Forms of popular display, rather than being divorced from official museum culture, form a constituent part of what Tony Bennett has termed ‘the exhibitionary complex’. This complex, Bennett points out, extends across a range of institutions including non-profit art, anthropological and science museums, as well as for-profit museums. Bennett’s own study refers to the grand world exhibitions of the nineteenth century. Considering exhibitions as vehicles for displaying power, he emphasizes the significance of an internalized surveillance function as the spectator becomes aware of his or her integral role in the exhibition. This form of intersubjective relation, he believes, functions to educate a citizenry by enacting the public as subjectivity rather than objects. Taking a different tack on the question of intersubjectivity, I will describe how exhibitions which consist of encounters with live people, or replicas of human beings, both locate and destabilize conventional states of apprehension.

The phenomenon of human spectacle, while undermining the strange within the everyday, also profited from employing marginalized and often disabled human beings. While this sad history of exploitation must be acknowledged, my aim in considering sensate exhibitions is to contextualize later recuperations of opacity through practices of self-exhibition. What is interesting to me is that exhibition rhetoric that incorporates people functions to produce a face-to-face encounter, which, by varying degrees, engages the spectator with a representation that ‘looks back.’ This situation raises not only the question of enunciative agency, but also impinges on the effectivities between bodies within the display context. Keeping in mind, then, the question of ‘who speaks’ and ‘how,’ I will identify the claiming and subliming of bodies across a range of historically specific sites of the ‘exhibitionary complex’.

Madame Tussaud’s wax works, a popular medium during the French Revolution, illustrate and articulate power relations through corporeal display. Rather than a sideline to official public culture, these commercial displays quite literally embodied key proprietary shifts of the turbulent political context.

Marie Groebelts (later to become Tussaud) had come to Paris to appeal to her uncle, a Swiss doctor named Christopher Curtius, who modelled human bodies in wax for his Salon de Cire. Curtius’ exhibition included various thematic arrangements of coloured wax effigies portraying the famous and the infamous. A popular tableau was The Royal Family at Dinner, which enabled ordinary people to gaze closely at life-sized effigies of Louis XVI and his family. It was customary for the royal family to freely admit the public while they dined. For those who could not make the trip to Versailles, Curtius’ spectacle proved a successful alternative. He produced the tableau working from Morris’ sketches, which detailed the table and attitudes of family members. To augment its authenticity, the queen’s dressmaker, Miss Bentinck was commissioned at great expense to dress the effigy of Marie Antoinette.

Curtius and Tussaud’s enterprise afforded them unconventional mobility across classes. Marie lived with the royal family for nine years as art instructor to Madame Elisabeth, the King’s sister. Curtius had a sideline in erotic miniatures for aristocratic customers. Yet, despite his niece’s court affiliations, his political sympathies were aligned with the people. The museum was open to all classes as long as visitors were properly dressed in wigs and stockings. No matter how threadbare, Curtius’ success in Paris enabled him to open a second exhibition, the Convent des Grandes Voisines, devoted to notorious criminals, which was a forerunner to the Chamber of Horrors, subsequently to become a trope of wax museums worldwide.

During the Paris riots of 1789, a mob arrived at the door of the Salon de Cire requesting Curtius’ life-sized wax work of Louis

EXHIBITING BODIES: ARTICULATING HUMAN DISPLAYS

By JENNIFER FISHER
Curtis refused on the condition that it was extremely heavy and could be broken, and those of the busts of the Controller-General Necker and the Duke of Orleans—supporters of the people, who had recently been dismissed by the King. These effigies were dragged in black crepe and placed in a mock funeral protesting the oppression of the royal regime. The struggle which ensued centered on the appropriation and procession of these simulated humans, and marked the first casualties of the French Revolution.

Concerned about Tussaud’s personal safety after she espoused her political affiliations, Curtis recalled his niece from Versailles.

The Revolutionary government focused upon the potential of public culture, including the fine arts, to re-make the citizenry. The life-sized wax effigies of the Salon de Cire had an immediate and verisimilitude that the boorishly codified codes of painting and drawing did not. Because they were extremely popular and accessible to even the illiterate classes, they provided an ideal means to carry the revolutionary ideology.

At the event of the execution, Tussaud was called by the Jacobins to a guillotine task: to cast the statues of those ‘anomalies of the people’ who met their death at the guillotine, including the King, Marie Antoinette, and Tussaud’s patrons and friend, Madame Elisabeth. This Tussaud performed under personal threat of his own death. Aside from its obvious horrific aspects, the exhibition of decapitated heads worked a concurrent shift of corporate ownership. Within the formal system of the Ancien Régime, ‘the people’ were, in effect, ‘possessed’ by the aristocracy which was the real holder of their properties. During the Reign of Terror, this was dramatically inverted as the wax effigies of heads—functioning both as relics and metaphors for the death of the Ancien Régime—were collected and displayed for ‘the people’ of the Revolution. (Madame Tussaud eventually left Paris, transporting her uncle’s two Paris exhibitions to London. Given her conflicted relationship with the royal family, it is curious that she chose to exploit the Terror by procuring and exhibiting parts of the original guillotines. Surrounded by the wax impressions of decapitated heads, of both, and of other relics of the Revolution, the guillotine became the centre of her famed Chamber of Horrors.)

Straton. Barnum began his performing career by renaming him General Tom Thumb and holding him as a Victorian sideshow.

Thumb’s form of satiric “exhibiting” involved singing songs and telling stories. Barnum’s public exhibitions also resided in his museum. While the potential existed for “live” exhibitions—like servant classes—to serve life-long, inescapable contracts, there was also the possibility for certain star exhibitors to jump social classes. The aristocratic titling of giants and midgets was common practice, perhaps prototypical of the entertainment industry’s star system where fame based on “class” was displaced by fame generated by “publicity.”

Postcard prints were sold by Barnum’s performers to promote their performances and to supplement their incomes. As both a resident and ambassador of the museum, Thumb toured widely as a celebrity and a frequent guest at glamorous dinners of the rich and royal. Straton is significant here in how he negotiated the narrative he was obliged to enact by tactically seizing the privileged space of his part in the circus—deflecting customary gaze by singling out and provoking his audience. His reputation as an iconoclast of etiquette had the effect of increasing his popularity. Refusing ‘thimble tests’ by taking-hold, his transparency of manners became a means of asserting himself as an embodied agent within the institutions of the ‘freak show’.

The “freak shows,” which had paralysed the museum boom in North America, were outlawed in the United States in 1860. As descendents of these displays, the Ripley’s Believe it or Not! museums are noteworthy here in that they have re-artifacted aspects of both live and inert human displays with in the entrepreneurial context of global capitalism.

With headquarters in Toronto, Ripley’s international empire includes perhaps the first worldwide museum syndicate of owned and franchised museums, which operate on tourist sites in Canada, the United States, Australia, South Korea and Mexico. Rooted in the 1980s world fairs, they display original and copied artifacts from the collection of Robert Ripley, well known for his “Believe it or Not! Syndicated newspaper cartoons.”

Ripley himself saw established his collection public- ily. Yet the proprietary fiction of Ripley the collector is sustained by the strategic placement of his wax effigy within the exhibition narratives. In St. Augustine, Florida—his actual residence—he is shown in his reconstructed office amongst fun and curious. In Niagara Falls, he is presented as a young boy at his first job polishing tombstones. Ripley’s paradigm weaves through the narratives as a metonymic way of the world’s history narrating a colonialist world view that characterized America’s rise as a world power. Yet, more sinister ties perhaps in the way that Ripley’s life story feeds and fronts an anonymous corporate subtext.

The display practices of the Ripley museums appropriate popular tropes in the for-profit side of the exhibitionary complex. For example, Tussaud’s ‘The Royal Family of Diana’ and Barnum’s freak show have been re-articulated at the Ripley museum.
um in St. Augustine Florida into a dinner party scene consisting of human curiosities, among them Tom Thumb. Similarly, the Ripley's Believe It or Not! museum at Niagara Falls includes an exhibit of wax models of popular "human oddities," photographs of amusing freaks and a stuffed two headed calf. Within the display, a sign beside a 'dreaming-room' type mirror invites visitors to curl their tongues—a genetically determined fact that only a few people can do. Moving on through the ambience of neon lights, signposts and the cacophony of body-shaped wall loops, the exhibition script eventually circles back to a quiet dark space—the other side of what is actually a two-way mirror—which confronts more repressed extremes humorously confronting their faces in attempts to curl their tongues. (Which, of course, you have just done yourself.) In this way, visitors unwittingly entertain on the "living freak" component of the display.

Within the contemporary fine-art discourse, the destabilizing effects of seeing the viewer-as-the-viewed have been mobilized by artists working out of feminism and post-colonial positions.

Jensen's Trout's Artifice involves 'exhibiting' himself in a museum vitrine along with 'the contemporary artifacts of a Loaizian man'; his divorce papers, college diploma and a fag label stating his name, birth date and tribe. In the context of New York's Lesbian Love, One Night, his breathing, living presence functions to fracture the static common to museological representations of Native Americans.

Looking away from the seductive allure of the Olympic Games, Bilodeau's "the artistic traditions of Canada's Native Peoples," the display returned a many extraordinary objects to Canada. Yet its support by Shell, an oil company the Government of Alberta had awarded drilling rights on the lands of the Lubicon Lake Cree, was broadly contested. In the path of the Olympic torch relay along the Trans-Canada Highway near Thunder Bay, Bilodeau herself as "Exhibit VII B," which is the Ontario Liquor Control Board's licence number for a brand of sweet red wine. Presenting herself as a "commercial" art fox refused what Charlotte Townsend-Gault has called the "history" without time, social context or human beings which characteristic The Spirit Sings designer-displays of ceremonial objects.

In a similar gesture, Caco Fusco and Guillermo Gomez-Pena's The Year of the White Bear confront the 1992 quinceneariel celebrations of Columbus' "discovery" of America. The performance involved publicly incorporating themselves as two undiscovered indians. Their clothing combined pseudo-primitive grass skirts and high tech running shoes. While in their caps, they would work on laptop computers, watch TV, sew voodoo dolls or exercise. Conceivably drawing upon conventions within the history of human display, a plaque in front of the cage gave information about their supposed origin and explained that, for a fee, they would dance, talk stories or pose with audience members for polaroids. In the performers' estimation, even after 500 years, they should be "real" natives, "true" natives identified with the detritus of popular culture. This performance investigates two aspects of spectacularity. In twisting back the spectator gaze, it functions as an outgrowth of the self-conscious ethnographic subject. Yet, if spectators don't catch the parody and actually believe these performed roles of 'authentic others,' it functions to foreground the territory of cultural misunderstandings.

Ex-porn star Annie Sprinkle's show Post-Porn Modernism, which was first presented at the kitchen in New York, takes up exhibitionism in her attempt to demystify sexuality and affirm sex in the context of the AIDS crisis. During the show she describes her transformatia from Ellen Steinberg into 'Annie Sprinkle: Porn Star' in a slide show of before and after photos. According to Sprinkle, 'the bigger the bust, the bigger the boobs, the bigger the star.' Sprinkle's stories from her days in the adult industry are interspersed with comments and tolerances of sexual preferences in preparation for her widely publicized Public Cervix Announcement. She dresses in drag while continuing using a friendly banner. After inserting a speculum to expose her cervix, she invites members of the audience to peer inside her with a flashlight. This performance appropriates visual display practices of the medical discourse to break the taboo of shame about genitals. To enhance aesthetic appreciation of the cervix, and Annie admits that it is a way of saying to some men, 'you guys want to see? I'll show you more than you ever wanted to see.' Like Fusco and Pens, Sprinkle reconstitutes the tradition of 'freak' photography. For a fee of five dollars, members of the audience are invited to pose with her for polaroids, her breasts forming Mickey Mouse ears on their heads.

Returning to the art gallery proper, Gary Hill's installation Full Ships, part of the 1983 (New York) Whitney Biennial and now at the Yaddo Hebeside Art Foundation (Torporo), simulates a face-to-face encounter by confounding conventional exhibition apprehension. Behind a black velvet curtain is an enclosed darkened gallery where the visitor feels the peculiar object of a multiple video generated viewers. In stereotypes of gallery viewing practices, life sized people appear to carefully approach the visitor, stop and gander, shift from one foot to another, or register a mild response, and then turn and walk away. These video loops have a looping effect, short-circuiting a consumptive one-way viewing habit by opening up an awareness of the space 'between' spectator and spectacle.

The above performances push beyond the superlative meaning of a given representation and stimulate a recognition of the social, political, and aesthetic implications of human exhibition. In terms of recuperating the body, then, 'exhibiting oneself' can deliberately confound the privileged viewing normally operative in display culture, for a disconnect-ed, objective position is problematized if the strategy of 'looking' involves being looked at. Contemporary exhibition practices which thus direct attention to the ontological status of subjects interrogate the means of cognition itself and hence the basis of aesthetic experience.