

Introduction

Why look at a shard of pottery, an old shoe, a scribbled poem? Two hallmarks of display are the foreignness of objects to their contexts of presentation and the location of meaning at their destination. Working toward a political economy of showing, *Destination Culture* deals with agencies of display in museums, festivals, world's fairs, historical recreations, and tourist attractions. Drawing on the history of the avant-garde and the implications of its practices, *Destination Culture* attempts to theorize the artifact and the logic of exhibition in the context of lively debates about the death of museums, ascendancy of tourism, production of heritage, limits of multiculturalism, social efficacy of the arts, and circulation of value in the life world.

The essays in this volume tackle aspects of a single project—the agency of display—even as they are prompted by various provocations, invitations, and long-standing interests. Among the provocations are the statement of Svetlana Alpers in 1988 that visual interest should determine what is exhibited; the comment by Peter Sellars in 1991 in which he identified authenticity with confusion; and the recent admonition of John Comaroff that folklore is one of the most dangerous words in the English language—Walter Benjamin spoke of the “appreciation of heritage” as a “catastrophe.”¹

An invitation from the Museum for African Art, on the occasion of an inaugural exhibition in its new home in Lower Manhattan, lead to an essay that reflects on secrecy in social life, ethnography, and museum exhibitions. The opening of the Ellis Island Immigration Museum prompted a critical analysis of the site. A crisis in museum identity and concern with the place of museums within cultural tourism brought opportunities to address museum professionals in the United States, New Zealand, and Australia on the relationship of museums and tourism.

From my long-standing interest in how Jews are constituted by disciplines, institutions, and display practices—some of which I have engaged in myself—arises a history of Jewish participation in world’s fairs.² All the essays—but specially the last chapter on taste—are informed by my ongoing concern with vernacular culture and the aesthetics of everyday life, both lived and exhibited.

However diverse the occasions for the essays, the larger project consistently, even insistently, asks the question: “What does it mean to show?”

The opening essay, “Objects of Ethnography,” explores the paradox of showing things that were never meant to be displayed. When the value of such things has little to do with their appearance, showing them—asking that one look at them—unsettles the certainty that visual interest is a prerequisite for display. The very absence of visual interest (in a conventional sense) points to ways that interest of any kind is created and vested. Particular kinds of interest not only guide the fragmentation and collection of the world and its deposit in museums, but also endow those fragments with their autonomy as artifacts. Ethnographic objects are a prime site for exploring these concerns.

I proceed from the proposition—the tautology, if you will—that ethnographic objects are objects of ethnography. They are artifacts created by ethnographers when they define, segment, detach, and carry them away. Such fragments become ethnographic objects by virtue of the manner in which they have been detached. They are what they are by virtue of the disciplines that “know” them, for disciplines make their objects and in the process make themselves. For this reason, exhibitions, whether of objects or people, display the artifacts of our disciplines. They are also exhibits of those who make them.

This is not to deny the power of those who make and claim these objects in the first instance to determine their meaning and fate. Rather, I want to suggest that ethnographic objects are made, not found, despite claims to the contrary. They did not begin their lives as ethnographic objects. They *became* ethnographic through processes of detachment and contextualization. Whether in that process objects cease to be what they once were, is an open and important question. That question speaks to the relationship of source and destination, to the political economy of display. The answer tests the alienability of what is collected and shown.

Detachment is more than a necessary evil. Fragmentation is vital to the production of the museum both as a space of posited meaning and as a space of abstraction.³ Posited meaning derives not from the original context of the fragments but from their juxtaposition in a new context. As a space of abstraction exhibitions do for the life world what the life world cannot do for itself.⁴ They bring together specimens and artifacts never found in the same place at the same time and show relationships that cannot otherwise be seen.

Exhibitions are fundamentally theatrical, for they are how museums perform the knowledge they create. I distinguish in this essay between in situ displays (dioramas, period rooms, and other mimetic re-creations of settings) and in-context displays (objects arranged according to such conceptual frames of reference as a taxonomy, evolutionary sequence, historical development, set of formal relationships). These two modes of display differ in their approach to the performativity of objects and the nature of their *mise-en-scène*. In-context displays as we know them from the history of museums depend on the drama of the artifact. Objects are the actors and knowledge animates them. Their scenario is what George Brown Goode, director of the U.S. National Museum (Smithsonian Institution), characterized in 1881 as “an intelligent train of thought.” Their script is a series of labels. Scenes are built around processes of manufacture and use. The larger narrative may be a story of evolution or historical development. The performative mode is exposition and demonstration. The aesthetic is one of intelligibility.

In situ displays are immersive and environmental. They privilege “experience” and tend to thematize rather than set their subject forth. At

their most fully realized, as in the case of Plimoth Plantation, they re-create a virtual world into which the visitor enters. This effect is modeled on the experience of travel and the pleasures of engaging the life world as the ultimate exhibition of itself. Indeed, it has been argued that exhibitions produce “an effect *called* the real world” that is anterior, if subsequent, to the representation.⁵ Live displays, and specifically the display of humans, are central to the completeness of in situ exhibitions. “Objects of Ethnography” concludes with an exploration of the history and conventions of live displays.

Distinctions between doing and showing, demonstrating and performing, presenting and representing govern this essay and the case studies that follow. “Exhibiting Jews” examines Jewish participation in world’s fairs from 1851 to 1940 in three national contexts (France, England, and the United States). Unlike the states and empires that built great national pavilions, Jews were a diaspora without territorial sovereignty. Though citizens of the many countries represented at world’s fairs, they were anomalous. Willy-nilly the “Jewish question” determined the basis for their display as a race, religion, or nation. This essay explores how a diaspora negotiated a transnational space of display in relation to struggles for emancipation, social integration, and national self-determination.

I begin with the exhibition of a private collection of “Israelite art” in 1878 in the Palais du Trocadéro at the Exposition Universelle in Paris. The display featured ceremonial objects from the collection of Isaac Strauss, an Alsatian Jew and the grandfather of Claude Lévi-Strauss. Judaism, not Jews, was the main subject of this exhibition, which classified synagogue appurtenances as art and integrated things Jewish into the discourse of civilization, thereby recasting Jewish particularism in universalistic terms. In contrast, the Anglo-Jewish Historical Exhibition in London (1887) showed historical documents and artifacts that affirmed Jewish presence in England. To attract the general public, the organizers included “Jewish ecclesiastical art,” including the Strauss collection. To the degree that Torah crowns and ark curtains showed evidence of non-Jewish influences, they also demonstrated the cosmopolitan effects of Diaspora life, according to the organizers.

In the United States, from the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia in 1876 to the New York World’s Fair in 1939–1940, Jews defended such uni-

versal values as religious freedom (without singling out Judaism), continued to frame the presentation of Jewish subjects in the cosmopolitan terms of art and civilization, secured for Judaism a central place in the history of religion, and defined themselves variously as a Bible people or as a nation about to become a state. Jews exhibited themselves retrospectively and prospectively.

Of special importance is the work of Cyrus Adler, who between 1888 and 1897 mounted exhibitions that included Jewish material for the U.S. National Museum at international expositions in Cincinnati, Atlanta, Chicago, and Nashville. Adler's work reveals how Jews were constituted as a subject by scholars, curators, and collectors, how disciplines were institutionalized in museums as an outcome of exhibitions and the collections they required, and how scientific and popular displays were implicated in the fight against religious intolerance, racism, and other forms of xenophobia.

Adler used his speciality, Semitic studies, to integrate "civilization"—and by that route, Jews—into the anthropology department at the U.S. National Museum and to avoid subjecting Jews to the ways that "primitive" societies were studied and displayed. Semitic studies not only offered a legitimate context for Bible studies as a nonsectarian enterprise at a time when Americans were preoccupied with religion but also positioned Jews advantageously in the history of religion. Adler mounted exhibitions of biblical antiquities and the history of religion in the Government Building and arranged the concessions for several foreign villages on the Midway Plaisance at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

His exhibitions of biblical antiquities included three types of things: first, objects recently made in Bible lands that were similar to what was known from the archaeological record; second, objects created anywhere and anytime in response to a biblical injunction (for example, an eighteenth-century German Sabbath lamp); and third, specimens collected from the natural environment of the region, including dust from Jerusalem and water from the Jordan River.

Adler's displays of the history and comparative study of religions focused on underlying religious ideas, not church history or theology. In this way Adler not only fostered religion as a field of scientific study that would encourage religious tolerance, he also succeeded in treating Judaism as a unified religion and Jews as a unified religious community,

even as he denationalized religion. He thereby integrated Jews conceptually into the larger category of Western civilization and won for them a privileged position at the beginning of the history of monotheism. To make religion exhibitible, Adler displayed artifacts associated with cult and through them tried to communicate creed.

Finally, the board of directors of the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition made Adler the commissioner to Turkey, Persia, Egypt, Tunis, and Morocco. He was to arrange the concessions for foreign villages on the Midway Plaisance. Although there was no "Jewish Village," Jews were present, albeit not as Jews. Most of the Turks in the Turkish Village, for example, were Jewish. There were several reasons why Jews did not exhibit themselves in live ethnographic displays, not least of which was an "aversion against being paraded as a 'dime museum freak,'" in the words of an observer of the time. By the last decades of the nineteenth century, the mass migration of eastern and central European Jews was well under way and scientific racism was guiding the display of the world's peoples. Anyone interested in a "Jewish foreign village" had only to visit Chicago's Jewish immigrant quarter.

By World War I, Jewish immigrants in American cities were re-creating the Diaspora as a world's fair in miniature, and by the twenties, the projection of a Jewish homeland in Palestine became more common. The essay concludes with a discussion of Zionist pageants and pavilions in Chicago and New York mounted by Meyer Weisgal in 1932, 1933, and 1939–1940. By following the model of national buildings, the Jewish Palestine Pavilion constituted the state symbolically before it was legally formed. Everything in the pavilion came from Palestine and was intended to demonstrate that to all intents and purposes a Jewish state was already in operation. In striking contrast with Adler's broad notion of biblical antiquities, Weisgal's strict guidelines for the pavilion—only products of Palestine—precluded the exhibition of ceremonial art created in the Diaspora.

The concern of this chapter is not so much with the image or even the representation of the Jew, as with the agency of display. I argue that display not only shows and speaks, it also *does*. Clues to its agency lie in the processes from which it emanates and in which it eventuates. This is the

subject of “Destination Museum,” which explores the role of exhibition in the production of heritage. Based on observations in New Zealand, Australia, and the United States, the essay begins with the proposition that tourism stages the world as a museum of itself, even as museums try to emulate the experience of travel. Indeed, museums—and the larger heritage industry of which they are part—play a vital role in creating the sense of “hereness” necessary to convert a location into a destination.

While the life world may be the ultimate in situ installation, it has the disadvantage of low density, for not everything of interest to the visitor is close at hand. Tourism organizes travel to reduce the amount of down time and dead space between high points. Museums, for their part, are high-density sites, giving the visitor the best they have to offer within a compact space and tight schedule. Yet, museums are experiencing a crisis of identity as they compete with other attractions within a tourism economy that privileges experience, immediacy, and what the industry calls adventure. Forced to depend more than ever on earned income, museums are becoming more service oriented. They also worry that objects can no longer draw visitors the way they once did. They are depending increasingly on installation as an art form in its own right. So is tourism, which not only compresses the life world, but also displaces it, thereby escalating the process by which a way of life becomes heritage.

While it looks old, heritage is actually something new. Heritage is a mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past. Heritage thus defined depends on display to give dying economies and dead sites a second life as exhibitions of themselves. A place such as Salem, Massachusetts, may be even more profitable as an exhibition of a mercantile center than it was as a mercantile center.

The problematic relationship of objects to the instruments of their display, a theme that runs through the volume, is central to the production of heritage, if not its primary diagnostic. Display is an interface that mediates and thereby transforms what is shown into heritage. By conflating a sense of the actual historical site with the techniques for producing this effect, Colonial Williamsburg, the heritage production, is represented as indistinguishable from colonial Williamsburg, the historical actuality, particularly in the marketing of the site. Not only does the heritage pro-

duction have its own history *as* a heritage production, but the display interface—the style of architectural restoration, use of costumed “animators,” approach to historical reenactment, handling of historical time (does it stand still or unfold?)—is a critical site for conveying meanings other than the message of heritage. Curatorial interventions may attempt to rectify the errors of history, and make the heritage production a better place than the historical actuality it represents.

Theatricalized performances of heritage in developing countries exemplify the strategic use of the interface to convey messages of modernity that stand in contrast with the heritage on display. The state-of-the-art amphitheater where Bomas of Kenya performs Maasai and other dances outside Nairobi—indeed the professional performance troupe itself—conveys messages of national identity, modern statehood, transcultural communication, and technological development. Such stagings of national heritage foreground the interface. To hide the interface is to foster the illusion of no mediation, to produce “tourist realism,” which is itself a highly mediated effect.⁶

In contrast, sites like Splendid China, which opened in 1993 in Kissimmee, Florida, near Orlando, produce heritage by foreclosing what is shown. They actively implicate exhibition in the disappearance of what is on view—namely, the monuments, palaces, temples, and religious and cultural practices of ethnic minorities featured there. Not surprisingly, this 76-acre park has become the focus of protest demonstrations.⁷ “The World-Folklore Theme Park” under development in Guangzhou, China, invites visitors to “enjoy the splendour of the world’s folklore by way of direct participation in the exotic life of people with outlandish customs and habits.”⁸ The very term “folklore” signifies a special relationship to what it designates, whether that relationship is marked by burlesque, nostalgia, irony, or dismay. “Errors” become safe—they acquire value—as archaisms and exoticisms. Display enables playful participation in a zone of repudiation once it has been insulated from the possibility of anyone going native.

The processes whereby errors become archaisms, objects become ethnographic, and ways of life become heritage test the alienability of what was found at the source. They also test the limits, even the violations, of a sec-

ond life as heritage, particularly in the presence of the not yet dead. While exhibition may capitalize on visual interest, these processes are driven by a political economy whose stakes lie elsewhere—in foreclosures and inalienabilities.

In that economy, virtualities, even in the presence of actualities, show what can otherwise not be seen. Tourists travel to actual destinations to experience virtual places. They set out for the very spot where the Pilgrims of Plimoth Plantation once lived, the foundations from whence the Abby Church of Saint Peter and Saint Paul in Cluny once rose, the Registry Hall where immigrants traveling steerage to America once stood, only to find that the actual spot is remarkably mute. Hence, the need for a re-created Pilgrim village, computer simulation of the reconstructed church, and restoration and interpretation of Ellis Island.

“Ellis Island” explores how a defunct federal office is reborn as a shrine. Not a place but an aperture, Ellis Island outlived its usefulness as an immigration center when restrictive legislation from 1921 to 1965 stemmed the flow of newcomers. Abandoned, the site became an evocative ruin. Restored, it has become a repository of patriotic sentiment and exemplar of institutional memory under the aegis of corporate sponsorship. In their collaboration, the tourism and heritage industries are ensuring that more tourists will pass through Ellis Island than did immigrants during the peak of its operation.

Now the premier site for “experiencing” what it was like to be an immigrant, Ellis Island *thematizes* immigration. It offers the perfection of the restoration as a remedy for the imperfections of history. As a heritage production, Ellis Island has become the master port of entry, no matter what historical period or what the conditions of a person’s arrival. So inclusive is Ellis Island, so encompassing is the theme of immigration, that the site subsumes prior and subsequent historical sites—from the *Mayflower* and the Middle Passage to Fort Chafee and Los Angeles International Airport. Even the Pilgrims can find a place on the American Immigrant Wall of Honor if their descendants will pay one hundred dollars to have their names inscribed on it. Plimoth Rock is just another port of entry for just another group of immigrants. But not at Plimoth Plantation, where everyone who came to America is an honorary Pil-

grim. Though they differ in display logic, Ellis Island and Plimoth Plantation, the subject of the fifth essay, are characteristic of an era of historical identification by consent (and dissent) rather than descent.

At Plimoth Plantation, where the year 1627 “lives forever,” the world of the first settlers is re-created in meticulous detail, complete with living representatives of the historical inhabitants of this village. By making time stand still, freeze-frame also interrupts the inexorable narrative of origins and displaces the unbroken line of its exclusive genealogy; descent has become irrelevant. Billed as the “Living Museum of Everyman’s History,” Plimoth Plantation achieves its democratic effect by paying attention to the “nobodies not less than the somebodies” and allowing everybody—not just those who can trace their lineage back to Pilgrim ancestors—to enter the Pilgrim world and walk among the living dead. Just how this site achieves these effects is the subject of this essay.

Plimoth Plantation is an unscripted ensemble performance. Improvisational and environmental, it aligns itself with experimental theater. The display history of the site reveals a shift from ceremony to virtuality, from commemoration to exploration, from authoritative narrative to ongoing conversation, from discrete moments, objects, and scenes to the waking dream of a virtual Pilgrim world. Much of the site’s appeal derives from its failure as the perfect time machine. It promises an experience of transport to the year 1627. But what the visitor experiences is the juxtaposition of 1627 and 1995 and the willful forgetting by the Pilgrims in the village today of all that occurred after 1627. The visitor has the uncanny sense of seeing into a future that those locked into an eternity of 1627 are not supposed to know. Actors and visitors collaborate in a jumbling of time by sustaining one small slice of it indefinitely, even while abutting it with the present moment.

The delight of such effects is the subject of “Confusing Pleasures,” an exploration of the 1990 Los Angeles Festival. This event featured thousands of artists from the Pacific Rim—Korean shamans, Eugene O’Neill’s *Hughie* in English and Chinese, Jemez Pueblo Matachines, and performers from Samoa, Alaska, Thailand, Australia, Mexico, and Indonesia. Events were staged across the city, in parks and churches, on streets, and in train stations.

Examining performance at the interface of cultural encounter, this essay is guided by questions of reception. What are the preconditions for creating interest in what audiences do not understand? How has the avant-garde prepared audiences to watch and value what they do not know how to react to? The Los Angeles Festival located authenticity in a moment of reception, rather than in the performances themselves. Authenticity occurred when audiences confronted the incomprehensible. Not only did the organizers of the Los Angeles Festival insist that meaning created at the source is inaccessible, they also valued unintelligibility at the destination. In addition to avoiding “ethnographic” and “entertainment” approaches, they tried to “undo” the ethnographic through a process of theatrical mediation. By restaging as art what might otherwise be treated as an ethnographic object, the Los Angeles Festival made possible the reception of Javanese court dance and Korean shamans as if they had emanated from the avant-garde itself.

A mode of reception in which confusion is pleasurable opens up possibilities for the exhibition of African art, while keeping alive the issue of what can and cannot be shown or known. This is the subject of “Secrets of Encounter,” an analysis of the inaugural exhibition of the Museum for African Art in Lower Manhattan. *Secrecy: African Art That Reveals and Conceals* features objects that withhold information by design. The exhibition explores the logic and procedures of concealment. It shows respect for what must not be revealed and humility in the face of what cannot be known. Visitors to the Guggenheim Museum on the corner or the New Museum of Contemporary Art a few doors away already know how to enjoy what is not explained to them. It is easier to display secrets without revealing them when African masks and textiles are exhibited as art than when they are shown as artifacts.

The volume concludes with “Disputing Taste,” an excursus on the social location and circulation of values in the museum of the life world, where everyone is a curator of sorts. Taking as a point of departure two books—*The Encyclopedia of Bad Taste* and *Quintessence: The Quality of Having It*—this essay begins with a paradox. The coherence of taste as a category derives from its power to distinguish those who make the distinctions. But not all those who value happy-face decals or Chihuahuas are

unified by what they have in common. Far from homogenizing all those who consume them, Hummel dolls and heavy metal, leisure suits and Liberace redraw the terrain of taste at every turn.

The *Encyclopedia of Bad Taste* posits a *golem* let loose in a world of snoglobes and lava lamps, astroturf, shag rugs, and black velvet paintings. Slick picture books like *Quintessence* imagine a homunculus of good taste in a universe of Spalding balls that are “sincere.” Ivory soap is “innocent,” Tupperware is “pure,” and peanut butter is “classic.” One can count on clean and honest lines, truth to material, and form following function. *Quintessence* mystifies taste by lodging it in the instinct of the well-bred. It suggests that taste cannot be learned (though it can be refined) and that it is a property inherent to things and practices. Taste, like class, becomes racist when the capacity for it is a matter of breeding, when it masquerades as the natural attribute of an elite, when it has recourse to the “quintessential” attributes of people and things. *Quintessence* writes pedigrees for objects that test their universality, singularity, and timelessness. Are they perfect, classic, abiding objects above the vicissitudes of fashion? If good taste withstands the test of time, bad taste is bad timing. Short of the death inflicted by evanescence, taste goes bad when it is out of step with its moment—when the hemline does not rise or fall quickly enough. That some of the same objects appear in both books for such utterly different reasons returns us to the questions raised throughout this volume: the location of meaning at the destination rather than at the source, the vested nature of interest, and the foreignness of objects to their contexts of presentation, in this case encyclopedias of taste. Objects in these two books are anchored not in the social space of their purported consumers but in the conceptual space of the inventory, a quality they have in common with museums and encyclopedic projects more generally.

Kitsch returns us to the transvaluation of the outmoded and Walter Benjamin’s faith in its potential as a source of revolutionary energy. What some fads lacked in exclusivity during their first life, they gain the next time round through operations of recoding and transvaluation. “Disputing Taste” concludes with a consideration of modernist critiques of

kitsch. The avant-garde disarticulated not only art, beauty, and pleasure but also taste, style, and culture. This process inaugurated a complex remapping of simplistic categories of high and low, sublime and paltry, in Milan Kundera's terms, and returns us to the possibilities of confusing pleasures, the location of interest, and the agency of display.