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# Reformulation of the museum's discourse in reflexive ethnographic exhibitions. Limits and ambivalences at the Museum der Kulturen (Basel) and the Neuchâtel Ethnography Museum

*Reformulation du discours muséal dans des expositions ethnologiques réflexives. Limites et ambivalences dans la réforme au Museum der Kulturen, de Bâle, et au musée d'ethnographie de Neuchâtel*

Gaëlle Crenn

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# **Reformulation of the museum's discourse in reflexive ethnographic exhibitions. Limits and ambivalences at the Museum der Kulturen (Basel) and the Neuchâtel Ethnography Museum.**

**Gaëlle Crenn**

Université de Lorraine, Centre de Recherche sur les Médiations (CREM) – France

During the last decades, following radical criticism (Jamin, 1998), ethnographic museums faced the urgent need to reform themselves. Seminal works in anthropology formulated critics toward ethnographic museums (Aldrich, 2012; Simpson, 2001, Clifford, 1997; Ames, 1992). According to Dubuc,

heavy of a colonial past and seeking a new path, ethnology museums, or better, anthropology museums, are currently living an existential crisis (Dubuc 2002, p. 31).

The crisis addresses their missions and meanings, and, as Françaço notices, it questions their practices in a changing context:

in a world increasingly connected, museums have been subject to criticism and reassessment of their objectives, and Europeans in particular have gradually tried to reconfigure their collection and exhibition practices in a post-colonial context (Franço, 2013: 451).

Benkirane and Deuber Ziegler underline the crucial questions that the museums have to answer: "What are ethnographic museums? At what kind of culture do museums contribute when they expose cultures? In the post-colonial era, what intellectual heritage do these museums claim?" (Benkirane & Deuber Ziegler, 2007). Answering these frontal questions first demands institutional change. It requires a rewriting of the museums' discourse as well as new conceptions of otherness (Maze, Poulard, & Ventura, 2013) and the invention of a new role. The challenge for today's museums then is to establish institutional positions articulating reformed narratives and (re)legitimation. But how can these museums, which owe the constitution of their collections primarily to colonial enterprises, rethink collections, museum work and otherness in the context of postcolonial discourse (Thomas, 2012; Schmouts, 2007)? How can they reformulate their ground narratives in order to reaffirm their institutional legitimacy without infringing their core missions at the same time? According to Basu and MacDonald, in response to the criticisms and suspicions about ethnographic museums, adding reflexive historical sections to exhibitions have become an ubiquitous practice: "Reflexivity has become a new orthodoxy" (Basu, MacDonald, 2007:20). Our contribution explores this reflexive process in two recent exhibitions: "Expeditions. Bringing back the World in a Suitcase" presented at the Museum der Kulturen Basel (MKB) (2012-2016), and "Return from Angola", (2007- 2010) at the Ethnographic Museum of Neuchâtel (MEN).

Exhibitions are dense spaces saturated with signs, where the body of the visitor comes into contact with the exhibits (Davallon 1999)<sup>5</sup>. Exhibitions are defined by their “textual and media forms” (forms textuelles et médiatiques) (Boucher & Schiele, 2001). We explore the program these exhibitions are based on (Drouguet & Gob, 2014), and especially the place provided for visitors in the exhibition’s display (Akrich 1987; Macdonald, 1996), in order to understand the discursive strategies implemented by the two museums. Our contribution illuminates how reformist narratives take place in these exhibitions and how, through such self-exhibition strategies, the two museums ultimately reinforce the legitimacy of the Western museum. Through their displays, both exhibitions do challenge the established system of museum values. However, ambivalent positions (toward the use of contemporary art, the meaning of objects, and the representation of subjects show the limits of the narratives’ critical resettling.

## Exploring the history of expeditions

The two exhibitions presented in two of the major Swiss ethnological museums in Basel and Neuchâtel take expeditions as a topic. In Basel, the course successively presents four major expeditions (Sri Lanka, Vanuatu, Indonesia and East Timor, and Cameroon) between the 1890s and 1950s. The exhibition showcases the collection’s acquisition context, showing the contingencies of collecting: the concrete, material, and sometimes trivial conditions in which objects are acquired. Beginning with the explorer’s portrait, it ends with the evocation of the “treasure” of multiple societies, preserved in the museum’s “warehouse”. For each expedition, collected objects are displayed in a specific way that underlines the values attributed to heritage and otherness during that period. Multimedia contents (texts, maps, and many photographs) allow visitors to dive deeply into the historical context.

In Neuchâtel, the exhibition focuses on one single expedition, the second scientific Swiss Mission in Angola, and creates a “return” in order to recall its scale, its nature, its achievements, but also its heritage. Faithful to the “muséologie de la rupture”<sup>6</sup>, the exhibition offers visitors a sophisticated and easily affordable game, in which each step of the museum work corresponds to a display and presents, among other objects, the tools of the museum professionals. In the first section, “Training the Scientific Gaze”, visitors enter a reconstruction of Théodore Delachaux’s workroom. Personal collections of the scientist are exposed in the style of an imaginary “cabinet de curiosité”. In the second section, “Fever of Departure,” we enter an immersive installation where objects evoking departure (such as a hardware list and exploration maps) overwhelm us. Typed texts from Delachaux’s archives recall the motivations of the journey. The “Field” section displays photographs on two transparent tissue screens, following the principle of the dioramas. Depending on the lighting, we discover frontstage or backstage photographs referring either to aesthetic or documentary type. In the room of the “Great Unpacking”, “authentic objects” are presented under glass display, but surrounded by other objects, the tools of the

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<sup>5</sup> The exhibitions anticipate the path of visitors. However, they still can thwart the implemented strategies (Chaumier, 2011; Davallon, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> In the 1980s and 1990s, the exhibitions held at the MEN under the direction of Jacques Hainard, in a critical and poetic approach known as the “*muséologie de la rupture*” (rupture museology), made it a key place for reflection on museum practices (Gonseth, 2008a, Hainard, 2007).

curators, in order to highlight the research work in the museum. In the same room, the "Masterpieces" section underlines the clashes between distinct criteria of value inside the museum and in the marketplace. The last section, "Objects", questions the issue of ownership in heritage.

The two exhibitions focus on collecting, preserving and exhibiting, namely the core functions of museum work. They both look back at the history of the museum's founders, with the will to contextualize the project, the actors and their actions. Through a retrospective glance, they aim to operate a double unveiling, both showing the inner work of the museum and pointing out key historical periods in the constitution of collections.

## Manifesto exhibitions

The exhibitions came at a significant moment in the history of the museums: renovation for one, new direction for the other. Besides, they inaugurated, in both museums, a new format of semi-permanent exhibitions. In Basel, the exhibition is visible for four years (June 2012-April 2016). In Neuchâtel, the exhibition runs for just over three years (December 6, 2007-31 December 2010). They are opportunities to express a statement at a key time in the life of the institutions, to open a new era.

The Museum der Kulturen, the National Museum of Ethnology, reopened in 2012. The intervention of "home" architects Herzog and de Meuron modernized the space. The new silhouette blends referents of the local vernacular architecture and spectacular international modernism. As curator Gaby Fierz explains in the *Journal* of the exhibition, the changes represent a "turning point for the Ethnographic museum of the twenty-first century".

[It] takes up the challenge of the new tasks, thematizes its history, and follows new paths in the encounter with others and with the difference" (*Exhibition Journal*, "A new name and a new concept").

For the Museum of Basel, it is a new beginning, a time for a "conceptual opening [and] a new understanding of the role of ethnological museum, vowing to a living cultural dialogue" (*Ibid.*). In Neuchâtel, the "Return from Angola" exhibition is the first semi-permanent project undertaken by the new team led by Marc-Olivier Gonseth, following the departure of Jacques Hainard in March 2006<sup>7</sup>. The new team, however, intends to follow in the wake of the previous one, with Gonseth and Hainard having cooperated for many years. The location of the exhibitions in their respective buildings also highlights the roles assigned to the temporary exhibitions. In Neuchâtel, the "Angola" exhibition re-invests the ancient Pury pavilion building, previously dedicated to the presentation of the permanent collection. The exhibition is not only housed there, but even more, it adjusts itself to the house, tightly fitting the binding configurations of the rooms covered with glass displays. The choice of the historic building demonstrates the commemorative and (re)founding aspect of the project. On the contrary, in Basel, the "Expedition" exhibition takes place in the newly "white cube" renovated spaces. According to Françoise, the "open, plain white

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<sup>7</sup> After the temporary exhibition « Figures de l'artifice » has been presented in the temporary exhibition area.

walls" make the spatial design "a metaphor for the entire exhibition project: open and clear in broad daylight" (Françoze, 2013: 452.)

Both exhibitions function to redefine the institutional project: they are manifesto exhibitions. They are distinctive by their meta-discursive character. Indeed, their true subject is the museum itself. They question its legitimacy and its predatory nature through the return to historic collecting expeditions. Such exhibitions are opportunities to address a statement about the institutional project and the definition of its current principles of action, both to peers and to the general public.

## **Re-contextualizing historical foundations**

Both exhibitions focus on expeditions undertaken by and for the museum, in different periods of history, and they are committed to re-contextualizing the historical foundations of the museums through a reflective gaze. They use different strategies in order to introduce critique into the museum's history.

Both museums adopt a local angle: the exhibitions present Basel and Neuchâtel ethnologists, and invite visitors to enter the discourse guided by the explorers themselves who worked at the Museum. While avoiding hagiography, the biographical dimension allows customization and facilitates identification. In Basel, each historical chapter is introduced by the portraits of the founders and their motivations, through a slideshow combining quotes, pictures, reproduction of documents, etc. In Neuchâtel, it is mainly through the eyes of Théodore Delachaux that the visitor is invited to follow the expedition in Angola. Through the portraits of the explorers, presented as typical figures of their times, visitors come to understand the *zeitgeist* with their conceptions of science and their motivations for collecting.

The exhibitions follow similar conceptual courses. They describe the successive stages of museum work and a specific type of final output, the exhibition. In order to highlight the historicity of research, collection and conservation methods, the exhibitions involve visitors in a process of comparing museum work at different periods of time, thus revealing the socially constructed nature of scientific understanding. In Basel, visitors conduct their own critical review through the four expeditions and the different exhibitions derived from them, that they then are invited to compare. The exhibition re-displays the collected objects to reveal the constructed nature of the ethnological exhibition and to highlight the logic they responded to at various times. For the exhibition to Sri Lanka, large, spectacular objects collected for prestige are clearly separated, in order to highlight their individual value. In Vanuatu (New -Hebrides), objects (masks, jewelry) are collected by series, illustrating aspects of life through material culture. Jewelry is displayed by function, the masks are arranged according to their social role. The presentation also increases their formal beauty and conveys a strong aesthetic impact. In Timor, the presentation is more systematic and functional. For instance, the spoon series show distinct provincial styles within a whole united culture. Thus, the juxtaposition of several period of time helps reveal the frame of thoughts specific to each period and, finally, helps raise awareness about the historicity of scientific classification and display.

In Neuchâtel, museum work is dissected stage by stage. The visit gives clues to understanding the use of tools by the curator, and also to deconstruct and criticize his work. For instance, through the title "The Great Unpacking" ("Le grand déballage"), the necessity of collecting is addressed; the double framing of photographs (as ethnographic documents; as sensible portraits of subjects with individuality) helps question the construction of others. The confrontation of art fair and museum values recalls the social order of significances surrounding building heritage. These hybrid installations stress the ambiguities in the construction of science and art values (Clifford, 1988).

The two exhibitions are designed to unveil or even to strip bare the social construction of ethnological knowledge in the museum context, revealing its stages, its methods, its instruments. In this regard, they are also histories of museum displays.

### **Hybridizing scientific and artistic register**

Close observation of the exhibition's design reveals a hybridization of scientific and artistic registers in the museum discourse. This strategy can lead to a varied tone of criticism toward ethnographic displays.

Both exhibitions are immersive. According to Montpetit, immersive exhibitions belong to the category of "analogical" museology (1996). They are designed under an "endogenous logic", where visitors are encouraged to recognize a familiar world of reference (be it real or imaginary). More than actual reconstruction, the environments are evoked, with emblematic objects displayed in realistic three-dimensional environments. In Basel, the choice and display of objects blend disparate registers, producing a hybridization of forms. The evocative exhibits impart references from the field of contemporary art. The overall design is marked by a tendency to aesthetize. For instance, in the first section of the exhibition, a series of juxtaposed field sheets is presented on a wall: this "table of fields sheets" can be read piece-by-piece or contemplated as a whole. As a whole, the series of sheets grasps the systematic character of the scientific enterprise. But it also induces an aesthetic reading, reminiscent of the works of contemporary artists exploring such systematic treatment for a series of objects (such as Christian Boltanski or Annette Messager). Similarly, this kind of artistic reference is usual in the design approach in Neuchâtel, and it is present in the "Angola" exhibition, where the curator admits "free loans to Anish Kapoor" in the final installation "Masterpieces" (Gonseth, 2008b, p.60).

Moreover, in both exhibitions, there is an undertaking of critical discourse by contemporary art. In Basel, the "Expeditions" exhibition is interspersed with a temporary exhibition entitled "Semiwild-Unlimited desire" featuring the work of the artist Ania Soliman. The exhibition aims at "challeng[ing] the multiple meanings of artifacts":

What are the links between objects and desire? And how is this manifest in the economic environment? By comparing the objects of the museum's collection with her own works, the artist creates an unconventional installation that questions the museological practices and probe together the themes "possession" and "desire." The visitors embark on an unexpected journey. (MKB, "Semiwild-Unlimited Desire" Exhibition's flyer)

The "Semiwild" exhibition unfolds partly in the heart of the "Expeditions" exhibition. In the first section, the installation "Bodies of currencies" displays disjointed parts of a model on a broad plinth. A column of video screens broadcasts a cyclic series of national symbols (national flag, geography, currency, writing,...). The label ties the two exhibitions by asking "what types of objects produce cultures?"

The exhibition "Expeditions. To bring back the world in a suitcase" brings together objects from 13 countries, collected by Swiss explorers in colonial times. Since then, almost all the countries gained independence, with national borders, a flag and a currency, and adhere to the IMF.

This display establishes a strong link between the two exhibitions, which mirror each other. The following parts are located on the upper floor. The exhibition consists of six sections, each one evoking museum tasks: "1. Selecting; 2. Processing, packaging, documenting; 3. Classifying; 4. Giving sense to (and through) the exhibit; 5. Questioning the value of the object". On the upper floor, a set of carved wooden statues, with sizes ranging between one and two meters, is arranged to turn away visitors. This reversal is sufficient in itself to question the status of these works: what is the initial context in which they were intended to take place? How were they intended to be seen? As such, the installation is a metaphor and an illustration of the de-contextualization-recontextualisation operation behind the museum process. The exhibition questions, raises and reverses the sense of displaying, as well as the values and conventions underpinning the economy of the museum. Overlooking "Expeditions" from above, "Semiwild" forms a negative mirror. Two voices meet in the museum: the voice of designers of the "Expeditions" exhibition, the voice of the invited artist. Two voices that do not say the same things about a shared topic. It is the tension between these two voices that provides support for the reformulation of the positioning of the museum. However, if contemporary art is used to support a critical discourse, it also serves to put it away from the museum officials. The use of contemporary artists to criticize the museum discourse can also be an easy way to exempt the museum staff itself from spelling the critics.

## **Unsolved issues in the discourse of the museum**

In both exhibitions, the displays lead visitors to raise questions about objects, about their status, their meanings, their properties and their uses. Discussions on "objects" are thus a means to unveiling the epistemic museum. Some displays tackle the role of material objects in anthropological knowledge, taking up the controversy of ethnology since Boas, who claimed in 1907 that "the material object [was] insignificant in relation to the scientific issues raised today" (Dubuc, 2002: 42.). In Neuchâtel, one can read between the lines, from his marginal writings, a critique by Théodore Delachaux about the "deficiencies" of the object: "because collections are not all and there would be so much to further study on the spot". Arnold Van Gennep (1914) is quoted at the end of the exhibition:

If ethnographic museums in their current state are hurting our science, it is because they perpetuate the old illusion that what is important to it is primarily the knowledge of material objects.

Other displays discuss the allocation of value to objects in the field of art or in the source societies. In Neuchâtel, "Masterpieces" introduces a reflection on the objects' biography and the value being given, inside and outside the museum. Other questions relate to the limits of the presentation of material objects. Some exhibits expose paradoxes inherent to the display of material objects to explain social phenomena; whose meaning is immaterial; whose indigenous use requires that they would be destroyed, or whose original destiny is to be hidden. In Basel, didactic devices are installed to think / reflect the qualities attributed, here and there, to objects and the importance of their intangible part. For instance, in the expedition to Cameroon (1950s), funeral urns are exposed. Considered as "souls' pots", they could not be taken away "without doing violence to the village". The women potters then agree to create pots "without souls" for collectors. These ones are "displayable" without damage.

The origin of collected objects, and the conditions of their collecting, are also put into context, again introducing critical reflexivity about the museum enterprise. In Basel, some weapons come from confiscation by the colonial army. Relations with colonial powers are mentioned to explain the presence of collections. However, these statements remain rather discreet. In Neuchâtel, Théodore Delachaux's doubts about collecting are mentioned but rarely questioned. In Basel, the visitor is invited to live a playful interactive experience. A telescope is placed near a window to look out to the outside wall of the inner court. The wall is covered by a series of field sheets, small square photographs (about 5 cm square), and some larger pictures. This quirky device is entitled "Discover yourself Paul Hinderling and René Gardi's Africa!" (naming the explorers). It involves the visitor in an act of "looking Africa at a distance". It offers a metaphor for the distance, both geographical and intellectual, with source societies and, as such, it guides us toward the way we should look at the exhibition, and beyond, at the whole museum's project. This device excepted, critical discourses on objects and collecting remain quite moderate, in order not to fully impair in museum enterprise.

Along with the objects, subjects from the colonized or explored countries are represented in the exhibitions. The way they are represented tells us how far the critical discourse intends to go. In Basel, the last section is dedicated to testimonies of explorers and museum professionals. Among them, only one indigenous voice is available, which is few. The exhibition re-displays models of the collections in a new context of interpretation. For instance, life-size models of a Wedda couple, originally displayed in a physical anthropology room, are re-contextualized. Surrounded by many cultural objects, the models evoke a cultural community, more than physical characteristics. At the same time, they are framed by a blue panel that surrounds them and isolates them from the context of the display as a whole, thus showing its socially constructed nature. The border operates literally and conceptually as a reframing of the meaning. However, a visitor reading the exhibition's *Journal* or getting closer to the side windows will find some human skulls of Wedda people, lent by the Museum of Natural History. These human remains are presented as specimens and the history of their collection is quite brief. While the exhibition of human models, which might inflame the debate, is treated with caution, the fact of exposing human remains is not questioned. In a complementary manner, the presence of human remains in reliquaries or masks is not mentioned, let alone questioned.



In Neuchâtel, the representation of subjects is mainly to be found in ethnological *clichés* in the "Field" section. The "Return from Angola" exhibition concludes with a reflection on the concept of "ownership" in heritage, quoting the response made by an indigenous person to Théodore Delachaux when he wanted to acquire an object: "I can not sell it, it is not mine". According to curator Marc-Olivier Gonseth, through this key phrase, the question of ownership "relates to both the source population and museum professionals" because "the heritage of others, gathered in ethnographic museums, does not indeed "belong to people" but has the capacity to "connect" people" (Gonseth, 2008b, p. 61). This position is partly an on-going critique made by the Neuchâtel museum against the fetishism toward objects, but it also offers a way of dealing in an euphemistic way with issues of ownership (versus dispossession) and property (versus theft, robbery or looting), while setting the stakeholders back to back. Therefore, any conceivable restitution is pushed into an indefinite and distant horizon and subject to conditions besides: "It is not unthinkable to imagine that major moves will take place one day if conditions permit", Marc-Olivier Gonseth says (2008b, p. 61). As Dubuc (2002) has shown, the use of a technological argument is an effective way to justify the role of the museum in the appropriation of other's heritage.

Critical reflexive displays lead visitors to raise questions about objects and subjects. If they do not bear the same critical load in both museums, they remain often ambiguous; paradoxes are mentioned, without being totally clarified, ambivalences remain, without a clear way out. Finally, the representation of subjects from the source communities remains static, with their own relationship to heritage limited. The two exhibitions challenge at some point the system of values that governs the construction of meanings in the ethnographic museum. However, persistent ambivalences mark the limits of the reformulation of the institutional discourse. The museums do not draw all the consequences about the issues they raise, and consequently do not fundamentally challenge the legitimacy of the Western museum.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the research makes visible how these exhibitions challenge the museum's project and, at the same time, reaffirm the Western museum enterprise. The criticism of the Western museum is euphemized through two processes: first, through distancing the responsibility of the critical discourse, entrusted to a contemporary artistic voice; second, through the balance between contesting collection and maintaining ambiguities about the sense of objects and subjects. The ideology of authenticity remains pregnant to justify the preservation of objects and reaffirm the full authority of Western museums on collections. As shown by Dubuc, these arguments imply that "what belonged to everyone, eventually belongs to the ones who developed the ideological and technological equipment of such a project" (Dubuc, 2002: 34).

The two exhibitions also draw a clear limit between the historical period of foundation and today. Very little is known about the actual situation of the communities at stake. The "return from Angola" is barely an opportunity to "return to Angola". The country itself is overshadowed, or is relegated to a very indefinite future. Even though looking at contemporary communities was not the primary

objective of the exhibition, this temporal closure of the exhibitions may also act as a gate against criticism. Through their seminal semi-permanent exhibitions, the two Swiss ethnographic museums, while commenting on their documentation of the world, strongly reassert their institutional project. Ultimately, their "agencies of display" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998) contribute rather to a reassertion of authority of the Western museum and its legitimate right to collect, preserve and display.

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### **Abstract**

In response to the criticisms and suspicions about ethnographic museums, adding sections on collectors and collections has become a common, even ubiquitous, practice. It remains crucial to know how such a critical reflexivity is displayed and how unsettling it is for the museum. The ethnographic museums of Basel and Neuchâtel in Switzerland recently presented exhibitions tackling the topic of expeditions ("Expeditions" Museum der Kulturen; "Return to Angola," Neuchâtel Museum of Ethnography). Indeed, the subject of these reflexive meta-exhibitions is the museum itself, whose legitimacy and predatory nature is questioned. Our contribution illuminates how reformist narratives take place in these exhibitions and how, through such self-exhibition strategies, the museum reinforces the legitimacy of Western museums. Through their displays, both exhibitions challenge the established systems of museums' values. However, ambivalent postures (in the representation of subjects, in the expression of their voices, in the presence of human remains) show the limits of the critical resettling of the museums. In the end, it appears that these exhibitions are neither the place for undermining the Western museum nor places where the voices of others are expressed. Ultimately, the agencies of display contribute to a reinforcement of the museum's authority and its legitimate right to collect, preserve and display.

**Keywords:** collecting, expedition, reflexivity, agency of display, ethnology

### **Résumé**

**Reformulation du discours muséal dans des expositions ethnologiques réflexives. Limites et ambivalences dans la réforme au Museum der Kulturen, de Bâle, et au musée d'ethnographie de Neuchâtel.**

Face aux critiques et aux soupçons qui pèsent sur les musées d'ethnographie, l'addition de sections sur les collecteurs et les collections est devenue une pratique commune, voire omniprésente. Reste cependant à savoir dans quel but cette réflexivité critique est déployée et dans quelle mesure elle déconstruit le discours muséal. Les musées d'ethnographie de Bâle et de Neuchâtel, en Suisse, ont présenté récemment des expositions prenant pour sujet les expéditions de collecte (« Expéditions », Museum der Kulturen ; « Retour en Angola », musée d'ethnographie de Neuchâtel). Ces méta-expositions réflexives ont pour sujet véritable le musée lui-même, dont elles questionnent la légitimité et la nature prédatrice. Notre contribution éclaire comment se déploie un discours réformiste sur le rôle du musée et plus précisément sur la façon dont, par les stratégies choisies d'exposition de soi, le musée reformule la légitimité de l'entreprise muséale occidentale, sans en saper totalement les soubassements. Les expositions mettent en question, à travers le traitement des objets, les régimes de valeurs qui président à la construction de significations. Cependant, des postures critiques inabouties et ambivalentes (quant aux représentations des sujets et à l'expression de leurs voix, quant à la présence de restes humains) montrent les limites de la reformulation. Apparaît finalement ce que ces expositions ne sont pas : ni des lieux de remise en cause de l'entreprise muséale occidentale ni des lieux où s'exprime la voix des autres. En définitive, les stratégies expositionnelles déployées contribuent plutôt à une réaffirmation de l'autorité muséale et du droit à collecter, préserver et exposer.

**Mots-clés :** collecte, expédition, réflexivité, stratégie d'exposition, ethnologie.