

## Ambiguous Messages and Ironic Twists *Into the Heart of Africa and The Other Museum*

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Just about everything that could go wrong with an exhibition seems to have gone wrong with *Into the Heart of Africa* at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) in Toronto.<sup>1</sup> The controversy that erupted was quite extraordinary, and made many of us working in the field of ethnographic exhibitions, particularly African exhibitions, tremble with a sense of "there but for the grace of God go I." How could an exhibition have gone so wrong? How could an exhibition offend so many people from different sides of the political spectrum?

Another exhibition that recently dealt with similar themes of collecting, representation, and colonialism was the installation piece by artist Fred Wilson called *The Other Museum* at the WPA (Washington Project for the Arts) gallery in Washington, D.C. Comparing these two exhibitions suggests some thoughts on the problems facing curators in science museums, especially ethnographic and natural history museums, in dealing with that most problematic of constructs, "the fact."

I visited *Into the Heart of Africa* in June, 1990, the month that *African Reflections: Art from Northeastern Zaire* opened at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Probably because I was a curator of *African Reflections*, a packet of press clippings sent by the Coalition for the Truth About Africa (the organization that had coalesced around the protests against the ROM) was passed on to me. Thus, although I have never spoken to Jeanne Cannizzo, the guest

curator, about the ROM affair, I knew about the ordeal she was undergoing and originally had no intention of adding my comments to the debate. It has, in fact, been difficult for journals to find colleagues who were willing to review such a controversial exhibition, since most of us were aware of the pain that the public protests had brought upon the curator. However, several months have now passed and the issues raised by the exhibition, the catalogue, and the ensuing controversy are so important for our field that I have finally decided to broach the subject in these pages. It is not my intention, however, to add insult to injury, and hopefully I can phrase my critique in such a way that it will be helpful in future attempts at mounting exhibitions with similar themes. My comments are based on seeing the exhibition, reading the catalogue, and reading a compilation of widely circulated press clippings and critiques of the exhibition.

The fact is that *Into the Heart of Africa* was meant to be a provocative exhibition, although I question whether either the ROM or the curator was certain whom it was intended to provoke. Although the organizers obviously thought that *Into the Heart of Africa* would be seen as a critical portrait of colonial collecting and museum ethics, the exhibition was seen by many people as a glorification of colonialism. What was it about the exhibition that led to such gross miscommunication? In my view there are two main issues. The first issue has to do with unrealistic, and untested, expectations about the audience and what kind of

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awareness it would bring to the exhibition. The second was to do with muddled intentions about the central idea of the exhibition and its failure to address consistently the themes the curator attempted to define.

The ROM had certainly had warnings that there were problems with *Into the Heart of Africa*. For instance, the museum changed the brochure for the exhibition after a small group of community representatives reviewed it shortly – perhaps too shortly – before the opening. After the exhibition opened, public protests gradually escalated: there were complaints to the ROM, then letters to newspapers, then pickets and street demonstrations, and finally, violent encounters involving the Toronto police. The ROM eventually obtained a court injunction to keep protesters from picketing within 15 meters of the museum's entrance. There were more arrests, a few injuries, and finally a statement by the Toronto Board of Education declaring the exhibition "unsuitable for Primary and Junior Division students" and "permissible for students in the Intermediate and Senior Divisions" only with structured preparation and follow-up instruction. In the end, *Into the Heart of Africa* probably received more press attention, most of it negative (although it had its defenders as well), than any other exhibition shown in Canada, with the possible exception of the Glenbow's *The Spirit Sings, Artistic Traditions of Canada's First Peoples*. In my files, which are by no means complete, there are more than 30 newspaper articles – news reports, magazine articles, letters to editors, and interviews, above and beyond the usual press releases and exhibition reviews.

Many people have claimed that one reason the controversy escalated the way it did was due to political conditions in Toronto and a generally tense racial situation that was searching for an issue. There are, undoubtedly, unique issues in Toronto, and unique issues for the ROM. There is no question that the appropriate bridges had not been built, that the public relations organized for the exhibition were poor, and that racial tensions in Toronto were high and could easily be galvanized by an exhibition at a major cultural institution. On the other hand, most North American cities have equally serious racial tensions, and many major museums, including the American Museum of Natural History, have monumental entrances which can serve as platforms for publicity-seeking protesters.

The controversy reached beyond Toronto. It reached other museums when all four slated to take the exhibition canceled – the Canadian Museum of Civilization, the Vancouver Museum, the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History, and the Albuquerque Museum of Natural History. Although I do not know exactly what went into these decisions, I assume that all the museums sent representatives to see the exhibition. What was most amazing was that the exhibition offended audiences from all parts of the political spectrum: missionaries whose colleagues were depicted in the exhibition, the descendants of colonial officers whose collections were shown (see Crean 1991: 23–8), and most strongly, Africans and people of African descent who saw the exhibition as racist and insulting. The exhibition was also offensive to some within another, somewhat less vocal group, that is, historians of Africa, art historians, and anthropologists working in universities and museums.

The one party that had the grace not to express dismay with Jeanne Cannizzo was the ROM itself. The administration of the ROM defended Cannizzo and the exhibition throughout the controversy, at least in print, as well they should have. Without an Africanist on their regular staff to oversee possible changes, and with no intention of making major alterations in the exhibition, the ROM responded to criticism by portraying the controversy as an issue of free speech and academic freedom. Cannizzo, the Director, and later the Acting Director, of the ROM, all claimed in various public statements that the exhibition was a carefully researched portrayal of historical fact.

Although ultimately unsuccessful, *Into the Heart of Africa* can be commended for its attempt to invoke multiple voices, to be self-reflexive, and to explore new ways of contextualizing a museum collection. However, deconstructing the museum within an exhibition is not a simple matter since it puts the curator in an almost impossible position. In this case, not until she was forced to defend the exhibition several months after it opened did the curator seem to accept the fact that her voice was actually apparent in the exhibition and that, as curator, she appeared to be speaking for the museum. Only after the ROM and the curator realized that their voice was camouflaged inadvertently into those of the imperialist collectors, did they seek refuge in the notion of curatorial authority.

The whole series of events at the ROM was tragic and the violence that was directed against the curator is something no one can condone. I do not believe that the curator or the ROM had any intention of presenting a racist exhibition. In fact, if there was any subtext, it was one of self-criticism, although "self" was defined as the museum and not the curator. The exhibition intended to be critical of colonialism, missionaries, collectors, and museums. Embedded in *Into the Heart of Africa* was a debate between the curator and the very idea of the museum, identified here – in the exhibition and in the catalogue – with imperialism itself.

Curiously, to judge from public statements, the ROM seems to have been unaware of the extent to which *Into the Heart of Africa* was an attempt to use the exhibition format to deconstruct the institution of the museum. The exhibition was, in fact, an invitation to look beyond conventional museum attributions and to reevaluate the ROM's own history, not simply the history of Canadian imperialism. In attempting to share with the public her critique of museums as repositories of colonial loot, while trying at the same time not to offend the ROM, Cannizzo unwittingly sabotaged her own enterprise.<sup>2</sup>

One reason for this may be that the ideas of post-modernism and deconstruction have not entered the consciousness of the general public to the extent that they can be relied upon to provide a matrix of understanding upon which one can mount such introspective exhibitions, at least in ethnographic or natural history museums. In visiting such institutions people still look for narrative stories; docents still need to tell such stories; and people still "read" exhibitions as texts even if they do not read the text on labels.

Whether or not she recognized the inherent difficulty of doing such an introspective exhibition, it is clear from a number of published statements that the curator felt that the approach taken was the obvious, and perhaps only, presentation that could encompass the geographical spread and "lack of chronological depth" of the collection. She explicitly stated that because of its age the collection could not be used to address issues of change in modern-day Africa. Moreover, Cannizzo, the guest curator, an anthropologist with some background in African art history, but with little or no previous experience mounting major

exhibitions, seemed to believe that such an approach would demonstrate the ROM's ability to mount "innovative exhibitions." As she put it,

the nature of the collection determined the themes of the exhibition, which are a reflexive analysis of the nature of the museum itself and an examination of the history of its Africa collection. This places the exhibition at the forefront of scholarly research in studies of African art. The ROM has chosen to take the museological lead in having an exhibition which makes clear the origins of some of its collections. (Cannizzo 1990)

As suggested above and in the catalogue, *Into the Heart of Africa* was an attempt by Cannizzo to present the stories that came into her mind as she viewed the objects. On the first page of the catalogue, she stated that in going through the storerooms of the ROM various "dialogues seemed to emerge from the masks, baskets, sculptures, and beadwork in which they had been embedded for generations." These supposed dialogues determined the basic format of the exhibition: the use of the "life history of objects" approach, and the presentation of objects in different contexts such as collectors' curio cabinets, a diorama of an African village, and a 1920s-style lantern slide show.

*Into the Heart of Africa* was divided into five sections beginning with "The Imperial Connection," followed by "Military Hall," "Missionary Room," "Ovimbundu Compound," and "Africa Room." The first three sections focussed on Western views of Africa, while the last two were meant to celebrate African life and art. The Ovimbundu compound was intended to show part of Africa as missionaries would have seen it, whereas the final section showed objects as they have conventionally been presented in Western museums. Every one of these sections included text that was meant to reflect one or another voice in the curator's imagined storeroom dialogues. Thus after visitors stood before the imperial flag, stared at a dazzling and much restored Canadian officer's helmet spotlighted in a pedestal vitrine, and gaped at an enlarged engraving of one Lord Beresford spearing a prostrate Zulu, they came upon the African "answer" to colonial exploits: a case full of beautiful Asante gold objects and brass gold-weights, with a very standard ethnographic description of goldweights in Asante culture. As the ROM's press release described the exhibition,

*Into the Heart of Africa* each with art introduction explaining why an exhibit went into what was presented. Highlighting Asante gold objects from the 17th-century. In the Military Hall stand Zulu warriors and discover gold dust. (RC)

The relationship between warfare, from which we can see that it is certainly not clear to most of the audience.

The goldweights show how objects reveal the beauty of African life. The meaning of the "answer" to the "Naturally," Cannizzo also reveals the beauty of their patterns, the complex philosophies, and the (1989: 62). It is, however, that the response to colonialism and the history of the artist, confusing, especially moments before the Canadian officer came across with the goldweights most people, that itself to condense

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*Into the Heart of Africa* is designed in five distinct sections, each with artifacts and historical photographs. The introduction established 'the Imperial connection', outlining why and how Canadians undertook their travels into what was then called by some the 'unknown continent.' Highlights of this section include a spectacular Asante gold necklace from Ghana and a world renowned 17th-century Benin Bronze [sic] from Nigeria.

In the Military Hall, the visitor will be able to understand Zulu warfare from the other side of the battlefield and discover how West African traders weighed their gold dust. (ROM News Release, 1 May 1990)

The relationship between Asante weights and Zulu warfare, from whatever side of the battlefield, is certainly not clear to me, and seems to have been unclear to most of the audience.

The goldweight case, one of many intended to show how objects can communicate to the viewer the beauty of African culture, was presented in the beginning of the exhibition to represent the African "answer" to the opening section on colonialism. "Naturally," Cannizzo wrote, "these same collections also reveal much about the cultures of Africa: the beauty of their artistry, the variety of their subsistence patterns, the cosmological complexities of their philosophies, and the power of their political hierarchies" (1989: 62). It was at this point in the exhibition, however, that the visitor needed to hear the African response to colonialism. In a dialogue about colonialism and the history of collections a showcase celebrating the artistry of goldweights was irrelevant and confusing, especially since the viewer has just seen, moments before, the red-ribboned, feather-plumed Canadian officer's helmet in its solitary glory in the center of the dark opening gallery. The message that came across with the helmet, was the same as that with the goldweights: all were treasured objects. For most people, the display of the helmet did nothing in itself to condemn colonialism.

By using the "life history of objects" approach, yet by necessity filtering all of the stories through the mind of the curator, many stories – including the most controversial ones about colonialism, appropriation, and exploitation – were raised and left unresolved. It was easy to leave the exhibition wondering what the "dialogue" was about. There were murmurs and innuendoes, but there really was no topic of conversation.

Where we should have had an African voice answering the imperialist collector, we had instead a dense filter of anthropology, ethnography, and art history shrouding the African side of the objects' life histories.

One of the major problems in *Into the Heart of Africa* is that Africans were presented as passive in this exhibition. They were never given the opportunity to answer the insults quoted in the labels from the Canadian soldiers and missionaries. Having conceived the exhibition as a dialogue, the curator should have carried on with this approach. Instead, the exhibition switched tracks in the middle and it appeared that colonialist-collectors were being allowed to speak for themselves (although, even here many observers felt words were being put into their mouths), while Africans were not.

As Cannizzo was well aware, tracing the life history of objects from Africa takes one through many minefields of history. As the guide on this excursion, it was the museum's responsibility to reveal the location of these mines, whether through the invocation of multiple voices or through the use of curatorial authority. The exhibit developers, or curator in this instance, assumed that the audience would distinguish between the voices represented in the labels and the voice of the museum. This did not happen and derogatory comments in the exhibition text that were meant to represent the attitude of missionaries, soldiers, and collectors were interpreted to represent the view of the museum. Asking the public to draw its own conclusions from something inherently inflammatory is a risky business.

One of the elements that distinguishes museum work, exhibition work in particular, from academic work is the nature of the audience and the problems associated with finding ways to address that complex and amorphous entity, "the general public," without sacrificing intellectual honesty and scholarly research. The degree to which this exhibition was misinterpreted from the point of view of the ROM suggests that the exhibit developers failed to understand the nature of the audience. The ROM ignored the sensitivity of the African and black Canadian population and made erroneous assumptions about the entire audience's prior knowledge and political opinions.

The format of the catalogue – 92 pages of captioned photographs, without references, citations, or

discussion of current research – suggests that it was meant to be read by a general audience with no special knowledge of Africa or anthropology. At the same time, both the catalogue and exhibition raised issues of particular interest to a fairly small group of academics and museum professionals. Current debates about museums, the politics of representation, and the history of ethnographic collecting, as found in the writings of scholars like Jim Clifford, George Stocking, Sally Price, and Christraud Geary, provided a hidden and inchoate sub-text for the catalogue and the exhibition, although it is curious that none of these works were cited in the “selected bibliography.”

The catalogue opens with a statement that immediately shifts the focus away from a consideration of African culture, African art, or African history and towards more arcane, and more academic, epistemological considerations:

Anthropology is frequently described as a kind of dialogue between the ethnographic other and the cultural self. This characterization is meant, among other things, to suggest the “fictional” nature of anthropology, for the work is generated in the interaction of the anthropologist’s own cultural preconceptions and ideological assumptions with those of the people among whom he or she works. As such, the dialogue reveals something of the other as well as the self. (1989: 10)

Raising these questions opens a Pandora’s box of issues that should not be trivialized, even in a work meant for the general public. By opening the box just a crack, Cannizzo armed the public with powerful ammunition that was then turned against her and against the museum.

The attempt to use the exhibition and catalogue as a way of deconstructing the ROM collection and museum exhibitions in general, and at the same time to mount a celebratory exhibition about African art, resulted in a presentation that lacked thematic coherence. However, there is reason to believe that Cannizzo deliberately attempted to avoid thematic coherence. As she wrote, “The accidental or serendipitous nature of many museum collections is obscured when exhibitions with clearly distinguished ‘storylines’ and carefully developed sequences of cases impose a unity on a miscellaneous collection of objects” (1989: 85). Eschewing curatorial authority, Cannizzo strung

together the bits of information that could be found in accession records, published accounts, archives, and interviews with the descendants of the collectors. This inevitably made for a very strange, impressionistic, and incomplete story. Thus instead of finding an account of Canadian involvement in the colonization of Africa, the audience got snippets of biographies and general statements that suggested colonial attitudes. The audience is told little about the history and effects of British military exploits in Africa, but is given a powerful hint of exploitation and violence – e.g., the enlargement and caption of “Lord Beresford’s Encounter with a Zulu.”

The visitor was expected to understand that this image of a white man spearing an African was not intended to offend because the image and its caption were “historical documents.” Instead of a discussion of the various missions active in Africa in the early colonial period, the visitor saw a mission map titled “The Dark Continent” and a lantern slide show with a derogatory commentary about saving the heathens. The brief disclaimer that accompanies the lantern show was easily missed. In each instance the commentary with the objects reiterated a stereotype supposedly held by the missionary-collectors. These remarks piqued some visitors’ curiosity, engendered anger and disgust in others, but they did not provide enough information for the audience to make informed judgments about the role of Canadians in the colonization of Africa. Predictably, many critics asked whether an exhibition on the Holocaust from the point of view of the Nazis would be acceptable.

Where there were opportunities to relate African objects to the theme of colonialism these were not taken. Islam, for example, is presented primarily as one form of artistic embellishment, whereas it could have been presented as a political, religious, and ideological movement that came into direct confrontation with European conquest and Christian evangelism. In the final section of the exhibition, where perhaps half of the objects are installed, there was an old-fashioned display of the more commonplace pieces in the ROM collection. The point here was to show how objects, once collected, would have been displayed in Western museums in the two or three decades after they were removed from their original context. This point might have been made effectively in one or two exhibit

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cases; instead there was a very large room filled with dozens of cases containing poorly displayed objects arranged in geographic, ethnic, functionalist, and object-type exhibits. Obviously, the reflexivity in this section was lost on most visitors and the only "voice" speaking was that of a rather pedestrian anthropology.

The approach of the curator of *Into the Heart of Africa* to the objects she found in ROM storage is exemplified in the caption and illustration on page 24 of the catalogue, quoted here in its entirety. Note how the tense used changes from the past tense (history) to the ethnographic present (anthropology?) at the end of the second paragraph:

Objects, like people, have life histories. But this four-headed figure remains something of a mystery. It was collected by Gore Munbee Barrow, who died the principal of a boys' school in the quiet Ontario town of Grimsby. As a young man, however, he was an officer in the imperial army. He fought in the Transvaal during the Boer War and by 1902 was a lieutenant in the West African Frontier Force. The next year he took part in the British campaign against the Sokoto Caliphate, an Islamic state in northern Nigeria.

Somewhere in Nigeria he acquired this statue. It was almost certainly made by an Igbo artist about the turn of the century in a village in the southeastern part of the country and probably depicts a spirit or supernatural being. A white face is found on many representations of Igbo deities and is often interpreted as an indication of moral purity.

Many years later Barrow's family gave the statue to the Royal Ontario Museum. They believed that one of his men had been sacrificed to this "death fetish." The inscription "No. 80. Lagos, W.A.F.F." on the metal tag that accompanied the figure was thought to be the victim's military identification.

Historical archives have not revealed reports of such an event. Whether or not the story is accurate, the alleged barbarity of "savage customs" often attracted collectors to certain kinds of artifacts, which now fill our museums.

Is it surprising that among the many problems faced by the ROM after this exhibition were rallying cries for repatriation (Asante 1990)? This caption, typical of many in the catalogue and exhibition, raises another troubling problem. That is, how often, as in the third paragraph above, were sensational tidbits interjected

into the text, left hanging, and ultimately used for no obvious purpose? The conclusion of too many people was that such descriptions represented the voice of the ROM. The charges leveled against museums in the passage above and others like it are serious; once raised in an exhibition catalogue, they require an answer. In this instance, the curator asked the questions and let the public, armed with incomplete information, respond. Clearly the ROM was not well served by this approach.

The critique of museums embedded in the text for *Into the Heart of Africa* backfired because it was presented in the context of a muddled exhibition. It ignited the very resentments that all sorts of cultural vandalism have, justifiably, produced. Whether the ROM ranks high on the list of cultural vandals is another matter and one that was addressed in some depth by the protesters in Toronto. Cannizzo seemed to assume that a like-minded public would understand that the exhibition was meant to criticize colonialism (but not particular colonialists), missionaries (but not particular missions), museums (but not necessarily the ROM). In the end, what was meant as critique was seen as a nostalgic memorialization, and questions of museum propriety conveyed, at best, only guilt.

Despite the claims of the curator, the objects selected for *Into the Heart of Africa* were not, of course, speaking for themselves and ultimately only one voice emerged in the exhibition: that of the Canadian collectors whose sentiments were expressed by the selection of derogatory, patronizing, and racist remarks, many of which were paraphrases and not actual quotes. Despite disclaimers that these people were speaking in the context of another epoch, the overall impression given to many visitors was that the ROM endorsed their views. After the protests began, the ROM and the curator went to great pains to explain that this was not the case, but clearly the wrong impression had been created.

It is patently absurd for the museum to blame the audience for misunderstanding the exhibition. In the opening section, the exhibition should have included a description of colonialism, its history, its effect on Africa, and most importantly, the African response it engendered. By failing to do this, the exhibition

appeared to endorse the loudest voice to emerge. As Susan Crean, a descendant of one of the collectors, put it:

By presenting the African collection through the history of its donors, by giving pride of place to the personal stories of the white Canadians who happened to bring them to Canada, Cannizzo creates a context in which that history is claimed rather than criticized and rejected, showcased even while she tut-tuts from between the lines. "Well, Greatuncle certainly was a scoundrel, and who knows what he got up to in Africa; but, well, you can't blame the old boy for being a product of his time." That seems to be the sentiment. (Crean 1991: 25)

There is no doubt that archival material always presents special methodological problems – how to simultaneously contextualize the words of those who "made history" and at the same time disclaim their actions and attitudes. In this instance, the exhibition required the public to supply too many missing "facts"; it assumed that people were familiar with not only the history of Canadian imperialism but also with the ROM's attitude toward it. So little context was provided, however, that even modern-day missionaries and the descendants of latter-day missionaries were offended. They resented the way in which colonial soldiers, officials, and missionaries of all kinds were given a unanimous voice. The defense of the curator and the ROM – that these bits of "dialogue" were an accurate presentation of history – sounded particularly hollow to many people in view of their knowledge that none of Canada's distinguished Africanist historians had been invited to consult on the project.

In both text and image, the exhibition attempted to use irony in order to present its condemnation of the colonial point of view.<sup>3</sup> In addition to the unfortunate quotations and pseudo-quotations, the exhibition contained section titles that were meant to be read as ironic cues. For example, the ROM assumed (wrongly) that the audience would understand the irony intended in the use of the word "Commerce" as a title for an exhibit case devoted to artifacts of the slave trade. In the controversy that followed, the ROM acknowledged that the trope had failed, but the tone of the apology suggested that the fault was with the audience, which was not sophisticated enough to get the point.

In *Into the Heart of Africa* the curator and designer seem to have assumed that it was acceptable to present verbal disclaimers to visual messages. I believe this is always a risky business and moreover, it may be a requirement of the exhibition format that visual messages and verbal texts convey the same idea. This caveat clearly limits the use of irony. For one thing, many people do not read labels. Labels and images, whether photographs or objects, must reinforce one another. The opening of *Into the Heart of Africa* was designed deliberately as a visual and experiential sanctum to colonial conquest. In this it succeeded magnificently, even though the ROM and the curator must have assumed, and hoped, that the audience would understand that this was intended as ironic or tongue-in-cheek – something like an off-color joke told with a knowing wink.

Was it the use of irony itself or was it the context of the ROM that made this an impossible undertaking? Given the difficulty of using irony, the ROM would have been well advised to consider whether there really was a need to couch a critique of colonialism in ironic terms.

While the protests were going on, the media printed many discussions about the need for the ROM to carry on a dialogue with the black community in Toronto. In the same period, some protesters wrote newspaper articles complimenting a much less ambitious African art exhibit being shown in a private Toronto gallery. What made the art exhibit acceptable? I tend not to think that the issue was prior community involvement, since it is unlikely that the art gallery held pre-exhibit community consultations. The protesters were genuinely insulted by *Into the Heart of Africa* because they had picked up on the fact that Africans were not, after all, given a voice in the dialogue that the exhibition set up. Had the exhibition text dealt in an even-handed way with the African response to colonialism and racism these concerns might have been addressed. The art exhibition, on the other hand, avoided this problem since it did not set up this incomplete dialogue with colonialism. The audience, therefore, could feel that the objects were speaking to them directly, as art.

It is instructive to compare *Into the Heart of Africa* with a recent exhibition at the WPA Gallery (Washington Project for the Arts).<sup>4</sup> In the two-part

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exhibition, *Power and Spirit*,<sup>5</sup> the artist Fred Wilson created an installation called *The Other Museum*. This work was a bold critique of colonialism, racial stereotyping, and various kinds of misrepresentation of colonized peoples. The first thing the visitor saw on approaching the entry to the installation was a huge wall map of the world, turned upsidedown. A brochure distributed at the entrance, designed with a yellow and black cover parodying the prewar *National Geographic*, explained that:

Fred Wilson, in his installation *The Other Museum*, exposes the prejudices still inherent in these [Western religious, scientific, and artistic] institutions by critically re-examining the colonialist roots of Western ethnography. Wilson "curates" his own exhibitions, using artifacts such as African masks, period photographs, taxidermic birds, natural specimens, and human remains. He labels these with ironic text and assembles them into a setting mimicking a natural history museum. (Alan Prokop, Brochure notes)

Throughout the installation, the text turned on its head the words "other" and "ourselves." A series of clinical photographs of colonized peoples, including a set of four showing a woman removing her clothes at the photographer's behest, were labeled "Photographed By Others" whereas more sensitive portraits by African, Latino, and Native American photographers were labeled "Photographed By Ourselves." In this installation the use of irony was crystal clear as in the original caption "The Sons of Cannibals Contemplating the Passion of the Redeemer" on a photograph showing a group of children in Uganda admiring a picture of the crucifixion. The visitor already had been prepared to find reality – the original quote as caption – used as a weapon against itself.<sup>6</sup> Irony permeated *The Other Museum*, so much so that if anything it could be faulted for being a bit heavy-handed. Still, there was no confusion when the visitor saw a line-up of Dan and Ibo masks, from former French and British colonies, each mask blind-folded and gagged with imperial flags; or when visitors were lured to face a Kifebwe mask and peer through its eyes at film clips of Hollywood's Africa.

The success of *The Other Museum* in communicating its message raises the question of whether it isn't easier, or perhaps even more appropriate, to use irony

in a work of art than in an ethnographic, scientific, or historical exhibition. Curators of ethnographic exhibitions may want to see themselves as artists, but this is probably a false conceit. Wilson's agenda was straightforward, cleverly presented, and unambiguous. He used the African art objects and the photographs in the exhibition to make a personal statement about colonialism. He never attempted to talk about the particular works of art on their own terms, for they were simply elements in his construction. Yet in some respects Wilson's agenda was not very different from Cannizzo's.

The caption "The Sons of Cannibals Contemplating the Passion of the Redeemer" would be horribly misconstrued in an ethnographic installation. Why? Here I think we come back to some basic differences between didactic exhibitions and works of art. The former are still assumed by most people to be presentations of "facts." Although Disney-like displays have blurred the distinction in the public mind (whatever that is) between fact and fiction, most people still expect to find a difference between works of art versus curated museum exhibitions, and between museums and exhibitions that deal with "facts" versus those that exhibit works of fantasy or an artist's subjective interpretation of reality. Disney World is the quintessential post-modern experience: there is no reality; fact is fiction and fiction is more real than fact. Yet it is not clear that visitors to ethnographic museums approach them as they approach Disney World. The protesters in Toronto clearly wanted a major cultural institution like the ROM to "tell the truth." There is something literal-minded in how people approach ethnographic exhibitions. Natural history museums are still thought to present interpretations of "reality" – history, culture, or biology, just as art museums are expected to present "real" if not beautiful objects. Whereas the public may intuitively understand the Disney experience, simply because they live in the post-modern age, few are sufficiently familiar with the deconstructivist approach to ethnographic exhibitions to appreciate the self-reflexive tone and ironic twists in *Into the Heart of Africa*.

*Into the Heart of Africa* and *The Other Museum* attempted, in different ways, to question the authority of the museum as an institution. The former failed and the latter succeeded, but the comparison may

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unfairly obscure the constraints faced by curators but not faced by artists. In *The Other Museum*, Fred Wilson had no restrictions in his choice of material. He was not operating in the didactic setting of a science museum. Jeanne Cannizzo argued that her selection of objects was determined by the activities of prior collectors and that her choice of themes was suggested by the objects themselves. Curators in ethnographic museums face an onerous challenge (see Freed 1991): how to invoke multiple voices, present diverse points of view, and at the same time convey information and deal with the public's expectation of hearing a curatorial voice. Many curators would argue that the best, although not necessarily safest, approach these days is to unabashedly accept the responsibility of curatorial authority, try to base an exhibition on solid research, and hope that not too many people are offended. This approach is consistent with the notion, or fiction, of scientific objectivity and disengagement but it is something that many curators find increasingly difficult to accept.

## Notes

- 1 I am grateful to the following friends and colleagues who have been kind enough to read and comment on earlier drafts of this article: Mary-Jo Arnoldi, Robert Carneiro, James Clifford, Elizabeth Flinn, Stanley Freed, Chris Geary, Laurel Kendall, Tom Miller, Craig Morris, Phyllis Rabineau, Chris Steiner, Sam Taylor, Susan Vogel, and Tom Wilson. I am also grateful to Colleen Kriger for sharing with me some of her knowledge of the ROM collection.
- 2 There is some question about whether or not much of the ROM collection can in fact be considered "loot." The most important pieces for the opening section were, in fact, borrowed for the exhibition from the

Royal Canadian Military Institute in Toronto and indeed, as one commentator has pointed out, very few of the objects in the ROM were actually taken as loot. Only two of the 19 Canadian collectors represented in the exhibition were actually soldiers directly involved in colonial battles (Colleen Kriger, personal communication).

- 3 The Oxford English Dictionary defines irony as follows: "1. A figure of speech in which the intended meaning is the opposite of that expressed by the words used; usually taking the form of sarcasm or ridicule in which laudatory expressions are used to imply condemnation or contempt. 2. A condition of affairs or events of a character opposite to what was, or might naturally be, expected; a contradictory outcome of events as if in mockery of the promise and fitness of things."
- 4 Originally exhibited at White Columns, New York City, May 18–June 10, 1990.
- 5 The other part of the exhibition was *Spirit House #2* by Renée Stout.
- 6 The artist found this photograph with its caption in *Africa Then* by Nicholas Monti, 1987. It was taken in Uganda around 1910 and is from the collection Archivio Provinciale dei Padri Cappuccini. Personal communication, Fred Wilson.

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