

# Book Reviews

## Comptes rendus de livres

Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, eds., *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*

Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer, and Steven D. Lavine, eds., *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*

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Karp, Ivan, and Steven D. Lavine, eds., *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*. Washington and London: The Smithsonian Institution Press in association with the American Association of Museums, 1991. 486 pp., illus., paper \$15.95, ISBN 1560980214.

Karp, Ivan, and Christine Mullen Kreamer and Steven D. Lavine, eds., *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*. Washington and London: The Smithsonian Institution Press in association with the American Association of Museums, 1992. 614 pp., illus., paper \$16.95, ISBN 156098189X; cloth \$45.00, ISBN 1560981644.

In the early 1950s, when the museum communities in Canada and the United States were awakening from the long sleep of the Depression followed by the war years, a contemporary literature of what is now called museum studies was virtually non-existent. There was no Canadian periodical of note and the new American journal, *Curator*,<sup>1</sup> the American Association of Museums' (AMM) *Museum News*,<sup>2</sup> supplemented by the newsletters of regional AAM conferences and the publications of the American Society for State and Local History, were the only sources of current writing on the subject. There were no new books on museum theory or history worthy of mention. Reference to the Milwaukee Public Museum bibliographies of museum work, published in the 1960s,<sup>3</sup> will bear out the contention that there was a minimal museum

studies literature available in English for students, teachers or working professionals. In the 1990s, the difficulty for teachers and students of museum studies is choosing from the plethora of publications, which vary from excellent to awful.

The last forty years has seen not only the growth in contributions from within the museum profession but also a new interest in and extensive writing about the phenomena of museums, collecting, exhibiting and interpreting by anthropologists and others in the social sciences. For at least two decades there has been a market for this outpouring. In addition to the proliferation of museum studies programs on North American campuses have come the newer course offerings in cultural studies, a more worldly cousin.

It is particularly interesting that in all of this no generally accepted textbook, even for introductory or survey courses, has emerged. There are a few "handbooks" on museum practice and there may well be putative general texts of the "How-To" variety that I have not seen, but museum studies has no "bible." How very fortunate!

There is no general agreement on museum theory, no history of the museum as an idea that has been written without heavy political or ideological bias, and many so-called accepted museum practices and standards are problematic. Even a quick scan of current writing in the United States, the U.K. and France will reveal the dimensions of differences in perspective. There are, of course, important books in museum studies from individual authors such

as Carol Duncan's *Civilizing Rituals*<sup>4</sup> or *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* by Sally Price.<sup>5</sup> Exhibition catalogues of the calibre of *ART/artifact* from the Center for African Art, New York,<sup>6</sup> also belong on the reading lists. Of particular value to the student, however, are the rich collections of essays, coming sometimes from individual authors, for example, Stephen E. Weil,<sup>7</sup> Michael M. Ames,<sup>8</sup> sometimes gathered up by an editor or editors, for example, Daniel J. Sherman and Irit Rogoff,<sup>9</sup> or John Elsner and Roger Cardinal,<sup>10</sup> and the collected papers coming out of conferences and symposia such as the two volumes from the Smithsonian Institution to be reviewed here.

*Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, edited by Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, was published by the Smithsonian Institution Press in 1991. It contains five important essays by the editors and twenty-two papers originally presented at the 1988 Smithsonian conference, "The Poetics and Politics of Representation." The conference had a distinguished cast, including Michael Baxandall, Carol Duncan, Susan Vogel, James Clifford, Curtis M. Hinsley and Kenneth Hudson. The twenty-two papers cover the issues of representation well, and one could hope that students would use the book as a source, a beginning, and be led from Clifford's paper to his book, *The Predicament of Culture*,<sup>11</sup> as they might go from Susan Vogel's paper to her exhibition catalogues from The Center for African Art.<sup>12</sup> There are chapters in the book of exceptional value to museum studies teachers. For example, Baxandall's brief, ten-page entry, "Exhibiting Intention: Some Preconditions of the Visual Display of Culturally Purposeful Objects," offers a perspective on the maker-object-exhibitor-viewer relationships that every museum student should be obliged to analyze and defend or refute.

*Exhibiting Cultures* is not, of course, a textbook or a survey or anthology of writing on the chosen subject. The classic essays from earlier writing are absent, and as with any conference or similar gathering, a critic can complain that certain points of view were not represented. It is an excellent source book though, and my New Zealand museum studies students found both it and its companion, *Museums and Communities*, invaluable. It must also be noted that *Exhibiting Cultures* is vintage 1988. So much has happened in the last nine years in museum world awareness of the issues of cultural pluralism, the need to share and/or transfer power, and the abilities of inherent context

in the mainstream museum, that this book might seem "old hat" to the more enlightened readers today. The views of the editors and many of the contributors were very fresh when presented, however, and for ninety percent of the North American museum community, they are still either unknown or unacceptably radical.

*Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*, edited by Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer and Steven D. Lavine, published by The Smithsonian Institution Press in 1992, comes from a follow-up conference held in 1990. Once again there is a distinguished list of contributors, seventeen in number, and essays by the editors. I found the papers by Vera Zolberg, Nancy J. Fuller and Mary Jo Arnoldi especially valuable to students. Zolberg's "Art Museums and Living Artists: Contentious Communities" is a most intelligent and informed essay on the war between living artists and art museums. This is an issue that art museum workers must address in the search for new, positive relationships. Nancy Fuller provides an excellent introduction to the ecomuseum idea, with a living example of an ecomuseum in social action in the Arizona desert, in "The Museum as a Vehicle for Community Empowerment: The Ak-Chin Community Ecomuseum Project." The ecomuseum as a mediator during cultural transition had special meaning for the students who were Samoan, Maori and European New Zealanders. In "A Distorted Mirror: The Exhibition of the Herbert Ward Collection of Africana," Mary Jo Arnoldi contributes an elegant and thorough narrative of a British colonialist's collection that found its way into the Smithsonian, changing throughout its life as anthropology, politics and views of "The Dark Continent" changed. Her analysis is insightful, and can lead any student (or veteran museum worker) to useful examination of the nineteenth century collections and long-standing ethnographic gallery installations close to home. Overall, however, the contents seem tame when put beside today's demands for autonomy, transfers of real power and curatorial authority as they are now being expressed by aboriginal "nations," ethnic nationalists and others. This takes little away from the book's value for study, as it helps to shed light on the development of museum and community issues in our time.

These two volumes are certainly among the essentials on any museum studies bookshelf, along with more recent collections of essays such as *Museum Culture: Histories, Discourses, Spectacles* (1994),<sup>13</sup> *Visual Display: Culture*

*Beyond Appearances* (1995),<sup>14</sup> and *Thinking About Exhibitions* (1996).<sup>15</sup> I would suggest that the next step should be a series of comprehensive anthologies of writings on museums, following, perhaps, the model of *Vagues: Une anthologie de la nouvelle muséologie*,<sup>16</sup> published in France with the support of the Ministry of Culture. *Vagues* allows the insertion of early classics and key statements and is international in scope.

If good anthologies are part of the answer to providing useful resources for teachers, students and practitioners, I further suggest that attempts at museum studies textbooks are not

Museology, as the soi-disant discipline of museum studies is called elsewhere, is a mélange of other disciplines, from philosophy to history to the social sciences, and even the most considered views on the museum are diverse. Solid, well-edited collections of papers, personal essays and in-depth studies of particular museum phenomena — and perhaps good anthologies in the future — can serve us well. The Smithsonian publications described here are exercises in intelligent examination of critical, constantly changing museum issues. A museum studies general textbook could only be the product of pathetic arrogance.

#### NOTES

1. *Curator: A Quarterly Publication of the American Museum of Natural History* (American Museum of Natural History, New York). Published continuously since 1958. *Curator* was founded by Albert Eide Parr, the Director of the American Museum of Natural History, a prolific writer and commentator on museums, research, and society (see *Mostly About Museums, From the Papers of A. E. Parr*, (New York: The American Museum of Natural History, 1959). Parr followed in the tradition of such as John Cotton Dana, the Director of the Newark Museum and the revolutionary evangel of museum populism in the early decades of the century. Today's museology, as in the books being reviewed here, must be studied in the context of the earlier writers, Dana, Parr, et al., and their opposites such as Paul J. Sachs, the elitist Harvard art historian who shaped mainstream art museum America from the 1920s to the late 1940s.
2. *Museum News* (American Association of Museums, Washington, D.C.). This journal has been published regularly since 1924. Its contents have always reflected the current vogue in the American museum movement. Although *Museum News* is essentially conservative, just flirting with radical innovations, it provides a running commentary on Museums America, à la mode.
3. Stephan de Borhegyi with Etha A. Dodson, *A Bibliography of Museums and Museum Work: 1900 to 1960, Vol. 1, and 1900 to 1961, Supplementary Volume* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: The Milwaukee Public Museum, 1960 and 1961). Note that Borhegyi's name appears variously as Steven and Stephan and with or without the "de," in bibliographies. These were the first bibliographies of museum work to be produced since the 1930s.
4. Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums, Re Visions: Critical Studies in the History and Theory of Art* series, Jon Bird and Lisa Tickner, eds., (London and New York: Routledge, 1995). Duncan looks at art museums — their architecture and their collections — as a complex entity within which social rituals are enacted.
5. Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989). A book "about the plight of objects from around the world that...have been discovered, seized, commoditized, stripped of their social ties, redefined in new settings, and reconceptualized to fit the economic, cultural, political and ideological needs of people from distant societies," (p. 5).
6. Arthur C. Danto, et al., *ART/artifact: African Art in Anthropology Collections*, introduction by Susan Vogel, (New York: The Center for African Art, 1988). The exhibition and publishing projects of the Center have focussed on comparative aesthetics, cultural appropriation, decontextualization and recontextualization, or how the perception of a work of art is conditioned by its presentation and the viewer's preconceptions.
7. Stephen E. Weil, *A Cabinet of Curiosities: Inquiries into Museums and their Prospects*, (Washington and London: Smithsonian Press, 1995). See also *Beauty and the Beasts*, 1983, and *Rethinking the Museum*, 1990, Smithsonian Institution Press. Stephen Weil, the recently retired Deputy Director of the Hirshhorn Museum, Washington, D.C., is one of the most insightful and readable analysts of the museum phenomenon writing today.
8. Michael M. Ames, *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes: The Anthropology of Museums*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, University of British Columbia, 1992). An anthropologist, teacher of anthropology and of museum studies, the long-term Director of the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology, (retired 1996), offers valuable perspectives on museums as viewed in the context of anthropological theory.
9. Daniel J. Sherman and Irit Rogoff, eds., *Museum Culture: Histories, Discourses, Spectacles, Media and Society* series, Richard Bolton, ed., (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994). The editors set out "to call attention to the museum's presence and power in the broadest conceivable configuration of contemporary culture" (p. XIX). They chose eleven distinguished scholars to help make the point.
10. John Elsner, and Roger Cardinal, eds., *The Cultures of Collecting*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994). A translation by Robert Cardinal of a

- part of Jean Baudrillard's 1968 classic, "Le système des objets," and eleven important essays such as Susan Stewart's "Death and Life, in that Order, in the works of Charles Wilson Peale."
11. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, (Cambridge, Mass., and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1988). This is a critical reading for students of contemporary culture. Clifford ranges far and wide, connecting anthropology, history and art history, literature and museums. The essay, "On Collecting Art and Culture," (pp. 215-251), is invaluable to anyone trying to understand museums.
  12. See note 6. See also, *African Aesthetics and Perspectives: Angles on African Art*, and other publications of The Center for African Art, New York.
  13. See note 9.
  14. Lynne Cooke and Peter Wollen, eds., *Visual Display: Culture Beyond Appearances*, Dia Center for the Arts, Discussions in Contemporary Culture, no. 10, (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995). This collection of essays is about the act of displaying, about display as a rhetoric of concealment, and the analysis of visual representations in the search for meaning.
  15. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce Ferguson and Sandy Nairne, eds., *Thinking About Exhibitions*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1996). The twenty-seven contributions to this anthology of exhibition practice, within and without museums, give a useful overview of the traditions, current variations and the politics of exhibitions.
  16. André Dévalées, ed., *Vagues : Une anthologie de la nouvelle muséologie, vols 1,2*, (Mâcon: Éditions W, 1992, 1994). Published jointly with Muséologie nouvelle et expérimentation sociale (M.N.E.S.), Savigny-le-temple, France, and with the support of the French Ministry of Culture. These two volumes are a comprehensive anthology of post-World War II writing in *La nouvelle muséologie*, the essentially French school of museological thought fathered by the late Georges Henri Rivière. The editor's excellent introductions to each volume place the contents soundly in perspective.

## Angela E. Davis, *Art and Work: A Social History of Labour in the Canadian Graphic Arts Industry to the 1940s*

BRYAN DEWALT

Davis, Angela E. *Art and Work: A Social History of Labour in the Canadian Graphic Arts Industry to the 1940s*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995. xx + 187 pp., 16 illus., cloth \$39.95, ISBN 0-7735-1280-2.

In the second half of the nineteenth century changes in graphic arts technology were central to the evolution of popular culture and the elaboration of a form of capitalism based on mass consumption. In the form either of advertising or of illustrations in popular periodicals, images produced by wood engraving and the new photographic processes became cheap and plentiful. But, as Angela Davis has argued in *Art and Work*, this industrialization of image production entailed an increasingly rigid distinction between an imaginative and expressive "high" art and the supposedly more manual skills plied by commercial illustrators and engravers. This has had major implications for our conception of the place of art in society.

*Art and Work* is subtitled *A Social History of Labour in the Canadian Graphic Arts Industry to the 1940s*. In seeking to fulfill this ambitious agenda, Davis has surveyed existing

work and produced some significant new research. The first three chapters of her book consist mainly of a synthesis of secondary sources. She provides a brief account of the emergence of a popular illustrated press in Britain. The mechanization of printing and the industrialization of wood engraving made possible the publication of popular papers like the *Illustrated London News*.

In the process, old notions of art as a unified profession encompassing all who exercised skill and creativity crumbled before an emerging class distinction between imaginative artists acceptable to such elite institutions as the Royal Academy and "art-workmen" who earned a living in the commercial realm. Over time, art-workmen became further differentiated into employers, commercial artists providing designs and pictures, and engravers working within an increasingly detailed division of labour. Having established this context, Davis then synthesizes existing research on the challenges faced by British immigrants in establishing viable engraving businesses in pre-industrial, pre-confederation Canada. In these early chapters, Davis has generally been judicious in her selection of