material culture from these places. This point of view is largely shared by the public and the ethnographic community.

And so in 1978, when I was the chief of staff at the Ethnology Institute in Neufchatel and Jean Gabus had just retired, we learned that the city's Culture Director had approached the Musée de Bale, asking them to organise an exhibition at Neuchatel. We met this director, who had perhaps forgotten the existence of an Ethnology Institute in his city! Having explained to him that we had the necessary competency to carry out the project, a mandate was sent to the Institute, and so was conceived an exhibition entitled *Nomadism in Today's Society*. While we dealt with various examples of nomadism outside of Europe for the first time we dedicated a section of the exhibition to nomadism as it exists in our own horizons. Other continents have hunter-gatherers, in ours we have travellers (gypsies) and peddlers, the people who go from house to house selling laces, knives, and haberdashery items. We also looked at hippies and tourists, two categories of individual who interest ethnologists.

This experience prompted my reflection. I followed this line of inquiry in curating my first exhibition; *Birth, Living and Dying*, which was a homage to Van Gennep, who was the first

ethnography professor at Neuchâtel, between 1912 and 1915. He is the author of the *Summary and Guide to the Ethnographic Museum* (1914), which was published on the occasion of the International Colloquium that was organised at Neuchâtel just before the First World War. He later wrote the *Manual of Contemporary Folklore in France*. We have forgotten all of this work, and it seemed important to me that we re-establish this researcher and re-awaken interest in his work among the ethnographic community.

A major theme in the exhibition, "Birth, Living and Death" is Rights of Passage, a subject upon which Van Gennep had theorised extensively.

As was the case for *Nomadism in Today's Society*, the exhibition put forward two distinct perspectives, or two themes. One part of the exhibition was dedicated to foreign societies, the way that they experience birth, marriage, and death. We explored the rituals that accompany these different stages in life. The other side of *Birth, Living and Death* took the form of a self-reflexive look at our own society. We asked ourselves: What is the definition of a rite of passage in our society? An example might be processes by which class is displayed in public. One example of a rite of passage in Neuchâtel itself is that typographers are thrown into a fountain after their apprenticeship, so as to be cleansed of the mistakes they made during their training. The aim of the project was to raise the idea of the rites of passage, and show that everyone is involved in these types of practices. For a teenager in the 1980s, owning a motorbike clearly constituted a rite of passage. That is no longer the case. I could give plenty other examples, rites of passage among engaged couples have been lost somewhat. Marriage, however, is an ever popular rite, even though divorce is very common. In the case of funerals, this event is still considered very important, even though funereal custom has changed. Wakes in the home of the dead are less and less common, we don't pay homage to the dead as was formerly the case, when the deceased was laid out in the dining room or lounge.

The exhibition was a homage to Van Gennep who, let's not forget, was exiled from Switzerland. As such, the project was a re-establishment exercise, but also a provocation..

Contestation was indeed part of my agenda. I realised, after reading Van Gennep's works, that museums were singularly lacking in ethnographic theory and discourse. We, the museum world, practiced what I have called a museography of juxtaposition; a museography that was content to align objects, one behind the other: a mask next to a mask, a chair next to a chair, without discussion, without histories, opinion or interrogation. I very quickly developed an allergy to this kind of museum practice and launched a concept that later became a school of thought, that is, the "museography of scission."

And what does this museography consist of?

It means cutting the umbilical cord that connects us to tradition! I am talking about the way that we visit museums, the way that we prostrate ourselves in front of beautiful works and exclaim: "My God, isn't this magnificent?!" After this, we re-close the door, the masterpieces having been admired and moved around, leaving nothing else to see. It's in this way that we 'consume' exhibitions, without ever interrogating them or putting them into perspective. I have then, opted for different exhibition concepts: the 'permanent exhibition', which can be called a 'reference exhibition', and the 'temporary exhibition' which we can call an 'exhibition of synthesis'. The first displays objects that are indispensable for our understanding of human history or of a particular society, the second invites reflection on objects chosen in accord with the circumstance, and that underscore a problematic in society. The beginnings of all of this are evident in the development of *Birth, Living and Death*.

In order to tell the story of humankind, it is necessary to collect objects that are very down to earth, everyday objects. This puts me in mind of a colleague of mine who was interested in the hooks at shop entranceways, with which to attach dogs. This absolutely banal object, for which the form and dimensions vary, illustrates the respect for order that this or that society may have.

To which is added a theoretical perspective...

Yes, a framework that consists in placing objects in perspective and using them to tell a story. This was the theme of my second exhibition, *Collections Passion*. A personal title, I have always loved series of objects and their accumulation. I therefore got in contact with collectors, in order to find out their motivations for amassing objects. Certain theorists (among which is Jean Baudrillard in *The System of Objects* (1972)) affirm that, whether conscious or otherwise, to collect is to fight death. Those that collect demonstrate a secret wish to leave their name to the posterity of the society in which they have lived. They do this by using the objects that they have patiently collected throughout their existence. For a collector, therefore, the museum is the ideal place to complete their career!

Hasn't the exhibition "Collections Passion" helped to define more precisely the essence of an ethnographic object?

Indeed, and it is also not so straight forward. Much like my colleagues, I believed that an ethnographic object must necessarily come from elsewhere. Little by little, I developed the conviction that the ethnographic object is only such according to the decree of the ethnographer. In this way, any object can have ethnographic value as long as the ethnographer considers that it does and can involve it in a theoretical framework supported by the society in question. But fundamentally, whether we collect here or there, the action is always the same. This is the case in institutional and private spheres. If a museum holds a good collection, the image of the institution is raised, which flatters the ego of the curator in the same way the ego of a private collector is flattered, when presenting their collection to friends or when they loan the collection to a museum. I have concluded that the museum is nothing more than a large dictionary. We have had to go through twenty years of reflection and experimentation to dare to affirm that, but that is the conclusion that we have reached. Too bad if the statement is shocking!

A dictionary?

Yes, a dictionary that defines and analyses objects which themselves play the role of words. As exhibitors, whether in the role of museographers or set designers, our work consists of telling stories with objects. Put another way, we produce dialogues. This supposes that we observe precise rules that prompt the manifestation of a discussion that witnesses the cultural realities of a society. We do this by mixing it with the social realities of the "other". From here we find that, however different we may be, human behaviour is remarkably comparable everywhere. Contemporary ethnography systematically reveals and displays that fact.

Would you say, then, that the principal value of ethnologists has been that they have demonstrated that "primitives" aren't really primitive?

Ethnography was born in 1850, when the theory of evolution prevailed. Concepts such as "primitive mentality" and "primitives" emerged at this time. The colonisation of Africa didn't help matters. In its role as a new science, ethnography was revealed to be arrogant and authoritarian. Trenchant about and on everything, ethnographers wrote about "the other", took a position and gave little credit to the balance in question. It would take a good century before the discipline opened up to

itself, became self-reflexive and began to explore ethnographies of ethnography. The amount of expertise acquired on other societies quite poetically evidences the complexity of knowledge systems. This in turn confirms that humans are intelligent, that there exist no stupid societies.

Are ethnographers, then, observers of expressions?

More-so than moralists, I would say, yes. There are some condemnable exceptions. We are observers who would not know how to point society in the right direction. We are content to theorise, using a scientific basis, in so far, of course, as we are able to. After all, fundamentally, to conduct ethnography, adopt a point of view, tell stories with objects, aren't those all new ways of creating fiction? That question needs to be posed. The researcher Marc Augé has embraced this discussion. He is the author of essays such as *Crossing Luxembourg* (1985) and *An Ethnologist in the Metro* (1986), and he has just published his first novel entitled *Arthur's Mother* (2004). Is it possible then that through a fictitious description he has best been able to translate his field observations? The recourse to fiction certainly has one advantage, that is of not placing x and y in direct causality. This allows the researcher to get closer to the truth and bring forth the kind of information that a society may not yet be capable of appreciating.

And so you claim that to exhibit is to destabilise?

To exhibit is to destabilise acquired knowledge. There are too many people who are sure of what they think they know. To destabilise them is to challenge them, which cannot be, in my point of view, anything other than beneficial. What we are aiming for is to think better, so that society *is* better, by which I mean more intelligent and more capable of solidarity. But with what right to we exercise the power to destabilise people's knowledge? When we ask that question, we recognise that our quest is pretentious.

Where does that power come from?

The institution. A museum is a place where one knows what one will discover: a manual on society. Each exhibition constitutes a new chapter, just as in a book. I am always delighted when a visitor says, "This year I have finally understood an exhibition from three years ago." Comments like this make me think that the wire between one exhibition and another isn't broken. In recalling lived experiences, we stir up in visitors a critical reflection of society.

Would you agree that critical reading means questioning?

Naturally. Although I am deliberately ironic and fond of provocation, I do not spare myself. I think I have the capacity not to take myself too seriously. To apply to oneself what one destines for others is part of the art of living and without this the game would be irremediably distorted. Furthermore, questioning our ethnographic reflexivity is part of our work. What goes for the public, goes for us too. After all, we are only proposing that they question their conception of the world and of life. Likewise for us, this question is part of our daily practice. In the end, we are in a museum as we are at home and as we are everywhere else. The museum experience should be part of the whole, it should not be divorced from that whole. Following this logic, the curators that succeed me will undoubtedly have a different museological vision from mine. I have no problem imagining and admitting that the only thing that will matter at that point will be the perspectives that they bring to this heritage and these collections. They will make the collections speak differently from the way I have done. In any case, that is my hope.

With the exhibition Marx 2000, the MEN will take a look at capitalist society and ultraliberalism. Your exhibition will be a critique of these phenomena. Do you believe that is the role of a museum

such as yours to enter this debate? Is it the purview of the city's institutions to support a critique of a system which ultimately the city regulates and structures?

That is a topic which is dear to my heart. I have always claimed that the State, at least a democratic state, is liberty itself. I continue to feel that way. The public indeed finances our work, our research, and our exhibitions. And we, we give ourselves the luxury of criticising that which finances us! That is the price of intellectual freedom. If this wonderful luxury should ever one day be refused to us, that would be the end of our freedom. Danger arises at the moment that 'rentability' is automatically associated with funding. This is so given that whoever speaks of financing, speaks of a discussion that plays along with these and that people, a discussion based on flattery and temptation. Of course, it's clear that a critical reflection isn't economically viable. This is the kind of discussion that is used, by definition, to identify faults and errors. In these cases, the nature of the discourse is that of complaint. How could private interests tolerate this? It is only the state, that is, the collective, that can allow itself this luxury. It is a luxury that we should salute. That said, we shouldn't confuse criticism with self-flagellation. The ethnographic museum should be a safeguard, it is the purview of this kind of institution to remind us that we are not the holders of a universal truth. Our role is to create a disturbance, to interrogate, make people think, alarm them, to open up a debate.

Is it with this spirit that the exhibition, "Marx 2000" was developed?

The fundamental premise of the exhibition was to show how much a re-reading of Marx is astonishingly on point in contemporary society. The exhibition looks further than political or partisan considerations, to Marxist philosophy in itself. The universality of Marx's proposal is, at its core, accepted by all. We thought it would be timely to demonstrate that. We sought to explore concepts and reflections that hold their ground, even though they have been opposed. Such is the case of Marxism, from a philosophical point of view.

Does the exhibition reveal why Marxist political doctrine failed?

That wasn't our intention. The exhibition illustrated that to follow one single doctrine presents a host of limitations and engenders unmanageable alienation. The last section of *Marx 2000* displayed identical objects juxtaposed. This was a way to illustrate the danger of intellectual cloning: if we all think the same way, the results are fatal. Put another way, the exhibition hoped to awaken critical consciousness and free will.

Critical consciousness, free will: The institution also confers another type of power, it makes people reflect. This sounds like a decree.

Here we can't get away from the logic advocated by Marcel Duchamp. He planted the theory that it was not necessary to invent objects, you only had to take them as they are and declare that they were art objects. You just had to sign them. This (crazy) reflection on the last century has fed a large part of this museum's practice.

Do you mean a museum practice based on choices?

And on the selection of themes. Our projects develop in an atmosphere of total freedom. Once a theme has been set, we define our focus. What do we want to express? Which story do we want to tell? We don't attempt to unpack a discourse from A to Z. Visitors to the exhibition are our guests. We receive them as such, and put forward a certain number of clues. I can vouch that a large part of these visitors often go much further in their reflections than the thoughts we propose.

Which criteria do you use to choose exhibitions?

We use utterly subjective criteria, let's admit it! Having said that, we have to respect certain conditions: The chosen theme should be sufficiently broad that everyone can be interested by it and it should be accountable to/respectful of academic and scientific perspectives. As for everything else, we are guided solely by intuition.

Is that really the ethnographic trajectory?

More than ever. The role of the ethnographer has changed completely. We've moved away from the idea of the ethnographer as observer, charged with describing others, their ways and customs, their societies. Today's ethnographer hopes to awaken critical reflection in the visitor. The implications of this are that the ethnographer has a personal commitment to their choices. Where this is concerned and with a total lack of modesty, I will state that we are adept at intervening in all spheres. That is, there is no sphere that is not the remit of the ethnographer: neither psychiatric clinics, nor jails, nor violence, nor drugs or sex. The ethnographer can enter any sphere to study its structures, shed light on processes that can later be submitted to public and specialist critique. What interests us is to see how people interact in the heart of a society. It is neither more nor less than that. As such, we dedicate ourselves to the study of behaviour, but we don't play the part of teachers or moralisers. We observe and demonstrate mechanisms. We may even take these mechanisms to pieces, in order to understand them. It is only at that point that we are in a position to make explicit a certain number of our perspectives. An exhibition has this as its objective. Society and those that govern it are free to take part in the debate that follows, if they want to. In terms of what concerns us, we are content to contribute to widening the debate.

Does the study of human behaviour always happen through objects?

That is no longer the case. Just as we can say that the role of the ethnographer has changed, we can also say that the way research is conducted has evolved substantially. Even in the 60s, ethnologists were generally more specialised in fieldwork. From their travels and interviews, they would bring back a fragment of material culture from the field to the museum. The ethnographer would collect and the museum served as their laboratory. But ethnology ended up freeing itself from that obligation to materials. Since then, it has become common to carry out excellent anthropological fieldwork without worrying too much about objects. A large number of ethnologists actually don't know anything about the material culture from the places where they work, since objects aren't necessary in order to analyse human behaviour. As such, anthropology is more theoretical than ever. In fact, anthropology is now especially concerned with power relations and power relations are not always, if sometimes, represented by objects. Which objects, for example, can we find to illustrate kinship relations? This evolution has brought museums, as "containers of objects," to a crisis point, since we can now dispense with objects. The solution is to "give life" to these accumulated collections. But how do we do that? What do these objects say about other people? What do they say about us?

And what do these objects say about themselves?

That's right, what do they say? This is a formidable trilogy, a new field of investigation! However, one part of this study has broken out of the museum, we are revisiting our country's history through gold and Jewish funds, we are going back to the discovery of our historic societal structures, opening the painful shelves of our orphanages. And so we ask ourselves, why do we behave in this way? Historians are also part of this debate. Disciplines begin to mix, as so they should. In this way, lateral perspectives are multiplying. But the objective remains the same: to understand.

In this research project, what is the role according to you of the visitor's background? Do elements of her/his biography form part of your exhibitions?

There are no rules in this regard but it does happen occasionally. In the exhibition *Our ancestors are within us*, biographies were at the heart of our objective. What do we remember of the life of an ancestor? Which memories, which relics? How do you build a lifetime's trajectory? Which objects (them again!) determine decisions and life orientations? The exhibition answered these questions. Another example is *The Void*. This exhibition put the spectator in the position of defining their own autobiography within the framework of *A Change of Heart*, by Michel Butor (1965). By going through a kitchen, a bathroom, by passing by an imaginary city or catching a plane, the visitor could re-write their own history starting from the premise of "emptiness." Empty, like an empty brain. To convert the visitor into an active spectator that is directing the exhibition, that was the key idea. The idea is very far from the stereotypical museum projects that were common until the last decade. For example, those museums where people kept quiet and didn't ask questions, for fear of being considered uncultured. Fortunately, that era has passed: visitors express themselves and have no compunction in leaving a space and quickly decreeing that the "Exhibition was terrible!" But we need to reach one further stage: For me, ethnographic museums should not only be spaces of interpretation and reinterpretation of the world, but they should also be spaces where visitors construct proposals for the future. They should be a new type of laboratory, where research and experimentation would be oriented towards all that has been worked on up until that date, in order to extract perspectives that are useful for the future. In reality, that goal isn't easy to reach.

Many times you have stated that museums are a necessary evil and that their multiplication is a sign of anxiety about the future. Some of your exhibitions pointed to the crisis of museums. Let's dig deeper into this.

It's clear to me that the fate of the traditional museum is condemned. Putting together exhibitions using objects from the collection does not allow for interrogations of contemporary society. In 2003, with the exhibition, *X- A speculation on the imaginary and the forbidden*, we looked at the place of sex and love in our lives. What did we do to illustrate that? Well, we went shopping! using the most classic shops, we selected a series of objects that would fit within this theme. We bought ice creams inside which were little dolls. Why? The new material heritage is made up of knickknacks. When people walk past them and give them a glance they don't even really notice them but when the museum exhibits them, the rules change. The museum is no longer a place of nostalgia. As a place of reference, museums no longer exclusively concern themselves with the past, instead they are concerned with the present. Museums have the advantage of holding the visitor's gaze, they have an understanding of knowledges and curiosity. This is what the new generations of visitors expect. Coming across visitors frequently, I find them increasingly demanding.

It has occurred to me that cultural heritage is made up, potentially, of everything that is here, before our eyes and I wonder whether museums will have the capacity to fulfil expectations in this respect. To multiply the number of museums on a national or even regional level is clearly not the answer. What is on the table is that the museums that already exist need to adapt and take decisions, to put together useful information. Otherwise, they will fall again into ignominy and to dust, they will become old sanctuaries that are nice to visit on rainy days.

You say, adapt. The MEN seems to be getting smaller, do you think it's a good idea to expand it?

I think the museum should invest places in which to reflect upon exhibition styles for the future.

A virtual museum, then? An open place where people can access a database at their leisure and from a distance.

In theory, the proposition is feasible. We may be able to give ourselves the luxury of conserving everything virtually. That would be a real cultural revolution! We are the inheritors of a tradition that has made sacred the ethnographic object, the art object, the commercial object. We have a desire to see the real thing, the original. However, we have to admit that a good part of our society has been produced by fiction: from books, travel books, photographs, artistic reproductions, films. As many reproductions as reductions. This is to such a point that upon seeing the original, people are often disappointed, because it seems suddenly to be less beautiful than it was in our school text book. And nevertheless we appreciate places that have been conserved as vestiges and signs of human history.

You mean remains that are behind glass, that we can't touch.

I would say that to look at something is somehow to touch it. A computer screen creates a distance and being close to an object is incomparable. In the case of a glass case, the spectator is in the presence of the original. You can't touch the Mona Lisa's face but her face is there. You could touch it, but you could not.

On the other hand, let's take a coffee cup. I mean to say, a relationship with an object is always different.

That's a certain text that we should respect. In the case of a coffee cup, you could drink from it, you could break it, or leave it. For a coffee cup to become a prestigious object, it needs to be admitted into an institution, a design museum, for example. The day that a coffee cup is behind glass, it will have the value in that it represents a porcelain working technique. That said, our society will always have more respect for a painted canvas than for a coffee cup, no matter the quality of the object. We took this theme for an exhibition called *Objects as Excuses, Manipulated Objects*. The glass case has the capacity to sacralise objects, in that everything it contains is considered precious. That which is not contained in a glass case is not considered as such. In our work, we have critiqued this system and we treat all objects in the same way. This democratic scheme makes sense in the elaboration of an ethnographic discourse. It's a fundamental levelling technique which reveals an institution's value system.

The questions remains: What is the most precious thing that we have?

Our capacity to think and reflect. The very fact that we need to think and reflect, and the pleasure that we take from that process.