

New Ireland: Arts of the South Pacific

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Musée du Quai Branly, 8 April to 20 July 2007

Almost a year after it opened, the Musée du Quai Branly remains the subject of intense speculation (including on this blog): how will its highly contested museographical project develop in the future? The dust had barely settled from the inauguration before the emphasis on aesthetics that characterizes the permanent exhibition had started to feel dated. The first major temporary exhibition, *D'un regard l'autre*, which traced five centuries of western representations of non-western peoples, was interpreted by many as a corrective to the de-historicized aesthetic shock of the galleries above. For all the splendour of its exhibits, *New Ireland: Arts of the South Pacific*, which runs from 8 April to 2 July, in turn represents a new chapter in the working through of the tension between art and anthropology in the new institution.

The exhibition, which occupies a large section of the ground floor 'garden' galleries, presents 150 objects from New Ireland and its neighbouring archipelago, arranged primarily according to location – separate sections display items from the south, central and northern regions – and subsequently according to a combination of aesthetic and functional criteria (Malagan sculptures are divided up into birds, fish, figures and couples and masks for lifting taboos, for example). The exhibition involved an uncommonly long preparation phase (ten years); it was originally commissioned for the Grand palais, a major temporary exhibition space in Paris, but was delayed on account of the upheavals that accompanied the creation of the Quai Branly. During this time, in order to establish a comprehensive database of objects, the curators visited a staggering 132 museums, a very large number of which are represented here. *New Ireland: Arts of the South Pacific* thus provides a unique opportunity to compare the very finest masks and sculptures to have found their way into European collections.

I was lucky enough to have the opportunity to visit the exhibition with the French curator, Philippe Peltier, in the company of a group of graduate students from the Ecole normale supérieure in Paris.

Rather than focusing on the exhibits, Peltier drew our attention to the exhibition design process: what criteria did they use to select objects? How did they work with the designer Massimo Quendolo (well known for his work with the old Musée des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie) to define the layout and feel of the space? What obstacles did they encounter? And how did they negotiate the thorny issue of aesthetics versus context? Peltier's observations about the exhibition provided a unique insight into what James Clifford has described as the need to 'track how those who animate this project [...] work with and against its spatial and ideological structures.'¹

The spatial structures posed the most obvious immediate difficulties. Jean Nouvel's powerful architecture dominates the space. The ceilings are alternately very low and very high, the space is fractured by giant columns, light seeps in through the edges of the blinds and noise percolates from the access ramp to the permanent exhibition. Quendolo and Peltier therefore took the decision to opt for equal boldness, creating asymmetric moveable walls and plinths in earthy colours. There is also a nod to the architecture of New Ireland, through the incorporation of woven fibre panels into the walls. Peltier explained that he had originally envisaged a very clear, bright space but, short of building a box-within-a-box, Nouvel's architecture rendered this impossible. The design certainly achieves the desired effect of directing visitor traffic and creating a series of distinct atmospheres. It is not however without its hazards, as Peltier unintentionally demonstrated by tripping over one of his own irregular installations (indeed, the day after the inauguration he confessed to having been busy with a saw and a paint pot, removing some of the shaper corners...).

Ideologically, Peltier and his American collaborator Michael Gunn (of the Saint Louis Art Museum) appear to have been subject to more subtle constraints. Whilst the exhibition would never have been commissioned had it not had the necessary aesthetic wow-factor, seen as essentially for drawing in the paying public, the curators had initially also planned to explore a historic angle. All the pieces on display were collected between 1890 and 1914, during the period of German colonisation. An introductory panel explains this, although the theme is not pursued further and questions that fascinated the curators, such as why the colonial period corresponded to a boom in the production of material culture on the island are addressed only in the catalogue. Indeed, whilst the colonial dimension is more visible here than in the permanent exhibition, the conditions in which the collections were gathered are likely to escape all but the most attentive visitors. Moreover, it could be argued that the films used to illustrate Malagan and Tubuan rituals efface the historical dimension, blurring past and present practice in a single atemporal ethnographic whole. Why this discrepancy between original proposal and final outcome? Peltier put it down to a “desire to be simple,” although the origins of this imperative were not clear. Did Peltier himself feel instinctively that the power of the objects would be diminished by their insertion in a more politicized narrative? Or was simplicity the expression of a bigger institutional logic that presumes that the language of aesthetics is the only one understood by the visiting public? The simplifying drive is also evident in the exhibition title. Gunn originally proposed ‘Walking shadows’ in order to draw attention to the role of Malagan sculptures in funerary rituals. The far less evocative final version was imposed by a nervous marketing department that feared that the public would shun an exhibition so abstract sounding.

Speaking at a 2000 conference at the MAAO Peltier asserted ‘our past as a colonial power and the political choices made bind us into a complex network of debts and responsibilities that implies cooperation.’² And indeed, it is in Peltier and Gunn’s work with the relevant source communities that *New Ireland: Arts of the South Pacific* really stands out from the other exhibitions at the Quai Branly to date. Having made a preliminary selection of objects they visited a large number of villages on the island with a photo album, soliciting memories, stories and comments to fill holes in the museum documentation. Many of the labels bear witness to this trip, citing local informants (indirectly) to explain the usage and provenance of various items. They also met with contemporary sculptors, whom Peltier would like to have invited to Paris had the cost not proved prohibitive. Nevertheless, *New Ireland* remains one of the few sites in the museum where there is real evidence of the ‘dialogue of cultures’ the institution so prominently espouses.

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~~If New Ireland Arts of the Pacific overall does a good job of reconciling different approaches it is~~ however also because the subject matter lends itself to disciplinary consensus. Peltier explained that one of the draws of the art of New Ireland is that it does not correspond to western assumptions about 'primitive' or 'first' arts i.e. it is finely worked, richly coloured and requires a technical mastery that corresponds readily to western conceptions of quality. Moreover, artists have a recognised and distinct status in the communities of northern New Ireland. A detached aesthetic presentation, foregrounding the formal qualities of the work, is perhaps less alien to the producing culture than it might be elsewhere. How the Quai Branly will contend with displaying the items from its collection that can be less readily subordinated to the dominant aesthetic narrative remains to be seen.

References

- James Clifford, 'Quai Branly in Process', October 120 (2007): 3-27. Available at <http://www.mitpressjournals.org/toc/octo/-/120>. Thanks to Haidy Geismar for highlighting this article on this blog.
- Philippe Peltier (2000), 'Les Musées: art ou ethnographie ?', in ed. Dominique Taffin, Du Musée colonial au musée des cultures du monde: Actes du colloque organisé par le Musée des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie et le Centre Georges-Pompidou, 3-6 juin 1998, Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, 205-218 : 215. My translation.