

# **Ethnographic collections in the hands of contemporary artists:**

## *The Joachim Schmid Collection and Mrs Cook's Kete in the Pitt Rivers Museum*

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Paper presented for the conference "The World Under One Roof: Past, Present, and Future Approaches to Universality in Ethnographic Museums", Vienna, Austria, August 19-24 2007.

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In this paper I will be probing into the Pitt Rivers Museum transformed into the space of cutting-edge art. The Museum was a stronghold where a particular mode of looking at cultural others operated. Today it is realised that ethnographic collections should not be appropriated for unilateral othering enterprises but serve to activate and articulate multifaceted cross-cultural processes. Two case studies of contemporary artists' interventions in the Museum will shed light on the future role of ethnographic museums, which lies in the universal engagement with discussing and understanding cultural differences in more open-ended ways.

### **Ethnographic museum of universal appeal**

The Pitt Rivers Museum is one of the museums in University of Oxford and specialises in archaeological and ethnographic objects. The present displays of the Museum date back to its earliest days in the late nineteenth century when its nucleus was formed by the gift collection of Lt. General Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt Rivers. On transferral to Oxford in 1884, it was not according to cultural or geographical areas but typological categories that his collection was organised out of the belief in evolutionary cultural progress, promoting comparative analysis of material forms and technologies across different societies (Chapman 1985: 33). Following the development of archaeology and

anthropology onwards, many objects have been collected through scholarly fieldwork from all over the world. The Museum can be understood to represent the world beneath one roof by collecting and exhibiting objects from different periods of time and from different parts of the world. The founding collection of 20,000 objects has grown to over half a million now. Their spatial manifestations still preserve the original typological formation, but this does not mean that the Museum holds on to outdated paradigms it once expressed.

In recognition that values and meanings attributed to the collections have entailed layers of nothing but the British view of the world, the Pitt Rivers Museum is trying to reengineer itself as an institution relevant to contemporary postcolonial sensibilities. The Museum's growing endeavours made to invite diverse and innovative interpretations of its collections are facilitated by the latest self-reflexive turn of anthropology towards decolonising institutional frameworks. It chimes in with the theoretical development of new museology that challenges existing premises and practices in representing cultural others (Clifford 1988; Hall 1997; Karp and Lavine 1991; Sherman and Rogoff 1994; Simpson 1996). Museums are nowadays looked upon not as a neutral vessel for presenting objective knowledge but as a medium of cultural production whereby socially embedded narratives and perspectives are performed in both intellectual and bodily manners for discussion, negotiation and meditation (Bouquet 2001; Hooper-Greenhill 1992, 1995; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2002, 2006; Macdonald 1996).

In this regard, the Pitt Rivers Museum for the last couple of decades has been committed to embracing and engaging with a wide spectrum of people, among which are contemporary artists. The driving force behind the rise of artists shown in the Museum can be found in many recent interdisciplinary approaches to contemporary art, notably in material culture studies, which focus on the potency and agency of artworks that could effect changes to social perceptions and relations (Gell 1998; MacClancy 1997; Marcus and Myers 1995; Pinney and Thomas 2001; Schneider and Wright 2006). On the part of artists who are featured in the Museum, the apparently archaic and somewhat arcane space may be a visually inspiring magnet, but clearly there is more to it than meets the eye. Through two projects of artists' museological interventions, I will be exploring how significantly and how subversively their artistic intentions could resonate with the Museum's cross-cultural undertakings.

### *The Joachim Schmid Collection (2000-2002)*

What German artist Joachim Schmid employed as a medium of intervention in the Pitt Rivers Museum is a set of mundane postcards. He stuck photographic postcards into the Museum's permanent display cases so that they appeared like part of museum objects. When I came across some of them from place to place without knowledge of his project, the presence of these postcards seemed intriguingly intrusive at first sight. My initial guess was that there might have been a contemporary anthropologist who had collected postcards as material culture from his or her research field – because anthropologists are the type of avid collectors. Modern everyday images printed in the identical postcard format in vivid colours, however, marked them off the rest of museum exhibits and made me wonder if something unusual was going on.



Figure 1. *The Joachim Schmid Collection*<sup>1</sup>

As I sifted through the entire space to find more of them, the images' themes looked perfectly within the purview of each vitrine's taxonomy. Postcards of kitsch kittens having tea and meals were put in the display case 'Animal Forms in Art.' Advertisements of a beauty salon and women's hairstyles were set up with Native American combs in rows. Photographs of Marilyn Munroe in diamond earrings and necklaces were in the display of 'Beads of Stone Glass and Pottery.' In the showcase of

<sup>1</sup> Photograph from the artist's website (<http://schmid.wordpress.com/works/2000-the-joachim-schmid-collection-at-the-pitt-rivers-museum/>).

‘Primitive Surgical Instruments’ there was a postcard where a nurse stood next to a fridge containing pharmaceutical bottles. Tourist postcards of Venetian gondolas were inserted among models of boats and canoes. A photograph of a television set and Australian Aboriginal message-sticks were side by side in the section ‘Writing and Other Modes of Communication.’ Postcards of Western dignitaries and royal families wearing sashes and regalia were categorised into ‘Ornaments Denoting Personal Status.’ In this way of juxtaposition, twenty-two small installations of eighty-six postcards constituted *The Joachim Schmid Collection at the Pitt Rivers Museum*.

The title complies with the convention in which some museum collections are named after their collectors. Indeed an enthusiastic collector, Schmid has been amassing an extensive range of photographs from the early 1980s to date. He salvages snapshots disused and discarded on city streets; he retrieves postcards, posters and other pictorial paraphernalia from archives and flea markets; or he cuts photographic images out of catalogues, publications and the Internet. These pictures are then numbered and catalogued, which become raw material for his art installations<sup>2</sup>. He describes the process of feeding the images into his art as artistic ‘recycling’ (Sachsse 2000: 256).

The leitmotif of recycling unmistakably came to the surface in *The Joachim Schmid Collection at the Pitt Rivers Museum*. It was in fact a project commissioned as supplementary to the special exhibition *Transformations: the Art of Recycling* which dealt with how people recycled for practical and creative reasons in different societies throughout history. Schmid forged a link to this theme by reusing postcards from his own vast recycled collection of commonplace photographs. What drew him to the postcard format is that the mobile medium circulates many conventional images across space and time as is the case with postcards that people collect from tourist spots. He picked up on postcards as found objects and as cultural practices. In the permanent displays of the Museum, his postcards created consonance and dissonance at once amongst museum exhibits. By means of “the archetypal recyclers of images” he posed a poignant question whether the Museum too is a recycler of some cultural stereotypes by collecting and juxtaposing material objects according to criteria that are systematic in principle but are often serendipitous to a certain degree (Edwards 2000: 72).

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<sup>2</sup> For example, *Pictures from the Street*, a work in progress since 1982, is composed of now nearly 900 images, many of which are torn-apart, walked-on, tire-tracked, rain-soaked, or sun-faded. For *Photographic Garbage Survey Project* carried out in 1996-97, he made inspection tours to selected cities all around the world and presented photographs found in each city along with a map, a list of discovery streets and a certificate-like report containing statistical evaluation stamped and signed by the artist. In the equally imposing work *Archiv* from 1986 to 1999, literally thousands of found photographs were gathered and grouped simply by shared subjects or formal traits.

Schmid's work made up of familiar images in the uniform format is apt to prompt a series of critical contemplation. In terms of the context of the Pitt Rivers Museum in particular, it undermines a widely accepted notion of ethnography executed in the space. The Museum is supposed to be a place for non-Western and out-of-date objects, but the photographs in his work are those taken in the West in the 1960s through to the 1990s. Challenging the preconception of the Museum vis-à-vis other cultures and bygone cultures, he invites viewers to look over the nature of perception in the ethnographic museum. As a matter of fact, the Museum has quite an amount of collections from British, European, and the 20th-century material culture, and his postcard compendium raises an awareness of the very presence. Encountering the samples of modern Western culture in postcards that unexpectedly emerge among exotic artefacts, viewers come to pause and rethink about assumptions about cultural otherness.

Transforming a postcard into an object of fascination, what Schmid brought forth is not so much individual photographs as the acts of accumulating, archiving and arranging them. This is concerned with transformations that take place in museum space. In the Pitt Rivers Museum, ordinary objects are organised into the peculiar form of ordered collections by selection, classification, description and presentation. No matter how banal a thing is, the museum technologies may subject it to museumification that would recontextualise objects not in terms of representing an original context per se but rather attaching to it a new interpretative context. Through the museological metamorphosis, everyday artefacts of cultural others form the basis for anthropological propositions and arguments in the Museum. It is the very context of the Museum that transformed Schmid's collection of postcards from a mere accumulation to a conceptual artwork. In some measure, his practice of found art bears an analogy to the Museum's curatorial practice, which deploys postcards as such so that they seem devoid of any touch of the artist but his relocation of them does yield new values and meanings.



Figure 2. *The Joachim Schmid Collection*<sup>3</sup>

During the exhibition viewers were encouraged to send in postcards their responses to Schmid's art installation, and thirteen of them along with the collection of his postcards were added to the permanent collections of the Pitt Rivers Museum after the exhibition was dismantled. The evolving process around anonymous postcards in a series of formation and transformation by the artist, the curator and the audience implies subjectivity and arbitrariness to a greater or lesser extent, in which Schmid's artistic statement consists. In the ethnographic museum that is an arena of open-ended transformations, commonplace material objects are used not only for understanding societies but could become a critical tool of examining the implications of what it is to investigate and communicate them cross-culturally.

### ***Mrs Cook's Kete (2002-2003)***

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<sup>3</sup> Photograph from the exhibition's website of the Museum  
(<http://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/TRANSFORMATIONS/images.html>).

The second intervention in the Pitt Rivers Museum that I would like to turn to is the project of women artists Christine Hellyar and Maureen Lander from New Zealand. Lander is of half Maori descent and her art stems from the Maori craft tradition of weaving kits and cloaks with natural fibres. As part of her art practice she traces ancient Maori treasures 'taonga,' especially those which have been dispersed in museums around the world since colonial times such as Captain James Cook's collection in the Museum. To have physical contact with these objects is considered by Maori people to come close to ancestors who made and used them and to the legacy of their knowledge (Henare 2005: 47). Non-Maori New Zealander Hellyar is also interested in the historical encounters between the English and the Polynesian during James Cook's voyages. Her attention is focused upon the exchanges of material culture and the changes in natural environment caused by those contacts. She primarily uses natural materials together with ordinary domestic objects for site-specific sculptural work, often investing them with an air of rarity by placing them in trays, cupboards and glass cabinets.

Hellyar and Lander teamed up for the intervention in the Pitt Rivers Museum with respect to the ways it weaves historical memories. Museum objects are tied into a set of narratives spun by museological processes in search of bringing order to a history of some kind, which might be actually a particular way of thinking at a particular time for a particular group of people. The artists did not confront or challenge the Museum's history-making and instead chose to imitate its modus operandi to delve into what it represents and what it does not. The focal point of the project was directed towards James Cook's voyages to South Pacific in the eighteenth century, and at the core of the artists' intervention in the history was the combination of fact and fiction. Their starting point was to imagine as if a Maori basket 'kete' were newly found in south London where James Cook's wife Elizabeth Cook had lived after his death. The kete was thought to have belonged to Mrs Cook and contained a variety of rather unusual objects from the South Sea Islands. Many of them were not represented in other collections from James Cook's voyages, and so these curiosities got to be displayed at the Museum. Coming up with this storyline the artists envisaged what kind of collection might have been made by Elizabeth Cook if she had travelled with her husband to the Pacific. The whole project to materialise the collection was hence named *Mrs Cook's Kete*.



Figure 3. *Mrs Cook's Kete*<sup>4</sup>

Prior to making installations, Hellyar and Lander carried out preliminary research on the Forster Collection of the Pitt Rivers Museum which had been obtained by Reinhold Forster and his son George Forster during James Cook's second voyage from 1772 to 1775. This historic collection informed and inspired the artists' speculations about Mrs Cook's journey. Fleshing out the imaginary journey, they generated a series of contemplative conjectures in tune with their shared concerns with the issues of gender and ecology. Like George Forster who kept a journal to describe James Cook's voyage and the island habitants, would Mrs Cook have had good observational skills? Like her cousin Isaac Smith who as an expert draughtsman assisted Cook in surveying, might she have had a finely tuned curiosity and have been keen on learning about new ways of seeing and doing? Like physician John Fothergill, would she have had a well-informed knowledge of exotic plants and an understanding of how they may have been used in other countries? Before anything else, the artists from a gender-wise perspective were interested in the interactions that might have occurred between women. Would they have shared and exchanged information and skills reflecting mutual interest in everyday household matters? Would Mrs Cook have

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<sup>4</sup> Photograph from the artist's website (<http://www.nz-artists.co.nz/hellyar/hellyar.htm>).

personally collected materials concomitant with the empathic relationships rather than merely from a desire to accumulate exotica?

The resulting exhibition presented artefacts that a woman might have collected on an expeditionary voyage, which looked like part of James Cook's collections but actually were found and made by the artists themselves in various media. They produced flax threads tied up ready for use or already made into different samples with a range of techniques such as beating, binding, plaiting, dyeing, knotting, weaving and twining. They fabricated woven bags, pressed specimens of plants, botanical drawings, bottles containing herbal samples, and so on. Among other plants they emphatically used 'pingao,' a native dune plant in New Zealand which traps sand around its stems and leaves and is used as a weaving fibre for its bright yellow colour<sup>5</sup>. As well as a small bottle of pingao seeds labelled 'Plant Me,' seedling trays were made from bundles of dried split pingao leaves as if small plants began to grow from these seeds. The artists also reproduced traditional Maori string figures in which string loops were transformed into a series of navigational configurations. Plus the golden colour of pingao, red colour was deliberately used here and there, which could denote blood bringing the museum space to life or could be associated with the Maori connotation of red for high rank and sacredness (Neich 1996: 74). All these items were arranged and placed in accordance with the Pitt Rivers Museum's organisation of collections by type and function. Many of them infiltrated into permanent display cases for domestic activities such as cooking, clothing, cleaning, sewing, dressing and adorning<sup>6</sup>.

What Hellyar and Lander suggested through the fictional collection is that in the ethnographic museum there may well be a sort of lacunae in representing historical memories because they cannot help being fragmented into an array of objects. Certain standpoints may not be embodied in material and written evidences in hand, or there may be certain voices that are hidden, erased or marginalised, sometimes hinging upon

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<sup>5</sup> Ecologically, the golden sedge once grew abundantly around the coastlines of New Zealand but its habitat is now threatened by introduced 'marram' grass as a result of colonisation on native flora and fauna. Culturally, pingao is taonga and there is an ancient legend about its origin that has a metaphorical significance to Maori people with regard to natural and cultural boundaries (Jahnke 1996: 167-168; Pendergrast 1996: 117-118).

<sup>6</sup> In parallel with the main exhibition, both the artists contributed to the Museum's *Pacific Pathways*. It is a web-based exploratory tool that interprets the Forster Collection of the Museum from different perspectives by commissioning Pacific artists, anthropologists, art historians and museum curators (<http://projects.prm.ox.ac.uk/forster/pathways.html>). Hellyar made a path called *New Zealand Flax Travels Well*, connecting flax-related objects and documents from the Collection with the context of *Mrs Cook's Kete*. Lander in collaboration with photographer Tim Mackrell constructed photomontage work *Postcards from the Antipathies*, a fictional narrative of the growth of pingao that would have been planted from seeds in *Mrs Cook's Kete* spreading from the Museum into the adjacent Natural History Museum.

the desires and biases of the involved. To excavate the voids and to examine how to fill them is very much dependent upon who get engaged with them. From women's point of view the artists inserted imaginary but probable aspects into the eighteenth-century cross-cultural history represented in the Pitt Rivers Museum. Through the manipulative union of fictional artefacts with historical materials of the Museum, they elucidated the conditions under which possibilities of historical interpretations are adopted or refused.

For a publicity leaflet of this exhibition, Hellyar and Lander visualised Mrs Cook holding a kete by digitally adding it to her original oil portrait. In Maori symbolism, each kete is a vessel of knowledge transmitting different dimensions of the world (Simmons 1986: 3). Presumably the artists picked out a kete as an important metaphor for the existence of another reality beyond what we see before us and alternative history beyond what museums represent. The Pitt Rivers Museum turned out to be effective space for unpacking the artists' kete. Their juxtaposition of a fabricated history against a validated one made it possible not only to revisit a specific point of the past in an intimate way but also to reflect upon its historical memories embodied in the Museum. What their project put forward is that the ethnographic museum is not for end results but is up for constructing and deconstructing cross-cultural histories so that they never cease to speak to the present.

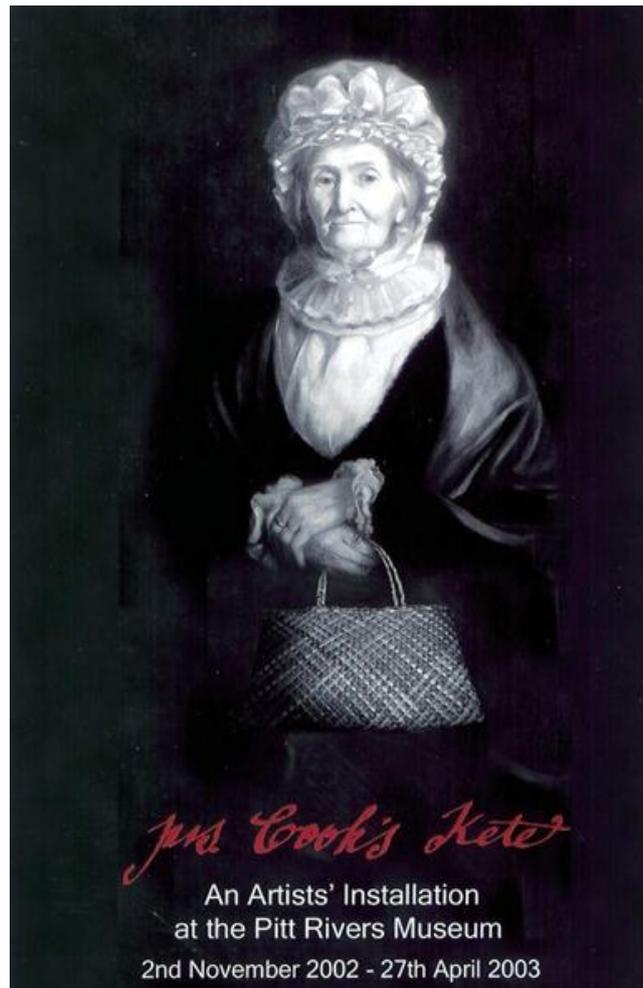


Figure 4. *Mrs Cook's Kete*<sup>7</sup>

### **Expanded horizons**

The Pitt Rivers Museum exerts a compelling spell on contemporary artists not least because historical manifestations can still be seen intact with the minimised use of modern display techniques. The artists' interventions discussed thus far were found to permeate seamlessly into the unique space, not distinguishing themselves from other museum exhibits on purpose. One might argue that the pieces of work by contemporary artists end up affirming the absorptive spatial power only to fail to produce a consequential distraction since the visual riches of the Museum simply swamp whatever contemporary work is added. It is yet another matter whether viewers appreciate it in the same way as artists and curators design and devise it. Perhaps this kind of intrusion by contemporary art might dismay some visitors who are faithful to the peculiar

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<sup>7</sup> Photograph from Hellyar's *New Zealand Flax Travels Well* commissioned for the Museum's *Pacific Pathways* (<http://projects.prm.ox.ac.uk:8080/pcs/viewpub.php?pid=254&id=18>).

institutional aura.

Nonetheless, it is obvious that these contemporary artworks let a greater deal of attention be paid to museological dynamics. The two projects above silently intercepted the Pitt Rivers Museum exploring to what degree the significance of cultural representations comes from material objects themselves. The way the artists related to the Museum seems to cogently point to the museological workings that transform cultural objects into ethnographic museum exhibits. Put otherwise, they make more visible how the Museum defines and defends the values and meanings of material objects in there. In the company of contemporary artworks, it becomes more recognisable that there is inherent and inevitable room for questioning official representations and for reorganising possibilities that might previously have been unthinkable.

The artists' creative force offers an opportunity of illuminating the notion that cultural identity and historical memory are not the static expression of what is out there but the way of active doings that bring about changes to our perceptions. Seen through the prism of contemporary art is where the ethnographic museum stands with possibility and responsibility that differ from those of the past. Acknowledging that the museum is a medium to perform embodied ideas and thereby to shape knowledge, ethnographic museums nowadays withhold a distanced gaze towards cultural others and put their own institutional authority into question when necessary. The Pitt Rivers Museum is making an effort to open itself up fully to the complexity and contradiction of comprehending the world, and in this vein the intervention of contemporary artists is being set in motion. The museum space must be in flux like a sort of circulatory platform that is perpetually unloaded and reloaded and is after divergence rather than convergence. Contemporary art seems one of the powerful means to push the boundaries of what the ethnographic museum could and should achieve with its multicultural collections on a universal basis.

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