

# The Postcolonial Museum

## The Arts of Memory and the Pressures of History

Edited by Iain Chambers, Alessandra De Angelis, Celeste Ianniciello, Mariangela Orabona and Michaela Quadraro, Università degli Studi di Napoli 'L'Orientale', Italy

This book examines how we can conceive of a 'postcolonial museum' in the contemporary epoch of mass migrations, the internet and digital technologies. The authors consider the museum space, practices and institutions in the light of repressed histories, sounds, voices, images, memories, bodies, expression and cultures. Focusing on the transformation of museums as cultural spaces, rather than physical places, is to propose a living archive formed through creation, participation, production and innovation. The aim is to propose a critical assessment of the museum in the light of those transcultural and global migratory movements that challenge the historical and traditional frames of Occidental thought. This involves a search for new strategies and critical approaches in the fields of museum and heritage studies which will renew and extend understandings of European citizenship and result in an inevitable re-evaluation of the concept of 'modernity' in a so-called globalised and multicultural world.

*Long overdue, here is a volume that updates and reconfigures the intersection of postcolonial critique with multiple interpretations of the museum and social praxis in globalisation. The Postcolonial Museum charts gaps, achievements and prospects in 20 chapters that re-interpret the connection of past and current imperialisms. Introducing a wealth of new voices, this is essential reading for anyone interested in curatorial practice and theory, modern and contemporary art, ethnography, museology and the interventionist potential of research in the humanities overall.*

Angela Dimitrakaki, University of Edinburgh, UK

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Chambers, De Angelis, Ianniciello,  
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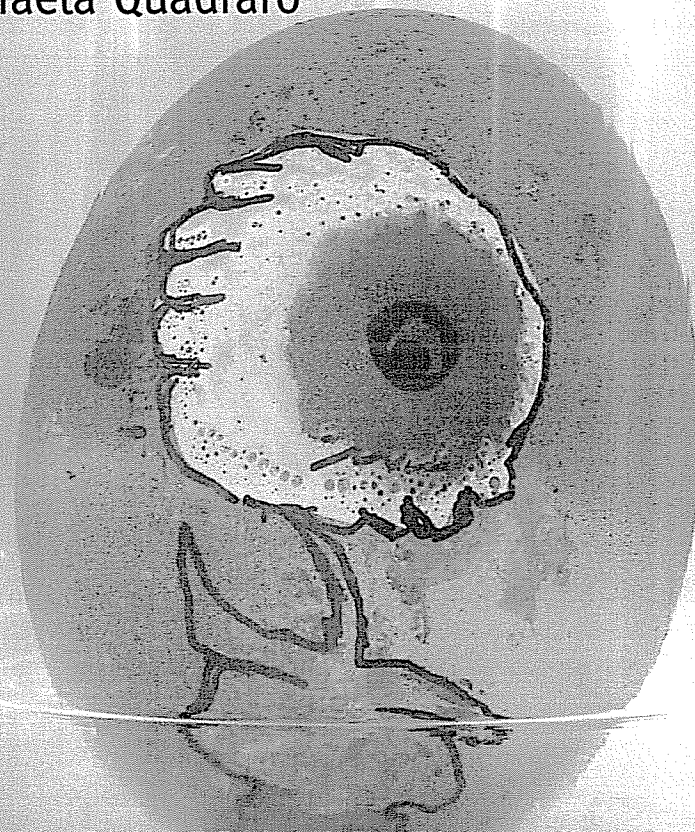
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MeLa – *European Museums in an age of migrations* is a four year long Research Project (March 2011–February 2015) funded by the European Commission under the Seventh Framework Programme within the Socio-economic Sciences and Humanities Sector (SSH-2010-5.2.2, Grant Agreement n° 266757). MeLa is an interdisciplinary programme aimed at analysing the role of museums in the contemporary multi-cultural context, characterized by an augmented migration of people and ideas, and at identifying innovative practices and strategies in order to foster their evolution.

The research activities developed by the MeLa Project are fostered by the cooperation of nine European Partners, and articulated through distinct Research Fields.

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examines the historical and contemporary relationships between museums, places and identities in Europe and the effects of migrations on museum practices.

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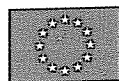
investigates and experiments innovative communication tools, ICT potentialities, user centred approaches, and the role of architecture and design for the contemporary museum.

**RF06: Envisioning 21st Century Museums**

fosters theoretical, methodological and operative contributions to the interpretation of diversities and commonalities within European cultural heritage, and proposes enhanced practices for the mission and design of museums in the contemporary multicultural society.

Partners and principal investigators:

Luca Basso Peressut (Project Coordinator), Gennaro Postiglione, Politecnico di Milano, Italy  
Marco Sacco, Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, Italy  
Bartomeu Mari, MACBA – Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, Spain  
Fabienne Galangau, Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle, France  
Ruth Noack, The Royal College of Art, United Kingdom  
Perla Innocenti, University of Glasgow, United Kingdom  
Jamie Allen, Jacob Back, Copenhagen Institute of Interaction Design, Denmark  
Christopher Whitehead, Rhiannon Mason, Newcastle University, United Kingdom  
Iain Chambers, 'L'Orientale', University of Naples, Italy  
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*Edited by*

IAIN CHAMBERS, ALESSANDRA DE ANGELIS,  
CELESTE IANNICIELLO, MARIANGELA ORABONA  
AND MICHAELA QUADRARO  
*Università degli Studi di Napoli 'L'Orientale', Italy*

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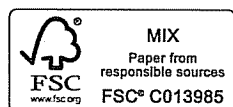
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# Introduction: Disruptive Encounters – Museums, Arts and Postcoloniality

Alessandra De Angelis, Celeste Ianniciello, Mariangela Orabona  
and Michaela Quadraro

Postcolonial art is intimately linked to globalisation – that is, to a critical reflection on the planetary conditions of artistic production, circulation and reception. This implies focusing on the interweaving of the geographical, cultural, historical and economic contexts in which art takes place. The relationship between globalisation and art, as Okwi Enwezor observes, conceived and institutionalised by the European history of modern art in terms of separation or simply negation, here acquires fundamental importance (Enwezor 2003). It represents both the premise through which the relationship between art and the postcolonial can be conceptualised, and the matrix that helps to convey the cultural and political value of this relationship, together with its significance as a *disruptive encounter*. Far from being lost in the sterile and abstract, yet provincial, mirror of self-referentiality masked as universalism – with the implicit claim of the autonomy and independence of art from other cultural forms and activities – postcolonial art is deeply and consciously embedded in historicity, globalisation and social discourse. On one hand, it reminds us of how power is organic to the constitution of the diverse relations and asymmetries that shape our postcolonial world, and hence of how ‘bringing contemporary art into the geopolitical framework that defines global relations offers a perspicacious view of the postcolonial constellation’ (Enwezor 2003, 58). On the other hand, postcolonial art also shows how aesthetics today presents itself as an incisive critical instance. Postcolonial art proposes new paradigms of both signification and subjectivation, offering alternative interpretative tools that promote a reconfiguration of a planetary reality.

Analysing the link between modernity and this global reality, we can say that globalisation can be understood as the planetary ‘expansion of trade and its grip on the totality of natural resources, of human production, in a word of living in its entirety’ (Mbembe 2003). It was inaugurated by the Occident through a violent process of expropriation, appropriation and an exasperated defence of property, spread globally through capitalism and its imperialist extension. This is a political economy that is deeply rooted in, and sustained by, the humanist, rationalist, colonialist and nationalist culture of the West. The central phenomenon of modernity, born in a historical exercise of power, was fed by the religion of ‘progress’ and the racist ideology of ‘white supremacy’ imposing itself for centuries as a universal ontological category through the institutions of laws,

## Chapter 4

# Ethnographic Museums: From Colonial Exposition to Intercultural Dialogue

Fabienne Boursiquot

The Musée des Civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée (MuCEM) is scheduled to open in Marseille in June 2013. This new museum brings together collections from the Musée de l'Homme and the Musée National des Arts et Traditions Populaires (MNATP), two major ethnographic museums that opened in Paris in 1937. Together with other new 'museums of society', MuCEM announces a shift in the treatment of cultural difference: whereas twentieth-century ethnographic museums used to primarily document and exhibit other cultures, museums of society present themselves as places 'where cultures converse' and as intercultural meeting points. This new mission raises certain questions: How exactly will this dialogue take place? Who will be part of it? What place will be made for the past, in particular the colonial past?

In this chapter, I seek to offer a genealogy of these new museums of society by taking into account a paradigm shift that occurred in anthropology itself. Now that some ethnographic museums are reconfigured into art museums (quai Branly, Paris) or 'museums of society' (MuCEM, Marseille), this chapter asks whether these new museums are effective ways to decolonise old ethnographic collections and to foster new relationships between Europe and the former colonies. I suggest that one of the keys necessary to understand this museum reconfiguration in France resides in the relationship between museums and anthropology that was established in the second half of the nineteenth century, and in the paradigm shift that marked the discipline.

The idea – central to the project of the ethnographic museum – that it is possible to reconstitute a society from its objects does not stand up any more. Most of the museums which exhibit objects that once belonged to non-Western societies were established in a context in which Europe dominated foreign continents; they materialise an asymmetrical relation to these societies. What meaning do these museums have now that the colonial era is officially over?

In our postcolonial world, it is not possible to speak on behalf of non-Western societies, nor to represent them or their objects without being preoccupied by what they would say about it. Since the 1980s, there has been a growing feeling that ethnographic museums are going through a crisis. They have been accused of presenting non-Western cultures in a reified and sometimes caricatural manner. In response to this crisis, a majority of ethnographic museums entered into a redefinition



process. Some museums chose to adopt an aesthetical approach; they converted ethnographic objects into works of art. Other ethnographic museums opted for closer collaboration with the communities the displayed objects came from (Ames 1992).

The very category of 'ethnographic museum', as a museum dedicated to the 'Others' – intended here as non-Western civilisations, societies or ethnic groups – needs to be thought through. What is the meaning today of a distinction between 'Us' and the 'Others'? What does it mean when a museum offers the possibility to encounter the 'Others' and to discover their culture when members of these communities are now French citizens (de L'Estoile 2007, 20–21)?

### Ethnographic Museums and Museums of the 'Others'

Let us begin by recalling a few historical milestones. Museums of ethnology and anthropology are part of the long history of collectionism and of the exhibition of non-Western societies and their objects.<sup>1</sup> The history of museums goes back as far as Antiquity, where the term *mouseion* (*museum* in Latin) evoked a temple dedicated to the muses. During the Middle Ages, relics, manuscripts and various objects brought back from the Crusades were displayed in churches and monasteries (Alexander and Alexander 2008, 3–5).

The cabinets of curiosities that could be found throughout Europe in the sixteenth century are commonly considered to be the prototypes of modern museums (Impey and MacGregor 1985; Stocking 1985). Like a microcosm, the cabinet brings the whole universe into one room. These collections of miscellaneous objects expressed a desire to understand the world in its universal dimension that translated into an interest in various domains: the natural world (animal, vegetal and mineral), Antiquity (Roman coins, sculptures, Egyptian mummies), exotic objects brought back from Africa, the Orient or the New World, mythical creatures and so on. Europeans' explorations and conquests of other continents supplied royal and private collections. But this was before ethnographic objects were treated as a distinct category (Stocking 1985, 6–7).

If we can see continuity between cabinets of curiosities and the first ethnographic museums, we must admit that their objectives were different.

<sup>1</sup> The terms 'anthropology', 'ethnology' and 'ethnography' are used differently to refer to the discipline dedicated to the study of man according to geographical and disciplinary contexts. In North America, the term 'anthropology' is used in a broader sense and encompasses archaeology, linguistics, physical anthropology, and social and cultural anthropology. In Continental Europe, the term 'ethnology' is equivalent to social and cultural anthropology, even though a growing number of practitioners identify themselves as anthropologists, at least in France (de L'Estoile 2007, 15). As for the term 'ethnography', it usually refers to the collection of data. 'Ethnographic museums' remind us that ethnographic expeditions were central to collection-building and the establishment of these museums.

Collectors from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries wanted to fathom the secrets of the Creation by collecting its strangest and rarest manifestations. On the other hand, ethnographic museums had a clear scientific aim: to preserve, to classify and to study the products of mankind and nature.

The first public museums emerged at the end of the seventeenth century.<sup>2</sup> However, it was during the nineteenth century that the pairing between museum and anthropology really took shape, at the very moment when the latter emerged as a scientific discipline. The idea of a natural selection, validated by the concept of evolution, justified the classification of ethnographic artefacts with animals and other natural specimens. Ethnographic objects were seen as evidence of the gradual evolution of mankind from the state of savagery to civilisation. Along with the ethnological exhibition of human beings in colonial exhibitions and world fairs, these objects both confirmed anthropology's status as an empirical science and established the distinction between Westerners and the 'Others' (Schildkrout 2012).

The emergence of anthropology as a discipline during the nineteenth century is tied to the museum (Sturtevant 1969; Stocking 1985; Dias 1991). Around the turn of the twentieth century, museums were fundamental in terms of 'the employment of personnel and the support of field research' (Stocking 1985, 8).<sup>3</sup> The curators of the first museums of anthropology, like Frederic W. Putnam at the Peabody Museum in the United States and John William Dawson at the Redpath Museum in Canada, played a major role in the professionalisation of the discipline and the foundation of the first departments of anthropology in universities (Browman 2002; Lawson 1999). Notably, in connection with the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, Edward Tylor, a founding figure of social anthropology, held the first chair in Anthropology in Britain (Stocking 1987, 264–5). Franz Boas, considered by many as the father of American anthropology, received his first position as an anthropologist at the American Museum of Natural History (Browman 2002, 514). Later, the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, in the form of a 'laboratory-museum' as

<sup>2</sup> Museums mainly dedicated to anthropology emerged during this period: the Academy of Sciences of Saint Petersburg (1836), the National Museum of Ethnology of Leiden in the Netherlands (1837), the National Museum in Denmark (founded in 1816; an ethnographic collection was established in 1840), the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology in Cambridge (1866), the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro in Paris (1878), the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford (1884) and the National Museum of Anthropology, History and Ethnology in Mexico (1909) (Alexander and Alexander 2008, 72; Stocking 1985, 7).

<sup>3</sup> William C. Sturtevant has defined the 'museum period' in anthropology, running from the 1840s to the 1890s, as the period when almost all research was done by museum anthropologists: 'The gathering of museum collections during fieldwork, and studying them later on in the museum, was an important and respectable part of anthropological research' (Sturtevant 1969, 622). But I agree with Stocking's assertion that 'the great period of museum anthropology only really began in the 1890s' (Stocking 1985, 8).

defined by Paul Rivet, had a durable influence on the field of ethnology in France.<sup>4</sup> The French case contrasts sharply with the situation in the rest of the world, where museum influence in anthropology declined during the inter-war years. In France, in comparison to Britain and the United States, the central role of the museum only began to decrease in favour of universities and research centres three decades later (Dias 2007, 77).

The relationship between museum and anthropology is complex because it is shaped by several factors: the initial identification of anthropology as a natural science and the consequent influence of natural history museums; the use of anthropology as a scientific justification of the European colonial project and the exhibition of 'Savages' during the colonial and universal exhibits through the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century; the idea that indigenous cultures should be recorded in an encyclopaedic fashion before their complete extinction, and the humanist project to prove both the unity and diversity of humankind.<sup>5</sup> Finally, the social and artistic context influenced anthropological museums and their museographic choices, as illustrated by the aesthetic approach adopted by the Musée de l'Homme during the 1960s, right after the opening of the Musée des Arts Africains et Océaniens.

All in all, one could say that the golden age of the relationship between museums and anthropology came at the moment when the main task of anthropology was defined as the study of the material manifestations of all mankind. Ethnographic museums were in part a response to the scientific necessity to collect and study ethnographic objects. On a theoretical level, these objects are considered to be material expressions of the culture of a given society. Being the depositories of huge collections, ethnographic museums stayed in place throughout the twentieth century, even though anthropologists progressively abandoned the material study of societies and became more and more interested in the study of meaning, social structures, power relationships, social practices, modes of being-in-the-world, and so on, which can only be accessed through fieldwork.

### Museological Turn and Paradigm Shift in France

The transfer of the ethnographic collections from the Musée de l'Homme to the quai Branly museum and the future MuCEM, as well as the closure of the MNATP, constitute a major turn in French ethnology and an irreversible transformation of

4 Paul Rivet defined *ethnologie* as 'the science of man in its totality', encompassing physical anthropology, linguistics and ethnography (de L'Estoile 2003, 342).

5 Important anthropological theories, such as evolutionism, diffusionism and structuralism, have also influenced the ways ethnographic objects were classified and presented in museums. Diffusionism was an anthropological theory that was influential during the first half of the twentieth century. It holds that culture traits spread from one society to another (Kuklick 2002).

the relationship between anthropology and museums (Dias 2007). The closing of these two institutions that shaped French ethnology marks the end of a museum paradigm that was more influential in France than elsewhere. This paradigm was not only characterised by an interest in objects; it defined the way the discipline was practised, its aims and methods that revolved around the project of an encyclopaedic inventory of the world achieved through a systematic collection of objects. This model was inherited from the natural sciences and the museum of natural history: to collect, to classify and to establish natural laws. According to this model, the purpose of ethnographic museums is to inventory cultures, peoples or ethnic groups just as the natural history museum makes inventories of plants and insects (de L'Estoile 2008).

The idea that it is possible to establish an inventory of the cultures of the world rests on two assumptions: (a) cultures are seen as closed and clearly delimited units, and (b) cultures exist in a limited number. However, these presuppositions were increasingly challenged during the twentieth century. Ethnography shifted from a 'collection model' to an interlocution or a 'translation model', and from a naturalist paradigm, whose aim was the objective depiction of different ways of life, to a translation paradigm (de L'Estoile 2008, 666). In a translation paradigm, the goal of anthropologists is to translate for the members of their own society the ways of life they learned while inserting themselves into another world. From this point of view, anthropology is not the science of otherness, but a kind of knowledge that relies on the relationship between different worlds. In other words, one can say that ethnographic knowledge is characterised by the fact that it is gained through interpersonal relations (de L'Estoile 2003). In a postcolonial world, ethnographic museums must acknowledge this paradigm shift. The challenge for ethnographic museums and anthropologists today is to find new ways to translate the results of their researches into exhibits. As de L'Estoile (2007) puts it: in a postcolonial word, ethnographic museums tend to become museums of the *relationship* between 'Us' and the 'Others' more than museums of the 'Others'. The transformation of the French museum landscape during the last decade reveals a relocation of such a boundary.

Before the relocation of their ethnographic collections to the Musée du quai Branly and the MuCEM, the Musée de l'Homme and the MNATP offered a dual definition of 'Us': at the level of all humankind, and at a national level. The redistribution of ethnographic collections into new museums traces new identity boundaries. The future MuCEM illustrates the desire to foster a European and Mediterranean sense of belonging, whereas the absence of European collections at the Musée du quai Branly establishes a new distinction between 'Us' and the non-European 'Others' (de L'Estoile 2007).

What place is given to the French colonial heritage in this identity reconfiguration? One important aspect of this reconfiguration is the absence of a museum dedicated to colonisation. In fact, it seems that the French colonial past has become a blind spot for the national museums. The colonial heritage is either relegated to the collections of quai Branly, or integrated into the larger theme of



immigration at the Cité de l'Histoire de l'Immigration, on the site of the former Palais Permanent des Colonies (de L'Estoile 2007).

### Museums of Society and Intercultural Dialogue

In France, new museums like the quai Branly and the future MuCEM adopt a posture of openness to cultural diversity. Thus, the motto of the Musée du quai Branly is *là où dialoguent les cultures* ('where cultures converse'), and the MuCEM is presented as a meeting place for twentieth-century civilisations. But as James Clifford brilliantly puts it: 'cultures don't converse: people do' (Clifford 2007, 16). Reflecting on the quai Branly's opening ceremonies, Clifford argues that even though the new museum identifies itself with indigenous recognition movements, this attitude towards cultural recognition and dialogue has little impact on contemporary inequalities: 'How, in practice, the Musée du quai Branly might position itself to foster a "dialogue of cultures" in contemporary Paris and its embattled immigrant suburbs was a question that haunted the opening events' (Clifford 2007, 18). In this respect, I agree with Mary Douglas when she says that this dialogue must take place with the people who made the objects displayed in museums and their descendants:

What an ethnographic museum should be able to do, in one way or another, is to engage a conversation with the descendants of the peoples that are at the source of this art, that created the marvelous treasures that the museum protects and transmits to future generations. And who are they? They are the immigrants, the refugees and the poor in our community that are not part of our Western traditions. (Mary Douglas, translated and quoted in Price 2009, 5)

As Price (2007) points out, preconceptions influenced by movies, television, books and so on are not absent from the contemplation of non-Western works of art. The pure aesthetic contemplation of objects cannot lead by itself to an intercultural dialogue. On the contrary, it can nurture a reified imaginary of non-Western societies as being exotic, mysterious, stuck in time, and far different from us. The question that remains to be asked is how the museum and its exhibitions can foster a constructive dialogue between different groups of people that are now part of the French society. One modest hypothesis is that temporary exhibits and cultural activities, being more flexible than permanent exhibitions, and guided tours might offer fertile occasions for learning, encounter and reflection about our relation to the 'Others'.

Ethnographic objects are enmeshed in multiple histories (colonial, familial, local, mythical). What is an adequate way to display them today in museums? As works of art? As a testimony of the culture that produced them? Or as remnants of a pre-colonial era? These different approaches often coexist in museums that display non-Western cultures. But globally, there has been, since the 1920s, a growing influence of the formalist approach over museums of ethnography (de L'Estoile 2007, 332). From this perspective, the introduction of 'first' or 'tribal' art to the

Louvre of the Metropolitan Museum of Art is representative of a transformation in the way non-Western objects are defined: from ethnographic objects, they become works of art and enter the universal history of art. This transformation is seen as a recognition of non-Western cultures and their art. But the formalist approach has also been the target of numerous criticisms: because it neglects the history of cultures, of the objects themselves and of local and transnational meanings (Clifford 2007), because it says little about the social and artistic processes of creation (Bensa 2006), and because giving an exclusively aesthetic meaning to objects that were once collected to inform Europe about the life of foreign peoples is in itself a semantic deviation (Dubé 2004).

L'Estoile (2007) suggests that these objects should be presented on the basis of the complex relations that were established around them. Ethnographic objects are not only non-Western objects in our museums; they are enmeshed in relations between 'Us' and the 'Others' – relations that are in constant redefinition. The postcolonial museum, as de L'Estoile suggests, is a museum that reflects on these relations and places history and reflexivity at its core. The postcolonial museum questions the very possibility of exhibiting cultural diversity as if it were a reality. It encourages the public to reflect on the fact that other cultures do not exist outside of the relation that determines difference. It asks how ethnographic objects were collected and why, how tourism transformed cultural practices, what is the 'museum effect' on the way we see non-Western societies (Alpers 1991). It is only through a reflexive effort of this kind that the possibility of intercultural dialogue can emerge.

For French philosopher and museologist Bernard Deloche (2010), this reflexive component is a central characteristic of *musées de société* ('museums of society'). These museums – the Musée de la Civilisation in Quebec City, the Ethnographic Museum in Neuchâtel, the future MuCEM in Marseille or the Musée des Confluences in Lyon – transform at the same time what they show and the relationship with the public. They define themselves primarily through their public, and not on the basis of their collections, and adopt a thematic approach to reflect on questions of society.<sup>6</sup> Museums of society want to escape ideology, they do not wish to transmit absolute values, nor an eternal dogma; they transmit questions rather than answers. In this perspective, the museum becomes an interactive 'observatory' of social life where the public are invited to question their own culture and identity (Deloche 2007, 204–5).

### Conclusion

The end of the Musée de l'Homme and the opening of the Musée du quai Branly in France mark a dual breakdown: in the encyclopaedic model with its universalistic ambition on the one hand, and in the disciplinary paradigm on the other (Dias

<sup>6</sup> In this regard, the Musée de la Civilisation de Québec, founded in 1988, acts as a trailblazer (Bergeron 2002, 63).

2007, 76). In their new forms, museums dedicated to the 'Others' seem to adopt one of the two following models: the art museum (as with the quai Branly) or the museum of society (as with the MuCEM). Dealing with questions of society and putting the public instead of its collections at its centre, the museum of society opens the door to a new role for the museum: reflexivity and critique. It is a role full of promises, as it meets with the critical posture of a certain kind of anthropology.

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