Exhibiting Intention: Some Preconditions of the Visual Display of Culturally Purposeful Objects
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In order to get a minimal specificity of focus on the problem, I think I must begin by positing both a certain sort of exhibition and a certain sort of viewer. The sort of exhibition I have in mind is, broadly speaking, traditional, by which I mean that it consists of the display of objects for examination. The objects are presented in vitrines, on stands, or on walls and are accompanied by labels, leaflets, or a catalogue. There may be additional elements—video displays or films, theatrical or musical performances, perhaps even cuisine—but the center of the exhibition consists of objects offered for inspection and to some extent expounded. This may seem a very conservative sort of exhibition, but it seems likely, particularly in the case of permanent displays as opposed to temporary exhibitions, that an array of objects and artifacts offered for inspection will remain the central element.

As for the viewer, he or she is an adult member of a developed society. He (let us say) has the "museum set": he has a sense of the museum as treasure house, educational instrument, secular temple, and the rest. However, it is to two particular aspects of him that I want to point. First, he has come to the exhibition partly to look at visually interesting objects. He expects things to look at and he expects a large part of his activity in the exhibition to consist of looking. If this were not so he would have stayed at home and read a book about the culture. And in looking at the objects he will find some more interesting than others, for reasons coming out of his own culture—these reasons being aesthetic, from vernacular anthropology, and other. But (and this is the second aspect I want to point to) he is also disposed to be interested in the purpose and function of the artifacts he sees. He wants to know what an artifact is. Like his value judgments, his analytical categories will be to a large extent culturally determined.

It seems axiomatic that it is not possible to exhibit objects without putting a construction upon them. Long before the stage of verbal exposition by label or catalogue, exhibition embodies ordering propositions. To select and put forward any item for display, as something worth looking at, as interesting, is a statement not only about the object but about the culture it comes from. To put three objects in a vitrine involves additional implications of relation. There is no exhibition without construction and therefore—in an extended sense—appropriation.

It is clear that the viewer looking at an artifact from another culture—whether the other culture is distant geographically or chronologically—is in a complicated position. This predicament has been the focus of elaborate discussion since the late eighteenth century. The viewer of an artifact in an anthropological exhibition is subject to further complications and pressures. Three cultural terms are involved. First, there are the ideas, values, and purposes of the culture from which the object comes. Second, there are the ideas, values, and, certainly, purposes of the arrangers of the exhibition. These are likely to be laden with theory and otherwise contaminated by a concept of culture that the viewer does not necessarily possess or share. Third, there is the viewer himself, with all his own cultural baggage of unsystematic ideas, values and, yet again, highly specific purposes.

Let us take the case of a European or American viewer with a Kota mbulu-ngulu by itself in a case or on a wall. Because it has been offered for inspection, he takes it that the object has been considered worthy of inspection, either for its cultural importance or for its beauty and the producer's skill. It is spotlit for some purpose. He may or may not find it attractive, but for any of
a number of reasons—the museum set, the authority of the exhibitors, or his own curiosity about a visually interesting object—he reads a label or catalogue entry with a view to learning about it. Let us say the label tells him something like the following: The object is made of brass sheet over wood and is the product of the Kota, who live in Gabon and the Republic of the Congo. They venerate their ancestors, and these carvings are made to warn off evil spirits from the remains of ancestors. The label or catalogue entry also makes two other points. One is that the mbulu-ngulu is to be compared with a wooden Fang bieri head or figure elsewhere in the room, the Fang being neighbors of the Kota to the west who make the bieri figures with a similar purpose of protecting ancestors. The second is that the Kota mbulu-ngulu is an example of the class of object on which Picasso drew in making the protocubist paintings of 1907. But for the moment I shall leave aside these pieces of information and discuss the effect on the viewer of the basic information in the label about facture and function.

What the label says is not in any normal sense descriptive. It does not cover the visual character of the object. To do so would involve an elaborate use of measurements and geometrical concepts and reference to the representational elements, and would in any case be otiose, since the object is present. The label stands to the object in a relation of a different kind, not a descriptive but an explanatory relation. What the viewer sees in the object is in the first instance an idiosyncratic representation of a human being—an easily recognizable head with open mouth and cicatrices on the cheeks, surrounded by forms that can be read as representational of some kind of headdress, the whole set on a lozenge-shaped base he is likely to take as representational of a much-diminished body and legs. The interpretation offered by the label, therefore, is explanatory of the object in terms of cause.

The label offers the name of the object, mbulu-ngulu. That the object class has a name, even though the viewer's ignorance of the language prevents him from construing any signification or connotation in it, does signify that it is an object that plays a defined or established cultural role. That it has a name means it is a sort of thing.

The label also informs the viewer about the materials used, brass sheet and wood. This carries two kinds of explanatory implication. First, it accounts for certain characteristics of the stylization of form and decoration, which are in a fairly straightforward way medium-determined, or at least medium-reinforced. Second, it seems the product of a culture in which a specific kind of metalwork is both highly developed and highly esteemed.

The label also invokes an ancestor cult and the role of such figures as this as protectors of ancestral remains. The viewer is likely to go back to the figure with this information and put it to interpretive use. He will again infer that this object is an important object in its culture. And the information will also color his physiognomic interpretation of the figure, so that the open mouth will be taken as minatory and fierce rather than say joyful or anguished.

All this is very obvious, and my reason for so laboring it is to lay the ground for a move away from the sense of exhibition as something that represents a human culture. Rather than one static entity representing another, I would prefer, as more productive, a notion of exhibition as a field in which at least three distinct terms are independently in play-makers of objects, exhibitors of made objects, and viewers of exhibited made objects. Two things are essential to this model. First, all three terms are active in the exhibition. Second, the activity of each of the three is differently directed and discretely if not incompatibly structured. Each of the three is playing, so to speak, a different game in the field.

The first agent, and clearly a very necessary one, is the maker of the artifact. If one thinks of the maker's relation to his culture in terms of the customary distinction between a participant's
understanding and an observer’s understanding, the maker is the classic participant. He understands his culture more immediately and spontaneously than any outsider (exhibitor or viewer included) can. Much of his understanding of it takes place without rational self-consciousness; much of his knowledge of it is dispositional. The Kota craftsperson making the mbulu-ngulu is a person who understands his culture with a tact and a flexibility no outsider, with however many years of fieldwork, can aspire to. He may well have reflected on why and how he makes the object, but it is not necessary that he should have done so; and if he has done so, the conceptual medium in which he has reflected will not have been ours. It would be possible for him to proceed with his craft much as he proceeds with his language—in a mood of informal knowledge and mastery. If he does reflect on his craft, he need not distinguish very sharply between the culturally specific and the general condition: between conditions set by the need to protect ancestors and conditions set by the properties of brass sheet. But the maker is active in the field of exhibition, in the artifacts that are the deposit of his activity.

The second agent in the field is an exhibitor. He is, of course, as cultural an operator as the Kota craftsperson. One of the odder products of his culture is the equivocating notion, or notions, of culture itself—a culturally specific concept with which he appropriates interesting things about other people. As the arbitrageur may appropriate the mbulu-ngulu by hanging it next to the 1907 Picasso in his living room, the anthropological exhibitor may appropriate it by "hanging" it next to it next to the concept of ancestor cult in a subcultural universe of discourse. The purposes of the exhibitor's activity are complex. They include putting on a good show and instructing the audience, but if these purposes come under the rubric of representing a culture then they also include, functionally, validating a theory—namely, a theory of culture. There seems nothing sinister in this. But clearly the exhibitor's activity in the field of exhibition has purposes and conditions different from those of the first agent, the maker of the objects exhibited.

The third agent active in the field is the viewer. In order to be able to think about him at all, I started by making some stipulations about his sort. He is a being of his culture; with his museum set, he colludes in the project of exhibition; on a vulgar level, he participates in some concept of culture. But specific to him are (1) that he has come to look at objects of visual interest, and (2) that he seeks understanding of the objects, whether in functional or teleological terms. There is, of course, a reciprocal relation between these two. Explanatory information affects the way he looks, and problems met in looking give rise to a desire for explanation. Culturally, he shares much with the second agent, the exhibitor, even if he does not participate in the stricter anthropological subculture. This degree of cultural overlap between viewer and exhibitor is one of the things that lead to confusion between the two, distinct though their purposes are. But though they may have much in common constitutionally, functionally they are dissimilar.

If exhibition is to be seen as a field in which three agents, not constitutionally identical, are behaving in three differently directed ways, how are we to conceive of their activities coming into contact? Perhaps we can conceive of them coming into contact in the space between object and label.

In invoking a space between object and label I have in mind a sort of intellectual space in which the third agent, the viewer, establishes contact between the first and second agents, the maker and the exhibitor. And I use the word label here to denote the elements of naming, information, and exposition the exhibitor makes available to the viewer in whatever form: a label is not just a piece of card, but includes the briefing given in the catalogue entry and even...
selection or lighting that aims to make a point. To attend to this space, it seems to me, is to attend not only to the scene but to the source of the viewer's activity.

Space (intellectual) exists between label (in its extended sense) and artifact because the label is not directly descriptive of the object. It may offer a name: mbulu-ngulu. It may offer a material cause: brass sheet and wood. It may offer a final cause: protection of the remains of ancestors. It may offer an efficient cause: a Kota craftsperson. It does not describe the object. It describes the exhibitor's thinking about the object, or that part of his thinking he feels it to be his purpose to communicate to the viewer. The nearest thing the label offers to a description is the numerical statement of the object's dimensions something of which the viewer, who can see the object, is unlikely to make very active use. To an extraordinary extent the exhibitor expounds by communicating pieces of information the viewer takes, at least in the first instance, as causes-material, efficient, final-of the object being as it is. The exhibitor may have been less interested in causes than effects; his interest in the pieces of information may well have been because they locate the object as an effect, or sign, of this or that cultural fact, one item in the larger pattern of culture he is charged with exhibiting. But the viewer, tackling these alien objects, seeks causes. This would give rise to more misunderstanding, and viewer and exhibitor would be even more at odds, if it were not that the viewer, being a doggedly cause-seeking animal, is at the same time constructing for himself a causal explanation of the exhibitor's behavior as well as the object maker's—but this is a complication I do not want to pursue here.

What I want to lay emphasis on is that the viewer, moving about in the space between object and label, is highly active. He is not a passive subject for instruction. He moves with great vitality between visually pleasurable (or at least intriguing) objects and equally pleasurable cause finding; then he moves back from information about causes to visually interesting objects, scanning the objects for applications of these causes. One can see this shuttling process in different lights. It can be seen as an attempt to reconcile two propositions about a culture—the participant's culturally conditioned action, or practical proposition, on the one hand, and the observer's implicit explanation, by selection of an item of information that potentially is a cause, on the other. It can also be seen as a case of the viewer demanding a certain kind of art criticism. He uses this or that item of information about cause to sharpen his perception of the object—attending anew to a manner of ornament or the significance of an open mouth, material or final cause at hand.

The purest causes—the least contaminated by our own culturally determined conceptualizations—are the material causes. Names may differ, but an 80-20 copper-zinc alloy is transcultural both as a concept and in its properties. "Brass" is not intellectually appropriative, as "ancestor cult" is. But an exhibition that confined its exposition to material causality would fall short of representing culture. What is more, the viewer would not rest at this point. He works primarily with intention—intention not of course in the sense of mental events in the maker's mind, but a posited purposefulness about the object. The intention of the object is a relation between culturally conditioned goals or functions (it does not matter which) pursued with culturally enabled resources in culturally determined circumstances. Given information about goals (or functions), resources, and circumstances, the viewer will construct an intentional description of the object for himself. And deprived of these pieces of information, he probably will make them up.

What is the exhibitor, who is charged with representing a culture and with doing so to a viewer whose posture in the field of exhibition entails not so much that he should take artifacts as
individual effects of general cultures but that he should take individual cultural facts as causes of artifacts-to do? Obviously, I have been arguing in a general way that one thing the exhibitor might do is to acknowledge in a practical way that he is only one of three agents in the field, and to acknowledge in a practical way that between the exhibitor's own label and the artifact is a space in which the viewer will act by his own lights to his own ends. But I would finish by making three more specific points in extension of this.

First, the objects or artifacts least likely to cause misunderstanding between viewer and maker are objects intended for exhibition. I mean that objects designed to be looked at for their visual interest are those that properly can be displayed and examined for their visual interest. A viewer looking at an artifact that is not designed for looking at but that is exhibited as culturally interesting, culturally telling, or indicative of cultural or technical level is hard put not to be a voyeur, intrusive and often embarrassed. But I have more in mind the point that an object that has been made with a view to being examined for its visual interest-to signify, if you will, visually-is less likely to be misread by the viewer disposed to look at things for their visual interest. This is naturally a matter of degree. It is not only what we would call works of art that are designed, at least in part, to be visually admired: there may be a large element of this also in a canoe or a fishing net, a little in an ax head. But we are less likely to mis-take an object made with a view to its visual effect, such as a mbulu-ngulu or a batik textile. In other words, there seems to me to be an issue of exhibitability. The exhibitable object is one made for visual exhibition or display. The viewer may indeed bring inappropriate concepts and standards to his examination of it (and this is something the exhibitor can do something about), but the visual curiosity itself will not be improper.

The second point I would make is that it is surely desirable to install actually within the exhibition itself the element of crossculturality inherent in the viewer's situation, that is, in the display of objects from one culture to persons of another culture. My own feeling is that exhibitions in which different cultures are combined or juxtaposed are inherently more wholesome than exhibitions of single cultures. The juxtaposition of objects from different cultural systems signals to the viewer not only the variety of such systems but the cultural relativity of his own concepts and values. On the other hand, faced by an assemblage of culturally coherent objects, the viewer is less alerted to his own cultural distance; cultural difference is not built into the display. An alternative to the culturally mixed exhibition is the exhibition that thematically addresses the relationship between another culture and our own. Thus one could argue that to exhibit the Kota mbulu-ngulu with the 1907 Picasso, at least without the further implications of a setting in an arbitrageur's living room, is precisely not to appropriate it but to acknowledge and signal cultural difference any reflective viewer knowing that the circumstances of the Kota craftsperson and Picasso are different. The effect of visual similarity is to accent difference.

The desirability of recognizing the viewer's disposition to be active in the space between label and object is my third and last point. It is, yet again, the status of the viewer as an agent in the field of exhibition that I want to accent. The exhibitor can accommodate this status less by seeking to control or direct the viewer's mind in this space than by, as it were, enlarging the space. There are many ways in which he can do this. The one I would mention here is the offering of a cultural fact relevant to the object that demands that the viewer work to make the connection. He need not work very hard. If I offer as a fact relevant to a piece of Maori sculpture the fact that Maori carvers of wooden sculpture leave the chips that fall as they cut lying on the ground as they fell, not allowing themselves to clear or disturb them, the implications for the
carver's sense of both skill and material can be drawn, as can the implications of this sense for the object seen. To offer a pregnant cultural fact and let the viewer work at it is surely both more tactful and stimulating than explicit interpretation. Sufficient interpretation lies in the selection of the fact. This can be made even more wholesome by incorporating a concept, indeed a word, from the culture that produced the object. The systematic incompatibility of another culture's concept with one's own culture not only makes the viewer work, but reminds him of cultural difference. The best label for a Fang bieri would be an exposition of the Fang concept of bibwe, a culturally specific concept in the area of what we would call "balance." The most effective elucidation I know of Chinese painting is the Chinese concept of pi-i (literally, "brush-idea"), precisely because of the concept's difficulty and cultural strangeness.

Exhibitors cannot represent cultures. Exhibitors can be tactful and stimulating impresarios, but exhibition is a social occasion involving at least three active terms. The activity the exhibition exists for is between viewer and maker. If the exhibitor wants to help or influence this activity, it should not be by discoursing either directly or indirectly about culture, which is his own construct, but rather by setting up nonmisleading and stimulating conditions between the exhibitor's own activity (selection and label making) and the maker's object. The rest is up to the viewer. [33-41]

Reprinted in Exhibiting Cultures editors Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine  Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991