PRESENTING «THE OTHER» — DILEMMAS FOR ETHNOGRAPHIC MUSEUMS

Ulla Wagner

Discussing something within the academic world and addressing a lay audience (the general public visiting museums) are different things. In the former, knowledge and being 'aux fait' with the ongoing theoretical debate can be taken for granted. In the latter, nothing can be taken as given. Focusing on exhibitions as a medium for conveying insights into other ways of ordering life, the inherent possibilities and restraints are discussed, as is the problem of 'voice', i.e. who speaks for whom. Finally a case is made for an inclusive 'we' rather than the divisive 'us' and 'them'.

Since the 1980s, ethnographic museums have increasingly become contested arenas for the presentation of non-Western societies. Contested by the communities that are usually referred to as the Fourth World, i.e. descendents of the original inhabitants in what became an encompassing industrialized world, and also increasingly from other areas of the world that have been (and are) under the dominance of the West. Contested also to some extent from within the museum world itself and from the academic world of anthropology/ethnology. Concurrently in the latter, the ethnographic account has come under scrutiny. Particularly since the publication of Clifford and Marcus's *Writing Culture* in 1986, to the earlier critique of essentializing culture has been added that even though the ethnographic

account is not a downright fabrication, it is, nevertheless, a view privileged by its author.

The ethnographic museum has thus come to be seen as an institution that not only embodies an old-fashioned way of presenting 'The Other', in spite of utilizing modern exhibition techniques, it is also seen as one that is privileged in that it has taken upon itself the authority of interpreting and making statements in these presentations. There is indeed a great deal that an ethnographer/anthropologist working in a museum should consider in this critique. Yet problem areas remain that are of vital importance to the ethnographic museum in a 'Western context', which have occasioned much less interest. To clarify what I am aiming at, let me relate an anecdote:

80 For several months after I had joined Etnografiska Museet, later renamed Folkens Museum Etnografiska (the National Museum of Ethnography), I toured the exhibition halls almost daily. On one of these occasions I happened to overhear a couple (middle-aged and, from their dialect, from the north of Sweden) standing in front of a showcase exhibiting cloaks, hats, and chests from the Northwest Coast societies of British Columbia. After contemplating the exhibits for a short while, the lady turned to her companion and said:» They do have strange hats, the Chinese.»

At the time my thoughts were along the lines of 'Help, what are we doing wrong?', seeing that texts and a map clearly situated these societies in North America, and although I soon became inundated by matters administrative and economic, with little time to think about, still less tackle, this matter, the episode remained in my mind. The reason is that it aptly illustrates the questions: For whom do we make our exhibitions, and how can we convey in a meaningful way an understanding of other ways of living, of other cultures? This, more than collecting, caring for the collections, continuing research and building up ethnographic knowledge, is the task that is seen as the most important one by the general public. And, as recent events have shown, also by the Ministry of Culture.¹

This type of question has been addressed in the case of non-ethnographic museums, and those findings are of interest in this context too. But I think they deserve much more attention when it comes specifically to dealing with 'other cultures' and, in the following, I would

like to address these problems with reference to Folkens Museum Etnografiska (hereafter FME) although they probably have a much wider validity. The 'data' underlying my remarks are the intermittent, very piecemeal and unsystematic glimpses I have had of our public in the fifteen years I have been with the FME, but more importantly from my own fieldwork in the Gambia in the early and mid-1970s. This work dealt with the impact of international (mainly Scandinavian) charter tourism on the local society as well as what the tourists perceived and understood of local culture and society.

PROBLEMS OF ESSENTIALIZATION

The title of this paper could, with some justification, have been 'The Split Mind of an Anthropologist working in an Ethnographic Museum' because the concept of culture has become so problematic. Knowing, on the one hand, that flux and change, together with movement in space, have not been absent from any society, although they are increasingly affecting many parts of the world, and, on the other, trying to make sense in exhibitions aimed at a lay audience with little or no prior knowledge of other societies is enough to split anyone's mind. This is especially so seen against the ongoing theoretical discussions in academic anthropology.

If we first take the idea that culture is bounded, in academic anthropology it has been shown that the 'culture' of a given population should not be understood as being of a uniform character, nor should

it be conflated with place, i.e. a given geographic area. In ethnographic museums, on the other hand, any exhibition of 'a people' tends to show a rather unified culture set in a specific place, or environment. In a way, the museum presentation could be said to reflect the anthropological understanding of culture/people/place that was current in the subject until some forty years ago.

Disregarding the strictures imposed by the materiality of the ethnographic artefacts (dealt with later on), the question is: Can we talk sensibly, through the medium of an exhibition, about any phenomenon without objectifying and simplifying it, limiting it, when addressing an audience with no previous knowledge of the subject? Is it possible in another medium than the spoken, or written, word (or films) to convey the multiplicity and the nuances of any one 'culture', and still make some sort of sense? The same problem underlies the temporal aspects (to which I will return later). Would it be possible, again focusing on the use of exhibitions, to convey a sense of change in other ways than by adding objects of the Coca-Colanization kind, or adding photos or films showing glimpses of contemporary society? I might lack imagination here, but I can see no clear way out of this dilemma, despite giving it some thought. Of course, if we were making use of other means of addressing our public or had an audience consisting only of professional anthropologists, there might be an answer. But this is not the case.

Thus, it is my contention that whether we are trying to present one 'culture/people', or several in a more thematic approach, to make sense we are forced to make

use of constrained concepts. In this context, we are obliged to show 'the culture' or 'the people' in an essentialized manner, even though, as anthropologists, we are aware that this presents a skewed picture; a drastic simplification of actual social and cultural facts.

The other problem, that of cross-cultural understanding, or, as I see it, the ever-present likelihood of misunderstanding, is of a different kind. Here one could, of course, object to my somewhat pessimistic view and point out that our public is probably more knowledgeable than I think. A case in point here could be the visitor statistics presented by Mark Davidson Schuster (in Pearce 1995), which show that the museum public has a higher education than the population at large. This would probably also be the case for the visitors to the FME and other ethnographic museums.

However, there is a significant difference here in the Swedish context. The general public visiting art museums and museums dealing with Swedish/European cultural history tend to have some prior knowledge of what they are about to see. This has been achieved through the educational system as well as through various media and the current public debate on things 'cultural'. When it comes to societies outside the Euro-American sphere, however, no such basic knowledge is conveyed in the Swedish education system. Moreover the *kultursidor* (literature and the fine arts pages) of the daily papers very rarely deal with subjects pertaining to non-Western cultures, with the corollary that exhibitions at the FME – or the Gothenburg Ethnographic Museum – are very rarely discussed by the large dailies. Unless they

82 happen to fall into the category of fine art. To this should be added that, as far as the general public is concerned, whatever prior knowledge might exist is often of a problematic or even negative kind, mainly being shaped by the ongoing general discourse on underdevelopment, poverty, suffering, and warfare.

Yet another aspect of how we view 'the other' stems from the fact that Sweden, in the past thirty years or so, has become a society with large numbers of immigrants and, like most other Western countries, immigrants are seen as 'a problem' by society at large. This, of course, also hampers a museum trying to convey some knowledge, or insight, into other ways of life and society.²

When talking about the understanding of other cultures it should be pointed out that I am not so much concerned with the 'writing culture' problematic. Although well aware of this discussion within the academic world, my concern here is whether anyone without prior training or experience in trying to understand 'the other' can even begin to do so, particularly by way of what a museum like FME can offer. Although, in a faint-hearted way, finding professional solace from the editorial remarks made in the 1997 ASA monograph *After Writing Culture*, which bring up, «the possible existence of *shared universal external references which might make cultural 'translation' viable...*» (p. 3, my emphasis added.), I still have doubts whether such cultural translations, in the shape of exhibitions, are understandable to a lay public. In other words, is what the curator is trying to put across in an exhibition making any sense in terms of understanding a culture? Or, are our

exhibitions seen as examples of 'exotic' displays, however much we try to contextualize them? I fear that this is often the case and I would like to illustrate this problem by drawing on my field data from the Gambia in the 1970s.

IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

In the charter tourist setting various excursions and tours are offered to the holidaymakers, and in the Gambia one of the tours on offer was 'the village tour', a half-day event. It consisted of a thirty-minute bus ride, either way, a shepherded tour through the village lanes and in and out of some villagers' homes, and ended with a 'song and dance' display in a nearby open gathering place. The Swedish guides were quite good at answering questions concerning the local fauna and flora on the ride to the village. When there were a few questions concerning land rights and crops, the answers seemed to be made up, perhaps on the spur of the moment, with little reference to existing local conditions. The Gambian guide, apart from deferring to his Swedish 'colleagues', appeared more like a broker particularly when dealing with the village elders.

The Gambian village houses were constructed either of wattle and daub or, for the better off, of 'building blocks', locally manufactured using imported cement. Some houses had thatched roofs, others were of corrugated metal, the type that can be found in many places in rural African areas.

In less well-to-do houses, which were the ones that the tourists were allowed to enter (the Gambian guide telling me that

the inhabitants would receive some remuneration for «showing hospitality»), furniture was scant and there were no modern appliances.

The tourist gaze became epitomized in this setting. What was seen was not the common humanity, but the poverty, in the sense of lack. Earthen floors, lack of furniture, lack of not only modern appliances but all the other things that one would expect to find in most Scandinavian households; in short, lack of material possessions. That the 'immaterial' aspects of the local village culture might be as rich as those of any Scandinavian counterpart, did not inform the gaze. Remarks made in any of the Scandinavian languages were mostly uttered in astounded and/or commiserating tones, the main theme being «poor people; look how primitive everything is; they really don't have anything», whilst the house-dwellers in question quietly beheld this invasion with, what seemed to me, some embarrassment.

For the finale of the tour, the tourists were seated around the open area, interspersed with village children and a number of adults. Fanta and Coca-Cola were served and music and some dancing were offered – by a group from the village but, as I discovered, contracted to appear on these tours to liven things up. This was probably also the case for the swirling performance of the *Kankorang* (a masked figure, clad in long grass or leaves, traditionally featuring in rites where one of its functions is the chastising of those who have transgressed the local norms). Apart from being a 'spectacular' sight in itself, the forays the mask made against some of the village children, who quickly retreated out of its reach, were greatly appreciated

by the tourist audience (who had no inkling of the punitive and frightening aspects of this figure).

So, in conclusion one could say that a good time was had by one and all (with the exception perhaps of the observing anthropologist). The villagers and the touring troupe were paid for their diverse performances and the tourists had value for their money in that they had seen an 'authentic bit of local culture'. Authentic because they had witnessed it with their own eyes and when they returned to their homes they would confirm to friends and acquaintances – not only in my imagination – that village people in West Africa were indeed as poor as they had been led to believe, and also had some rather strange and exotic customs (Wagner 1975). And what did the villagers themselves make of all this? Unfortunately, I never had the opportunity to look into this specific question, though I gathered other data that showed how tourist behaviour was 'translated' into local terms of reference (Wagner 1977).³

Having prior knowledge, or an opinion, about something, very much determines how we understand it. This has already been raised concerning visitors to exhibitions by Riksställningar in their 1976 publication *Going to Exhibitions*, where it was shown that if a group had seen a video, or in other ways had become acquainted with the subject beforehand, they saw and understood much more of what the exhibition was trying to convey. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill has paid specific attention to this in her article 'Audiences – A Curatorial Dilemma' (in S. Pearce 1995), and although she is talking of art museums, I would like to quote her at

- 84 some length as the points she makes are just as relevant for an ethnographic museum:

It is now generally recognized that people learn in a variety of ways ...In many museums, therefore, a mix of types of learning opportunity is offered: looking and thinking; object-handling; interactive exhibits; demonstration; reconstructions; drama; film. Many non-art museums are developing ways to enable people to enter an active process of exploration and discovery that has the potential of becoming personally meaningful to them, recognizing that it is only when experiences are personally meaningful that they are truly valued. Most art museums limit the mode of learning to looking and reading, a physically passive yet intellectually demanding form of learning. (Ibid. p. 155)

Although several of the 'ways of learning' mentioned here are carried out at the FME, and no doubt in ethnographical museums elsewhere, it does not solve the problem of exhibitions. These are static in the sense that they can only be enjoyed (and learnt from) by looking and reading. So here the dilemma of previous knowledge is perhaps at its most acute (disregarding the fact that videos often form part of the exhibition package). How can one learn from viewing an exhibition of objects, even a contextualized one, when there is no prior knowledge, or a rather negative one, as my example from the Gambia illustrates? And whose knowledge is being privileged?

LIMITATION OF OBJECTS AND THE ILLUSIONARY ETHNOGRAPHIC PRESENT

Before coming to the problem of 'voice', i.e. who has the right to speak and about whom, I would briefly like to consider other possibilities and constraints when it comes to the exhibition of a 'culture' – or 'a people', that is the limitations imposed by the ethnographic artefacts and the unquestioning use of 'the ethnographic present'. And in doing so I will disregard the fact that the setting up of an exhibition is not a one-woman, or one-man, undertaking as it involves a number of other museum staff than the curator(s) in question, and is moreover often a much contested event, as 'everyone' has ideas about what an exhibition should be like.

Having pointed out the gap between the present theoretical insights in anthropology concerning people/culture/place and praxis in ethnographical museums, and having explained some of the cognitive strictures necessitating these phenomena be presented in a rather uniform manner, I would like to consider another obstacle to the closing of this gap. Anthropologists working in museums are in agreement with their academic colleagues that culture stands for a shared social system of meaning, an ideational system that underwrites 'customs and manners' and finds expression in 'material culture' as well as in philosophy, literature, and the fine arts. However, the objects in the museum collections and the very materiality of exhibitions, as I see it, are something of a hindrance when it comes to conveying the richness, variety, and flux of ideas that make up any culture.

Looking at the ethnographic objects in our collection, this becomes immediately apparent. A rough approximation of the main categories shows us that tools, weapons, textiles, clothing, household goods, ornaments and ritual objects account for most of the contents, and although they pertain to certain 'cultures', they are but material instances. Consequently an exhibition featuring any social group and/or people, be they the Inuit, the Zulu or the Hmong, can only be a very partial account. This partiality is perhaps to some degree alleviated by a contextual model, or diorama, despite the fact that this inevitably objectivizes and stresses the otherness of the subject of the exhibition.

Given the materiality of the objects, what aspects can we account for in an exhibition? I think that we can show how the people live and survive against the background of the economic resources at hand. Habitations, gendered work as evidenced in tools and other implements, social strata through various insignia of rank, to name some aspects, can be shown and are also readily understood without much prior knowledge. We also try to give an idea of the cosmological beliefs by exhibiting sacred and/or ritual regalia of various kinds, but I doubt whether we can convey what they really mean to members of the society in question. Let alone that these meanings probably vary on an individual level, as well as our own interpretations of them (cf. S. Alpers in Karp and Levine 1991).

Unless there is a guided tour, where a curator can explain their meaning (which in itself does not preclude partiality), I think that to our visitors these ritual objects are more often seen as examples of

the exotic rather than expressions of other people's views of 'the meaning of life' in a specific social and nature-given setting. This may partly explain why some ethnographic objects are seen as 'art'. An African mask in an art museum context is interpreted aesthetically, perhaps also according to the resonance it has for the viewer, whilst the same object in an ethnographic context is tied to the meaning it has in its original context – which might be hard to convey.

Apart from the limitations inherent in the materiality of the collections, and which I think are difficult to overcome, there is another aspect that characterizes many ethnographic exhibitions, that I believe, on the other hand, can be easily overcome. This is the preponderance of the ethnographic present, that locks 'The Other' in a timeless void, where the 'present' is very much a function of when 'We' came to interact with 'Them'. This problem has been observed by others (e.g. N.P. Smith in Kavanagh 1996) and is exacerbated by the fact that the objects from any one ethnic group might date from different periods of time. But in the exhibition they all inhabit the same indefinite time frame. An example of this is the Bakongo display in our own museum, where Wyatt McGaffey (whilst working on the museum's Minkisi Collection in the late 1980s) pointed out that the objects exhibited were not anchored in time although they stemmed from four different temporal frames.

Should one then abandon the 'monographic' exhibition as we know it? I think not. Unless we want to do away completely with displays featuring other ways of life in space and/or time. But what we

- 86 should make clear is that these exhibitions deal with *cultural history*, and not current conditions. Moreover, we should also be explicit about the historical context, and whether this concern with 'the other' has come about through trade cum voyage of discovery, or through colonialism and domination, or through a missionary presence, to give some examples of contact.

THE QUESTION OF VOICE

To the problems that are inherent in 'giving insights into other ways of life and society', should be added the problem of authority, or whose 'voices', or interpretations, are we listening to. Questions concerning this problem vary to some degree when comparing the museum world with academic anthropology, although in the end they pertain to the same structural imbalance of power and authority. In the issue of *Ethnos* (1995:3-4) devoted to the Vega Day symposium on *Culture and Voice in Social Anthropology*, Ulf Hannerz, when talking of Veena Das's anthropology says that

she also asks us to listen to more voices than mainstream metropolitan anthropologists have historically done: to the scholars of the periphery, grounding their work in other experiences and world views; to women, youth and children, to victims of disaster and upheaval. (Ibid. p. 158)

This question of 'voice' is a far more contested issue when it comes to museums, however. The concern here so far has mainly been between the power and authority of the state and its institutions and the encompassed autochthonous minority groups in the industrialized world. Steven

Lavine, in the volume that resulted from a conference on *The Poetics and Politics of Representation* at the Smithsonian in 1988, says the following:

Voice has emerged as a crucial issue in the design of exhibitions. Whose voice is heard when a curator works through an established genre of exhibition, such as the monographic account of an artist's career or the ecological and social explanation of the lives of 'primitive' peoples in the diorama of a natural-history museum? How can the voice of an exhibition honestly reflect the evolving understandings of current scholarship and the multiple voices within any discipline? How can museums make space for the voices of indigenous experts, members represented in exhibitions, and artists? (Karp and Levine 1992: 151)

My concern here with 'the other', is not in the sense of the powerless within a society, which is perhaps better tackled within academic anthropology, but with people and societies that have been (and are) dominated by colonial and neo-colonial powers, or have become encompassed by modern welfare states. Furthermore, as I am dealing with exhibitions in this paper, the question of repatriation will not be dealt with, although it is part of the more encompassing issue of 'Us' and 'Them'.

Disregarding the fact that any exhibition tends to objectify that which it exhibits, apart from the restrictions that are inherent in this medium, several commentators have made a valid case that a people's culture (historical and present) belongs to them and that they themselves should be the final arbiters concerning what should, and could, be presented for general viewing (cf. A.L. Jones 1993: 211-13). Seeing also that many regard the making of an

exhibition as being akin to making a political statement, this problem should be of serious concern. However, we should not lose sight of the fact that the voice of 'the other' is not always a consonant one.

My own awareness of this became pronounced during a UNESCO conference on *Museums and Indigenous Peoples* held in June 1986 in Jokkmokk, Lapland (northern Sweden). Apart from museum people there were representatives of 'Fourth World' peoples from North America, northern Europe, Japan, and the Pacific (including Australia and New Zealand). Several of the latter category were of the museum world themselves, and thus had a wider perspective on the issues under debate than the rest of us. During the often heated discussions (in a setting that was truly exotic to several participants as it was just before midsummer with a sun that never set, plus a heatwave) it became very clear to me the extent to which consciously emblemized culture (past and present) was part of a people's survival as a group, and that it was also a political means to this survival.

On reflection this should not, of course, have come as a surprise, as culture, whether in material or non-material form, has tended to be looted and/or destroyed, as well as suppressed or eradicated by the conqueror, wherever in the world encroaching power has wielded its force. Although culture in anthropology is no longer seen as being essentialized and bounded, perhaps more as a case of identifying with rather than being completely shaped by, in the general struggle of the 'Fourth World' societies culture has become a focal point for political emancipation (cf. Clifford 1997, Ch. 10.). Whether

from an analytical point of view these are imagined communities or not seems to me to be beside the point, as there are no accounts that are truly objective.

That there might be practical obstacles to allowing 'the others' to speak for themselves (economic, administrative, or staff-related) is another question. It might not be so easy as has been the case with the FME, where transferring the Sami collections to the Ájtte Museum on 'indefinite deposition', and divesting ourselves of the prerogative of 'voice', was a move facilitated by both museums being state institutions. As part of this mutual cooperation, annual Sami weeks are featured at the FME (programmes and exhibitions) by Ájtte in collaboration with our educational and exhibition departments. However, I think that this solution is but one example and that each case, when there is contention about who speaks about whom, should be judged, and dealt with, on its own merit.

The problem of 'voice' can also be a bone of contention between societies that are not in a power/powerless relationship to one another. This became apparent in the mid 1970s when the FME featured a large exhibition titled 'Japan – Living Tradition', where we had, perhaps arbitrarily, chosen the chronology to end with World War II by showing a photo of a march featuring Japanese flags together with the Nazi swastika. This occasioned some discussions with the Japanese embassy, which maintained that it gave an unfavourable impression of Japan and they would rather we took out this photo. We, on the other hand, maintained that this was part of history, and however painful, it should be left in place. In the end, we

88 solved this problem in all fairness by extending the exhibition to include the post-war years of Japan up until the most recent past, showing the country emerging as a modern economy.

Does allowing other 'voices' to speak leave the curators working in the FME and other ethnographical museums, in what we might call the Euro-American socio-cultural context, out in the cold? Have they outlived their usefulness and do we no longer value their fund of knowledge? I think not, and I would concur with Ames and others who hope that a balanced collaboration between museums and 'indigeneous peoples' might be the happiest outcome when it comes to reorientating museum practices (Ames 1992: 148-50). The important point is that knowledge is valuable and should be cherished equally, whether ethnographic or traditional, whether accumulated through scholarship or through oral history within the social group in question.

In saying this, my thinking is also influenced by the possible ultimate consequences if a radical policy of 'voice' were pursued. Specifically if 'culture', and the displaying of it, were seen as being the sole prerogative of any ethnic group, society, or nation. In the end it seems to me that this could lead to a sort of ethnic monopoly, which would be working against openness and mutual understanding and respect across 'ethnic boundaries'. Even with the limited impact that today's ethnographic museums have on the everyday life of society at large, I think it behoves us to continue working towards this goal.

There are even more pitfalls here, however, when it comes to outside and inside views. What I have in mind is the fact

that whilst the concept of culture has become rather problematic within anthropology, it has been taken over by, and used, in the general political rhetoric in many Western countries. In Sweden, it is expressed in terms of 'equal but different' when discussing problems and solutions for coping with a large immigrant community, made up of a number of ethnic groups, of both European and non-European origin. The point being that although the policies are well-meaning, they simultaneously support divisions and separatism, possessing the double-edgedness that is inherent in most types of affirmative action.

What bearing does this problem of 'voice' have when it concerns who curates an exhibition? To me it seems that the fundamental question comes down to whether we want to fall in line with the exclusivity of reified cultural difference, with all that it entails of limitation and closure, or whether we will try to work against this not only in what we display and how we do so, but also when it comes to whose 'voice' is heard. My own thinking on this is that we should try, whenever feasible from a practical point of view, to work towards having other 'voices' join our own when displaying 'other ways of life'. To some extent this is already done at the FME, when it comes to talks and programmes, but I think it could also be extended to our exhibitions as well.

THE INCLUSIVE WE

Having given the problem of exhibiting cultures some thought during the past few years, and, apart from the problematic of 'voice', seeing that there has been a call for

a story or theme-driven approach (cf. Crew and Sims in Carp and Levine 1991), the time has probably come to create some exhibitions that are more ethnographically overarching, and less specific. To this end, we have been working at the FME for the past couple of years on a programme which we call *Den Kunskapande Människan*. Directly translated it would be 'the knowledge-creating human (or man)', which loses some of the connotations it has in Swedish where *kunskap* means knowledge and *skapande* creating, and *människa*, unlike man, is of the feminine gender.

As can be understood from its working title, the programme looks at aspects of humanity's common cultural history, and at first glance it could be seen as representing very old wine in new bottles. Old ideas in that some were already in currency in the eighteenth century, or when the first ethnographic exhibitions were given form in the Smithsonian, more than a century ago. However this is illusory, in that the underlying rationale is not that of a progressive evolutionary kind that sees the cultural history of humanity (or mankind) as leading to an ever more 'evolved' society. Rather it asks very simple, perhaps even childlike, questions about why certain human institutions, or social creations if you like, have come into being.

Let me sketch what we have in mind. The programme, at present, consists of seven themes, the working titles of which are: 1. Becoming Human. 2. Living and Surviving. 3. The City. 4. Writing. 5. Time. 6. Beliefs. 7. Warfare. As is evident from the topics chosen, the knowledge base will come not only from ethnography/anthropology but also from palaeon-

tology, archaeology, history, human geography, and ecology. From a logistics point of view, we do not envisage scholars from these different subjects forming big 'think tanks' for every single theme – although in the best of worlds this might be ideal. For practical and economic reasons, it is rather the case that, apart from a bit of 'foraging' from the existing literature in these disciplines, we would turn to different specialists to obtain relevant answers and/or material as the need arises. This would then be processed, simplified if you like, so that it could be understood without any prior knowledge other than that furnished by the fact that we all live in the same world and that different social phenomena are present in most societies (albeit with different cultural expressions).

In anthropology, it has been often said that in studying 'the other' we understand ourselves. And in ethnographic museums our underlying rationale has been to 'teach' the general public about 'the other' so as to engender understanding and respect. As I have indicated earlier, the way we have gone about this has not been very successful. In spite of all our good intentions, it would not surprise me if 'the exotic' is the message that has come across to our public. Thus, if we want to understand ourselves, we have to put ourselves in the same frame as 'the other'. A theme-driven approach allows this, whether it deals with contemporary issues, or those pertaining more to cultural history, like our programme on *Den kunskapande människan*. Here, the Swede, and her past, is of equal interest to that of any other people or group, the relevant questions to be asked centring more on what possibilities and/or constraints have been or are at

90 hand in any specific setting than seeing these as something (almost biologically) inherent in any specific population.

I also envisage that instead of making authoritative statements, we could try to enter into a dialogue with our public, and perhaps shape this in a way that allows for some introspection. On the theme of 'becoming human', we could for example show the different milestones on the road to becoming what we are today, i.e. upright stance, use of tools, use of fire, use of spoken language, ideas about the supernatural, and pictorial creativity to name some, and ask the questions: «When did we become human? What is a human being?»

The programme on *Den kunskapande människan* looks backwards, in considering our common past as humanity, paying special attention to man's interaction with both the natural and the social world, he himself (in Swedish, she herself) creates in a continuous motion. The thematic approach, however, would also lend itself to a number of topics that could be of a comparative kind. Gender roles could be one, generational roles another, the main point to be kept in mind being the restrictions inherent in the exhibition medium.

'VÄRLDSKULTURMUSEET'
(THE MUSEUM OF WORLD
CULTURE)

This inclusive 'we' is an approach that I wish could be one of the guiding lights for the programme to be formulated for the new museum in Gothenburg. As indicated earlier (in footnote 1), it would seem that the decision to establish this new museum

was reached before proper thought had been given to what it would be intended for. So far, the only indication is the working title, *Världskulturmuseet* (The Museum of World Culture). Although this name has a majestic ring to it in the present era of globalizing catchwords, it is somewhat more problematic when it comes to giving it substance.

I brought this up two years ago, in a newspaper article (*Svenska Dagbladet*, Oct. 8, 1996) where I asked, somewhat polemically, what the concept 'world culture' entailed. Needless to say, I did not get an answer from the then minister, and I am still waiting. However, my friend and colleague Ulf Hannerz of Stockholm University pointed out to me that «Världskulturen finns!» (World culture exists!) and I have no argument with the way that he, and perhaps others, define the concept:

There is now a world culture, but we had better make sure we understand what this means: not a replication of uniformity but an organization of diversity, an increasing interconnectedness of varied local cultures, as well as a development of cultures without a clear anchorage in any one territory. And to this interconnected diversity people can relate in different ways. (Hannerz 1996: 102)

What is problematic, however, is that this understanding of 'world culture' is most probably not the one that the Ministry of Culture had in mind, if indeed any deeper thought had been given the matter. Also, it is not quite what I have in mind when it comes to the thematic exhibitions on cultural history, although both ways of looking at 'interconnectedness' offer reflections on the human condition. In my

approach, however, the stress is more on common human propensities (perhaps underlying structures), while Hannerz seems to me to be more concerned with expressive forms and intellectual ideas.

Could these latter also form the base for different exhibitions? Or are their contents such that they would demand the use of other media to make sense? At present, this is not clear to me, but I think the matter deserves some very serious thought.

What is important, however, is that we rethink today's (and yesterday's!) approach. This cannot really be done until we have a much better knowledge about what our lay public understands of the exhibitions that the FME (as well as the Gothenburg Ethnographic Museum) at present offer. Research into this would need to go further (or deeper) than the types of surveys that have so far been carried out, so *that we could obtain* some qualitative data to guide our future approach when creating exhibitions.

It would come as no surprise to me, however, if the results of such a study were to indicate that the best way to serve our audience would be a diversified approach. However this will be formed in the future, it seems to me that the two most important aspects to keep in mind are to work for an inclusive 'we', against a divisive 'us' and 'them', and to be very clear in each instance whose 'voice' is talking. In doing that, we would cater to a wide variety of visitors, and perhaps also attract those who at present have scant interest in other ways of life.

This article is the revised version of a paper entitled 'Problems of Time, Place and Voice', which was presented at a conference on *Anthropology, Museums, and Contemporary Cultural Processes* held at the FME in May 1998. I am grateful for the comments following my presentation and particularly to Gudrun Dahl and Wilhelm Östberg for their subsequent close reading of my draft.

Some of the thoughts presented in this paper have been inspired by the ongoing discussions in a research project concerned with how *we* have looked upon *them* since the 17th century to today (*Från primitiv vilde till medmänniska: svenska perspektiv på världen utanför Europa från 1600-talet till modern tid*). This project is jointly financed by FME and Riksbankens Jubileumsfond (The Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation) and will be completed in the year 2000.

1. In the autumn of 1996, the Ministry of Culture announced, when presenting the budget for 1997, that three museums in Stockholm, the National Museum of Ethnography, the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, and the Museum of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Antiquities, were to be amalgamated and moved to Gothenburg, where together with the Gothenburg Ethnographic Museum they would become a new museum for 'World Culture'. For the staff at the three Stockholm museums, this came as a total surprise, and a furious debate ensued within the museum world, and on the 'culture pages' of the daily newspapers. This in turn occasioned the setting up of a committee with the mandate to come up with a solution to how this move and/or new creation should be realized, economically, administratively, and, I assume, program-wise. At the time of writing, the establishment of the new museum does not seem to involve a move of the three Stockholm museums but it is not clear what else will in fact happen.
2. This is well illustrated whenever potential visitors leave bus 69 at the stop on Museivägen (Museum Road). About nine out of ten go to our neighbour, the Museum of Science and Technology, showing that Western technology has a greater attraction than 'foreign culture'.
3. In the 1960s, one of Sweden's pioneers in running a private (ad-sponsored) radio station on board a ship, through the government's use of the then existing law, was obliged to discontinue the airing of her programs in Sweden. She then transferred to the Gambia and established the station Radio Syd, as well as putting up a tourist hotel. The local understanding of her success in this (knowing that she had had problems with the authorities in Sweden) was that she had done away with her husband somehow (hence the legal

problems) and secreted his funds and when she got out of gaol, this enabled her to become a businesswoman in the Gambia. Not an unlikely story, from a local point of view, though with scant fit with what had actually happened in Sweden.

REFERENCES

- Abrams, G. H. J. 1994. The Case for Wampun: Repatriation from the Museum of the American Indian to the Six Nation Confederacy, Brantford, Ontario, Canada. In F. E. S. Kaplan (ed.), *Museums and the Making of «Ourselves»: The Role of Objects in National Identity*. London: Leicester Univ. Press.
- Ames, M.A. 1985. *Museums, The Public and Anthropology*. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- Ames, M.A. 1992. *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes: The Anthropology of Museums*. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- Appadurai, A. 1986. (ed.). *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press.
- Arnell, U., I. Hammar and G. Nylöf. 1976. (eds). *Going to Exhibitions*. Stockholm: Riksstutställningar.
- Augé, M. 1995 (1992). *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. London: Verso.
- Boylan, P. 1992. (ed.). *Museums 2000. Politics, People, Professionals and Profit*. London: Museum Ass. and Routledge.
- Clifford, J. 1997. *Routes: Travel and Translation in Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Hannerz, U. 1996. *Transnational Connections. Culture, People, Places*. London: Routledge.
- Hooper-Greenhill, E. 1992. *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*. London: Routledge.
- Hooper-Greenhill, E. 1995. Audiences – A Curatorial Dilemma. In S. M. Pearce (ed.), *Art in Museums*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press.
- Hudson, K. 1987. *Museums of Influence*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press.
- James, A., J. Hockney and A. Dawson. 1997. (eds). *After Writing Culture: Epistemology and Praxis in Contemporary Anthropology*. London: Routledge.
- Jones, A. L. 1993. Exploding Canons: The Anthropology of Museums. *Annual Review of Anthropology*. Vol. 22.
- Jones, J. P. The Colonial Legacy and the Community: The Gallery 33 Project. In I. Karp, C. M. Kreamer and S. D. Levine (eds), *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*.
- Karp, I. and S. D. Levine. 1992. (eds). *Exhibiting Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*. Washington: Smithsonian Inst. Press.
- Kavanagh, G. 1996 (1991) (ed.). *Museum Languages: Objects and Texts*. Leicester: Leicester University Press.
- Kuper, A. 1994. Culture, Identity and The Project of a Cosmopolitan Anthropology. *Man* (N.S.) 29.
- Lumley, R. 1988. (ed.). *The Museum Time-Machine: Putting Cultures on Display*. London: Routledge.
- Macdonald, S. and G. Fyfe. 1996. (eds). *Theorizing Museums*. Oxford: Blackwell/The Sociological Review.
- Marcus, G. E. 1995. Ethnography in/of The World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography. *Annual Review of Anthropology*. Vol. 24.
- Myers, F. R. 1998. Uncertain Regard: An Exhibition of Aboriginal Art in France. *Ethnos*. Vol. 63: I.
- Newton, D. 1994. Old Wine in New Bottles and the Reverse. In F. E. S. Kaplan (ed.), *Museums and the Making of «Ourselves»: The Role of Objects in National Identity*. London: Leicester Univ. Press.
- Perin, C. 1992. The Communicative Circle: Museums as Communities. In I. Karp, C. M. Kreamer and S. D. Levine (eds), *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Schuster, J. M. D. 1995. The Public Interest in the Art Museum's Public. In S. M. Pearce (ed.), *Art in Museums*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press.

- 94 Shokeid, M. 1997. Negotiating Multiple Viewpoints: The Cook, the Native, the Publisher, and the Ethnographic Text. *Current Anthropology*. Vol. 32, No. 4.
- Stocking, G.W. 1985. (ed.). *Objects and Others: Essays on Museums and Material Culture*. London: Univ. of Wisconsin Press.
- Stolcke, V. Talking Culture: New Boundaries, New Rhetorics of Exclusion in Europe. *Current Anthropology*. Vol. 36, No. 1.
- Strong, P. T. 1997. Exclusive Labels: Indexing the National «We» in Commemorative and Oppositional Exhibitions. *Museum Anthropology*. Vol. 21 (1).
- Treinen, H. 1994. Vad söker besökaren i museet? Massmediala aspekter på museiväsendet. *Nordisk Museologi*. 1994:2.
- Wagner, U. 1977. Out of Time and Place – Mass Tourism and Charter Trips. *Ethnos*, Vol. 42: I-II.
- Wagner, U. 1975. Turisten och icke-människan (The tourist and the non-human). *Internationella Studier*, No. 3
- Wolff, B. 1995. Missing Paradoxes and The Evidential Nature of Things; Material Objects in a Cross-Cultural Perspective. *Nordisk Museologi*. 1995:2.

Ulla Wagner, Associate Professor of Anthropology, was museum director of Folkens Museum Etnografiska between 1983 and 1991. She has since been head of research at the same museum.

*Adr: Folkens Museum Etnografiska, Box 27140,
S-10 252 Stockholm
Fax: +46-8 66 65 070
Email: ulla.wagner@etnografiska.se*