Challenged Objects - Challenged Texts: Reflections on American Indian Museology and the *History of Reading*.

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In this paper I would like to discuss two aspects of the same phenomenon in the field of material culture. One is how post-modernity challenged - and has been challenging - the status of "ethnographic objects," and the other is how scholars coming from various disciplines elaborate appropriate methodologies to face the challenges.

This is, of course, an enormously wide topic and I am neither a student of material culture, nor a professional museologist to be able to provide a sufficient survey of it. Being, as for my formation, half an historian - half an anthropologist (a *historical anthropologist*, as we used to say beforeⁱ), I am going to restrict myself, on the one hand, to the example of the newly born Native American museology, i. e. a museology practised by the North American Indians themselves,ⁱⁱ and, on the other hand, to a relatively new research methodology in French cultural history which is called the *history of reading*. I would like to show in the end how much these two approaches to "objects" would have to say to one another, and to what extent they seem to represent two sides of the same coin.

In 2001 and 2004 I had the opportunity to spend altogether seven months in Lawrence, Kansas in the U. S. A. and to study aspects of the so-called "American Indian Ethnic Renewal." As I already summarized elsewhere (Sz. Kristóf 2004b, 2004c and Forthcoming/b) the "American Indian Ethnic Renewal" is a cultural and political struggle which dates back to the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s in the U.S.A. In its current forms it involves North American Indians living not only in the United States but also in Canada (especially in British Columbia), and its purpose is to create a new, specific, modern Indian identity by reviving Native American values and ways of life on the one hand, and integrating, on the other, in the surrounding Euro-American culture (Nagel 1997). From the 1960s on numerous Native American thinkers have contributed to establish and (re)formulate the ideology of the movement (especially Deloria 1988, 1992 and 1995; see also Biolsi-Zimmermann 1997), and there is an ongoing discussion of it even today. It would be perhaps more exact in this respect to speak about "ideologies" in the plural, since there is

a considerable variety in the ways of how individual Indian academics conceive their struggle for a new identity; whether they are ready, for example, to share their ideas with non-Indians in this process, or not, whether they intend to cooperate with the "white" society, or not (Thomas 2000). One finds more severe voices such as that of Devon A. Mihesuah or Donald L. Fixico demanding that any research relating to Native Americans be permitted (and sometimes even pursued) by Native Americans themselves (Mihesuah 1998, 2000 and 2001; Fixico 1997, 1998 and 2003), and one finds more moderate ones, such as that of N. Scott Momaday who argues for accepting Euro-American contribution for example in matters of Native American archeology, refused heavily by Vine Deloria Jr. (Thomas 2000, 254-267), or that of Duane Champagne who thinks that understanding is not tied to ethnic descendance and that indigenous studies should be open for anyone (Champagne 1998). What seems, however, to be a common basic concept, shared by all these thinkers, is that being "Indian" has to acquire a new and honorable meaning in these (post)-modern times. Indians have to cultivate their "cultural heritage" which is an all-Indian - as it is put - a Pan-Indian heritage, to be preserved as well as acted out while adapting to Euro-American society (Fixico 2003).

As I discussed in my former study on Pueblo Indian tourism (see Sz. Kristóf 2004b), this indigenous struggle for identity resulted in many important developments during the last three decades or so. One is that from the 1970s/1980s on tribal museums and cultural centers have been established on the reservations (there are more than two hundred of them today), another is that elementary and secondary schools have been founded (Archambault 1993), still another is that indigenous newspapers have been established, and most recently electronic homepages have been created by and for Native Americans (Sz. Kristóf 2004b, 74-76). A third and highly important momentum in this history is that since 1990, a federal law, the so-called Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) has made it possible for the 536 federally recognized tribes to claim back human remains and ceremonial-ritual objects from various collections and repatriate them. Since this date, dozens of Indian tribes have been submitting requests to archeological and ethnographical museums, universities and other public collections of the U.S.A. to gain pieces of their culture back (Mihesuah 2000). And there is a fourth development which lies behind the above mentioned three: during the 1970s-1980s a Native American intelligentsia was born that would reproduce itself now in its own educational, cultural, administrative institutions,

and that make considerable efforts to control - and in the same time to construct - its own "cultural patrimony" (Fixico 2003, 114; Sz. Kristóf, Forthcoming/b).

It is obvious that these developments constitute an unprecendented challenge for cultural anthropologists, museologists as well as legal scholars who are to work out the appropriate forms of cooperation with those culturally-politically conscious Indians. Handling "objects" and museological practice in general has become an important subject of this new discourse on cooperation, into which I was introduced during my stay in Lawrence, Kansas.

Lawrence - founded in 1854 as a mission center of the Unitarian Church and having some 72000 inhabitants today - has two institutions of higher education specifically for American Indians. One is the Haskell Indian Nations University that has developed from an industrial boarding school - founded with the intention of acculturating and christianizing Indians in 1884 - into a four year Indian university *par excellence* which represents today the only intertribal university for Native Americans and Alaska Natives in the U. S. A. The other is the University of Kansas, which established a *master's degree* program called *Indigenous Nations Studies* in 1997. The seminars and conferences held in these institutions as well as the books written for and used in them provided me an excellent opportunity to have a look in the work of Native American professors and students, and to get an overview of their current problems and efforts.

The sources of my knowledge on Native American museological matters are various. Apart from the above mentioned seminars, the MAASA (Mid-America American Studies Association) held its 20th conference in Lawrence between 17-19 April 2004 which was entitled "Creating Communities: American Studies, Indigenous Nations Studies, and First Nations Peoples." A section of this conference concerned specifically archival-museological matters, and a part of the pre-program was a guided visit to Haskell Cultural Center and Museum which was attached to the University in September 2002. The tour was lead by Bobbi Rahder, archivist and curator of the Museum, who gave a thorough introduction into current American Indian museology and its application there. And, one could also find a great amount of publication on NAGPRA, repatriation, and the handling of "objects"; it constitutes one of the most frequent discourses to be found in books written by Native American academics and used currently as course books, too; I will return to one their most important examples soon.ⁱⁱⁱ

The particular American Indian museology of which I had the chance in this way to get some impression of , appears at first sight to be considerably different from its Euro-American counterpart. It considers "objects" as *spiritual entities*, as *living beings* and holds that the purpose of their preservation is not so much exhibition, amusement or learning, but the continuation of an active, and primarily *ceremonial-ritual* use. As Bobbi Rahder told us, "objects" need sunlight as every living being does, so, time to time, they are being taken out to the fresh air, and, time to time, they are also given out to anybody willing to perform ritual ceremonies - either public or private ones - with them.^{iv}

These principles are also taught in Haskell University as part of the formation of future tribal archivists and museologists. It is a so-called *holistic* worldview - a total, or circular, or ritualistic worldview - in which this museology is inscribed and which the Indian academics admit as something characteristic of and distinctive for them. Let me cite a passage from a book of the above mentioned Donald Lee Fixico, a Shawnee-Sac and Fox-Muskogee Creek-Seminole academic, historian, who directed the Indigenous Studies Programs in the University of Kansas and taught at Haskell Indian Nations University, too. This passage illustrates how the specific idea of *holism* is used to be the focal point in this new/old indigenous cultural ideology.

"A *full* approach of examining community, culture, history and environment - says Fixico - is needed for studying native peoples, as one scholar remarked, 'all these are integral parts of living, dynamic, and adaptive heritage, and of the wider environment, within which communities develop sustainable cultural systems. In short, the perspective is one of *holistic* preservation and continuation of *all* aspects of cultural life. Museums should ensure that their practices are grounded in *holistic* heritage frameworks.' Using the Navaho approach of considering *all* relations and the Muskogee concept of *totality* is important for studying indigenous people. The next step is cultural patrimony of who owns native cultural evidence and traditional knowledge. To most people it would seem obvious that native people do, but the academic process of research and publication has caused serious discussion. Who owns the copyright of printed materials about indigenous peoples and their cultures? Who owns the stories which share traditional knowledge even with outsiders?" (Fixico 2003, 126. My emphasis: I. Sz. K.)

This passage would indicate two important points for outsider, non-native scholars. Firstly, it reveals much about the broader, international context of the concept of holism as

an indigenous idea of culture preservation. The scholar that Fixico cites above is Amareswar Galla, Professor and Director of Studies of the Sustainable Heritage Development Programs at the Australian National University, Canberra. Born and educated in India, Galla is an emblematic figure of indigenous cultural struggles in this post-colonial/post-modern era: he was the first Australian to be elected as President of the Asia Pacific Organisation, he was among the founders of the International Council of Museums, Paris, he founded and directed the National Affirmative Action Program for the participation of Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders in museums, galleries, national parks and World Heritage Areas in Australia, functioned as an International Technical Advisor for the implementation of Museums and Cultural Diversity Promotion at the National Museum of Ethnology, Leiden, and worked with UNESCO in the establishment of World Heritage Areas in Vietnam and India.

The presence and appreciation of Galla's views - as well as that of other Fourth World academics, such as Maori ones etc - in Fixico's text testifies to the fact that the "American Indian Ethnic Renewal" forms part of a broader phenomenon of cultural-political developments among post-colonial minorities. Apart from the U.S.A., Hawaii and Canada, a similar increase in self-consciousness and a similar fight for controlling "cultural property" was to be seen among indigenous people in Australia (Whittaker 1994), New Zealand (McKenzie 1993), New Caledonia (Kasarhérou 1993), or, for that matter, in Lapland or elsewhere in the Arctic (Ingold 1987; Nuttal 1998) etc. Indigenous academics know about each other's efforts, they gather regularly in workshops and conferences, they organize graduate student exchange programs such as WIGE, vi they have common forums in UNESCO, which contribute to the fact that they develop quite similar concepts.

Such a concept - and this is the second point that Fixicio's above cited text indicates is to be seen in the opposition between holism (i.e. a holistic-circular-relationist-ritual worldview, based mostly on orality) which North American Indians attribute to themselves, and linearity (i.e. a broken-divided-unilinear-profane worldview, based mostly on the written mode) which they attribute to Euro-American culture, in general. As Fixico put it, holistic thinking is viewing the world "according to relationships with the natural environment and a circular philosophy based on cycles of seasons, migrations of animals, and the rotation of the Earth and the stars" (Fixico 2003, xii), it is a logic that "adresses items as to their relationship within a system" (op. cit., 34). "Indian thinking" is a thinking in which physical and metaphysical aspects are combined, while linear thought is "based on the Western mind

believing in empirical evidence "only (op. cit., 2), it is "rationalizing how something originates at point A, is affected by some force or influence and transforms into B, to point C and so forth" (op. cit., 15). Shortly, "the linear mind looks for cause and effect, and the Indian mind seeks to comprehend relationships" (op. cit., 8).

It is in this particular spirit that Native American museologists and other indigenous academics are against our way of handling material culture; they believe that by confining "objects" to store-rooms and to Do-Not-Touch-exhibitons, and by reducing our relationships to them to the eye contact (to seeing only), Euro-American museological practice brokes precisely those ties - supernatural-spiritual as well as human-social-ceremonial relations - that "objects" are made of, and also part of, that make them *live*. According to indigenous museologists, "objects" vested with a spiritually dense meaning become pure and profane *scientific* evidence in our practice. This is why they require their artifacts back.

All this would lead us, European scholars - either ethnographers or historians - to some exciting, epistemologically as well as morally-politically important questions about the way(s) of - if I may paraphrase the title of our symposium - "touching things." How should we deal with "objects" whose status - as museological objects in the Euro-American sense - is attacked, whose meaning - i.e. ethnographical objects in the Euro-American sense - is questioned, and whose property - i.e. Euro-American museum ownership - is defied, and defied by those people who are the very makers of them and who are their primary owners as well? Could we still consider these artifacts "ethnographic objects" in the traditional scientific sense? Or, should we change our views about "material culture" as such, and, about museology in general, too? How could we find a correct - culturally-politically correct - approach to "objects" in these post-modern, multi-cultural circumstances?

To support a reconsideration and re-evaluation of our museological concepts one could easily find appropriate arguments in the abundant literature that developed on NAGPRA and indigenous cultural property rights in general. Let me approach these questions from a different angle, namely, turning to European cultural history and the lessons that we could learn from it. It would help us recall the fact that a multi-faceted, ritual-religious-symbolical-emotional - one could also say "holistic" - approach to "objects" (as rather loosely defined pieces of "material culture") is not so far, not so alien from our culture either. On the one hand, a rich tradition in Euro-American sociology and social as well as cultural anthropology has already drawn attention on *our own* symbolic objects i.e. objects vested with a variety of meaning (to mention only Marcel Mauss, Victor Turner, Clifford

Geertz or Jean Baudrillard), viii as well as on our own process of symbolization, ritual behavior as well as "sense making" in everyday life (from Erving Goffman through Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht to Pierre Bourdieu and others). And, on the other hand, interdiscplinary, interpretive, post-modern approaches to certain historical "objects" developed since the 1980s which focus on the exploration of their *use* - or rather *uses* in the plural -, i.e. the actual *socio-cultural practice* in which they gain meaning. In the case of the images for example this is to be seen in the studies of Patrick Geary, Hans Belting, Thomas Mitchell and others; in the case of sites and objects (of history and memory) in the studies of Pierre Nora etc. And this is exactly what characterizes French cultural history in recent times, and especially one of its specific branches which is called *histoire de la lecture*, that is *history of reading*. Let me turn to this discipline now.

Conceptualized by Roger Chartier, one of the leading historians in the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), Paris, this approach focuses on a rather forgotten aspect of reading, namely its materiality, the very physicality of texts. Drawing on the sociology of Michel de Certeau and Pierre Bourdieu, it assumes that texts as "objects" - i.e. writing and printing as something tangible, as something that you can touch, get hold of, smell, lick, kiss and manipulate in many different physical ways - are always exposed to various uses and interpretations other than reading. The medium of the text itself implies practices that are beyond the process of verbal, linear decoding. Consequently, this approach considers the act of reading as an act of "sense-making" in the broadest sense of the term, in which process non-verbal, non-textual, non-linear practices - different manifestations of physical/sensual contact, manipulation and interpretation - could take as an important part as verbal and literary practices do (see especially Chartier 1992 and 1995). The European Middle Ages and the Early Modern period would provide countless examples of how written and/or printed religious texts were used in non-textual ways, for example as ritual objects (charms). They were tied round the neck, put under the pillow (if there was one), kissed in sign of veneration, burnt or even eaten for different ceremonial - or magical - purposes. One of the first representative of historical anthropology, Keith Thomas could collect an abundance of these practices from the English Middle Ages: written texts, handled in the same time as physical as well as spiritual/sacred objects, were widely used for healing and divination (Thomas 1978, 209-300). David Cressy found similar non-literary practices of the bible - the Protestant bible - itself in 17th- century England and America (New England): it "served for swearing oaths, registering births, curing the sick, making decisions, predicting the future, and warding off devils. It could be imagined as a shield or weapon, or used as a talisman or totem "(Cressy 1986, 94). Let me cite only one particular and widely known practice - which was common in my country, Hungary, too both in historical and recent times - bibles and also psalm-books were used in a specific way for divination and fortunetelling. Most frequently, a key was inserted in the spine of the book, it was tied up with a string, then names were enumerated loudly, and the book was waited to turn when the right name - that of a thief, a future husband, or, for that matter, a witch - had been pronounced (Gunda 1989; Sz. Kristóf 1995). In an article co-authored with Gábor Klaniczay we attempted to survey such non-literary practices from all parts of Europe and from medieval to early modern times. We could demonstrate that despite of the fact that Christianity was defined as a "religion of the book" par excellence, non-bookish, non-textual, non-linear practices of "reading" occured in practically all the most important spheres of community and private life. The religious-spiritual sphere - i.e. the field of communication with the supernatural - was as much penetrated by these "holistic" practices as the social one - i.e. the field of communication among human beings (Klaniczay-Kristóf 2001; see also Sz. Kristóf 2003 and 2004a).

As for the latter, let me refer to my previous research concerning the field of civil law another rich field of the non-literary uses of texts - in Hungary. From the Middle Ages right into the 18th century, the act - or rather the ceremony - of writing and validating a legal document involved at least four different means of communication. In the act of writing the document itself, the presence of a couple of witnesses was mandatory. These people were to testify to the act later on, when needed, orally and, again, ceremonially. Beyond this mix of the written and the oral mode, specific non-verbal means, such as symbolic gestures and symbolic objects seem also to have been obligatory for centuries. Shaking hands, drinking a cup of wine, exchanging certain objects like a coin, a vine-shoot, a handful of ground, etc. were the most frequent elements of the ritual.xi These non-literary practices served to confirm the legal agreement in an additional sphere of symbolic expression, so the ordinary practice of civil law seemed to legitimize a whole repertoire of communicational practices, the elements of which - written texts, oral words, ritual/symbolic objects and ritual/symbolic acts were used rather arbitrarily, complementarily for a long time, sometimes even in the beginning of the 19th century. The veritable dominance of the written mode as a legal - and linear - evidence came rather late; significant changes in the norms of legal practice appeared only with the centralized, bureaucratic state practices, introduced in Hungary by the Habsburg rulers in the 18th-century. The ancient forms of legal ceremonialism and communication have not, however, disappeared all at once. To mention only one particular discourse that I studied more closely, the testimonies to witchcraft trials as well as the confessions of the alleged witches in 18th century Hungary happened to be full of the reminiscences of the ancient "holistic" legal practice. The contract, for example, concluded, allegedly, with the devil, was represented in them mostly as a legal ceremony, and the same verbal and non-verbal modes and means were used to depict it that could be seen in everyday social practice. Town and village people confessed to have made both oral and written pacts with the devil, a symbolic object - such as a coin - could represent the already concluded contract (it could be a sign for it), and the pact could also take the form of ritual/symbolic gestures, such as a handshake. Even the image of the witches'sabbath - an imaginary ceremonial gathering and banqueting together with the devil and his allies to celebrate the covenant - seems to be a transfigurated, diabolical representation of a particular legal ceremony, namely the ritual of wine drinking, the so-called *Wiss-Wein* or *Almesch trinken* (Sz. Kristóf 1999, 2002 and Forthcoming/a).

What the new French *histoire de la lecture*, as a *par excellence* pragmatic approach to reading proposes is that *each* of the above mentioned practices formed a constituent part of the everyday world of our ancestors, each one was considered legitim, so they all together should be taken into consideration and be counted with when discussing early modern practices of "reading". It is actually the *whole possible repertoire* of communication practices - past and present - that is to be explored, if possible, by cultural historians (Cavallo-Chartier 1999; Chartier 1989b and 1995). And such a repertoire obviously would contain - in our Euro-American culture, too - both non-textual and textual, both non-literary and literary, both religious and secular, both community and individual, both "holistic" and "linear" uses.

I would argue in the end that the study of reading as a study of *practices* and especially as *interpretive practices* would provide us a useful methodology for getting closer not only to our own understandings and handlings of "objects" and "texts", but to those of Native Americans as well. It would perhaps provide a useful perspective for the latter, too, to look at our ones. Let me conclude by making two remarks in this direction.

Firstly, the pragmatics of reading suggests that we have not been so different in our historical practices of communication as some Indian academics see today. In the long run, however - and especially during the 18th and 19th centuries when our science and museums

were born -, we did tend to forget this similarity, and to conceptualize cultural differences between THEM and US according to binary oppositions like "orality" versus "writing", "community" versus "individuality", "holism" versus "linearity" as well as many other pairs of social, cultural and metaphysical oppositions (see for example Tylor 1871; Durkheim 1893; Lévy-Bruhl 1910 and 1922; Goody 1977, 1986 and 1987 etc). Contemporary Native American thinkers seem to have drawn their binary theories from *our* scholarship; the above mentioned Donald L. Fixico refers, for example, not only to Indian thinkers but to Emile Durkheim, Edward B. Tylor, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, Jan Vansina, Jack Goody and many others who did build their approach to culture and society around such overpolarized concepts (Fixico 2003 and Sz. Kristóf Forthcoming/b). What, however, the new history of reading like postmodern research in general - reminds us is how inappropriate these binary oppositions are (see Chartier 1989a and 1992; Clifford-Marcus 1986; Sz. Kristóf 2002), and how similar WE and THEY were/are in the final account.

Secondly, the pragmatics of reading implies that it is always a *multiplicity* of uses and interpretive practices that is to be expected. Beyond the fact that the medium of texts - or for that matter, "objects" - would imply a variety of uses and convey a couple of possible meanings, it is always the community of the actual users - i.e. the particular *interpretive community* - that makes the actual sense of them. Meanings could vary according to the users, and the same text - or object - could be interpreted rather differently by different "readers." In sum, it is a sort of *multi-cultural repertoir of interpretive practices* that would be to be drawn by Euro-American as well as indigenous, native scholars which, instead of the good old binary oppositions that divide, would constitute a common - and hopefully unifying - platform for us to see/touch things. We have to learn to accept each other's practices and we have to learn to share "objects." "xii

I am convinced that it is this very epistemological and political challenge coming from Fourth World people that constitutes one of the most important characteristics, or - to return to the title of our conference again - the *ethnological aspects* of modern material culture. This means that we Euro-American scholars are obliged to take a closer look at this challenge, and that we have to find a way of dealing with it without offending the other side, without questioning the rightousness of their perspective, and without denying the respect that they require for their own ways.

I am also convinced that the new *history of reading* would provide us some enlightening methodological considerations to reach this end.

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Notes

- i. For the particular approach to social and cultural history which was called *historical anthropology* in French, American, English and also German scholarship during the 1970s/1980s and which arrived in Hungary from the late 1980s on let me refer only to the the important methodological articles written by Keith Thomas, Natalie Zemon Davis, and the late Robert W. Scribner (Thomas 1963; Davis 1981; Scribner 1997), and a collection of essays edited by R. Po-Chia Hsia and Robert W. Scribner (Po-Chia Hsia-Scribner 1997).
- ii. Using the terms Native American, American Indian, indigenous etc rather complementarily in this paper, I have Donald L. Fixico's remark in mind, that it is not so much the terms themselves (having the well-known negative connotation) that should be changed, but their *meanings*. New meanings, new definitions are to be given to them "from a native perspective," and this is exactly what is happening now among American Indian academics (Fixico 2003, 163).
- iii. Let me express here my gratitude to the American Indian scholars and students I met in Lawrence and elsewhere for all that I have learned from them.
- iv. My special thanks to Bobbi Rahder for these pieces of information.
- v. His biography can be consulted on various Internet sites, such as $\frac{http://www.anu.edu.au/hrc/people/staff-bios/gallabio.php or }{http://placemaking.com.au/2003/committe/galla.html}, etc.$

vi. World Indigenous Graduate Exchange, a graduate student exchange program among the University of Kansas, U.S.A, the University of Newcastle, Australia, and the University of Oulu, Finland.

vii. On the question of repatriation see the collection of essays edited by Devon A. Mihesuah (Mihesuah 2000); her other works relate mostly to the American Indians' struggle for cultural copyright and an appropriate research protocol (*Eadem* 1998 and 2001). The ethics of collecting cultural "objects" is treated in an abundant literature, let me refer here only to the volume edited by Phyllis M. Messenger (Messenger 1993) as well as to the - somewhat more critical - works of Michael F. Brown (Brown 1998 and 2003). For a reconsideration of the science of anthropology in the light of the American Indians' struggle for a new identity see the collection of essays edited by Thomas Biolsi and Larry J. Zimmerman in general (Biolsi-Zimmerman 1997), and the works (relating to the Hopi people) of Peter M. Whiteley in particular (Whiteley 1997 and 1998). See also my study on tourism organized and controlled by Native Americans in Pueblo Indian country (Sz. Kristóf 2004b) and my review of Donald L.Fixico's book, *The American Indian Mind in a Linear World. American Indian Studies & Traditional Knowledge*. New York and London: Routledge, 2003 (*Eadem* Forthcoming/b).

viii. See Mauss 1955 (especially 145-284: "Essai sur le don. Forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques"); Turner 1969 and 1974; Geertz 1973 and 1983; Baudrillard 1984.

ix. See Goffman 1967; Gumbrecht 1992; Bourdieu avec Wacquant 1992.

x. See Geary 1979a and 1979b; Belting 1990 and 2001; Mitchell 1986 and 1994; Nora 1984, 1987 and 1992.

xi. Michael Clanchy has found rather similar multi-communicational practices in diverse sections of everyday life - such as bureaucracy, law, religion etc - in medieval England (see Clanchy 1993).

xii. For that, there are already some excellent examples in recent American museology (see especially Kahn 2000).