

## **Exposing exoticism – the near and the far in the exhibition context**

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This article analyzes a set of situations drawn from the exhibition *La Triennale 2012 – Intense Proximité*, held at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, from April 20 to August 26, 2012. In this exhibition, the curatorial discourse is seen as playing a mediating role, making the vision possible, i.e. providing the context of the scopic relations to be described. Its role is to make the vision possible, i.e. it provides the context of the scopic relations to be described. In this case, the enunciator-curator defines the conditions in which the displayed objects are seen, and in which the visitors see. Thus, the analysis of situations (Landowski 1996) that constitute visibility regimes defines the scopic relations.

*La Triennale* highlights the ethnographic image, which is seen as an art object, while at the same time art objects are seen as ethnographic documents. Displayed in a contemporary art event, ethnographic images express ethnographic content, and therefore play an ambiguous role. In any case, the function assigned to the image, whether artistic or ethnographic, allows one to consider, at the fundamental level of analysis, a semantic category that unfolds into two opposite terms: fictional and documental.

The objects chosen by the addresser-curator, Okwui Enwezor, confront the addressee-visitor with a broader problem than the distinction between artistic or ethnographic function. Considering that these functions manifest themselves simultaneously to variable degrees in each element of the exhibition-text, one finds that the same image can have a dual function, hindering its classification in a single field of epistemological relations. The curatorial discourse, broken down into various components (works of art, exhibition design, printed publications, digital publications, side events, signage and lighting of the space), is controversial and builds a non-linear, or not evolutionary, path of art history. Rather than reiterating principles that lie beneath the existence of parallel art histories, i.e. Western and non-Western, a type of non-hierarchical network of synchronic connections between distant cultural contexts is produced in the curatorial discourse (Martinez 2002).

The subtitle of the *La Triennale 2012* catalog, *An anthology of the near and the far*, defines the general proposal that the exhibition is, like all anthologies, a collection of fragments. Such is also the analysis proposal developed in this text, highlighting the role that some works play in the capturing of the values underlying the curatorial discourse. In the case of the exhibition held at the Palais de Tokyo, the authorship and subjectivity can be attributed to both the chief curator, Okwui Enwezor, and to the institution. In this analysis, given that all of the presentation texts are signed by the curator, and, together with his statements and design of the spaces, determine the context of relations in which the whole event should be understood, the role of addresser is assigned to the curator.

Seen as a mediating practice, the curatorship of *La Triennale* produces a syncretic discourse in which isotopic elements are reiterated to ensure its cohesion (Rastier 1975). One such element is the inclusion of ethnographic images. However, as in art history, which *must be* inclusive, the configuration of the exhibition space is eclectic, and the visitation route is largely discontinuous. Some aspects of its appearance will be described in this article.

The Palais de Tokyo is a three-storied building that does not look like a museum. The space does not have a homogeneous appearance, or architectural uniformity. It appears to be an unfinished work or a ruin. It is not covered with the decorative artificiality that characterizes the exhibition design of museums and international art fairs. It is not an adjuvant for some kind of aesthetic pleasure to be achieved. It looks like a war zone, abandoned, each survivor struggling to make himself or herself seen or heard, despite the surrounding beseeching cacophony. In this architectural context, the marks of curatorial mediation are diverse and range from interventions in the architectural space (printed texts on the walls, partitions defining the visitation route) to the design of equipment (showcases) for displaying the works<sup>1</sup>.

Assuming that each situation highlighted in the analysis is a significant structure, and its elements perform different functions, one finds that the modalities of interaction between the displayed works are varied and simultaneously link different semiotic systems in the curatorial discourse. Therefore, in addition to understanding the way in which the elements of artistic discourse are linked together (intradiscursive relations), one must also understand how each work or situation on display is linked to the others in the composition of *La Triennale*.

Still on functions, there is a contradiction. The use of ethnographic photography is generally associated with the referential function (Jakobson 2003). However, if what one sees in them are past realities, in distant lands and times, how can veridiction marks be assigned to them? That is, to what extent does the addressee keep a safe distance, allowing him to maintain his belief system and, at the same time, interpret the truth conveyed by the addresser? What determines the truth of photography? To what extent do the relationships between works and curatorial discourse play a decisive role in the epistemic judgments of the enunciator?

## 1. Situational context

This article is part of a research project<sup>2</sup> that analyzes exoticism as a strategy to contrast the known and the unknown in contemporary art. In *La Triennale*, works by 115 artists from different countries were exhibited in adjacent spaces, thus reiterating the fragmentation that characterizes the venue's architecture, and giving the visitor frequent intervals and breaks in the reading of the whole, which becomes discontinuous.

The figure created by the curator in the Introduction of the exhibition's general catalog is that of a "rainforest", or "forest of signs". To reiterate it, on the cover of the catalog there is a still extracted from an ethnographic film (Figure 1), where we see an Amazon Indian.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Landowski (2010), a type of space produced by a type of "use of the world", as one may describe the space created by the curator.

<sup>2</sup> The research project *Art and Anthropology: the museum of modern art as a field of travelling concepts*, is financed by the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development, Brazil.

# INTENSE PROXIMITY

AN ANTHOLOGY  
OF THE NEAR  
AND THE FAR



Edited by Okwui Enwezor  
with Mélanie Bouteloup, Abdellah Karroum,  
Émilie Renard and Claire Staebler

la TRIENNALE  
2012

 PALAIS  
DE TOKYO

Figure 1. *La Triennale 2012 - Intense Proximité/Intense Proximity*, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, April 20 to August 26, 2012. Catalog. Cover picture: Timothy Asch & Napoleon Chagnon, Production Photograph from “Yanomamo Series”, 1973. Courtesy Documentary Educational Resources, Watertown, Massachusetts, USA.

On the other hand, in the exhibition-forest visitation, or forest-exhibition, the visitor-addressee is in a state of disorientation. In the rainforest, beings are born and reproduced according to some unknown logic. In order to go through it one must be willing to deny old certainties about the art system. Is the photograph of an Indian of the Yanomami tribe, which occupies lands in the Brazilian and Venezuelan Amazon Forest, a work of art?

The implications of such statement link the exhibition design to a range of provocative discovery strategies through which the addressee *must* overcome the fear of proximity. Does the visitor, the addressee, see what is shown, or what he wants to see?

The exhibition entrance (Figure 2) is marked by the phrase “Fear eats the soul”, the English translation of the title of a film by Rainer Werner Fassbinder (*Angst seele auf*, 1974). The phrase that frames the entry to the exhibition route is hand painted directly on the wall, instead of printed with neutral types. Thus, the expression is not confused with the signs printed by mechanical processes, and marks the curator’s physical presence in the space. The expression “fear eats the soul” is painted on the wall as if it were a trace of a sudden unscheduled intervention, like the graffiti covering the walls of abandoned buildings. The expression in its apparent spontaneity is, as is the curatorial discourse, an individual testimony. The phrase seems to be a mark left by someone with the intention of sharing a personal belief, or a revelation, with the other visitors. The quoted expression refers to a person’s inner being (one’s “soul”) and takes on an almost monumental scale (eating the whole setting of artworks). Just as graffiti does, the expression challenges the fear of transgressing, and also fear itself. It is like saying “I’ve been here and seen this”, or “careful, if you do this (feel fear) you will suffer the consequences (your soul will be corroded)”.



Fig. 2. *La Triennale 2012 - Intense Proximité*, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, April 20 to August 26, 2012. Ground floor entrance, in which the title of a Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s movie, “*Angst seele auf*”, from 1974, translated into “Fear Eats the Soul”, was painted on the walls.

However, instead of an individual observation, the expression, an enunciation in the third person, is a negative sanction of behavior considered inappropriate when visiting a contemporary art exhibition. In this case, the sanction is institutional, to the extent that the curator is also a collective enunciator, or an addresser who conveys to the visitors the institutional values that should guide their appreciation of the works. According to the statement, generic fear “eats the soul”. This undefined “fear” is the force of containment that regulates social and moral behaviors. And the “soul”, which opposes fear, is the figure that brings the promise of a higher level of existence: the spiritual. “Fear” is devouring, like an animal that fears for its survival. On the other hand, the exhibition that the visitor reaches after going up a flight of stairs, i.e. ascending to a higher floor of the building, houses the “soul”. Will seeing the exhibition, visiting it, following a route of disorientation and discovery, allow the visitor to rise to a level of experience and knowledge that will convert him from an animal state (of the beast that “eats”) to the sublime heights of aesthetic experience<sup>3</sup>?

Later, on the same route, the visitor descends to the lower level and, after going through it, returns to the ground level to conclude the visit and leave the exhibition space. The visitor is provoked to overcome the fear that ties him to the old aesthetic dogmas and cross the exhibition’s entrance. The image of this portal, which opens like a big mouth, reiterates the theme of eating and establishes another metaphor: fears that corrode the digestive system, which require new taste experiences to overcome them. If the visitor does not overcome the resistances that tie him to the printed institutional messages, he will not enjoy the feast that awaits him. A higher vision of the art world is the promise to those who manage to expand the basic diet of appreciation of technical virtuosity samples and representations of “appropriate” artistic themes.

## 2. Interactions

If disorientation and discovery are proposed, why is it necessary to consider the curatorial discourse as a coherent and cohesive situational context? Free from fear, does the addressee still need a guide? Could the disorientation create conditions for the occurrence of “exceptional aesthetic apprehension” foreseen by Greimas (2002, p. 25)? How to think simultaneously of a route as a threading of situations, and recognize the role of the interruptions of the path, marked figuratively by silence? Could the release from the contingencies of everyday life and, among these, from the need to feed the physical body, be the condition to return to “the moment of innocence” (*ibid.*, p. 26) and obtain aesthetic pleasure?

To address the intersubjective relations that are established in the galleries of the Palais de Tokyo during visitation of *La Triennale*, we resort to the analysis model of visibility regimes proposed by Eric Landowski in *Jeux optiques: exploration d’une dimension figurative de la communication*<sup>4</sup>. In this text, Landowski introduces two types of possible approaches, a semantic and a syntactic one. The author’s adoption of the latter, which distinguishes invariants and formalizable devices (Landowski 1992, p. 86), creates conditions for it to be presented here as a type of analysis model. However, one can not completely rule out the

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<sup>3</sup> One must not forget the legacy of cultural relativism presented by Michel de Montaigne in his essay, *Des cannibales*, in which he describes cannibalism as a universal cultural practice, not restricted to the savage non-Christian peoples of the New World.

<sup>4</sup> In Landowski (1992).

identification of socially connoted functions as one interprets the ambiguous construction of the curatorial discourse.

Given that the ethnographic image is a visual document, produced by a view from outside the portrayed group, the scopic relations that it expresses are transcultural. In addition to the use of non-native language (photography, film or realistic drawing) to record what is seen, the ways in which one makes the *other* seen (recording how an Indian shows himself to the camera) are interpreted through an ethnographer's gaze. An analysis built from the point of view of the subject portrayed would be different. Moreover, the analysis of the ethnographic content of the situations caught by the camera resembles that of ethno-literary semiotics, defined by Greimas and Courtés (2013, p. 169) as that in which one considers a distance "between the production of discourse and its execution"<sup>5</sup>.

Ethnographical images have marks of the ethnographer-enunciator who, when using photography or drawing in his field work, exposes his point of view. On the other hand, a snapshot of the everyday life of the people he is studying, and that are framed with scientific objectivity, should seem to be a neutral document, free of judgment and marks of subjectivity. The enunciated enunciation, the image that has no marks of the presence of whoever produced it, establishes a paradoxical situation. If the addressee is seduced by familiarity with what he sees, how can he value what is presented as unknown, the *other* in ethnographic discourse? Also, from the reading of the entry "*ethnosemiotics*" in the dictionary of Greimas and Courtés, a question emerges: can one analyze the discursive and narrative structures of an ethnographic image without resorting to the ethnocentrism that draws the boundaries between familiar worlds and exotic worlds? Considering the relations between elements of the image as syntagmatic nonlinguistic threads (gestural, somatic etc.), Greimas and Courtés (*ibid.*, p. 170) envision the expansion of ethnolinguistics toward ethnosemiotics because "the still too few analyses of rituals and ceremonies suggest the possibility of ethnology becoming, once again, the privileged place of construction of general models of significant behaviors"<sup>6</sup>.

### 3. Ethnosemiotics

In facing the exotic being that inhabits ethnographic collections, a subject who *sees* plays a dual role: on the one hand he takes the position of one who *does not want not to see* and, according to a certain body of knowledge, *must* act in a qualified, scientific manner. The subject's gaze brings no *embarrassment* as the objects displayed are *indifferent* to his *curiosity*. In order to remain in such position, they do not look back.

The next stage of the visitor's engagement with the exhibited works is a type of *mutual interest*: the institution *wants to be seen*, and to that end uses various seduction strategies (all sorts of free giveaways to visitors) and, in return, the visitor *wants to see*. On this aspect, Landowski (1992, p. 99) describes the complex picture "in which roles are intertwined and motivations overlap".

The ambitious proposal of *La Triennale* is to produce an anthology, that could encompass all that is near and far. What one sees are different ways of exposing private life, contrasting the homogenizing constraints of the art system. Consequently, the juxtaposition of works in a discontinuous way generates cacophony, similar to a situation in which "private could be

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<sup>5</sup> Here we refer to the canonical, figurative design that expresses the need to present images of unknown life situations according to parameters of proportionality and anatomic correction institutionalized by academic education.

<sup>6</sup> Here, the reference is explicitly to the position that the ethnolinguistics work of Greimas occupies in the origin of a general semiotics.

likened to the individual, and correlatively, public to the collective” (*ibid.*). In this context, the works of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Timothy Asch overlap.

#### 4. Claude Lévi-Strauss

One of the strategies used in the curatorial discourse is to make the *addressee* face documents that show, regardless of the institutional setting, the exotic territory – the far – as it is – the *enunciate*. Using photographs, notes and drawings by Claude Lévi-Strauss, curator Okwui Enwezor arranged one part of a room with documents about peoples lost in the history of the origins of anthropology as a modern science (Caduveo, Bororo, Nambiquara, Tupi-Kawahib). These tribes were visited during his eight-year stay in Brazil.

Seen as a set of figures of the expansion of imperialism, Lévi-Strauss’s documentation presents us with two possibilities. On the one hand, the images appear to have been the result of a clumsy use of the photographic device, as if framing could be avoided, and someone who *wants not to see* could maintain a reserved attitude. Thus, the ethnologist expresses a way of acting close to what Landowski calls “epistemological awareness that would be (or is believed to be) able to account for its own way of building sense, in an act” (Landowski 2001). On the other hand, the photographed subject, indifferent to the presence of the photographer and (if it is still possible to imagine this situation nowadays) to the power of the photographic image to consolidate stereotypes, *does not want not to be seen* simply because he attributes no value to visual documents and, consequently, does not express any “embarrassment” (Landowski 1992, p. 91). In addition, the photographer seems to *want to be* a kind of implicit observer. His presence is revealed only to those who can identify his role as an observer who obtains a scientific image. He hides his marks because he *wants not to be seen*, and also *does not want to be seen*. These “attitudes” or “dispositions” are translated, in Landowski’s approach, respectively, by two metaterms “prudence” and “modesty”.

Besides photography, field notes and descriptive drawings compose a picture of the *other (far)* without the characteristics of an intimate diary. Thus, contact is established between two *community intimacies* (*ibid.*, p. 86): that of the observer, the French ethnographer, and the contemporary visitor to an art exhibition<sup>7</sup>.

The interaction between subjects, each endowed with a type, or mode, of viewing and responding to the presence of the *other*, occurs in various ways<sup>8</sup>. Initially, there is no single form of *scopic cooperation* (*ibid.*, p. 97) and its volitions, that is, the manifestations of *wanting to see* are neither complementary nor in mutual conformity. Based on the above-mentioned analysis model, the distinction between the two subjects is maintained, “S1 who is in a state of ‘being seen’ and S2 who occupies the position of the ‘observer’”. Moreover, it is understood that “according to circumstances, that is, from a syntagmatic point of view, the same actor [...] may well change syntactic positions and occupy at times the position of S1, at others that of S2” (*ibid.*, p. 91).

In some works, it is considered that the Indian (S1) *does not want to not be seen* and the ethnographer (S2) *wants not to see*. Thus, a modest gaze is cast over the former. In the exhibition, in a large number of photos the camera seems not to have access to the intimate domain that it portrays. In this case, there is a type of interaction that Landowski defines as *modesty*. However, this is not the only way to understand the interplay of positions between

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<sup>7</sup> On “collectivity”, see T. Todorov, *La conquista de América, el problema del otro*, translated by Flora Botton Burlá, Buenos Aires, Argentina, Siglo XXI, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> According to Fontanille (2007), two types of relation and orientation are encompassed by this “structure of communication”: one informational and the other intentional.

who sees and who is seen. In some photos, the Indians seem to *not want to be seen*, dodging the gaze of the camera (and of the ethnographer) which, in turn, *does not want to not see*, following the object as far as necessary.

The opposition between the inclinations of S1 and S2 is caused by situations in which the Indian “allows himself to be seen” (*ibid.*, p. 98) and, on the other hand, generates in the ethnographer-observer a moral dilemma. The ethnographer wavers between the need to see, *a wanting to see in the name of science*, and not wanting to see in order not to expose his indiscretion. We will never know whether there is a manifest *want* on the part of the Caduveo people. Even if they are indifferent to the presence of the Europeans (Figure 3), which does not seem to be the case, they are *caught* by Levi-Strauss’ indiscretion, that is, they *want not to be seen*, and at the same time, the ethnographer *does not want not to see them*.



Figure 3. Claude Lévi-Strauss. *Photographies réalisées lors de voyage de recherche*, Brazil, 1937. Tirages d'expositions. Musée du quai Branly, Paris.

In some images, the depicted face is static and the symmetrical framing is similar to the one used in anthropometry. When the facial features of a particular indigenous group and the body painting that characterizes it are highlighted, one sees the marks of preference of a *we* that inhabits the territory of art. By framing the face in a symmetrical and frontal way, the enunciator produces an image that stands out as a portrait with artistic qualities rather than documental ones. As the space around the face is reduced and information about the environment surrounding the portrayed subject is left out, the ethnographic function of the image is reduced and replaced by the value of its formal beauty. Therefore, switching between near and far seems to have, in ethnography and art, opposite logical principles. While the

former seeks to bring the addressee closer to the observed population through images filled with contextual information, the latter maintains the marks of the gaze that frames and treats the scene as a motif (Calabrese 1997).

## 5. Timothy Asch

The theme of *proximity* continues in the work of Timothy Asch, *The Ax Fight*, a film made in 1975 (Figure 4) which, as previously mentioned, is highlighted on the cover of the exhibition's catalog. This time, the group observed is the Yanomami in the Brazilian Amazon. The proximity to the ethnographic writing of Lévi-Strauss is established in that a degree of awareness of the medium itself is expressed. That is, Asch explores the elements of photography as language (light and shadow, sequences, camera positioning, among others) to mark his presence in the space of his fieldwork.



Figure 4. Timothy Asch, *The Ax Fight*, 1975. Still from the 16mm film.

On the other hand, the gestures and facial expressions of the Yanomami are not rehearsed or directed. The film's cuts build sequences and narratives that, in spite of having an internal logic, are defined by the ethnographer-narrator as "chaotic and confusing". The beginning of the film is marked by the text<sup>9</sup> that anticipates the scenes and qualifies them as socialized text or as a form of "publicity" in the primary sense, i.e., "in which the very production of

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<sup>9</sup> The text: "You are about to see and hear the unedited record of this seemingly chaotic and confusing fight, just as the fieldworkers witnessed it on their second day in the village."

discourse presupposes the presence of an audience” (Landowski 1992). At times the film seems to have a sort of secret and inscrutable logic. Thus, its value as cinematographic work seems to lie, unlike the photographs of Lévi-Strauss, more in its inclination towards ambivalence between two other scopic regimes defined by Landowski (*Ibid*, p. 97) as *voyeurism* and *repulsion*. These terms define two opposite modes of interaction between scopic regimes and summarize two modes of relations. In the first, the Indian (S1) *wants not to be seen*, because he already knows the uses of the ethnographic image, and the ethnographer (S2) *wants to see*. The latter finds a way of seeing without being seen, or of not exposing to the Indians the purpose of the document that he is making. In the second case, the Indian *does not want to not be seen* because he trusts that the images will be used ethically, without harming him, and the ethnographer, on the other hand, *does not want to see*. It is not about disgust or repulsion, in the strict sense, but rather disgust for a type of situation that the ethnographer considers unfavorable to the purpose of the documentation. In other words, his gaze deliberately excludes that which does not help in the composition of a document, or of a simulacrum of what he sees. The politically correct view influenced by the *need to be impersonal* haunts the ethnographer’s view. The film exposes the subject and, at the same time, the way in which the subject is exposed by its author.

The value of the ethnographer’s work corresponds to the persuasive ability of his fieldwork. The curio cabinet and the colonial and natural history museums display the convergence of ethnographic experiences. However, it should be noted that the motivations to build these *spaces* are not based on an educational need, but on the need to convince those who see them that they are before a distant and enigmatic reality. Through an apparently unrestricted accumulation of specimens, strategies are used to bring the addressee close and, at the same time, distance him. In this context, the different uses and meanings of artistic *versus* documentary photography, and the different dimensions of the curatorial discourse, i.e. display of ethnographic objects *versus* display of art objects, present issues that go beyond the mere artistic/non-artistic duality. By analyzing how the same theme, religion and transcendence, is represented by photographs and paintings, Maria Giulia Dondero (2012, p. 222) states that each medium “will prove to be a product that depends on three semiotic levels of analytical relevance”, which are:

1. institutional status (in terms of reception and interpretation practices),
2. textual configurations (morphologies of visual textualities) and
3. instantiation practices (i.e., production practices).

In the present analysis, it is considered that, in addition to these levels, the level of transtextual relations occupies a central place. In the selection of works in international events, each artist represents a region or a country. Thus, each work is seen as part of an ephemeral curatorial discourse and also representative of a complex geo-political reality. Each work represents other works (Bakhtin 2003).

The difference between photographs, as reproducible images, and paintings, as unique objects, is irrelevant given the scope of the themes proposed by the curator of *La Triennale*<sup>10</sup>. Even when reproductions, facsimiles, of originals that are in public collections are included, they must be destroyed at the end of the event. Compliance with this clause preserves the rarity of the original object that was reproduced. Consequently, it is not the use of an image reproduction technique, the facsimile, which turns the original object (a rare and unique

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<sup>10</sup> Especially if we consider that most of the displayed objects are “copies” of videos and photos.

drawing preserved in a museum) into an ordinary and worthless reproduction. That is, although it is not possible to consider “an ontological meaning of the medium” (Dondero 2012, p. 223) as the basis for analysis, it is necessary to recognize that the medium may be taken as more or less appropriate to persuade the addressee of a truth, whether the truth is its ethnographic content or its artistic value. Thus, in the analysis of the set of works composed of heterogeneous elements (photographs, sculptures, TV monitors, posters, videos, paintings, etc.) it is more relevant to identify the parameters that “take into account the mediation of statuses and interpretive practices” than the simple classification of objects according to the techniques used to make them (*ibid.*, p. 222). Instead of distinguishing the unique image, with its vocation to express the soul, from the reproduction as an expression of the fear of oblivion, the “testimony-image” (enunciative enunciation) is distinguished from the “document-image” (enuncive enunciation).

## 6. Curatorial discourse

The exhibition as a device organizes visibility regimes and is broken down into intertwined figurative paths<sup>11</sup>. To exhibit is to display knowledge in a way that fits a curatorial proposal.

The screening of *Ax Fight* on the wall of a gallery integrated it unequivocally into the exhibition design. It was no longer a movie to be seen in a dark projection room, isolated from the surrounding works like most of the videos in the show. It was a piece that required from the visitor the will to take momentarily the role of the ethnographer, and to come to grips with what he *does not want to see*, the repulsion described above. The film reveals itself with *ostensible visibility*, exposing situations that have been caught by the camera, portraying subjects who are not self-conscious, and, therefore, *want to be seen*, or exposed. It should be noted here that this self-exposure is not considered as a sign of a desire to be seen in the film, but as a desire to be seen by the cinematographer. It appears that these people do nothing to hide from the gaze of the other behind the camera and therefore they *want to be seen* by either one, the ethnographer or any other viewer<sup>12</sup>.

The conditions for “good visibility” as the path throughout the exhibition unfolds, are up to the observer. In this situation it required positioning oneself facing the wall on which the film was projected and viewing it through in the continuous flow of visitors blocking, albeit temporarily, the visual experience. As a consequence of the continuous projection of the film, intersected by the presence of visitors, discontinuity, as in a forest, requires a multifocal perception of the world of art. In this perspective, the curator is the *operator subject* who intervenes relatively autonomously in relation to the two basic players: the social group that is portrayed and the eye behind the camera.

## 7. Meschac Gaba

In addition to situations where scopic subjects correspond to different actors, in some cases there is a kind of overlapping of volitions that, according to Landowski (1992, p. 81), can be defined as “narcissistic”. In this case, in which *one and the same actor* plays both scopic roles, the “organization of the underlying inter-actantial syntax” remains “indifferent to the more superficial variations concerning the organization of the actorial device”.

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<sup>11</sup> In Landowski’s text (1992, p. 88) they correspond to “simple translations, at the figurative level, of more abstract devices related to communication (or retention) of a certain type of *knowledge* among the subjects”.

<sup>12</sup> Fontanille (2007, p. 106) defines the “additional” or “indirect” addressee, who is “a third observer, visible or invisible, whose presence is recognized by, at least, one of the subjects, therefore influencing the exchange”.

In another work, objects and images in the installation have been created by the same subject who is exposed. Thus, the work of Meschac Gaba is a micro-universe<sup>13</sup>, made up of a diverse set of objects, figures of a sub-forest of signs in Enwezor's terms: legal documents (the artist's marriage certificate) and photographs that make up the *Marriage Room* (Figure 5), the assemblage in which one could step in.



Figure 5. Meschac Gaba. *Marriage Room* – *Museum of Contemporary African Art*, 2000-2009. Installation view.

The artist exposes himself, *wants to be seen*, and to do so he designs the space for the visitor who *wants to see* his privacy. The visitor is moved by the appetite of one who *does not want not to see* the artist's intimacy, his marriage, as well as the institutional authority vested in the curator's statement – *fear eats the soul* – that framed his path throughout the exhibition.

The visitor too is an ethnographer. The event – *marriage* – is drawn from the artist's personal history, and the elements – African or Dutch in origin – chosen to compose the installation refer to a social role, or a collective subject. The subject belongs to a group (African) in an ambivalent manner. The physical expression of this collective identity is at times positivized (exposing objects which symbolize the presence of Africa in the creation of a global and miscigenated contemporary society), and at other times negativized (exposing objects that demonstrate how African ingenuity to come up with new uses for objects discarded by industrial societies may be an obstacle to the expansion of globalized consumerism). Thus, the narrative that is built is, rather than an intimate diary, through which

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<sup>13</sup> In general, in this analysis, the fictional/documental category is used in an ironic sense.

one might enter the artist's secluded privacy, a "journal of civilizations" (Enwezor 2012 a, p. 110).

The assembly of the *Marriage Room* contains not only documents and objects that, as fragments of social intimacy exposed by Gaba, imply the existence of a subject – or a collectivity – that has conferred some use to them. Like the objects in collections of ethnographic museums, witnesses of the presence of human groups whose origins are unknown, Gaba's objects are the result of curatorial choices. They make up a scenario in which, willing to expose himself, the artist does *not want not to be seen*. As a consequence, private roles are "publicized": man, husband, African expat, artist<sup>14</sup>.

In this case, it appears that by *being able to be seen*, by taking part in a curatorial discourse, and exposing objects valued as artworks and as relics from the past, the artist builds an ambivalent ethnographic discourse. A conflict occurs to the extent that the *competence* required from the visitor – the socialized "I" called visitor – is to *want to see* the work as an expression of the hidden inner artist. Hence, this visitor is tempted by his own curiosity. In fact, the strategies adopted by the artist highlight the display of a private role (married artist) through *publicization*, or denial of privacy, turns it into *public*. Conversely, the public role (single artist) becomes an aspect of private life that are publicized in the documents and objects exposed.

## 8. Lorraine O'Grady

Unlike Gaba's work, which exposes documents of the artist's private, or almost intimate, life, Lorraine O'Grady exposes another type of individuality. It is that in which membership to a collective body, in this case African, allows one to state that "each member [of the social unit] only discovers his 'self' in the 'among ourselves'" (Landowski 1992, p. 86-87).

One series of photographs composes an identity that, unlike the *community intimacy* (*ibid.*, p. 87) of Gaba's work, exposes the *socialized* self of African descent. The work *Miscigenated Family Album Series* (1980-1994, Impression cibachrome en diptyque), of Lorraine O'Grady echoes, according to the curator, the feminist slogan of 1969, "the personal is political". However, the images used in her work are not accounts of intimacy. Instead, one may see the juxtaposition of two groups of images (Figure 6): photographs from a family album whose affective meaning is not disclosed and reproductions of works (sculptures and reliefs) of ancient Egypt. They are framed in pairs, contrasting ancient and contemporary models of feminine beauty.

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<sup>14</sup> This situation is similar to the one described by Landowski (2004, p. 87) when analyzing how the political may acquire, under certain circumstances, a "body".



Figure 6. Lorraine O'Grady. *Miscigenated Family Album Series* (1980-1994).  
Impression cibachrome en diptyque.

All photographs are black and white and have the same size. By standardizing the technical procedure and dimensions, O'Grady provides the same conditions of exhibition/presentation and, therefore, equals the values of photographs of Egyptian portrait sculpture and pictures copied from a contemporary family album. As a whole, the *Family Album* is a collection of *situations* that, although contradictory, merge in an inter-individual or community order. In other words, it can be defined as a “*collective private* (*ibid.*, 86) manifesting itself in the form of awareness of *we*”. One of the groups makes it explicit to the addressee that the visual narrative is, in fact, fictional. The Egyptian faces are sculptures. Also, each framed diptych creates an obvious ambivalence, by elevating the contemporary family album to the status of an art collection and leveling the miscegenation in both ancient and contemporary societies of African descent. One might trace back African ancestry and acknowledge its contemporaneity. Or, taking a parallel path, consider that documenting the beauty of African women is a task as ancient as Egyptian art. Also, they express a didactic aspect: is photography a language for the expression of individuals and their intimate feelings or simply a technique to be manipulated for documentary institutional purposes?

In this case, the subject exposes all faces in similar poses, according to the tradition of Renaissance portrait (Jakobson 2003). Even the photographs that seem to be of real people conceal emotional or self-referential content, expressing another type of volition, the *modesty*, of one who does *not want to be seen* or exposed to large audiences. The eyes of the women in the photographs do not confront the viewer. Moreover, in order to state that there is modesty in the series one has to consider that a paratext (Calabrese 1997), the title, seduces the

indiscreet viewer to look for a community intimacy, as one may find in Asch's film or in Gaba's installation. At the installation, the ordering imposes a rhythmic principle that regulates the gaze. In diptychs, a body or series is built, as the sum of many layers or points of view upon African ancestry. Also, scopic distance regulates nearness and farness, as a condition to any consensual understanding in a communication process.

The contingencies of the exhibition situation move the family album away from its most trivial aspect: the document of a private family unit. What one expects and what one should see in a public exhibition mediated by the curatorial discourse contributes to the reading of a broader history of art. Also, it adds to a more complex reading of the world, less supported by causal relations, or fixed roles for subjects. It is the presence of the photographic records of works of ancient Egypt that make O'Grady's family album transpose modesty to reach the ostentation of a constitutive interdependence of images: ethnicity, social class and gender.

## Conclusion

Considering the exhibition as an example of "peacekeeping situations, assuming an almost contractualization of the 'right to look' between the partners" (Landowski 1992, p. 95) several strategies to stage an "economy of visual exchanges" have been identified. To think of the multiple directions of *want*, *see*, *should* and *know* allows us to compose a network of scopic relations in which subjects who observe and subjects who are observed display themselves, and appreciate each other, either in a forest of signs or, as it seems more appropriate, in a greenhouse.

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