Museums and Truth

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P U B L I S H I N G

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

FOREWORD

ANNETTE B. FROMM

Since the start of the current century all categories of museums have been questioning their *raison d'etre*. Their foci have turned more toward how to address public accountability through the use of collections and public programs rather than exclusively of what to collect. Community-based programming developed with or by members of specific groups has become the norm in museums globally, including ethnographic museums.

As we look back at the first decade of the twenty-first century, many new approaches to interpretation in museums dedicated to preserving and presenting the cultural diversity of humankind have appeared. Material culture representative of newly "discovered" people around the quickly shrinking globe has found its way into many of the most quintessential cabinets of curiosity. These collections elevated the social status of their owners with assemblages of the unique, exemplary and valuable. Ethnographic corpuses from these origins formed some of the major holdings found in the great national nineteenth-century natural history museums. They represented portions of the human aspect within the wonders of the natural world. In some instances, living representatives actually joined the display of static tangible heritage. By the later part of the twentieth century, however, communities around the world began to strenuously question the scholarly and ethical validity of exhibiting their cultural heritage alongside flora, fauna, geology and other aspects of natural history.

But the physical material and intangible expressions representative of peoples found overseas are not the only foundations and bases for ethnographic collections. Items characteristic of the cultural traditions of usually rural people in their own countries and regions also formed the bases for documentation and interpretation. Collections such as these are also found in such locations as regional and open air museums. Gradually, change in these institutions also came to represent societal changes as the lives of the immigrant and the urban dwellers are now part of the socio-cultural fiber of cultural history in museums. Thus, ethnographic museums today can be seen as museums of societies.

The International Committee for Museums (and Collections) of Ethnography (ICME) is one of the older international committees within the International Council of Museums (ICOM), founded in 1946. This change in museological approach from overseas to domestic, from scholarly to community-based has been addressed regularly in the annual meetings of ICME. A quick perusal of conference topics starting in 2000 include "Diverse Trends in Ethnographic Exhibitions" (Copenhagen 2000), "Connections, Communities and Collections" (Miami 2006), "Past, Present and Future Ethnographic Approaches to Universality" (Vienna 2007), "Migration, Diaspora, Pilgrimage" (Jerusalem 2008), "Museums for Reconciliation and Peace, Roles of Ethnographic Museums in the World" (Seoul 2009), "The Challenging Museum/Challenging the Museum" (Shanghai 2010), and "Dissolving Boundaries. Museological approaches to national, social and cultural issues" (Banz 2011). Detailed examples of how these often difficult themes were presented visually and programmatically in different museums around the world were at the heart of presentations and discussions. Collectively these topics show the growing interest in conditions shaping human interactions and how museum ethnographers present aspects of this in the museum context.

The group of essays in this collection comes out of the trend to consider the growing change and commitment in ethnographic museums around the world. Per Rekdal, a past chair of ICME, has long wrestled with challenges facing the presentation of cultural diversity in the museum setting. He saw beyond exhibitions and public programs which explained cultural differences and similarities in our shrinking world. He, himself, challenged museum ethnographers to embrace subject matter and approaches which might seem out of the intellectual reach of the ethnographer. It was Rekdal that suggested a working group which would regularly ponder the depth and variety of this concept.

Rekdal's initiative prompted ICME to invite members to directly address the topic at the 2010 Shanghai meeting. Previously, in 2009, several papers in the Seoul annual meeting addressed topics usually not found in ethnographic museums. These gatherings are the primary sources of the selected articles found here. Additional authors were invited to contribute because their topics strengthen the collection. In gathering these works, our goal is to offer a platform for posing questions over time pointing to the complexity of what the field has been and what it might become.

This publication is a combined effort of the International Committee for Museums of Ethnography. The articles herein, however, are not about ethnography. They are about the museum as a venue to present the not

easily grasped realities of societies in a dynamic, rather than a static, context. The essence of all the chapters is people from the point of view of the political and historical. We hope that this representation of the ongoing discussions will lead the reader to question and broaden their approach to museum work, whether in the ethnographic museum or another venue.

PREFACE

MUSEUMS AND TRUTHS:
WHAT, WHOSE, WHEN AND WHY?

VIV GOLDING

Museums of various kinds, heritage sites and sacred spaces around the world, have, since their inception, been repositories of that which is valued by those who hold power in diverse societies. While museums in the West have traditionally purported to hold material culture and display Truths, in shrines across the globe sacred guardians have historically kept watch over the ancestors and protected the living. The main idea we are alluding to here, at the outset of this book, draws attention to the "glocal" that underpins the contemporary work of museums, *with* communities and collections of material culture and the intangible heritage from which it emerges. In other words, as we contend, there seems to be a local need to keep culture alive, with custodians to preserve and treasure objects, which appears to have some universal resonance.

At the local level we regard individual ideas as arising out of embodied responses to a shared world, although, as Rajagopalen Rhadakrishnan (2003) points out, not on equal terms with others. For museums of the twenty-first century concerned with developing their social roles and supporting activist challenges to injustice, the economic "unevenness of the world" has an impact that may demand not only our care but also our collaborative action and the forging of new networks and alliances across different platforms of traditional allegiance (Ibid.). Here, we want to point to the ways that, just as all humans are inextricably linked but not inevitably fixed within wider groups of families and neighborhoods, so museums and other institutions exist within and may work to subvert wider socio-economic frameworks that are iniquitous.

It is now more than twenty years since Gayatri Spivak wrote her inspiring chapter on the impossibility of the subaltern speaking, which was important to museum scholarship and practice at the turn of the twentieth century. Spivak's thought has encouraged some workers in privileged

institutions such as the museum to engage polyvocality and be wary of speaking for "Others," yet her notion of the privileged *not* remaining silent, instead learning to listen carefully and take collaborative action for political change across the globe may have been heeded more (Spivak 1988; 1999, 62). It is to this perceived gap in scholarship and practice that this book turns, with a small group of individuals who care for and work within museums and the struggles for power and control, joining together to address these ideas.

The series of chapters we present here have evolved from more than three years of professional meetings and discussions at annual conferences, which were organized by the International Committee for Museums of Ethnography (ICME), in Korea (2009), China (2010) and Germany (2011), on the theme of Challenging Museums/Challenging the Museum. As editors, we have selected ten chapters from internationally respected academics and practitioners that address aspects of the theme in interesting and challenging ways, as we shall outline here.

In Part One, Truths, Faiths and Realities**,** Viv Golding offers reflections on "Museums and Truth: The Elephant in the Room," inspired by a traditional Indian story of five blind men who encounter an elephant and each describe the different aspects, tail, truck, side, leg or ear, subjected to their touch. Golding uses the tale to challenge museum study approaches that privilege Western perspectives. The value of the folktale for museums, according to Golding, seems to lie in the Jain notion of *Anekant*, a concept translating as "Many-sidedness," which is seen in the diverse faith versions and in the narrative itself. She takes the tale as a metaphor for polyvocality in the challenging museum since it points to the complexity of Truth as viewed from individual standpoints and broader perspectives in a socio-economically "uneven world" (Rhadakrishnan 2003).

Golding's chapter explores contemporary meanings and discusses the potential clash of cultural perspectives, the elephant in the room, the difficulties and dilemmas that museums ignore or silence at their peril. Overall, it argues for museums to raise their voices in protest against abuses of human rights around the world (Sandell 2012), to uphold certain universal values, to stand firm against injustice and be ever vigilant when prejudice and discrimination changes its ugly form.

In Part Two, Museums and "Difficult" Heritage, we offer five chapters. Per B. Rekdal in chapter two, "Peace is Never Neutral," reflects on ICME work. He reminds us that one of the themes of the ICME 2009 conference in Seoul was "The particular responsibility of museums of ethnography for promoting peace and reconciliation." He admits that his first reaction was

that "I am far too old and cynical to participate in that kind of optimistic dream weaving," but notes how the theme was nevertheless intriguing. For instance, as he states: "Life in a totalitarian state can be very peaceful and no doubt the museums there promote peace." The peace reached at the end of WWII was a moment of victory over the undoubtedly bad powers, but, he asks was, it in all cases a victory for the undoubtedly good powers? What is peace, really? And is reconciliation always a good process, even when it prevents the oppressors from a former regime being to justice? In his short contribution, Rekdal considers the position and role of museums in various forms of peace and reconciliation settings, reflecting upon dilemmas, paradoxes, contested issues over who are "worthy" to be commemorated, and the political limitations imposed upon museums when they openly discuss the real complexities of peace and conciliation and the not always so clear-cut divisions between good and bad.

Bärbel Kerkhoff-Hader's chapter, "Concepts of Remembrance and Commemoration," comments on the musealization of German History and the Perception of transaxial Parallels. Kerkhoff-Hader discusses the territorial shifts of borders, which she notes have impacted the fate of Europe since the early period of its history in antiquity, as well as the contemporary migrations of people to the European continent. She observes that "United in diversity" has become the thesis of the European Union (EU), which currently has twenty-seven member states. The EU is the result of an unprecedented unity after bitter experiences and the devastating impact of the Second World War (1939–1945) with victims worldwide. The Shoah of six million Jews by the Nazi regime, the flight and expulsion of millions of Germans from the eastern territories of the former Germany after 1945, the consequences of the so-called Cold War between East and West, the re-migration of German people from Russia and Romania, and the fate of people in the divided Germany until the opening of the borders in 1989 contribute profound memories of the individual and collective experience of the German people.

With chapter four, Heidi McKinnon gives us "Proposing a Museum of Memory: Reparations and the Maya Achí Genocide in Guatemala." She notes that museums of memory, sites of conscience and memorials have developed a clear role in fostering dialogue on peace and reconciliation in many regions of the world where governments and societies have made inroads toward transitional justice. In "post-conflict" Guatemala, where tensions and violence related to the civil war are still present dangers, the value of both national and community reconciliation efforts cannot be underestimated. Even as serious questions linger as to whether the general public and the government are indeed ready to engage in a national

reconciliation campaign, millions of Guatemalans are recovering from the most recent episode of genocide during which over 200,000 people were killed. McKinnon addresses the history of the attempted cultural genocide and displacement of the Maya Achí of central Guatemala in the early 1980s and summarizes civil society efforts at reconciliation through memorials and museums in Achí communities. Community attempts at negotiating governmental reparations for the loss of intangible heritage are contextualized within the historical development of often controversial memorialization efforts across Latin America. In closing, she reflects on how these new museums inform the debate over museums of memory and reconciliation in contemporary Guatemala and how they address the question of whom, in the end, is sanctioned to manage the difficult truths in any society.

Mario Buletić in chapter five, "Towards which Reconciliation? Different Aspects of Museological Approaches in the Istrian Region," examines two concrete European cases of how museums deal with issues of reconciliation and peace. His focus is on the future display of The Istrian, Fiuman and Dalmatian Cultural Civic Museum in the City of Trieste, Italy and on the recent exhibition on Istrian emigration displayed in the Ethnographic Museum of Istria, Pazin, Croatia. The reflection and comparison of two different museological approaches which basically have the same object of interest, shows how tricky the representation of a specific conflict situation can be, more generally, of a modern plural society, especially when strong ideological conviction and political purposes are implicated. Addressing this problem recalls a more general questioning of what is and should be the role of ethnographic museums, as well as others, and enables us to consider how museums might face such issues in a pragmatic way.

In chapter six Leiv Sem asks readers a series of questions. Can a World War II memorial of the Nazi concentration camp system also commemorate other stories of incarceration, violence, and suffering? Can one single place at the same time symbolize different events, narratives, and social groups? Who decides which narratives are worthy of being told in national museums, and whose suffering is worth commemorating? These questions are but a few of those raised in a public debate when the Nazi concentration camp memorial, Falstad, in Norway published plans for a new permanent exhibition in 2003. The very tense and emotional debate lasted for two years. The planned exhibition sought to combine the displaying of the Nazi camp history (1941–1945) while simultaneously telling how the same facilities had been used by Norwegian authorities, through different epochs, as a youth correctional facility (1920–1941), as a

prison camp for collaborators (1945–1949), and then for children once more, this time the mentally challenged (1950–1980). Sem analyzes this debate, focusing on how narratives and traumatic experiences authorize arguments, and how different discourses, of Holocaust, of the history of occupation and of human hights, fight for hegemony at Falstad.

Part Three, Coping with Old Realities in New Settings has three chapters. In chapter seven, Anette Rein reflects on public space. She considers a taxi driver in Montreal who posted pictures of his family, religious artifacts and other objects close to his heart on the dashboard. He never received a complaint from customers, but was fined by Montreal's taxi agency. This action resulted in a court case which tested the line between private and public space. Although the driver was not particularly religious, the human rights lawyers turned it into an issue of freedom of religious expression, and where and how religious items could be displayed.

Rein muses on the fact that taxis and museums are culturally molded public spaces. Both are secular. In a museum, the display of religious items is part of a scientific concept, though the personal preferences of the museum staff also play a role. Through examples, this article explores the various ways religious objects are presented in museums, pointing out the difference between religious and sacred objects, the two main trends of presentation as art and in context, and the reflexivity and play approaches to presentations. The public, in one example, is no longer met by the grand story of a particular religion, but by an individual attitude to daily religious practices. They are asked at the entrance of the exhibit to decide whether they would like to proceed as believers or non-believers. The latter is one example of several, where the tendency is to leave the conclusion of the presentation to a "participant"-visitor, as a kind of self-educational project.

Marie Paule Jungblut and Simon Schweizer's "Murder and Manslaughter. An exhibition about life," chapter eight, considers an in-house exhibition which was hosted by the Luxembourg City History Museum and at the Historical Museum of Berne. The exhibition prompted a number of visitor reactions in both locations, due to its participatory approach. The authors attempt to shed light on some of the key questions raised in the exhibit. Why does a history museum conceive an exhibition on a subject as controversial as murder and manslaughter? How can this phenomenon be illustrated in two different geographical contexts? Did the Berne public react differently to the Luxembourg public? In examining these questions, the chapter unpacks ways in which museums might work with the public hunger for sensational stories and engage audiences in a productive social dialogue on how to deal with those who commit murder and homicide and

on the motives underlying their crimes.

In chapter nine, Ann Siri Hegseth Garberg outlines an innovative educational program on a challenging theme which was developed at the Sverresborg Trøndelag Folk Museum in Trondheim, Norway. The starting point for the youth program was an 1888 case recorded in the media of the time. The newspaper reported how a girl was found lying outside the pharmacy at the city square of Trondheim, unconscious and clearly intoxicated. The case went to trial and attracted much attention in the media of 1888. Garberg explores the issues of rape and consent that the museum education department considered to be of contemporary significance in the lives of teenage audiences of the museum's historic buildings. The questions of "consent" or "rape," which were debated at the time and were considered by contemporary visitors to the site are explored in the chapter. The perspectives of young people from the twenty-first century perspectives and the media coverage of similar cases within which their views were formed are outlined.

Emerging Postnormality in Museums? is the final question posed by the authors in Part Four. Klas Grinell's richly theorized chapter draws on Chamberlain's (2011) observation that the claims for radical museums to be democratic and dialogical are inspiring, if somewhat self-assured. To theorize about the challenges with radical museum practice, mainly in an ethnographic frame, his chapter posits that we live in postnormal times that are marked by complexity, chaos and contradictions, according to Sardar (2010). His chapter points to the ways antagonism and controversy are seen as foundational and productive aspects of human life. In other words, Grinell argues that any contemporary challenge has multiple dimensions.

Grinell observes that museums are framed in normality/normativity, in the Modern Western social imaginary. To face the democratic challenges of postnormal times he wants them to find groundings across traditions and become places for creative disagreement. Yet, a number of questions are raised as radical museums strive to be both public spaces *and* actors in the public sphere. Are museums the best institutions to fill these roles? What are the roles of museum objects in this? The later writings (2000–2011) of philosopher Judith Butler constitute a major vehicle for reflecting on the challenges of radical museum efforts, especially the concepts of framing, grievability and "space of appearance."

We now warmly welcome readers to engage with the issues raised by our authors. While by no means the final word on this theme, Museums and Truth contributes to promoting critical museum practice and to progressing museums as responsive and responsible agents of social global concerns.

INTRODUCTION

WHY A BOOK ON MUSEUMS AND TRUTH?

PER B. REKDAL

Already, by this stage, the reader may wonder why this publication has a Forward, a Preface and an Introduction. The reason is simple. When each of us editors drafted a proposal for an introduction, we found that our perspectives on the theme of Museums and Truth differed. We could have tried to reach one authoritative version, but that would have been like punching ourselves in the mouth, would it not? Instead, we are true to our theme and give you three individual approaches, one being no less truthful than the other, or, indeed, the one *being* less truthful than the other. In this book of truths we note that our perspectives naturally differ, and that we do not seek an authoritative compromise, but rather embrace our different perspectives.

Arenas for Authorized Versions

Many years ago I was given a t-shirt from Amsterdam's Historisch Museum on which was printed "I make history." This slogan was probably an effort to comfort us into believing that any person, after all, makes a difference in history. Instead, I thought "in museums we *stage* history." We even *fake* history in the sense that we construct make believe worlds. We shorten history and societies into exhibitions that are supposed to present "Africa" or "the seventeenth century" in 200 m^2.

Such simplifications require tough choices between alternative approaches. And yet the texts of museum exhibitions seldom reveal doubts or give the public information about other possible angles. It is as if the truth of the matter is no problem. But can a "faked" history be true?

"Yes," the exhibition makers would probably say. The aim is to tell a truth that is not very precise and detailed. It is a truth simplified to fit the limitations of an exhibition, but nevertheless based on serious, professional knowledge.

One might say that this attitude towards museum exhibitions has worked for a century or more, based on an underlying, very general agreement between museum staff and public about what and how museums communicate and should be perceived. The agreement implies a certain "museal way" of relating to the realities of the world, where adjustments are done as societies as well as professional knowledge develop, but the "museal way" is still easily recognizable, though not as easily definable.

We see the same kind of agreement between theatres and their public, where extremely abstract presentations are accepted as mirroring a complex social reality. The difference is that museums mostly claim to be authoritative, academic institutions aiming at conveying correct information. Visitor studies also tell us they are widely perceived by the public as trustworthy, reputable sources of knowledge.

In my many years in ICOM I have noted an increasing tendency for conferences to focus on museums taking up themes that are considered challenging. Though this topic may be popular at meetings, at present I am certain it is a minority trend. When, or if, it comes to an end, I am afraid that in most museums visitors and staff will not even have noticed that such a trend had existed.

In my opinion, however, when museums challenge authorised truths, they open a door to a deeper understanding.

Different Truths—Uncertain Truths—Contested Truths

None of the chapters in this publication were explicitly written with Museums and Truth as a thematic headline, but they nevertheless illuminate the issue. They were selected because each, in one way or another, deals with how some museums handle complex, contested, new or alternative versions of reality. All examples are from museums of human history and society. All the authors have as their starting point museums that primarily see themselves as arenas for insights and knowledge about histories and societies, rather than being display venues for valuable objects.

The chapters in this volume should be read with a critical mind. Not only the cases described, but the ways they are described and analysed, sometimes possibly inadvertently, highlight the question of museums and truth. We, the authors, are not solely analysers, but also actors in the museum field. We are or have been museum practitioners, and, as in many publications written by museum insiders, we seem unable or unwilling to keep our analysis apart from our ideas about how museums ought to be improved.

The chapters stand on their own, but I permit myself to present some post-reading reflections. Neither are they a criticism directed at the chapters, nor are they an attempt to identify the most important points of the chapters. They are my own personal after-thoughts and questions drifting in various directions. Hopefully, the chapters can inspire others' personal reflections.

The Obvious and Injustice

No historian or social scientist will deny that the *perception* of how reality is constituted will depend on one's position in society and/or one's location on the globe. Indeed, this is not only a matter of perception, but obviously also the case for the *experience of how reality works in practice*.

When, though, will museums start relating explicitly to this "obvious" by telling their audiences what their considerations were when they made the exhibition? How were angles weighed against each other? Whose perspectives? What and why was included, and what not? When will such questions become regular elements in their communication to the public?

One of the points in Golding's article is that injustice is something museums unquestionably should fight and that the perspective of those being subject to injustice should be shown in the museum, thus making the exhibitions more truthful. This makes me ask myself whether seeing something as unjust is solely a politically-based viewpoint, or whether it can also be defended as relating to an objectively defined condition, universally agreed upon.

Most museums probably have an implicit moral basis grounded on ethical and political values that are taken to be self-evident truths in the society of which the museum is part. Should museums try to define and make explicit a moral basis?

Some museums would possibly point to the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) as the closest one can get to a globally valid description of justice and, thus, a good value basis for the museum. The UDHR is, however, now under attack. Some countries want changes, which in itself falsifies its universality.

Personally, I recognise that today's UDHR reflects a certain political viewpoint stemming from a specific set of values. But more than anything, the UDHR is something I would struggle to make universally accepted in reality, with no modifications. Am I then a person who self-righteously wants museums to impose the questionable "truths" of the West upon the rest of the world? Or am I, on the contrary, simply exerting my democratic

right in trying to convince others about the truthfulness of my political opinions?

Post Conflict Peace—Tricky Ground
for Alternative Truths

"Is the moment of victory over undoubtedly bad powers in all cases a victory for the undoubtedly good powers?" I ask in the article "Peace is Never Neutral." What are the limitations imposed upon museums if they openly try to discuss the real complexities of peace and conciliation, and the not always so clear-cut divisions between good and bad?

Or what happens when underprivileged "winners" in a conflict are still partly at the mercy of those who "lost?" McKinnon describes how underserved victors erect memorials and establish museums which depend on an interplay that is both complex and dangerous, because the economic and, partly, political powers are in the hands of the losers. For how long will the truths of the disadvantaged winners be the ones presented in these museums?

Buletić describes an honest attempt by his museum to show how individuals from different national/ethnic groups inside and outside of Istria (now part of Croatia), became victims of Italian fascism, the Second World War, and territorial conflicts between Italy and Yugoslavia, while a museum in Italy shows only Italians, particularly the refugees from Istria, as victims. He fears that displaying only one group as victims may nourish new conflicts. Perhaps a problem in both museums can be that a victim-aspect may increase the emotional level and make the historical facts unclear? Maybe an "old fashioned" explanation of the circumstances and atrocities of each historical period are better suited for settling the case? The task is difficult, perhaps too difficult to solve through a museum exhibition. Or should museums, on the contrary, use their authoritative voices to discuss the really difficult questions?

The development of locations of remembrance, the concepts for temporary and permanent exhibitions, documentation centers and memorial sites following the end of the Cold War and the re-unification of Germany are analysed by Kerkhoff-Hader. I cannot help but wonder how these sites and museums may, perhaps unintentionally, create over time new "truths" about how pre-war Europe was constituted. Is there now a need to see nostalgic European idylls in the pre-Nazi/pre-Communist past? Having visited some of these sites and being old enough to have lived with the east/west divide from its start to its end, I strongly felt an "at last can we resume the lives of a happier past"-relief. Do I have a need to see

nostalgic European idylls in the pre-Nazi/pre-Communist past? What truths will sites and monuments convey to an already adult, post-1989 generation?

Leiv Sem asks whether a site and a building which is a World War II Nazi concentration camp memorial, and a center for human rights, can also commemorate other stories of suffering and violations against human rights which took place at the same location, but at different periods of time? In this case, there is no strong disagreement about the historical facts, but whose suffering is worthy of commemoration? Can one truth dilute another, so to speak, making it weaker? There is nothing trickier than unsympathetic victims!

Like McKinnon, Buletić and Kerkhoff-Hader, Sem describes a case where future generations' reading of the truths of history are at stake. But in both Buletić's and Sem's examples balanced comparisons are critical. Will giving equal value to all the victims in and from Istria be credible? Can the concentration camp memorial also present the suffering of the others and still be able to clearly communicate differences? Comparisons meant to be neutral may paradoxically give raise to prejudices and intolerance.

In the "Peace is Never Neutral" article, I claim that war memorials may often be emotionally deep but intellectually shallow. Can a new generation of memorials and museums manage to include both the emotional and the intellectual aspects? Can a museum help their public to keep two contrasting thoughts in their heads at the same time?

Participatory Approaches and YOU

Museums are influenced by media in approaches as well as in themes. You-journalism, "what can YOU do to avoid sickness?" "How can YOU have better sex?" is usually a cheap trick for selling tabloid papers. "Which religion do YOU choose?" "Would YOU be able to kill?" "What would YOUR verdict be in a rape trial?" These are questions asked in museum exhibitions and educational programs described and analysed in Rein's, Jungblut & Schweizer's and Garberg's chapters.

With the higher than average educational levels of the museum public, the typical adult visitor is no longer an awestruck beholder of fantastic objects and absorber of authoritative truths. Visitors are more and more able to question the curators' truths. As a consequence, some museums provide insight through inviting the visitor to reflect, so to speak, together with the curator. "What do YOU think?" the curator asks. "There is no absolute truth here, but considering the ethical aspects, what would YOUR

choice be? And what would YOU have been able to do?" One might say that what museums gain from questioning the truth by asking for the visitors' involvement and opinions is to reveal more complex truths, if indeed there are absolute truths to be found.

However, the risk is that visitors may be led to believe that their uninformed opinion is just as truthful as those of the experts. Therefore, the value of this approach is dependent on giving the visitor sufficient new information to acquire a reasonably enlightened opinion. Simply inviting the visitor to state opinions based on the same knowledge as when entering the museum makes no one smarter.

Postnormal Diversity?

So where lies the future? In the final article, Grinell suggests that we may be entering a postnormal period, in society as well as in museums. His paper points to a multiplicity of perceptions of what is "normal," what is right and what the truth is. An era characterised by complexity and contradictions. Can museums in this situation be arenas for creative disagreements?

I am tempted to add that we may be entering a state where some very few museums become places of creative disagreements, particularly in peaceful and affluent democracies, where disagreements are not dangerous. However, in a context of rivalling perceptions of normality, is it not more likely that museums are given the task to consolidate and be even more authoritative agents for the normality of their own society?

I am surprised that political disparities so often seem to be at the core of discussions about museums and truths, while I have almost never come across a museum which has made disagreements among scholars the theme of an exhibition. After nearly five decades of experiences in the museum world, which thanks to ICOM were global though mostly European, it is my impression that displaying scholarly differences in exhibitions was and is considered improper. On the other hand, is there a fear not openly expressed that this will rock the authoritativeness of the museum? I'd think the effect would be the opposite.

In this publication we have admittedly used a word as strong as "truth" to catch your attention. We try to convey that truth will always be an approximation. We want to challenge the authoritativeness represented by museums that they so often take for granted.

Personally, I believe that nuances, complexities, contradictions, dilemmas, doubts, communicated in an engaging and understandable way, may nourish reflections, which again create new insights. That's *my*

"museal" obsession; that's what *I* would have liked museums to engage in. Enjoy the publication!

PART ONE:

TRUTHS, FAITHS AND REALITIES

CHAPTER ONE

MUSEUMS AND TRUTHS:
THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

VIV GOLDING

Introduction, the disputed, the obvious and the not quite graspable elephant(s)

In this chapter I will reflect on the troubled relations museums have with notions of Truth lingering from colonialism to the detriment of peoples, cultures and environments around the world today. I shall think about Truth from an interdisciplinary perspective as written texts of various sorts, as oral tradition and as fine art, arguing that intertwining enriches museums. First, let us listen to the voice of a young British policeman writing an account of "truth" and "lies" in the colonial India of the 1930s. In "Shooting an elephant" (1977) George Orwell notes:

> A story always sounds clear enough at a distance, but the nearer you get to the scene of events the vaguer it becomes. Some people said that the elephant had gone in one direction, some said he had gone in another, some professed not even to have heard of any elephant. I had almost made up my mind that the whole story was a pack of lies, when we heard yells a little distance away (267).

Reading this piece of journalism in another part of the world (Leicester, UK), having just returned from Shanghai, China, and some eighty-five years, a lifetime later, I am struck by the blindness of historical positioning. While Orwell was clearly sympathetic to economically disadvantaged peoples the world over, risking his life fighting for equality and social justice in Spain during the Spanish Civil War, he was bound by the mores of his time and the thought patterns of his socio-cultural background, rooted in logic and scientific knowledge, as, to a degree, we all are. Pondering Orwell's text highlights the notion of Truth, authenticity and, the real thing according to written and verbal accounts in specific

contextual circumstances, which impacts what we should do and how we should act.

In other words, Orwell raises questions of concern for the social role of the museum in the twenty-first century. What is the place of emotion and cognition in remembering and recording past events? How might new embodied knowledge(s) emerge and operate within wider hierarchies of power and control that shift over different epochs and locations? Who adjudicates between the rights and responsibilities of humans as they clash with each other and the rights of other animals at local and global levels? What competing factors might impact on different interpretations and representations of self and other that are made over distances in time and space? These are the broad themes, the why, where and when questions, that I attempt to address with reference to the mission underpinning contemporary museum practice.

The chapter is also concerned with voice and points to museum silences. In the UK when we speak of "the elephant in the room" we usually refer to a glaringly obvious problem of which everyone seems oblivious. The elephant, however, is impossible to miss and so the people there must be deliberately ignoring it. But two other readings of this elephant are related in terms of interpretation. A second elephant, as Orwell observes, causes a lot of damage but there are contradictory claims about its whereabouts or existence. A third elephant whose character cannot be grasped in its entirety also lurks. In this chapter, the elephant in the room largely stands as a metaphor for the issues, problems or risks that groups of people are reluctant to address and the difficulties inherent in interpretive positioning(s). I suggest that emotionally charged topics, controversial and taboo subjects, religion and politics, sexual orientation, "race" and ethnicity may be considered as such elephants in the museum.

In terms of structure, first the distinction and nuances between truth and fiction, history/herstory and story will be unpacked with reference to key philosophical perspectives and international examples. Next, some illustrations from the realm of social history, activism and world art will be outlined since museums of anthropology have benefitted from collaborative efforts together with creative people. Finally, some concluding remarks, remaining questions and suggestions for best practices will be made.

Stories, Histories and a Traditional Tale

Opposing views of Truth, and what counts as truth and what as fiction, have perhaps clashed throughout history and perverted the course of "Social Harmony." This was the theme of the ICOM 2010 triennial