Reading Objects

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The first book presents 130 masterpieces of the Museum of World Cultures in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. The pieces were presented in an exhibition likewise entitled ‘Being Object Being Art’ which lasted from 31 October 2009 to 31 October 2010. The objects come from a large part of the world ranging from the Americas, Southeast Asia, Oceania, and East Asia. The objects are beautifully photographed, some with extra photographs with details, and described and they show the astonishing variety of forms and objects people are capable of devising in the non-Western world. The photographic section is preceded by a short essay by Eva Ch. Raabe, Mona B. Suhrbier, Christine Stelzig, and Achim Sibeth. It describes the new tendencies of Ethnographic museums to consider the artefacts in their collections as more than ethnographic tools but also as expressions of art, albeit not as art in the purest sense as in the case of art exhibited in art museums, which has no other purpose than being art in itself. In short, the exhibitions of these objects endeavour to present them out-of-context as objects in themselves too. This being so, there should always be some sort of accord between objects and audience if communication is to take place. Art museums try to facilitate this communication by organizing exhibitions and publishing catalogues, explaining art, and discussing the pieces quite like ethnographic museums do with their objects, although with different content. In the latter case, the artistic and aesthetic qualities have to be explained, something that is unnecessary for objects in art museums where the artistic
and aesthetic are taken for granted. Thus, the book presents ‘masterpieces’ taken from particularly unique “ethnographica” to present the ‘exceptional, the elaborate, the other, the perfect or perhaps imperfect, the harmonious or the disturbing objects among them’ (p. 11).

The chapter on Southeast Asia was written by Achim Sibeth. It is unfortunately only two pages long but provides interesting information about the history of the collection in the museum. The Southeast Asia part of the book centres on Indonesia as the museum’s collection on this part of the region vastly outnumbers that of any other area. Many objects were donated to the museum by the people who acquired them through their explorations in Indonesia during the first part of the twentieth century. The pieces portrayed in the book are considered outstanding for quality and aesthetic reasons, whatever they are. The objects displayed here originate from India, Sumatra (Batak, Nias, Palembang, Lampung), Borneo (Iban, Kayan), Java, Bali, Buton, Flores, Solor, Adonara, Lembata, Alor, Timor, Leti, Tanimbar, and North Luzon in the Philippines. The photographs are all of outstanding quality and portray the objects in the clearest way possible.

The introductory chapter quite rightfully asks the question whether it is appropriate to use terms like ‘art’ for the objects displayed in the book and especially whether using the word ‘masterpiece’ is the appropriate term to talk about them. In the West, art often exists in a different context than everyday objects, no matter how nicely made or decorated. For Westerners or for people from indigenous cultures, art means something different, if the term may be known in these cultures at all. I think the discussion is academic because for me it does not matter. However, for modern exhibition and museum policies, the idea is important because it appears that more money and prestige are attached to art rather than to ethnographic paraphernalia, which are often now seen as interesting, but not necessarily in the positive sense of the word. The discussion is of course also about the different ways people from different cultural backgrounds view things from their own and other cultures and whether statements made in the West about art and ethnographic objects from other places in the world are valid.

That people may look at the same objects in totally different ways is clear. The notion of validity is also academic. Valid in whose eyes? Let me illustrate this following Siegel’s anecdotal approach with some experiences I had at Leiden University some 15 years ago and in Jakarta even longer ago. One of our Islamic students in Leiden went to Indonesia for a holiday and to visit his family and I asked him to bring me a batik cloth from his place of origin, Ponorogo in Central Java. He did. He came back with a nice batik, which I hung on the wall in my office. He was astonished. Why on earth would I want to hang a piece of...
clothing on the wall? It would boil down to his people framing a pair of jeans to adorn the wall in their homes. The second story may also be illustrative. When I was in Jakarta while I was still a student my friends asked me how I lived in Leiden and I told them I rented a room in a house that was built in 1765. ‘O my God’, they exclaimed. ‘You poor thing to have to live in a house that old. That is really horrible!’ My explanation that the Dutch had no problem in living in old houses and that they are well taken care of was dismissed. Living in an old house is horrible, period.

James T. Siegel's book contains six articles, four of which had been published before, either in *Diacritics* (‘The Reappearance of Georg Simmel’ and ‘Academic Work: The View from Cornell’) or in *Indonesia* (‘Kiblat and the Mediatic Jew’ and ‘The Curse of the Photograph: Atjeh 1901’). Two articles are new, and have not been published before. This discussion will centre on those two. The first, ‘The Hypnotist’ deals with the aftermath of the Tsunami of 2004. It is well known that many thousands of people perished in the disaster while others lost their place in the world. Some of them even found their way back to their families years after the event. Many people are presumed dead because their bodies were either never found or they were found but not identified. Many Acehnese, especially women, have great trouble coming to terms with their deceased family members, especially their children and they refuse to believe they are dead and rather opt to think of them alive but missing. Siegel explores the differences in mourning for women and men and between rural and urban areas after the tsunami. After the tsunami, the dead and missing were grouped together as the ‘living-dead’ and they populate the cities with the living as there is no other place for them. They are not the same as ghosts, however, and Siegel explores the differences between the ‘living dead’ and ghosts in detail. A hypnotist is a special kind of street thief who by using hypnotism, or rather perceived hypnotism manages to relieve, especially women, of their valuables. Siegel sees the events of the living dead and the hypnotist as a part of similar processes of alienation caused by the unexpected and the unnerving process of no longer being able to make sense of one's surroundings and one's place in it. The article contains many thought provoking ideas that may be applied to other places in Indonesia and elsewhere.

The second article, ‘Tout autre est tout autre’, links back to the first book reviewed here. It recounts that in Paris, the Musée de l'Homme's ethnographic section was closed and the collection was moved to the new Musée du Quai Branly. The objects were no longer intended to show the lives of people but were instead displayed for their aesthetic value. The article at least mentions that the director of the new museum had ‘clearly indicated that objects without aesthetic value were not to be included’ (p. 119). At any rate, the objects are to
be used to better understand the ‘other’. That this apparently can only be done through aesthetics, as indicated by the directors statement, leaves much to be explained, I fear. Apparently, a conflict of values has come up between what is considered ‘aesthetic’ versus what is deemed ‘ethnographic’. However this conflict is resolved, for the time being ‘ethnographic’ is out, ‘aesthetics’ are in.

The first book is a visual delight and the photographs have been made with great technical skill combined with artistry. I have been unable to discover why the objects in the book have been chosen while others were left out. Looking at the few photographs from objects from Indonesia, one would get a distorted idea of what Indonesia is about and I fear the same will hold true for the other parts in the world. The second book is worthwhile for ideas to be explored later in more depth. The idea that ethnography has left its once geographical confinements is interesting as if follows the flow of people around our increasingly mobile planet.