



EXHIBITING BODIES: ARTICULATING HUMAN DISPLAYS

By JENNIFER FISHER

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 great 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 enlisting the public as subjects 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 unearthing 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 agency 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, to 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 affectivities between bodies within the display context. Keeping in mind, then, the question of 'who speaks' and 'how,' I will identify the claiming and reclaiming 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 side-line

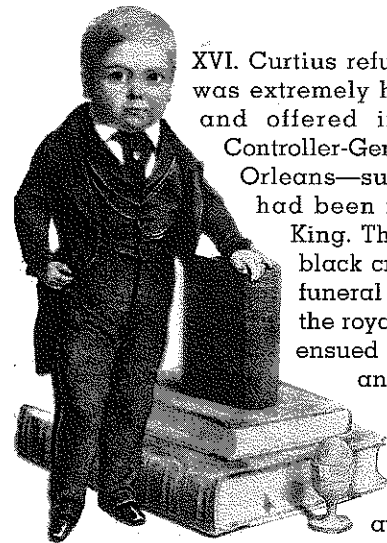
to official public culture, these commercial displays quite literally embodied key proprietary shifts of the turbulent political context.

Marie Grosholtz (later to become Tussaud) had come to Paris to apprentice 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 tableu 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 Marie's sketches, which detailed the table and attitudes of family members. To augment its authenticity, the queen's dress-maker, Rose Bertin, 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 Elizabeth, 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 *Caverne des Grands Voleurs*, devoted to notorious criminals, which was a forerunner to the *Chamber of Horrors*, subsequently to become a trope of wax museums world wide.

During the Paris riots of 1783, a mob arrived at the door of the *Salon de Cire* requesting Curtius' life-sized wax work of Louis

To be made into an exhibit involves an epistemological violence which also functions in other display institutions constituting the exhibitionary complex. The exhibition of people in anthropological museums has involved the brutal collapse of their lives and even death. The residency of Ishi—at the University of California's Museum of Anthropology—is well known in anthropological circles. At his death, his tenure as an exhibit merely transformed from an exhibition displaying daily activities to one comprising his skeleton and death mask. Similarly, Saartjie Baartman, known as 'the Hottentott Venus,' was exhibited live in Paris and London. After her death, her genitals were cut off and displayed at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris.



"Tom Thumb" 1844 engraving made while exhibiting in England; Houdini Collection

XVI. Curtius refused on the condition that it was extremely heavy and could be broken, and offered instead the busts of the Controller-General Necker and the Duke of Orleans—supporters of the people, who had been recently dismissed by the King. These effigies were draped in black crepe and paraded in a mock funeral protesting the oppression of the royal regime. The struggle which ensued centred 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 his political affiliations, Curtius recalled his niece from Versailles.

During the Terror, the Revolutionary government focussed upon the potential of public culture, including the fine arts, to re-make the citizenry. The life-sized wax effigies at the *Salon de Cire* had an immediacy and verisimilitude that the heavily academicized 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.

As the events of 1793 escalated, Tussaud was called by the Jacobins to a gruesome task: to cast the features of those "enemies of the people" who met their death at the guillotine, including the King, Marie Antoinette, and Tussaud's patroness, and friend, Madame Elizabeth. This Tussaud performed under personal threat and duress. Aside from its obvious horrific aspects, the exhibition of decapitated heads marked a concurrent shift of corporeal ownership. Within the feudal system of the *Ancien Regime*, 'the people' were, in effect, 'possessed' by the aristocratic classes as part 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 Regime*—were collected and displayed for 'the people' of the Revolution. (Madame Tussaud eventually left France, transporting her uncle's two Paris exhibitions to London. Given her conflicted relationship with the royal family, it is curious that she later chose to exploit the Terror by procuring and exhibiting parts of the original guillotine. Surrounded by the wax impressions of decapitated heads, of Marat dead in his bath, and other relics of the Revolution, the guillotine became the centre of her famed *Chamber of Horrors*.)

George Bataille has linked the origin of the modern museum to the development of the guillotine. Rather than locating 'an origin' of the museum as such, I would contend that the Reign of Terror marks

both a significant articulation and point of divergence between the display cultures of the museum and those of the wax-works. But while the guillotine's sharp closure assured the Enlightenment taxonomies of the Louvre's collections, it was Madame Tussaud's museum that eventually procured this technology of death to sensationally augment the *Chamber of Horrors*. In 1854, Tussaud's son Joseph purchased the blade, lunette, and chopper as well as scale drawings of the guillotine from the grandson of Charles-Henri Sanson, the executioner of Louis XVI.

As a presentational mode, the people of Tussaud's displays consisted of still tableaux of wax effigies. The exhibition of live human beings, however, operates on another level of display practice. During the nineteenth century, the extension of European imperialism increased encounters with alterity. Living human beings were sought out for the express purpose of exhibition in sideshows, World Exhibitions and circus acts. P.T. Barnum was amongst those who sent agents throughout the world to procure so called human curiosities—albinos, siamese twins, hermaphrodites, midgets, dwarfs, giants, the physically and mentally disabled, and groups of aboriginal people. (Robert Bogdan describes three types of 'freaks': those born with physical abnormalities, those produced either ideologically—i.e. displaying 'primitive' types—or physically—the tattooed woman—and those which were faked—the four-legged girl where one set of legs belonged to another girl behind a screen.) Barnum's American Museum, which he bought in 1840, was billed as New York's greatest display of curiosities: 'natural, theatrical and unnatural.' In the tradition of a European *kunstkammer*, his collection included stuffed animals, miniatures, portrait galleries and so called 'freaks' of nature. As an unorthodox cousin to museums of art and science, Barnum's exhibits were framed by superlative claims which translated to 'what he could get away with.' Likewise, his hyperbolic self-promotion found a market in people's capacity to be attracted to 'the sensational,' however ethically questionable.

Barnum's American Museum marks the institutionalization of the 'freak show,' both in its conventions of presentation and as a social formation. Human beings had been exhibited previously, but their primary professional relationship had been with their managers rather than with each other. As residents of the museum, so-called human curiosities in fact often developed mutually supportive affiliations.

Where 'being exhibited' involves an inherent epistemological violence, 'exhibiting oneself' holds the potential of rupturing such representational closure. Significant in this regard is a midget born to a low-income family in 1838 as Charles Sherwood



Re-articulation of the "Dinner Party." Display of Human Curiosities at the Ripley's Believe It or Not Museum, St. Augustine, Florida

Stratton. Barnum began his performing contract by renaming him General Tom Thumb and molding him as a Victorian aristocrat.

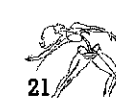
Thumb's form of reflexive 'exhibiting' involved singing songs and telling stories. Barnum's living exhibitions also resided in his museum. While the potential existed for 'live' exhibits—like servant classes—to serve life-long, inescapable contracts, there was also the possibility for certain star exhibitors 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 portraits 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. Stratton is significant here in how he negotiated the narrative he was obliged to enact by tactically seizing the privileged space of his performative context—deflecting curious gazes by singling out and provoking his audience. His reputation as an iconoclast of etiquette had the effect of increasing his popularity. Refusing 'thingness' by talking-back, his transgression of manners became a means of asserting himself as an embodied agent within the institution of the 'freak show.'

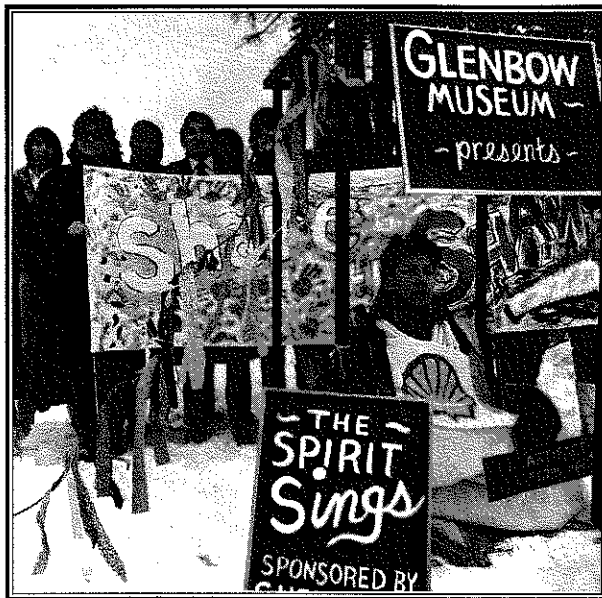
'Freak shows,' which had paralleled the museum boom in North America, were outlawed in the United States in 1940. As descendents of these dis-

plays, the *Ripley's Believe It or Not!* museums are noteworthy here in that they have re-articulated aspects of both live and inert human displays within the entrepreneurial context of global capitalism. With headquarters in Toronto, Ripley's International comprises perhaps the first worldwide museum syndicate of owned and franchised museums, which operate at tourist sites in Canada, the United States, Australia, South Korea and Mexico. Rooted in the 1930s world fairs, they display original and copied artifacts from the collection of Robert Ripley, well known for his 'Believe It or Not!' syndicated newspaper cartoon.

Ripley himself never showed his collection publicly. 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 fan mail and cartoons. In Niagara Falls, he is presented as a young boy at his first job polishing tombstones. Ripley's personage weaves through the narratives as a metonymic 'man of the world' implicitly sustaining a colonialist world view that characterized America's rise as a world power. Yet, more sinister perhaps is the way that Ripley's life story feeds and fronts an anonymous corporate substructure.

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 at Dinner' and Barnum's freak show have been re-articulated at the Ripley muse-





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 amazing feats and a stuffed two headed calf. Within the display, a sign beside a 'dressing-room' type mirror invites visitors to curl their tongues—a genetically determined feat that only few people can do. Moving on through the ambience of neon lights, signage and the cacophony of bombastic audio 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 recent entrants hilariously contorting their faces in attempts to curl their tongues. (Which, of course, you have just done yourself!) In this way, visitors unwittingly entertain as the 'living freak' component of the display.

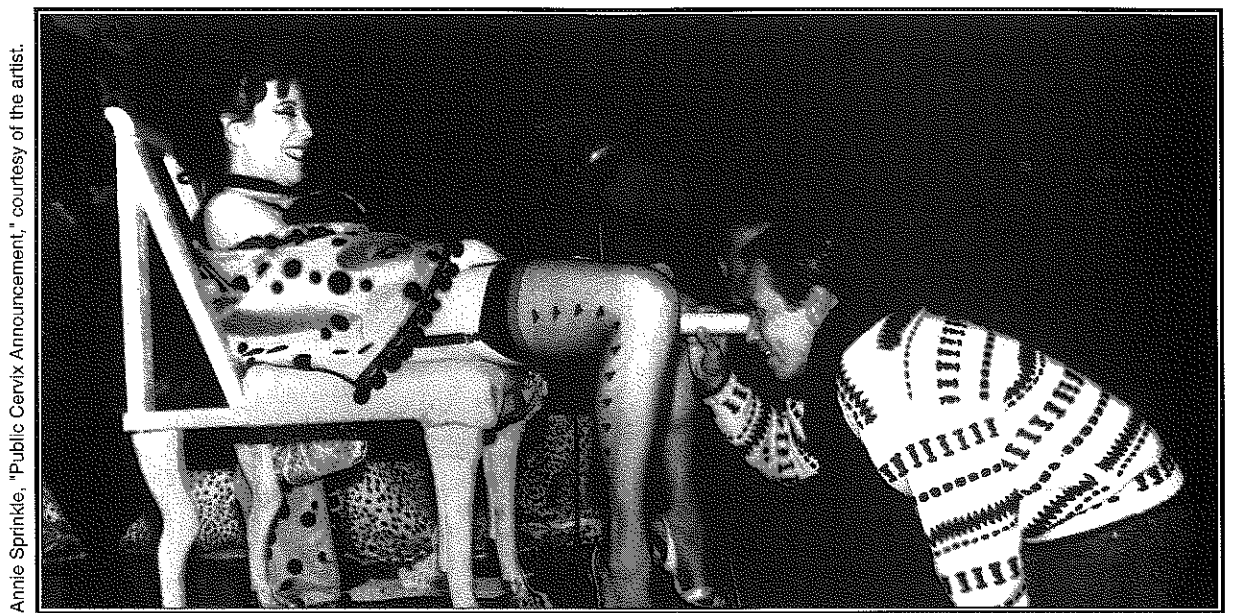
Within the contemporary fine-art discourse, the destabilizing effects of situating the viewer-as-the-viewed have been mobilized by artists working out of feminist and post-colonial positions.

James Luna's *Artifact Piece* involves 'exhibiting' himself in a museum vitrine along with 'the contemporary artifacts of a Luiseno man': his divorce papers, college diploma and a label stating his name, birth date and tribe. In the context of New York's 1992 *Decade Show*, his breathing, living presence functions to fracture the stasis common to museological representations of Native Americans. Pre-dating Luna, Ojibwe artist Rebecca Belmore also framed herself as an artifact to protest *The Spirit Sings*, an exhibition mounted at Calgary's Glenbow museum during the 1988 Olympic Games. Billed as the 'artistic traditions of Canada's Native Peoples,' the display returned 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, Belmore displayed herself as 'Exhibit #671 B,' which is the Ontario Liquor Control Board's licence number for a brand of skid-row wine. Presenting herself as a live 'artifact' refused what Charlotte Townsend-Gault has called the "history" without time, social context or human beings' which characterized *The Spirit Sings* designer-displays of ceremonial objects.

In a similar gesture, Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gomez-Pena's *The Year of the White Bear* confronted the 1992 quinqucentenary celebrations of Columbus' 'discovery' of America. The performance involved publicly incarcerating themselves as 'two undiscovered indians.' Their clothing combined pseudo-primitive grass skirts and high tech running shoes. While in their cage, they would work on laptop computers, watch TV, sew voodoo dolls or exercise. Consciously drawing upon conventions within the history of human display, a plaque in front of the cage gave information about their supposed origins and explained that, for a fee, they would dance, tell stories or pose with audience members for polaroids. In the performers' estimation, over half of their audience thought they were real captives, 'true natives tainted with the detritus of popular culture.' This performance investigates two aspects of specularly. In twisting back the spectatorial gaze, it functions as a parody 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 misunderstanding.

Ex-porn star Annie Sprinkle's show *Post-Porn Modernist*, 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 transformation from shy, insecure Ellen Steinberg into 'Annie Sprinkle: Porn Star' in a slide show of 'before and after' photos. According to Sprinkle, 'The bigger the hair and the higher the heels, the bigger the star.' Sprinkle's stories from her days in the sex trade advocate safe sex practices and tolerance of sexual preferences. In preparation for her widely publicized 'Public Cervix Announcement,' she douches on stage while continuing a friendly banter. 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 genitalia, to enhance aesthetic appre-



Annie Sprinkle, "Public Cervix Announcement," courtesy of the artist.

ciation 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 Pena, 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 Micky Mouse ears on their heads.

Returning to the art gallery proper, Gary Hill's installation *Tall Ships*, part of the 1993 (New York) Whitney Biennial and now at the Ydesa Hendeles Art Foundation (Toronto), 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 specular object of multiple video generated viewers. In stereotypes of gallery viewing practices, life sized people appear to carefully approach the visitor, stop and ponder, shift from one foot to another, register a mild response, and then turn and walk away. These video loops have a rivetting effect, short-circuiting a consumptive one-way viewing habit by opening up an awareness of the state 'in-between' spectators and spectacle.

The above performances push beyond the superficial meaning of a given representation and stimulate a recognition of the social, political, and experiential 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 disconnected, objective position is problematized if the state 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.

My thanks to Susan Douglas and Jim Drobnick for their comments and suggestions.

Jennifer Fisher is a doctoral candidate in the Humanities Program at Concordia. She teaches contemporary art criticism and museum studies.

FURTHER READING

- Bataille, Georges. 'Museum.' *October*. Spring 1986.
- Bennett, Tony. 'The Exhibitionary Complex.' *New Formations*. Spring 1988.
- Bogdan, Peter. *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988.
- Pauline. *The French Revolution: As Seen by Madame Tussaud*. 'Witness Extraordinary.' London: Quiller Press, 1989.
- Kroeber Theodora. *Ishi In Two Worlds: A Biography of the Last Wild Indian in North America*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1961.
- Sawchuck, Kim. 'Unleashing the Demons of History: An Interview with Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gomez-Pena.' *Parachute*. July, Aug., Sept. 1992.
- Sprinkle, Annie. *Post-Porn Modernist*. Amsterdam: Torch Books, 1991.
- Townsend-Gault, Charlotte. 'Having Voices and Using Them.' *Arts Magazine*. Feb. 1991.
- Tussaud, John Theodore. *The Romance of Madame Tussaud's*. New York: George H. Doran, 1920.
- Werner, M. R. *Barnum*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1923.
- (Exhibition Catalogue) *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s*. New York: The Museum of Contemporary Art, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1991.