

PREFACE

Museum Frictions: A Project History

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Museum *Frictions* is the product of a series of discussions that began six years ago and included a July 2002 conference at the Rockefeller Foundation's conference center in Bellagio, Italy. At the same time, it is part of a longer process, building on a project that began more than a decade earlier with two Rockefeller Foundation-supported conferences held in 1988 and 1990 at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. Each of those conferences resulted in an edited volume: *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Displays* and *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*, both published by Smithsonian Institution Press. With *Museum Frictions*, this pair of books becomes a trilogy of volumes that seek to engage a wide range of scholars and museum professionals. Through their different foci, the books consider core issues in museum and heritage practice by examining how they play out in different kinds of museums and in related institutions through a collection of theoretically informed case studies that together present a valuable comparative collection.

A conversation with Lynn Szwaja and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, officers in the Creativity and Culture Program at the Rockefeller Foundation, set the current project in motion early in summer 2000. We talked about the rich literature on museums that had burgeoned in the decade since the earlier conferences. Work had flourished on the history of museums, on particular types of museums and related places, on dilemmas and debates related to exhibitions, and

on connections among tourism, heritage, and museums. A few in-depth case studies had appeared, and greater attention had also been given to the diverse ways that visitors interpret and use exhibitions and to the dynamics among museums, communities, and publics.¹

Looking back, we remarked that the essays in the first two books seemed to capture key questions and concerns at a particular moment in museum practice and in the developing field of museum and heritage studies, concerns that have been further taken up by that literature. The books also seemed to reflect a configuration of issues prominent in the United States of the time, though both volumes had a comparative breadth that included essays about other parts of the globe as well. We wondered what issues would have characterized the conferences had they been held ten years later, in the new millennium, and what themes would allow a similar overarching and comparative access to contemporary museum practice and the shifts that we sensed had taken place since the first two conferences. As we reflected on issues currently facing museums and museum and heritage professionals and on the most salient changes and continuities since the two earlier conferences and books, the four of us started to formulate a new project.

We recognized that international connections and global orientations had become increasingly central to the circumstances and practice of museums since 1990, in ways that sometimes seemed to differ from the international associations that have long been part of the museum world. At the same time, globalization had become the focus of an extensive body of writing during the 1990s, yet institutions of public culture such as museums were rarely part of that discussion.² Globalizing processes and museological practice thus presented an intersection with potential insights for both fields. We decided to examine this intersection and the workings and implications of this significant trend in museum practice through a conference and a book that would add to *Exhibiting Cultures* and *Museums and Communities* from our present vantage point. In developing an initial framework, we noted the importance of a critical concept of globalization, one that sees it in terms of a range of processes that entail and generate various kinds of frictions and contradictions.

An initial planning meeting in New York a few months later gathered colleagues experienced with museums and other cultural institutions to discuss the project and identify central issues affecting museums and heritage institutions over the previous decade. We circulated a preliminary statement outlining some of the circumstances and issues we hoped to address as well as responses written by all attending. The statements and the ensuing discussion raised questions, presented varied perspectives on issues through key examples

from specific museums and exhibitions, and provided invaluable input and advice that helped us rethink and reshape our plans. In the end, that meeting launched a project that would include three other workshops as well as a conference, concluding with this book. We knew our topic demanded consultation beyond the United States in order to determine what issues were most important in different regions and settings and to understand the different ways they were configured and defined. But we also knew we could not pretend to have a comprehensive sense of what was happening across the range of museum and heritage settings and around the world. We sought to include people from a wide array of situations but decided to concentrate particularly on Latin America and Africa, building on our own expertise and networks. We organized regional workshops in Buenos Aires and Cape Town the following year modeled on the one in New York, bringing together colleagues from the Caribbean and Latin America in the first and from the African continent in the second.

The shape of this volume and the paths that would lead to it were not fully envisioned when we began. Rather, we designed a process that would itself serve as a way to chart the varied contours of global connections and concerns in contemporary museums. The final conference and book became just one part of a larger coordinated project that would spawn other outcomes as well. The three workshops were meant to foster dialogue and exchange on these issues, to build networks regionally, and to help make cross-regional connections. Workshop participants wanted to know what colleagues in other workshops had to say, so we sent all who took part a compilation CD with the circulated statements, extensive notes from each workshop, and information on all participants. We also created a Web site where others could learn about the project.³

In July 2002, building on the workshops, we convened a four-day conference at the Rockefeller Foundation's conference center in Bellagio, Italy. Twenty colleagues came together from six continents to discuss contemporary museum, heritage, and exhibition practice in different parts of the world. Most essays in this volume were prepared for that conference.

We also planned for a postconference workshop intended to reach the next generation of museum and heritage professionals and scholars. This "next-generation" workshop took place in November 2002 at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. Participants from the Bellagio conference helped us identify junior staff to invite from museums and related institutions as well as advanced students doing relevant research. About two dozen people attended, including some Atlanta-based museum professionals and several visiting colleagues.

Participants read and discussed the Bellagio conference papers, relating them to their own work, experience, and research plans and providing feedback for authors. Their energy and excitement continued the discussion begun at the conference and expanded the networks and engagement that the larger project had been building.

Workshop participants in New York, Buenos Aires, and Cape Town had shown keen interest in the book that would result from the project, and as the volume preparation began we wanted to continue the dialogue and interchange that we had found so fruitful. We hoped the volume would serve as a resource and help frame conversations carried on in many places and projects, and we wanted to keep regional differences, issues, and perspectives in mind throughout the editorial process. To do so, we invited three colleagues from the workshops to become part of an extended editorial committee for this book. Gustavo Buntinx, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, and Ciraj Rassool agreed to join the effort, and we met for three days immediately after the conference to start the editorial process. The full editorial committee convened again a year later to review final papers, finalize the volume's organization, and begin to write introductions for the book's sections.

The project began with the name "Museums and Global Public Spheres," but all agreed by the end of the conference that the notion of "global public spheres" lacked sufficient specificity and was not entirely useful or appropriate for articulating recent trends, circumstances, and issues in museum and heritage practice. While the sense of dialogue, exchange, and interaction associated with the notion of "public sphere" was important, that term's strong association with Jürgen Habermas was troublesome in part because of his emphasis on bourgeois European circumstances and bracketing of hierarchical differences.⁴

Instead of "global public spheres," we ultimately decided that intersections between the concepts of "globalizing processes" and "public cultures" seemed better to characterize the range of cases and changes outlined in the conference papers; they also more clearly recognized the varied articulations involved in globalizing and localizing. For us the concept of "public cultures," which we had used in the subtitle of the *Museums and Communities* volume, seemed to convey a better sense of the fields of activity that emerge out of diverse interests and orientations, fields that are less integrated than the public sphere and more heterogeneous in their politics and aims. These conclusions crystallized into the title *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations* during the subsequent editorial meeting. Yet the debates that led to this reformulation continue to have a spectral presence in several essays in the book, with traces of

“global public spheres” providing their own kind of disjunctive friction against the recasting of the final title.

Given our focus, *Museum Frictions* includes a greater range and weighting of international cases and authors than the two earlier books produced around 1990. *Museum Frictions* seeks to develop frameworks for understanding how global opportunities and constraints affect the goals and practices of museums and heritage practitioners and organizations, and how well local needs are acknowledged and served in an increasingly diverse and contradictory global environment. It presents case studies that illustrate how relationships among museums, public cultures, and globalizing processes are being realized in exhibitions and in other museum and heritage programs. Throughout this project we have been particularly concerned with differences between people and institutions positioned at the apex of global systems and those at the margins, and we have sought to draw on examples that extend over the range of institutions. The results, we hope, will convey some sense of the intense and lively dialogue that animated all of the meetings we convened.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors in this volume are but a fraction of those who took part in this project and helped support it in various ways. We would like to express our thanks to everyone who attended meetings in New York, Buenos Aires, Cape Town, and Bellagio for their generous and thoughtful participation and to several others who shared papers with us as we prepared the manuscript: Joseph Adandé, Norton Batkin, Ronaldo Bianchi, James Boon, Américo Castilla, Michael Cooke, Arlene Dávila, Ana Maria de Oliveria, Vishakha Desai, Charlotte Elias, Ticio Escobar, Kathy Halbreich, Carolyn Hamilton, Mauro Herlitzka, Maria José Herrera, David Koloane, Moussa Konaté, Richard Kurin, Susan T. Leval, Zayd Minty, Chon Noriega, Chika Okeke, Marcelo Pacheco, José Antonio Pérez Gollán, Jean-Aimé Rakotoarisoa, Mari Carmen Ramírez, Marion Pastor Rocas, Doran Ross, Osvaldo Sánchez, Yonah Seleti, Patricia Tappatá de Valdez, John Kuo Wei Tchen, Storm van Rensburg, Stephen Weil, Connie Wolf, Victor Zamudio-Taylor, Vera L. Zolberg, Sharon Zukin, and the authors in this volume.

Those who attended the next-generation workshop in Atlanta offered astute responses to earlier drafts of these papers, for which we thank them: Natasha Becker, Amy Branch, Aimee Chang, Jeffrey Feldman, Cheryl Finley, Derek Hook, Qanita Lilla, Thanduxolo Lungile, Wayne Modest, Michele Gates Moresi, Huong Thi Thu Nguyen, Michael O’Hanlon, Jeffrey A. Ow, Andrea Silvia

Pegoraro, Veerle Poupeye, Yasmin Ramírez, Marina Roseman, Inez Stephey, Shelley Stevens, Jed Stevenson, Carol Thompson, Krista Thompson, Kirsten Wehner, Michelle Wilkinson, and Jonathan Yorba.

Lynn Szwaja and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto have been fellow travelers in this project from its inception, both intellectually and literally. Their partnership has made the entire enterprise a pleasure and an adventure. Editorial decisions and debates were much enlivened by the participation of Gustavo Buntinx, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, and Ciraj Rassool on the extended editorial committee.

A multifaceted international project has complex logistics. Jennifer Adair not only handled all meeting and travel arrangements with grace and efficiency while she was at the Rockefeller Foundation but also contributed her bright curiosity and shared our enthusiasm. Staff at the Center for the Study of Public Scholarship took over after the conference, making arrangements for the next-generation workshop and guiding the manuscript through its lengthy preparation. Linnet Taylor at the Rockefeller Foundation also assisted in its final stages.

Through the Center for the Study of Public Scholarship, Emory University provided staff support for the project and a venue for the next-generation workshop. We particularly appreciate the steady and enthusiastic support for CSs and its activities from Robert A. Paul, dean of Emory College. Ken Wiskoker, Anitra Grisales, and other colleagues at Duke University Press have been attentive, efficient, and enthusiastic as this book came to fruition; it was a pleasure to work again with Sue Warga, our copyeditor. Support from the Rockefeller Foundation made this project possible, and the foundation's Bellagio Study and Conference Center provided an idyllic and congenial setting for the final conference and two editorial meetings.

NOTES

- 1 The following are just a sampling of the books that have appeared since 1990, listed in chronological order within each group. For works on the cultural analysis and history of museums, see Karp and Lavine, *Exhibiting Cultures*; Ames, *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes*; Coombes, *Reinventing Africa*; Findlen, *Possessing Nature*; McClellan, *Inventing the Louvre*; Sherman and Rogoff, *Museum Culture*; Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*; Brigham, *Public Culture in the Early Republic*; Bal, *Double Exposure*; Simpson, *Making Representations*; MacDonald and Fyfe, *Theorizing Museums*; Barringer and Flynn, *Colonialism and the Object*; Holo, *Museums and Identity in Democratic Spain*; Maleuvre, *Museum Memories*; Crane, *Museums and Memory*; Legassick and Rassool, *Skeletons in the Cupboard*; McIntyre and Wehner, *Negotiating Histories*; Luke, *Museum Politics*; Kreps, *Liberating Culture*; and Bennett, *Pasts Beyond Memory*.

Several useful readers have compiled important journal articles on museum and heritage practice, including Pearce, *Interpreting Objects and Collections*; Greenberg, Ferguson, and Nairne, *Thinking About Exhibitions*; Preziosi and Farago, *Grasping the World*; and MacDonald, *A Companion to Museum Studies*.

Books that consider particular types of museums and related display spaces include Fjellman, *Vinyl Leaves*; Pointon, *Art Apart*; Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*; Harvey, *Hybrids of Modernity*; and MacDonald, *The Politics of Display*.

See note 24 of this volume's introduction for works about dilemmas and debates related to exhibitions.

The following consider connections among tourism, heritage, and museums: Castañeda, *In the Museum of Mayan Culture*; Davis, *Spectacular Nature*; Handler and Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum*; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture*; Stanley, *Being Ourselves for You*; and McEachern, *Narratives of Nation*.

A number of in-depth case studies of particular exhibitions have appeared, including O'Hanlon, *Paradise*; Sandeen, *Picturing an Exhibition*; Gaspar de Alba, *Chicano Art Inside/Outside the Master's House*; Rassool and Proselandis, *Recalling Community in Cape Town*; MacDonald, *Behind the Scenes at the Science Museum*; and Kratz, *The Ones That Are Wanted*.

Other recent works focus particularly on how visitors interpret and use exhibitions, education and learning, museum design, and the dynamics among museums, communities, and publics: Karp, Kreamer, and Lavine, *Museums and Communities*; Falk and Dierking, *The Museum Experience*; Dean, *Museum Exhibition*; Roberts, *From Knowledge to Narrative*; and Hein, *Learning in the Museum*.

- 2 See, for instance, Featherstone, *Global Culture*; Robertson, *Globalization*; Ahmed and Donnan, *Islam, Globalization, and Postmodernity*; Featherstone, *Undoing Culture*; Sassen, *Losing Control?*; Clark, *Globalization and Fragmentation*; Bauman, *Globalization*; Jameson and Miyoshi, *The Cultures of Globalization*; Sassen, *Globalization and Its Discontents*; Meyer and Geschiere, *Globalization and Identity*; Tomlinson, *Globalization and Culture*; and Westbrook, *City of Gold*.
- 3 The project Web site is part of the Web site for the Center for the Study of Public Scholarship: <http://www.csps.emory.edu>.
- 4 Sound critiques and debate have led to various reformulations of the notion of "public sphere," but Habermas's theory typically remains the starting point. Nancy Fraser's useful summary of these critiques identifies several problems with the way Habermas defines "public sphere": (1) the public sphere is actually not separate from the state, as he seems to assume; (2) the notion must be pluralized, for there will always be multiple public spheres, sometimes intersecting and sometimes in contestatory relations; (3) Habermas's assumption of equal access to participation in a public sphere is wrong, as is the assumption that participation is defined as if among status equals, because hierarchy is bracketed (within museums, inequalities of access and status have been major issues in the past few decades); (4) unequal access and participation entail differential knowledge and skill in the communicative conventions involved in the public sphere (or more specifically here in museum practice)—shared communicative conventions cannot simply be assumed to exist already but would need to be

developed. In the end, Fraser finds the notion of “public sphere” to be important and necessary but in need of revision. Bruce Robbins concurs that “public sphere” is “a concept that must remain both unacceptable and necessary,” surrounded by contradictions. See Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* and *The Structure of Communicative Action*; Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere”; Robbins, “Introduction: The Public as Phantom.”