

## FOREWORD

**T**his book results from a series of meetings on museums and globalizing processes convened over the last six years by the Rockefeller Foundation in New York, Buenos Aires, Cape Town, and Bellagio, Italy. It builds on two earlier conferences and volumes supported by the Rockefeller Foundation and the Smithsonian Institution over a decade ago, *Exhibiting Cultures* (1991) and *Museums and Communities* (1992).<sup>1</sup> These volumes reflected the concerns of the period, debating pluralism, the representation of minority and non-Western cultures, and the role of museums in civil society and in according or denying identity. The foundation's own programming, described briefly below, developed along similar lines in the 1980s and early 1990s.

The foundation's museums program, begun in 1989, sought to assert a more inclusive narrative of the United States in contemporary and traditional cultural production, supporting, among other projects, exhibitions of African American, Asian American, Latino, and Native American art both in mainstream museums such as the Whitney Museum of American Art and in culturally specific venues such as the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Wing Luke Museum in Seattle, and the Mexican Fine Arts Center in Chicago.<sup>2</sup> A persistent aim in funded exhibitions and scholarly research has been to question rigid and closed art history canons and museological practices, recognizing museums as arenas of discourse and negotiation useful in defining new forms of

public culture. A concerted effort has been made to establish archives, train a new generation of curators, and create new paradigms for the evaluation and interpretation of the multiple strands of cultural production that form contemporary art in North America. At the same time, the foundation has supported research and exhibitions on African, Asian, and Latin American culture and how artists and practitioners in those regions are responding to the cultural exigencies of multiple modernities. The frameworks and content of the museums program are also reflected in the foundation's humanities programming, which has for much of the last twenty years focused on race, gender, and ethnicity, on developing countries, and on transnational or diasporic issues and identities. Anthropologists, historians, and sociologists as well as art historians have provided context for the funded catalogues and exhibitions.

Much has happened in the world and in the world of museums since the publication of the two volumes that preceded this one. So in 2000 we began with Ivan Karp (our earlier collaborator), Corinne Kratz, and an international group of scholars and museum professionals to examine how international and global connections have become central today to the circumstances of museums and other display institutions. Museums and their staff have been international actors for some time, and other globalizing processes have deep historical roots. However, the present moment is one in which globalization and the changing nature of communication have created environments to which museums are adapting and opportunities museums are taking advantage of. Yet not all museums and certainly not all communities are positioned to benefit from these globalizing processes and new technologies. The processes of globalization are as likely to produce newly disadvantaged institutions and deepen the patterns of inequality between regions of the world as they are to provide occasions for attracting new publics and developing programs. The positive aspects of globalization—increased access to and innovative use of new technologies, the reemergence or preservation of voice and traditions, and the creation of “imagined communities” united across geographic boundaries—are in some cases offset by negative effects such as the global proliferation of mass media and concomitant loss of some traditional cultural transmission, clashes of value systems, and increasing inequality and poverty.

In recent years the foundation has sought to address in its cultural programming these two faces of globalization by supporting national and transnational networks of scholars, artists, and museum or heritage professionals as well as by funding more community research, training, and exhibition programs in eastern and southern Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia. This has involved strengthening a network of indigenous community museums in Mexico; supporting exhibitions and research that seek to understand

and define the “transnational imaginary” of migrant populations who continue to traverse cultural corridors between their homelands and the United States, and also to interrogate and theorize notions of cultural heritage (both tangible and intangible); and encouraging community cultural development projects that use oral history and dialogic exhibitions to probe histories of repression and conflict and to safeguard memory.

The five international meetings that Ivan Karp and Corinne Kratz have helped us organize have brought together colleagues from some of these funded projects, as well as a host of others from different kinds of cultural institutions, to specify how the cultural, economic, political, and social flows characteristic of globalization affect not only museum practices but also the societies within which museums operate. A number of tensions, or frictions, come to the fore as museums’ international involvements and concerns have burgeoned in the last decade and as they position themselves within the interface between the local and the global. Some institutions are transforming themselves to reap the benefits of globalization or to build on significant political and social changes in their countries (e.g., in South Africa); others are being transformed in spite of themselves. The past decade has seen a proliferation of sites of memory in many countries, including national monuments, memorials, and “museums of conscience.” Along with changing rhetorics within and about museums and the multiple roles that museums and related institutions are asked to perform nowadays (including display, collection, heritage management, social critique, and civic, historical, and cultural education) there are changing bases of financial, political, and constituent community support. Some museums attempting to survive the changing conditions may find that their very existence is under threat. Shrinking public budgets threaten museums everywhere, but especially in poor countries on the margins.

The set of discussions, with a long list of meeting participants, authors, and other advisors and consultants from many parts of the world, has been wide-ranging and provocative, and the Rockefeller Foundation’s Creativity and Culture Program is grateful to all who gave their time, energy, and ideas to the project. These acknowledgments remind us of the thanks we owe to two early explorers and supporters of this field: Alberta Arthurs, former director of the foundation’s then Arts and Humanities Division, and Steven D. Lavine, former associate director of Arts and Humanities, who also collaborated on and edited the two previous volumes with Ivan Karp. But especially we owe a profound debt of gratitude to the general editors and animators of this project, Ivan Karp and Corinne Kratz. Their broad knowledge and experience with the important roles museums play locally and globally in contemporary society have been sources of inspiration to us.

We have been committed to the critical development of museums as well as museum development per se because we believe that these institutions can and must be mobilized to help tilt the benefits of the world's globalizing processes toward those who are marginalized or excluded from these benefits. The volume makes clear how difficult this is but also demonstrates the transformative potential of these institutions in the public sphere, institutions that resonate with memory, history, pain, beauty, and resilience. Our hope is that this book, like its predecessors, will help to develop further both the theory and practice of museums as actors in global civil society.

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#### NOTES

- 1 Karp and Lavine, *Exhibiting Cultures*; Karp, Kreamer, and Lavine, *Museums and Communities*.
- 2 Developed initially by Alberta Arthurs and Steven D. Lavine as “Representing Cultures Through Museums” and more recently known as “Reinventing and Renewing Cultures Through Museums.”