Quai Branly in Process

JAMES CLIFFORD

Viewed from the Seine, through its glass palisade, the museum looks like a capsized container ship . . . in dry dock. Hoisted on pillars, the exhibition plateau seems exposed and incongruous. Red, gray, yellow windowless boxes protrude. Seen from the rue de l'Université, on the opposite side, the long, scored body seems already to be rusting. Three smaller buildings are yoked to one end; a domed restaurant perches on top. Underneath, a garden, or rather, a forest, is taking root. The trees are small, anchored by stakes and wires, accompanied by thousands of seedlings and grasses whose irrigation tubes and valves haven't yet been made to vanish. When the surrounding forest has grown up, the museum will, according to its architect, mysteriously dematerialize. The colored boxes will be glimpsed as if they were native "huts" poking through jungle foliage.

Time will tell how the Musée du Quai Branly eventually looks and how its ambitious program is realized. Opened to great fanfare and widespread grumbling, it is a work in process—dynamic, pretentious, and raw. As of fall 2006, the central exhibition space is largely complete (though like all "permanent" displays it will certainly be revised as tastes and times change). An impressive array of public events and research resources has been projected, and a first round of temporary exhibitions is under way. The guiding priorities and style of the new project are becoming clear, as are some of its contradictions and tensions.[1] Quai Branly is clearly more than one thing, a coalition of different agendas that will, no doubt, be renegotiated. The founding vision and dramatic architecture create possibilities and impose limits. It will be interesting to track how those who animate this project—curators, anthropologists, historians, bureaucrats, technicians,

1. The present report, explicitly provisional, draws on personal impressions from Quai Branly's opening events, June 20–25, 2006, and on museum publications, press accounts, Web resources, and conversations with knowledgeable individuals. The photos reproduced here were taken at that time by the author. The report's general perspective is elaborated in "Museums as Contact Zones," *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 188–219.

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Installing the sacred grove.
All images courtesy the author.

artists and diverse audiences—work within and against its spatial and ideological structures. Even more decisive, perhaps, will be the ways this self-identified "bridge museum" responds to changing transnational contacts and pressures in Paris, Europe, and beyond.

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> Jean Nouvel's architectural vision is featured in the museum's press kit:
>
> This is a museum built around a collection. Where everything serves to draw out the emotions at play within the primal object, where everything is done to shield it from light while capturing that rare sunbeam, so necessary for the vibrancy of a spiritual presence. It is a place marked by symbols of forest and river, and the obsessions of death and oblivion. It is a sanctuary for works conceived in Australia or in America that are scorned and censured today. It is a haunted place, wherein dwell and converse the ancestral spirits of those who discovered the human condition and invented gods and beliefs. It is a strange, unique place, poetic and disturbing.

Inside the exhibition space, conventional walls, false ceilings, glass cases, stairways, and informational texts will be eliminated or concealed. The result: a vast magical world, theatrically illuminated; fluid spaces rather than rooms; a dark, disappearing ceiling; everything in earth colors. The tall pillars, haphazardly positioned and of unequal heights, "can be taken for trees or totem poles." Both inside and out,

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View from the Seine.

"matter, at times, seems to disappear, and one has the impression that the museum is a simple shelter, without facade, in a wood. . . . Here illusion cradles the work of art."[2]

In the Musée du Quai Branly, "illusion" and the "work of art" coexist uneasily with the realism of ethnography and history. Indeed, since the project's inception under the sign of "arts premiers," the proper balance between aesthetics and anthropology has been hotly debated. A decade of polemics and committees has produced an unstable truce, with the aesthetic agenda in overall control. Nouvel's ecstatic primitivism of spiritual communions in a high-tech sacred forest is an embarrassment for some on the museum staff who are working to counteract it. Jacques Chirac, the project's founder, now translates neoprimitivism into the language of universal human rights: the museum is a long-overdue gesture of respect for the arts and cultures of the small tribal peoples of the Americas, Africa, the Pacific, and the Arctic. (The canonical "civilizations" of Asia remain in the Musée Guimet.) "Là ou dialoguent les cultures" ("where cultures converse") is the new institution's motto. Exactly how "cultures" will be able to "converse"—speaking what languages? supposing what epistemologies? what political agendas? with what degrees of authority? representing whom?—remains to be seen.

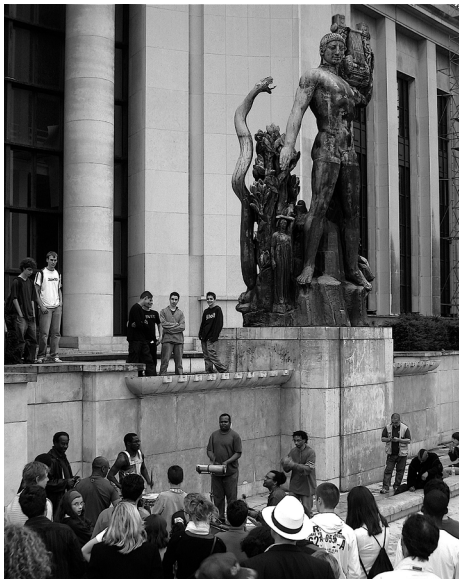
2. Jean Nouvel's letter of intent for the 1999 international architecture competition is quoted prominently in the museum's lavishly illustrated and detailed introductory materials, distributed at the opening ceremonies, June 20, 2006. All self-descriptive quotations, cited below, are taken from this document or from the Quai Branly Web site.

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Quai Branly's president, Stéphane Martin, projects a new kind of institution, something much more than a familiar art or ethnographic museum. In interviews he describes a multiplex cultural center, serving diverse audiences who bring to the conversation different needs and backgrounds. Tourism will underwrite the operation, located as it is on prime real estate next to the Eiffel Tower. But Martin also projects a cultural resource and performance space in the lineage of the Centre Pompidou at Beaubourg. Today, he argues, the world is technologically interconnected. People can access many sources of knowledge about non-Western societies: the museum does not need to provide comprehensive information, assuming that were even possible. Rather it offers a central spectacle, with changing events and informational tools for both transient and returning visitors. Objects from the superb collection will provoke experiences of wonder and recognition. Quai Branly "is making theater, not writing theory." "The priests of contextualization," Martin tells Michael Kimmelman of the *New York Times*, "are poor museographers."[3]

Martin's model, the Beaubourg center, contains a heavily used public library, as well as one of the world's premier modern art museums and various laboratory and exhibition spaces. In its neighborhood, Beaubourg has become the focus for an unruly, exuberant street culture. It is hard to imagine anything equivalent in Quai Branly's affluent part of town. Its jungle/sacred wood is intended to be available to the public. Who will spend time there? What will happen (be permitted) behind all the trees? And how can this very expensive operation be sustained through budgetary feast and famine? Will tourism keep it flush (like the timeless Tour Eiffel)? Perhaps. But times change. Across the Seine two once new and fashionable institutions offer poignant testimony to historical transformation.

The Musée de l'Homme, opened in 1937 as a monument to socialist humanism, amassed a large collection of artifacts and human remains in the service of a holistic human science—cultural, biological, and aesthetic. Its



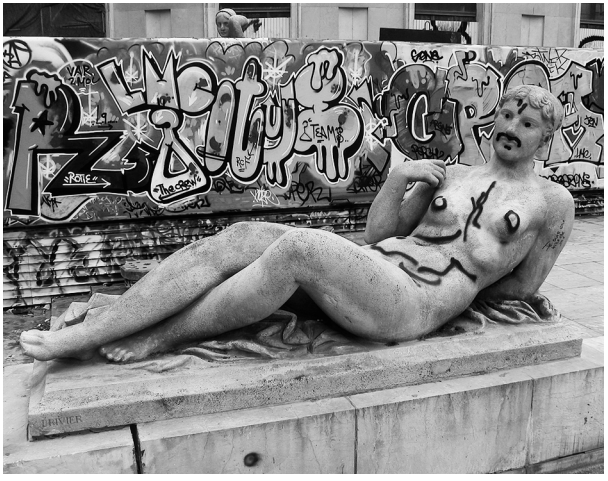
Outside the Palais de Chaillot.

3. Michael Kimmelman, "Heart of Darkness in the City of Light," *New York Times*, July 2, 2006. This widely noticed report, a wickedly acute critique of Quai Branly's central exhibition space and the overall project's neoprimitivist, neocolonial inclinations, was the first prominent break with a generally uncritical press response to the museum's opening. It does not, however, engage with diverse tendencies in the project or take seriously the perspectives of contemporary anthropology and history. Kimmelman sees incoherence, not contradiction or structural tension, and he takes refuge, finally, in the hyperaestheticism of the Louvre's Pavillon des Sessions.

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more than two hundred fifty thousand ethnographic artifacts now reside in the underground storage areas of Quai Branly (below the flood level of the Seine, to the consternation of some experts). Selected "masterpieces" of African, Oceanian, and American art can be seen in aesthetic splendor at the Pavillon des Sessions of the Louvre. The Musée de l'Homme, in one wing of the still-monumental Palais de Chaillot, is an empty shell. There are plans to keep it going as a scientific establishment devoted to the biological, evolutionary strands of a once-unified "science of man." Outside, on the esplanade's smooth pavements, skateboards clatter, visitors snap pictures of the great cast-iron totem across the river, vendors sell tourist art, and youth hang out. The gold-painted statues of naked boys and peasant girls are scratched and a bit forlorn. An African drum group performs at the foot of a giant bronze statue: the spirit of music, a green muscle man holding a harp, with a swaying serpent by his side.

Just down the Seine, a smaller architectural gem from the same period directly faces Quai Branly. The "Palais de Tokyo" was home to the Museum of Modern Art of the City of Paris before the collection was transferred to Beaubourg in 1977. Its Art Deco–classical exterior, with graceful colonnades and bas-reliefs of mythological creatures, remains unchanged, albeit decorated in places with graffiti. The basin of its dry fountain recently accommodated a dance of mini-motorcycles and a chain-saw sculpting event at the opening of a collective exhibition, *Five Billion Years*. The Palais de Tokyo's interior was gutted during an abortive project to create a gathering site for all of Paris's film programs and archives, a "Palais du Cinéma." In 1996 the project fled to the newly vacant Frank Gehry American Center across town, and a "Centre de Création Contemporaine" took up residence. Inside the Palais de Tokyo's worn but still lovely shell, a kind of perpetual construction site is adapted to each new project. A lot seems to be happening there . . . open noon to midnight.



At the Palais de Tokyo.

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Across the river, the newest addition to the Parisian world of museums has already gone through some changes. A more-or-less official origin story features the encounter (some versions include a beach and a sunset) at a resort on Mauritius of Jacques Chirac, then-mayor of Paris, and Jacques Kerchache, an influential collector and connoisseur of tribal art. The two men discover a common love for what will be renamed "arts premiers." And they agree that these works need to be recognized as great creations of human artistic genius. This being France, they should therefore have a place in the Louvre. Chirac is elected president in 1995, and the Pavillon des Sessions opens five years later. A hundred of the most striking works from collections in the Musée de l'Homme and the Musée des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie (MAAO) are summoned to the Louvre. Kerchache dies the following year, leaving as his testament this exquisite aesthetic exercise: a gallery filled with isolated, perfectly lit, sculptural "masterpieces." It is just the beginning.

Vigorous protests were expressed over the "arts premiers" initiative—its aggressive aestheticism and its "looting" of collections at the Musée de l'Homme and MAAO. By 2000, however, the writing was on the wall for the two older institutions. The Pavillon des Sessions was now conceived as just part of a major new museum and research center devoted to "primary" or "first" arts and cultures. Chirac had, initially, repudiated the expensive "grands projets" favored by his predecessors François Mitterrand and Georges Pompidou. But he eventually yielded to the temptation. The new museum, backed by presidential power, was soon unstoppable. Its form and message were, however, subject to considerable debate. For while the Pavillon des Sessions could afford to be rigorously aesthetic in approach, the emerging project could not. It was, after all, swallowing up the collections of two well-known museums that were more than art galleries. In petitions and in the press, Chirac's initiative was portrayed as less an act of magisterial imagination than of presidential imperialism. Furious politicking and institutional infighting ensued. The Musée de l'Homme, especially, had passionate defenders. Everyone recognized that it had fallen on hard times, the result of underfunding, institutional conservatism, and mismanagement. But the prospect of a progressive scientific-humanist tradition reduced to a glitzy presidential project, tainted with aesthetic connoisseurship and primitivism, was repellent to many. The visionary élan of the Musée de l'Homme's founder, Paul Rivet, found no contemporary equivalent in the emerging institution, which could not even find a name for the objects at its core. "Arts premiers" was too-obviously a substitute for "arts primitifs." Other options soon fell apart (the class of objects and cultures is, in fact, incoherent) leaving only a site, the Quai Branly, to serve as synecdoche—literal placeholder for a project seeking its raison d'être.[4]

4. For a full account of the history sketched here, see Sally Price's forthcoming book, *Paris Primitive: Jacques Chirac's Museum on the Quai Branly* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming, Fall 2007). Nélia Dias offers a critical overview and a pointed contrast with the Musée de l'Homme in "'What's in a Name?' Anthropology, Museums, and Values, 1827–2006," *Transatlantische Historische Studien* 26 (2006), pp. 169–85.

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During the late 1990s, it looked as though social science might find a way to counterbalance aesthetics in the evolving project. Claude Lévi-Strauss had lent his considerable prestige; a commission of scholars and museum professionals was weighing a range of options. A prominent anthropologist, Maurice Godelier, seemed to have acquired a position of influence. But before long, Godelier departed, convinced that social and cultural perspectives were destined to remain marginal and underfunded. Many other scholars washed their hands of the project. A few stayed on, struggling for a viable interaction of art and science. The project was, however, dominated by Chirac (who took a personal interest in the details), by Nouvel (who imagined a total environment), and by professional administrators like Martin (who wanted an exciting place people would visit in large numbers). As construction proceeded, the assembled collections were being cleaned, catalogued, and digitally recorded at a temporary site. A research and education department, a *médiathèque*, and photographic and textile collections took shape. It was apparent that what was emerging would be a composite, sometimes contradictory affair.

Museums are, of course, "political" spaces, where different departments compete and negotiate over budgets, calendars, and floor space. Directors, funders, politicians, and publics exert varying degrees of control. Moreover, the lines of affiliation constantly shift, and it is now far too simple to see a struggle between art and anthropology, aesthetics and science, formalism and history. While these tensions remain in contemporary museum practice, there is a growing recognition of the need for a multidiscursive approach. This applies particularly to non-Western objects for which contestations around (neo)colonial appropriation and cross-cultural translation are inescapable. Institutions holding such collections find themselves working through and beyond the aesthetic and scientific categories that structured twentieth-century Western knowledge about the rest of the world. In practice, museums like Quai Branly do not answer to stable constituencies of art connoisseurs or social scientists. Their audiences are more diverse. And Paris itself is a changing contact zone—no longer the center of Civilization (high culture and advanced science), but a node in global networks of culture and power.

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Quai Branly's permanent display area has drawn considerable attention, for it is the project's most fully achieved and spectacular element. Here critics of neoprimitivism and aestheticism find much to deplore. And they are not wrong, as much of what follows will confirm. Yet such a critical focus is in its own way ahistorical; for it is all too easy to discover a completed, already familiar text. A tendency to dwell on the museum's centerpiece, Nouvel's impressive and sometimes kitschy exhibition space, can obscure the diversity, tension, and potential of a large-scale project exposed to ongoing historical crosscurrents.

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Permanent exhibition plateau.

In the permanent "plateau des collections" the dominance of architecture over content is extreme. One enters at the top of a long, curving ramp that suddenly plunges into darkness (much like the start of a fun-house ride) and emerges into a dim world populated by striking, sometimes mysterious shapes. Along the middle of the plateau an undulating channel has been constructed, with low flanks made of tan leather in the contours of adobe. The architect calls this "the river" (and sometimes "the snake"). Video screens are scattered along its sides, with stenciled texts, images, and tactile/acoustic elements for the visually and aurally impaired. Around this axis the non-European world is distributed. Visitors wander, without explicit transition, from Africa to the Americas to Oceania to Asia. The museum literature invites visitors to become "explorers." (Overheard cell-phone conversation: "So where are *you*? I think I'm in America.") There is no obvious ceiling, instead a high firmament, studded with spotlights; the floor is painted in rich and earthy colors. Along one whole side, between the different-sized protruding "boxes," glass walls are colored with translucent green foliage producing a murky aquarium-light. Most of this area, devoted to sub-Saharan artifacts, is dimly lit: "darkest Africa." The literalism of Nouvel's neo-*Naturvolker* concept is especially oppressive here, overwhelming attempts by the curatorial staff to claim conceptual or cultural space for the objects on view.

The overall interpretive strategy minimizes written labels and explanations while making extensive use of touch-screen video programs. The short programs provide cultural background and show present-day rituals and practices. But it is difficult to connect these performances with the adjacent objects, which seem to occupy a separate time of aesthetic/mystical power and traditional authenticity. One wonders, for example, what connections will made between New Guinea carvings and a film clip showing scores of seminaked men brandishing spears in

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Melanesian magic.

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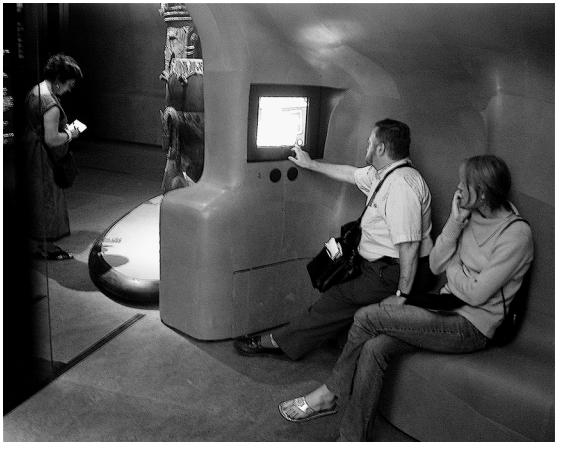
African confusion.

the classic, but now dated, ethnographic film *Dead Birds* (1965). Will visitors have the impression that intertribal warfare persists (still using spears, rather than guns)? Another screen, under the rubric "North-American Rituals," offers a welcome glimpse behind the scenes. A man in sunglasses, decked out as a powwow dancer, admits to the camera: "I had no idea how to put on these feathers." Such moments of realism are few and far between. And unless visitors stop frequently to explore the touch-screen options (and how many will actually do this?), their experience of the "human patrimony" and universal "masterpieces" gathered in what might, uncharitably, be called a magical theme park, will, at best, be exciting, at worst, confused and superficial.

It should be said right away that the issue of formal versus contextual presentation in museum display—the dilemma of how to include substantive explanations without overwhelming the visual and emotional presence of objects, admits of no obvious solution. It is compounded, in a time of reflexive museology and diversifying audiences, by the problem of which contexts to feature. There are always too many relevant possibilities. Every exhibition finds its own modus vivendi. The Pavillon des Sessions at the Louvre, for example, adopts a low-tech solution, supplying ethnographic and historical data on plasticized cards that visitors can choose to take with them as they wander among the art works. Quai Branly keeps explication at a different distance. Labels are discreet. Nothing interrupts the visual impact of the objects, artfully lit in isolation or in dramatic clusters. Contextual data—photographs, films, maps, descriptions, living people—are kept in virtual space.

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The anthropologists who stayed with the project through its twists and turns, particularly Emmanuel Désveaux, have worked to sustain a significant presence in the mix. A small suspended gallery contains a dozen computer stations that give access to a "multimedia encyclopedia of anthropology." Here, one could easily spend an entire day searching through extensive databases for cultural, geographical, linguistic, and ecological information on many of the world's societies and regions. A critical history of anthropology and its key ideas is also on offer. This gallery does not try to provide specific contexts for the objects below but is described in the museum's literature as a "site of reflection . . . giv[ing] the curious visitor access, in a personal and playful rhythm, to fundamental notions of anthropological research." Following the branching pathways of the encyclopedia, one can watch ethnographic films and photocollages, listen to academic talking heads explain key concepts, and construct comparative itineraries under general rubrics such as architecture, cooking, or myth. While much of the overall taxonomy and interpretation reflects an old-fashioned, structural-functionalism, the ethnographic and historical perspectives offered can be quite rich. Zeroing in on the "Masks of New Britain," for example, one quickly gets into the lived details, with the possibility of visiting five quite different regions of the Melanesian island. Photographs from 1907 are juxtaposed with color shots of the masks in use today, along with full explanations of fabrication and ritual protocols. The most revealing sections of the "encyclopedia" reflect recent rapprochements of history and anthropology, showing complex continuities and transformations, rather than timeless essences. One is in a different reality, here, from that of the floor below. The media gallery also contains absorbing interactive installations, which introduce the languages of the world along with some basic phonology, syntax, and historical linguistics. This little gallery feels like a refuge, or perhaps an escape module, a place where one can encounter real cultural and historical experiences. Its narrow stairway is, however, easy to miss.



Virtual contexts.

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The current truce between aesthetics and anthropology keeps the "priests of contextualization," as Stéphane Martin called them, in virtual space, or suspended in the temporary galleries. The central spectacle is thus preserved: Chirac's aesthetic universalism and Nouvel's mystical/natural environment remain largely undisturbed by history, politics, or the arts and cultures of a contradictory (post)modernity. Contemporary art from the societies featured at Quai Branly, or their diasporas, does find a place, but outside—on the entry ramp, in temporary installations, or covering the walls and ceilings of the gift shop and several offices. How these spatial divisions are transgressed will be interesting to follow. It is difficult to imagine that the lines of separation can be rigorously sustained for very long.[5]

The "boxes" that line one side of the exhibition plateau present intriguing possibilities for something different. The windowless rooms are conceived as variously shaped and organized mini-environments. Many are now simply extensions of the main plateau, devoted to particular classes of objects. Some open it out or suggest counterpoints. The largest box is a multimedia zone where video projections, music, and other recorded sounds attempt to produce a "you are there" feeling—a ritual, a street parade, a jungle. A smaller box focuses on Siberian shamanism, bringing together costumes, videos, and ethnographic information. Here one encounters images of real people (unlike the ghostly holograms that hover in the nearby Asian costume area). A mesmerizing film clip shows an elderly woman donning shamanistic attire; she does not remove her everyday, modern clothes, but slowly and deliberately covers them with traditional garments. Examples of these garments (Ainu from Sakhalin Island) are displayed in a case nearby. They are stunning works of art and much more. This uncluttered, gently evocative, and informative little "box" offers a glimpse of an altogether different museum. Another glimpse can be found in a high-ceilinged, brightly lit space displaying tall Dogon masks and sculptures. It reminds the visitor of the modernist display style so aggressively rejected elsewhere. The presentation remains aesthetic and formal, but in a mode of clarity: "brightest Africa." The possibility of using the boxes to create alternative, even critical or reflexive spaces holds potential for a less-totalizing museography. So far, only a little has been done in this vein. And the common (ultimately condescending) curatorial argument that visitors should not be confused by discrepant messages and contexts seems to have prevailed.

A few of the smaller boxes in the African zone go all out for theatrical effects, with unfortunate results. Two monumental wood statues from Dahomey

5. A very different museographic world can be found in the Sainsbury African Galleries of the British Museum. Here, contemporary African art is displayed in counterpoint to more traditional pieces. Among the latter, some are quite old, some obviously more recent, and some clearly represent colonial figures and histories. The galleries are evenly lit, mystery is banished, and a dynamic, inventive, lucid world is evoked. Famous bronze plaques from the palace of Benin, displayed to great aesthetic effect, are described in a nearby historical label as "booty" from an 1897 military expedition that subdued resistance to British rule in southern Nigeria.

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(familiar to many from the Musée de l'Homme) are wedged into a narrow rectangular space to produce a feeling that they are coming toward, even menacing, the viewer. One is forced to view these fabulous, three-dimensional statues from a single side. At the far end of a darkened box nearby, slits reminiscent of a Bambara sanctuary have been created. Peering in, one catches a glimpse of dimly lit objects, including the famous "Kono," whose surreptitious acquisition on the scientific "Mission Dakar-Djibouti" of 1931–33 was scandalously described by Michel Leiris in *L'Afrique fantôme*. Objects such as this cry out for rescue by the "priests of contextualization." Another darkened space harbors something reminiscent of a peep show: statues that can only be called "fetishes" appear in small windows spookily lit from below: black magic. Such retrograde, embarrassing installations will, one hopes, not last long.

If ethnography is present but marginalized in the permanent exhibition space, history has almost entirely vanished. A few laudable efforts remind one of what's not there. On a small section of the "river's" leather banks, a pointed paragraph recalls that the objects on display have their own, usually colonial, histories. Small images printed faintly on the wall record the explorers, missionaries, and ethnographers who did the collecting. This zone, which one walks by in a few seconds, is the space provided for all the colonial and contact histories represented by the thousands of works on view. It's worth quickly recalling some of what is absent: histories of the cultures in question, from deep archaeological time through colonial changes to their present social and artistic life; histories of the objects themselves, collecting practices, markets, prior sites of display and changing meanings; local, national, metropolitan, and transnational contexts for currently changing practices of signification—how the objects, and the forms of art and culture they embody, *make history* (for example, how their meanings and powers can be repatriated by old and emerging "indigenous" groups).[6]

Quai Branly is focused on other stories. In a revealing interview, Martin distinguishes the new museum's strategy from those that combine objects with texts and images in the service of a governing narrative or argument. He associates this didacticism with Anglo-American-Australian museography and with expressly political agendas (histories of feminism, slavery, etc.). By contrast, the French, at least in their art museums, are "obsessed by the purity and authenticity of the object."[7] Quai Branly assumes and edifies these "French" expectations. Martin's

6. At the British Museum, the JP Morgan Chase Gallery of North America adopts the opposite strategy. It makes history the guiding strand for objects and interpretations—from archaeological deep time, via culture contact, trading relations, resistance, and conquest, to tourism, craft markets, and cultural resurgence. Texts, maps, and photographs share display space with masks, weapons, pottery, baskets, and painted skins. There are frequent recent color photos of North American native people. Many of the objects are beautiful, but it takes an effort to think of them as "art."

7. Peter Naumann, ed., "Making a Museum: 'it is making theater, not writing history': An Interview with Stéphane Martin, Président-directeur général, Musée du quai Branly," *Museum Anthropology* 29, no. 2 (2006), p. 122.

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national essentialism is curious, to say the least, given all the local criticisms of the "arts premiers" project. One wonders what sort of an institution might have been created in the tradition of Leiris, Aimé Césaire, and anticolonial Surrealism, to mention just one alternate French strand. There are, in any event, many nonreductive ways to articulate aesthetic, historical, natural scientific, and political agendas in the inventive museographic spaces that exist between the abstract alternatives of "art" and "ethnography."

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Underground, more than three hundred thousand objects are preserved in state-of-the-art storage (protected, the museum insists, against flooding from the Seine). Some thirty-five hundred—barely a hundredth of the total—are on permanent display. The rest can be visited (as little images) on line. Qualified researchers will have more direct access to the extensive ethnographic, historical, and photographic materials. But the new center will not, like the Musée de l'Homme, support permanent research laboratories. Who exactly will be able to engage with these objects at the core of the institution? How does a collection communicate? "Là ou dialoguent les cultures": the motto begs all the important questions. Cultures don't converse: people do, and their exchanges are conditioned by particular contact-histories, relations of power, individual reciprocities, modes of travel, access, and understanding.



Kofi Annan, Rigoberta Menchú Tum, and Jacques Chirac, projected at the opening ceremony.

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At Quai Branly's opening ceremonies, President Chirac was flanked by dignitaries from Africa, Latin American, and the Caribbean. His inaugural address welcomed "this new institution dedicated to *other* cultures [*cultures autres*]." The museum, he said, would offer "an incomparable aesthetic experience," as well as "a human lesson [*un leçon d'humanité*] that is indispensable for our time." In a period of unprecedented globalization, Chirac stressed, "it was necessary to imagine a special place that does justice to the infinite diversity of cultures, a place that presents another way of looking at the genius of the peoples and civilizations of Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas." Calling for an attitude of "respect and recognition" and a rejection of "ethnocentrism, that unacceptable, unreasonable pretense by the West to be the sole bearer of human destiny," Chirac expressed a special obligation toward "peoples who have been brutalized, exterminated by harsh and insatiable conquerors; people humiliated and scorned, of whom it was even denied that they had a history; peoples often still marginalized, enfeebled, threatened by the inexorable advance of modernity; peoples who nonetheless want recognition and a restoration of their dignity."[8]

Chirac, certainly the most prominent head of state to ally himself publicly with contemporary indigenous movements, reminded his audience that in 1992 he and Kerchache had declined to celebrate Christopher Columbus and had instead organized a major exhibition in Paris on the Taino Indians, those who had "greeted Columbus at the edge of the Americas before being annihilated." Recalling this act of solidarity with contestations of the Columbian Quincentennial throughout the Americas, Chirac aligned the "arts premiers" project not with a retrospective recognition of fragile and dying cultures, but with the emergence of an international movement. In his opening address Chirac singled out Eliane Toledo, from among the guests, recalling the election in 2001 of her husband, Alejandro Toledo as Peru's first president with Indian roots (and, he neglected to add, a Harvard training). Chirac also warmly remembered his own visit to the new Inuit territory of Nunavut, whose prime minister, Paul Okalik, was in attendance.

Contemporary indigenous politics were symbolized at the opening ceremony by Kofi Annan, representing the United Nations with its protocols on indigenous rights, and by Rigoberta Menchú Tum, increasingly "Maya" identified since her Nobel Peace Prize of 1992. Quai Branly thus identified itself with cultural assertions and social movements unimaginable in Europe even twenty years ago. This symbolic presence at the museum's opening was a sign of changing times. Of course, "native," "aboriginal," "Indian," "tribal," "first" peoples have long been engaged in complex, often brutal, struggles of survival and transformation. But after the 1960s, wider regional and transnational alliances would grow in importance, and the 1990s saw the emergence of a loosely articulated "indigenous

8. "Allocution de M. Jacques Chirac, Président de la République, à l'occasion de l'inauguration du Musée du quai Branly," June 20, 2006, available on various government Web sites. See, for example, www.quaibranly.fr/index.php?id=933.

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presence" on the world stage. This was reflected in, among other things, the Columbian Quincentennial protests, a United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, and a ramifying network of international contacts, festivals, and alliances. The new museum is already engaged, more or less ambivalently, with these new cultural and political articulations. (Two days before her appearance at Quai Branly, Rigoberta Menchú opened a well-financed "International Forum of United Indigenous Peoples" held in the south of France.)[9]

A tone of heartfelt, impassioned appreciation infused Chirac's opening remarks. And whatever its residual paternalism, his discourse was certainly the kind of speech one would like to hear from more heads of state. Like Bill Clinton's 1992 apology to Native Hawaiians for the illegal overthrow of their monarchy, such gestures of postcolonial regret and recognition are welcome. But they do little, in themselves, to change ongoing material structures of inequality. Indeed, it has been cogently argued that liberal agendas of cultural recognition and dialogue such as those announced by Chirac are integral to contemporary forms of multicultural governance. They point in both neocolonial and postcolonial directions.[10] While Chirac forthrightly condemned the injustices of Western expansionism, he made no mention of France's violent legacy and continuing power in places like New Caledonia or Tahiti. Nor did he recognize the presence of indigenous representatives from either of these still-colonial territories.

The inaugural speech ended on a note of multicultural universalism: by embracing dialogue and diversity "humanity will come together around the values that really unite it." Chirac assured his listeners that the ambition "to bring together all those men and women from around the world who are working to advance the dialogue of cultures and civilizations . . . has been fully embraced by France." Skeptics would not fail to point out the emptiness of a rhetoric that made no reference to the nation's current difficulties with communication among its own diverse populations. 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.

In 1992 Chirac and Kerchache imagined a project of artistic and cultural recognition that fit comfortably within a late-colonial liberal politics of recognition. Picasso and the Surrealists had already established the value of African, Oceanian, Arctic, tribal "art." Collecting, authenticating, and marketing practices

9. Representatives from five continents shared stories, dances, prayers, and ecological and political visions at a weeklong event, held in Pau. A "Convention de Pau" was signed whose most immediate outcome is an Internet site Indigenous4Earth.org. On the emergence sketched above, see Ronald Niezen, *The Origins of Indigenism: Human Rights and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003).

10. See, among others, Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002); and Charles R. Hale "Does multiculturalism menace? Governance, cultural rights and the politics of identity in Guatemala," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 34, no. 3 (2002), pp. 485–524.

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were well in place. All that remained was for these primitive arts, rebaptized "arts premiers," to conquer the Louvre. But as the project was unfolding, the historical ground shifted. One sees this in the tension between an updated, antiethnocentric (and still recognizably "French") universalism and a potential alliance with contemporary indigenous social movements. Chirac and Quai Branly find themselves in a complex situation composed of tangled post- and neocolonial histories whose futures are indeterminate. The museum's "first" or "tribal" arts and cultures can, in any event, no longer be held at an exotic distance or relegated to a past of vanishing peoples whose authenticity is administered either by connoisseurs or social scientists.

At one point in his inaugural address, Chirac spoke of "ces peuples, dits 'premiers' [these so-called 'first' peoples]." A shift in the use of "first" is revealing: for the "premier" in "arts premiers" (with its primitivist connotations) is potentially quite different from the same word in "peuples premiers." In recent decades "first peoples" has come to signify a claim of primordial indigenous sovereignty. Audiences can now understand the "firsts" in Chirac's discourse differently—primitivity for some, a politics of resistance for others. This tension is integral to the project's historical situation, an ongoing renegotiation of the new museum's relations with its "cultures autres."

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Quai Branly's rich collection has been much praised—a *patrimoine* for all humanity. Yet collections are always ambivalent, both a wealth and a burden. Museum directors have been known to complain about the practical limits they impose. Moreover, the shape and quality of "great'" collections often reflect troubling histories that haunt their present owners. The more than three hundred thousand objects that over the centuries found their way to Paris have a great deal to say about the vicissitudes of exploration, the self-confirming benevolence of colonialism, the arbitrariness of taste and global markets. (Là ou dialoguent les *histoires* . . .) Who and what is included in Chirac's *leçon d'humanité*? (As Quai Branly was opening, protests were registered from Quebec over how little from that part of Native Canada was on display.) Of course no collection, at this scale, can be complete, and the museum has already spent a considerable amount to strengthen its holdings. But as the collection becomes even larger an established pattern of accumulation deepens. And the fundamental scandal remains: so-called source communities in Africa or Alaska or the Pacific still have no direct access to important works from their own traditions. At this moment, Quai Branly appears to be more a part of the problem than of its solution.

At a local level, is this consolidation of the major Parisian holdings of "first arts" a cause for celebration? The objects are better catalogued and can now be digitally consulted. Since a great deal is routinely "lost" in large research collections, the reshuffle and fresh look will certainly bring new understandings. But

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these benefits could have been achieved without building a spectacular new center. In Paris there is now only one place to encounter tribal objects, works whose meanings are not fixed and that "speak" differently, depending on site, presentation, and audience.[11] Given the top-down ("presidential") logic of the undertaking, it will, no doubt, be difficult to undo the consequences of holding so much in one place. A further cost of centralization is the budgetary strain of an elaborate new installation, sustained, inevitably, at the expense of smaller venues. With the same or even less funding, several Paris sites could have been renovated and encouraged to diversify their modes of display and interpretation.[12] Even more creatively, their large collections might have been conceived as traveling and lending operations, throughout France and beyond. Such a project may appear utopian. But it is already being practiced by other "major" collections. For example the Smithsonian Institution is building a new "exhibit/study center" in Anchorage, Alaska, where objects originally from the region now in its Washington, D.C., collection will be displayed, on long-term loan. The space is designed for "hands-on" visits from tribal elders, for recording and disseminating the results of collaborative research, and for the use of old pieces as models for contemporary artists—working with the Native-administered Alaska Native Heritage Center.[13] Quai Branly is currently exploring cooperative networks with other museums in Europe and Australia. How extensive these will be, and whether they will be limited to privileged metropolitan partners, time and politics will tell.

The centralization of resources at the new institution puts pressure on its temporary exhibits and surrounding programs to cover multiple perspectives. A glance at the current program reveals an energetic agenda—reflecting the range of backgrounds and the visions of a diverse staff of museographers and researchers. A good deal seems possible in this programmatic space, depending on how hierarchical the direction of the museum continues to be and how much innovation is encouraged around its edges and in its temporary galleries. While the basic structure of the permanent display area cannot be easily modified, some flexibility is possible. Fresh works from the reserves can be cycled through, in the thematic "boxes" and especially in two galleries suspended just above the main floor. During its first year, seven temporary exhibitions are planned, ranging from a major work of anthropological analysis and comparison (*Qu'est ce qu'un corps?*) to regional displays and the nineteenth-century Yucatan photography of Désiré

11. On situational meanings for "tribal" objects, see James Clifford, "Four Northwest Coast Museums," in *Routes*, pp. 107–46; Ann Fienup-Riordan, *Hunting Tradition in a Changing World* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000).

12. A comparative glance at the British Museum provides anther instance of centralization's mixed blessings. After a major renovation that included closing the branch Museum of Mankind in Mayfair, the ethnological sections find themselves struggling for floor space in the main complex. A certain (underfunded) freedom to experiment at the Museum of Mankind has been sacrificed for a place at the more visible, and crowded, center.

13. The permanent space will open in 2010. A pilot project, "Sharing Knowledge," gives a sense of the collaborative approach; see alaska.si.edu.

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Charnay. A temporary exhibition, *Premières nations, collections royales,* presents little-known North American artifacts from the Quai Branly collection in the context of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century collecting practices. Conceived by Christian Feest, director of Vienna's Museum für Völkerkunde, the show's historical approach differs markedly from the museum's dominant presentation. In the large, bright "Garden Gallery," separate from the permanent space and physically adaptable to a variety of uses, three shows are projected: a critical history of how Westerners have portrayed exotic peoples; New Ireland artifacts drawn from the Quai Branly collection and elsewhere; and an installation (*Jardin d'amour*) by British Afro-diasporic artist Yinka Shonibare. For several months, in the foyer outside the theatre, a traveling installation *La bouche du roi* by Benin artist Romuald Hazoumé assembled hundreds of jerry cans customized to resemble masks, along with voices, figures, and video, to represent a slave ship, thus drawing pointed connections between the trade in people and in petroleum. Currently the exhibition plateau's entry ramp features installations by Trinh T. Minh-ha and Jean-Paul Bourdier designed to raise awareness of the activities of walking and looking—including the awkward experience of stepping on floor projections of moving human faces.

The Théâtre Claude Lévi-Strauss (along with an outdoor amphitheater) offers music, theater, and dance. In the first year, selections from the Mahabharata epic cycle are to be performed by Indian and Japanese theater groups and a French-Italian puppeteer. Also on view: a masking society from Burkina Faso (with introductory lectures); a selection of Siberian shamanistic performances; improvised oral poetry from Cuba; a multimedia musical journey (*Desert Blues*) featuring a troupe from Mali; and *Exotica,* a modern French group's work of "imaginary folklore" melding the traditions and musical instruments of four continents. Quai Branly's performance program inserts itself in the networks and audiences of world music and transnational indigenism. It draws on circuits and venues now available to successful non-Western and diasporic artists like Hazoumé, or the Aboriginal painters whose work can be found both on the ceiling of the Quai Branly gift shop and in the high-priced galleries of Mayfair or Soho. Such sites of display and performance are productions of the past few decades. While they show some affinities with previous forms of cross-cultural appreciation and consumption (exotic spectacles at world's fairs, negrophilia, and the vogue for jazz . . .), they take place in new contexts of media-saturated globalization, post-1960s identity politics, renewed traditions, and the marketing of heritage. The cultural politics and social agencies at work are ambivalent and open-ended. Dynamic histories intersect in an institution that collects, and is collected by, other worlds. Will the center hold at Quai Branly? It is not too soon to notice that what has, in fact, emerged is something that exceeds the promotion of tribal masterpieces first envisaged by Chirac and Kerchache.

Discrepant globalizations, traveling and translating cultures, currently converge on an institution that aspires to be a crossroads and a place of conversations.

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These complex, postmodern forces can no longer be sublimated as "art," nor can they be relegated to the suburbs (Paris neighborhoods like Belleville feel like global places now). Indeed, recent press accounts suggest that Quai Branly may be attracting an unusual number of non-Western diasporic visitors. Commenting on this phenomenon (which may or may not be sustainable), Stéphane Martin remarks: "We eat Thai, our tattoos are Polynesian, we dress African, and do our hair in Antillais style. . . ."[14] This globalized, hybrid, French "we" will, he promises, be addressed by the new museum. Gone is the discourse of purity and authenticity. Quai Branly, from its privileged site in the museum-like core of bourgeois Paris, feels its way through a changing environment.

A lecture and colloquium series ("l'Université populaire du quai Branly") has been organized by the philosopher and novelist Catherine Clément. The first two cycles are devoted to "The Global History of Colonization" and to "Great Debates on Universality." The former explores "colonial legacies in countries such as France," a theme of obvious importance for the new museum. The latter stages dialogues on more abstract issues such as: "Is there a single human family?" (Ann-Christine Taylor and Bernard Henri-Lévy); "How do barbarous acts happen?" (Julia Kristeva and Maurice Godelier); "Do we need a common ideal for all people?" (Alban Bensa and Alain Finkielkraut). The first major exhibition held in the Garden Gallery was titled *D'un regard l'autre*—a reflexive tour through several centuries of European representations of non-Western people. More than a thousand objects—from early paintings by explorers, through nineteenth-century scientific and ethnographic specimens, documentary photographs, popular collectibles, to the modernist primitivism of Picasso and Matisse—tell a complex history of stereotyping, appropriation, love, repulsion, taxonomy. The museum's literature describes this as a "mise en abyme" and "manifesto" for the entire undertaking. While the exhibition stops in 1946, the extrapolation is clear: whatever way of perceiving other cultures seems obvious today is part of a problematic, unfinished history. Whatever is scientifically or aesthetically correct today will eventually be out of date. As the two well-worn museums across the Seine silently testify, no one gets the last word.

It is hard not to see, in Quai Branly's array of temporary projects, a certain *mauvaise conscience* with respect to the dominant vision of Chirac, Kerchache, and Nouvel. At the very least, several discrepant agendas are apparent. The "arts premiers" legacy, already badly dated, is being contained, bypassed. At least one hopes so. Will the programs on contemporary arts and cultures, on colonial and globalizing forces, on the history and politics of representation—everything absent from the museum's core—continue to receive encouragement? Nothing guarantees this trajectory. A potent constellation of neoprimitivism, commodified multiculturalism, and tourism may well dominate. If and when state support flows

14. Carolyn Brothers, "For Some, A Museum Hits Close to Heart," *International Herald Tribune*, August 17, 2006.

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elsewhere, the spectacular exhibition plateau could persist more or less unchanged as a sort of theme park, a house of magic firmly attached to the Eiffel Tower apparatus, while the more innovative, critical, and scholarly programs contract. Alternately the plateau could be rearranged and transgressed in an institution increasingly open to the contemporary world with all its contradictions and impurities. Both futures—and no doubt others—can be discerned in the present Quai Branly.

As part of the museum's opening celebrations, a day of round-table discussions was organized, bringing together scholars, museum professionals, critics, and artists from Europe, the Americas, Africa, and the Pacific. At the wrap-up session, the air conditioning in the Théâtre Claude Lévi-Strauss stopped working. People fanned themselves and contemplated the scheduled cocktails. Ralph Regenvanu, director of the widely admired Vanuatu Cultural Centre, spoke from the audience.[15] He had just completed a residency at the British Museum's innovative "Melanesia Project," where he spent several months working in the extensive Pacific collections. Among the outcomes of this consultancy was an original painting in which the visitor graphically repatriated several powerful objects and symbols from his home place currently held in London. Politely and firmly Regenvanu exhorted the Musée du Quai Branly to support mutually beneficial links with cultural centers in the Pacific and in Asia. That would mean, he said, a robust budget for making Paris collections accessible, for collaborating on multisited projects, and for promoting new art from places like Vanuatu, New Caledonia, or Tahiti. Regenvanu stressed the importance of working with "living art and culture," not just artifacts from the past. Without these reciprocal, far-reaching, contemporary links, he warned, the new museum risked irrelevance.

15. On the Vanuatu Cultural Center, see Lissant Bolton, *Unfolding the Moon: Enacting Women's Kastom in Vanuatu* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002). For Regenvanu's residency at the British Museum and his painting discussed below, see www.vanuatuculture.org/contemporary/20060522_ralphbm.shtml.

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