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# The Uncontacted: Ontogenesis at the Museum

**Vincent Normand**

*Vincent Normand discusses the modern museum, including its ethnographic variant, as an exhibition machine producing dialogism of objectivation and subject formation. The media of museum display and exhibition are identified as producers of colonial discourses as well as the conditions of Western citizenry through the dialectics of de-animation and reanimation, inscribing the artifacts on view with a sepulchral aspect and the emergent modern citizenry with cultural norms.*

In a chapter of her book *Museum Pieces* (2011), Ruth B. Phillips explores the politics of display of *ga:goh:sah* (a specific type of Onkwehonwe, or 'Iroquois' medicine masks commonly referred to as 'False Face' masks) in North American ethnographic museums. Extending her inquiry to the appearances of *ga:goh:sah* in contemporary popular visual culture, Phillips turns to an incident that occurred during the 1996 presentation of the annual National Aboriginal Achievement Awards, televised across Canada by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation:

*Native actor Tom Jackson, star of a popular CBC television series, [...] playfully [held] a ga:goh:sah over his face before making one of the awards. In one letter of protest, an Onkwehonwe correspondent wrote that 'this misuse of our sacred masks is akin to someone serving sacramental wine and consecrated hosts at a cocktail party.' John Kim Bell, the founder of the Canadian Native Arts Foundation, which organises the awards and the ceremony, and himself a Mohawk from Kahnawake, defended the show by affirming a distinction between active masks, carved according to correct ritual procedures, and the masks used on the program, which he described as 'tourist replica knock-offs, which are sold and made by the hundreds by Iroquoian people.'*

Despite its anecdotal flavor, the story indexes a commonly described effect of the colonial appropriation of Indigenous artifacts by Western culture, and more specifically by Western museums: the emergence of an equivocity between *active* and *passive*, sacred and secular, aura and reproduction, fetish and commodity. The spectator of secular modernity implied by the museological artifact on view indeed differs radically from what one might call, borrowing Alfred Gell's terminology, the 'patient' initially intended by the 'agent' (or maker) of the mask.<sup>2</sup> From Surrealism to poststructuralist anthropology, a great deal of art historical and anthropological literature has been dedicated to the semiotic traffic of artifacts crossing the limit between the realm of tradition validated by history (folklore, material culture and craft) and that of a

modernity validated by connoisseurship, museums and markets (originality, singularity, authorship and, ultimately, the very nominalist concept of Art).<sup>3</sup> This traffic, as well as the binary divisions it articulates, runs along lines of conflict that have political, epistemological and ontological dimensions that the museological apparatus continues to crystallise, especially because the exhibition paradigms of art and ethnographic artifacts of the first half of the twentieth century (its taxonomies, its ethnographic or art-historical presentism) have cast long shadows extending towards us: they have been gradually naturalised as the implicit frameworks of scientific and artistic exhibition.

These paradigms form the suggested scripts coding the mode of existence of objects in modern institutions of scientific knowledge such as the museum (the object's use value, exchange value, and most importantly here, exhibition value). Further, they highlight the specific resonance of the ethnographic museum within the history of colonialism and postcolonialism, in which ethnographic artifacts have long been battlefields for the dialectical construction of tradition and modernity. As a matter of fact, these implicit scripts take us to the foundations of what we could call the 'ontological engineering' of modernity, its symmetrical making of subjects and objects, persons and things, spectators and artifacts, where the constitution of objecthood (or what delineates the terminus of scientific observation) mirrors the limits legislating subjecthood (or the right to be a subject). As such, these scripts need to be denaturalised, and understood against the backdrop of the historically contingent, objectivist and positivist regime of rationality that gradually coded the apparatus of the modern museum.

## **Tropics of the Artifact**

The modern museum is a site where the typically modernist division between the *optic* and *haptic* dimensions of sight (its scopic and tactile nature) found both a dramaturgy and a scenographic morphology. This separation of sight from touch in the exhibition evinces a rift of access

that is constitutive of objects entering a specific epistemic and ontological regime, divorced from the realm of commodities: that of the artifact. It is constitutive of the exhibition as a means of inscribing cultural norms; as a privileged site for modern, positivist and objectivist forms of mediation between the artifact and the exhibition viewer, or subject. The morphology of this separation in the context of museological display is made of distancing or separating effects: sight from touch, intention from corporeality, judgment from interest, contemplation from manipulation, performer from observer. These distancing effects play a determining role regarding both sensorial and hermeneutical access to the object of display. They operate as interfaces, of which the glass case is possibly the canonical synthetic form. Western aesthetics are in fact reliant on such distancing effects, from Cartesian perspectivalism to Kantian subjective aesthetic judgment, through the genealogy of the beholder that emerges in Denis Diderot's *Salons* (1759–1781) and terminates (at least as an art historical meta-narrative) in Michael Fried's critique of theatricality (1967).

The synthetic forms of mediation produced by these distancing effects hence crystallise the epistemic operation at work in the museological apparatus. The artifact is mobilised as a figure inscribing a limit in the field of history: it is installed in the modern cosmography of taxonomy. It has been uprooted, de-animated. But it is also inscribed in the logico-spatial order of the museological device, and has therefore been reanimated. A dialectical reversal is imprinted on the 'life' of the artifact: the museological device puts the artifact 'to death' by isolating it from its milieu. And yet, the artifact is also re-animated by its simultaneous projection into a continuous semiotic order (i.e. taxonomy), and restricted field of attention (i.e. scenography). The crucial operation of the museum is to be found in this dialectical reversal, in which a powerful eclipse of mediation occurs between the artifact and the spectator: the procedures of denaturalisation through which objects

have been uprooted and abstracted from their milieu are constantly *naturalised* by the hermeneutic interface of the museum and the morphology of its display. If the dramaturgy of the modern museum appears uncanny (in the Freudian sense of hovering in a multistable space, at the tipping point between dead and alive), this is no accident, for its infrastructure is not solely based on its existence as a space in which to think and feel, but to a large extent on it serving as a piece of technology, a quasi-*automaton*. And if this sepulchral aspect of the modern museum has fascinated modern minds, its dialectics of de-animation and reanimation have also long been understood and articulated as constitutive of Western culture, as, for example the opening words of Alain Resnais and Chris Marker's film *Statues Also Die* (1953): 'When men die, they enter into history. When statues die, they enter into Art. This botany of death is what we call culture.'

## The Exhibitionary Nexus

The museum functions as an exhibition machine, a spatial experiment in which the subject or viewer is enfolded in the theatrical machinery. The theatricality of observation produces a rational universe in which certain perceptual contingencies are transferred onto the object (here, the artifact). Perception is 'purified' so that what is perceived can be disputed: the visual economy of the museological apparatus is the product of an architectonic operation whereby the situatedness of the spectator's gaze, the perspective through which they observe, is transposed to the object as a mode of presentation. Ethnographic representations are provided with a hermeneutic dimension by this scenography as well as by the scopic regime that emerges between the artifact and those who witness it.

As such, the museological apparatus is a space of configuration of the chain of mediation between object and beholder, formalised as a stage for the encounter between 'consciousness' and 'form', regardless of the functional chain of mediation in which the artifact was

originally embedded. This is why the nexus of the exhibitionary dramaturgy directly leads to concepts pertaining to the ontological matrix of Western modernity, and to its historical and political ramifications. This exhibitionary nexus between consciousness and form articulates the ontological categories against which the museum has historically unfolded. It is the morphological translation of what we could call, borrowing from French anthropologist Philippe Descola's system of four ontologies,<sup>4</sup> the 'naturalist rift': the dichotomy between 'persons' and 'things' that characterises the cosmography of Western modernity, the ontological fissure that has historically crossed through the modern world, distributing subjects and objects on either side, while also ushering in uncertainty in the modern psyche about whether or not this limit can be crossed. As a matter of fact, the genealogy of this rift probably finds its most expressive origin in a foundational text of materialist thought, the *Conversation between D'Alembert and Diderot* (1769), in which the philosopher tests his encyclopedic program by picturing a scene that almost resembles an exhibition: he wonders what the classificatory attitude of the materialist philosopher should be in front of a stone. Should the stone be infused by the qualities of life and considered part of a greater sensitive being, thus potentially entering a realm shared by humans? Or, should it be considered as pure matter and quantity, thus potentially negating the possibility in turn of the human being regarded as a sensitive and qualitative being?

This historical distinction within materialism between a 'stonified' life and a 'vivified' stone is one in which the modern apparatuses of exhibition are deeply invested, because of their specific dramatisation of the nexus of consciousness and form. The architectonic operation of the modern museum, and more broadly of institutions of exhibition throughout modernity, are pieces of technology largely dedicated to the social translation of this ontological matrix into sensorial experiences, hermeneutic operations, and truth effects. The museological apparatus is entirely shaped

by the dialogism of objectivation and subject formation: here, the making of objects is simultaneously the making of subjects. As such, it can be regarded as a space dedicated to 'ontogenesis': a site of production of positive binaries (objectified objects and subjectified subjects) within which implicit, transparent ontological frontiers crossing the modern world (and legislating normative realms therein) are materialised, made palpable and explicit.

The modern museum, and more specifically its ethnographic variant, is a privileged site for understanding the entanglement of categories that modern thought has worked to purify and distinguish: objects, knowledge and form. Stacked-up together, these categories give to the exhibitionary nexus its ontological, epistemic and phenomenological dimensions. The association of the exhibitionary nexus with colonial frameworks (through its role in the naturalisation of positivist and objectivist categories into ontological, universal grounds) is a historically contingent reality, which means that it can be strategically mobilised towards other, emancipatory ends. Because of its existence as a stage made of the overlapping of categories that gave colonial history its power, but to which colonialism itself historically remained blind, the ontological limits it materialises can be put into heuristic and sensorial variation: it is a space where ontological, epistemic, and phenomenological operations can be put into dialogue, transformed through experimentation, and given a common direction. The modern museum, along with the exhibitionary nexus we have inherited for scientific and artistic representations, need not be brought back 'home from the tropics'. However, the ontological meridians it inscribed in our world are yet to be mobilised as fully political sites, that is to say as dialectical battlefields.

- 1 Ruth B. Phillips, *Museum Pieces. Towards the Indigenization of Canadian Museums* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011), 118.
- 2 See: Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency. An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).
- 3 See: James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).
- 4 Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).