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Bricolage in the Ethnographic Museum Archive

Ethnographic museums hold a multitude of objects and texts that all too often remain packed away in their storage areas and archives, inaccessible and unknown to the general public. How might some of these artifacts and documents be retrieved and engaged with, to invite alternative interpretations of their contemporary significance? This project returns to the strategies and practices of *bricolage* (Levi Strauss 1962) in order to explore possibilities for working critically and creatively with an ethnographic collection of artifacts and their accompanying explanatory texts. Revisiting the largely forgotten impacts and legacies of the French surrealists from the 1930s upon the discipline of anthropology, this is an artistic-anthropological collaboration that utilizes methods of the ‘cut-up’ to create a new and experimental archive of material objects, images, and narratives.

Much photographic and written documentation aims to fix an object in time, freezing it into a dominant and authoritative perspective. Processes of collage, however, from Tristan Tzara’s cut-ups to Hannah Hoch’s photomontages, have been utilized as strategies for dislodging such interpretive hierarchies. By using such bricolage techniques and other methods of ‘deep play’ (Geertz 1972) to question the condition of the institutionally represented material object, this project offers other, quite personal, interpretive narrative layers to the chain of events stringing together the history—and future histories—of artifacts deemed to be part of the ‘authorized’ heritage (Smith 2006) of in a particular ethnographic museum’s collection.

A collaboration between a visual artist (Selena Kimball) and a social anthropologist (Alyssa Grossman), this project takes as its source material the visual and textual documentation of collected objects in an ethnographic museum archive. Kimball transforms representations of a set of artifacts through collaging them into new objects, while Grossman creates a new explanatory text for each object by cutting up the original descriptions and piecing the words together into new sentences. By using only the images and words from the primary archival sources, we become bricoleurs, experimenting with form using a self-contained body of content. The bricoleur’s task is to assemble existing odds and ends, leftover things from individuals and society. For Levi-Strauss, bricolage is a form of ‘mythical thought,’ relevant to anthropology as it involves processes of ordering and making sense of the universe using underlying structures of classification. Both art and science, he argues, have a demand for organization, and we need to recognize and validate taxonomies that follow aesthetic lines, not just so-called scientific ones.

(See images below of objects and texts before and after our bricolage interventions.)

As the surrealist artist Claude Cahun wrote in 1935, ‘It is necessary to discover, handle, tame, fabricate irrational objects oneself to appreciate the particular or general value of those we have under our eyes.’ By turning existing photographs of artifacts and their scientific narratives into a new series of fictional images and commentaries, an alternative archival inventory may emerge, suggesting subjective, imaginative, provocative stories. Our new objects and texts are only one of many different possibilities of how parts of a museum’s collection might be reconfigured and interpreted. By drawing upon but also transgressing established traditions of anthropological classification and display, we wish to provoke different kinds of intellectual, emotional, and evocative encounters with the ethnographic archive, rousing people out of the passive ways they might ordinarily perceive such collections.
The Robe

The heroine, victorious object. It left an impression.

A distinguished audience attended the production

while men in white clothing acquired their weapons,

tracing through glass a swarm of events.

A life portrayed. Two deeds recognized.

The exact value of such institutionalized objects
cannot be shown.
The mask shown on this page is a native Alaskan mask. It is known as a 'mask of the whale.' The mask is made of balsa wood and has a long, narrow shape. It is decorated with a series of lines and patterns that simulate the scales of a whale. The mask is held up by a rope that is attached to a pole.

The mask was used in traditional ceremonies and dances. It was believed to have magical properties and was used to protect the wearer from harm. The mask was also used to communicate with the spirits of the sea and to bring good fortune to the community.

This mask is an example of the rich cultural heritage of the Alaskan people. It is a symbol of their connection to the natural world and their respect for the sea.