Interview with James Clifford

Alex Coles: Three main factors have made your work vital to debates around art over the last decade and a half. First, is your critique of the Primitivism exhibition at MoMA published in Art in America. Second is your interest in the activities of dissident Surrealists such as Bataille and Leiris and perhaps Benjamin too; and third is the way you foreground methods of textuality in the book you co-edited, Writing Culture (1986). In many ways your writing in the early 1980s prompted the fascination with ethnography in art practice and criticism (firstly by Craig Owens, and more recently by, amongst others, Renée Green and Fred Wilson), in others it draws on it. So, with particular emphasis on the way your work has driven much of the exchange, what do you think of the traffic between art and ethnography? Do you think that it has benefited both sides?

James Clifford: First I'd like to just add one name to your list of quasi-surrealists who inspired me: William Carlos Williams. He was an early, and continuous, influence--a modernist writer who made the choice, against Europe's pull on his generation, for America. And not for New York City, either. For an obscure place, Rutherford New Jersey, and for the peculiarly intimate/distant ethnographic perspective and habitus of a family doctor. The poetic documentary and social critique, mixed with populism, and a visionary streak (vision at ground-level, among real people, their voices and ethnic, gendered, quirky bodies) ... all this was of great significance for me as an opening up of what would become an expansive notion of the "ethnographic." Williams' *Paterson* became a model, a provocation for a new kind of realism. This was a situated knowledge, freed from the constraints of scientific objectivity and the Lukacsian "type," a path through even the most particular and subjective facts to a kind of general view, a "big enough" vision.

It was, perhaps, just the right kind of localism (Williams was, of course, very much in touch with the modernist "centers," Paris and New York) for someone like me in the 1960s and 1970s beginning to feel he was no longer at the progressive center of the world and looking for ways to be off center, but connected. I think this wavering, this fragmenting, of the spatio-temporal centrality of modernism and of "the West" in the 60s (the greater 60s, one might say, following Jameson) has a lot to do with the appeal of "ethnographic" dispositions across a wide range of activities. Writing Culture, and the writings from the late 1970s and 1980s which were stuck together in *The Predicament of Culture*, were part of a proliferating style.

I was surprised at first by how quickly those two works were taken up by artists, writers, performance and media people. And I can only situate this influence with reference to a moment in the modernist

centers and their satellites when Williams's dicta "no ideas but in things" and "the universal through the particular" took on new kinds of meaning. People no longer saw themselves making "art" or contributing to a cumulative "culture." Art and Culture seemed like local acts now, provincial definitions (an "art-culture system," I called it). And the response wasn't to rush to some new, emergent, historical center of avant-garde activity. Where was that? The world seemed to secrete many, divergent, arts and cultures, discrepant modernities. One's task as an "ethnographer" (defined, predominantly, as cultural critic, a defamiliariser and juxtaposer) was to mine the museum, in Fred Wilson's terms, to probe the cracks, search for the emergent: Benjamin's messianic time, without any particular messiah.

I think we can see, now, this was a response to decentering, and perhaps a preliminary millenialism, by people in a historically displaced condition. Not a universal prescription or normative "postmodernity." To be sure, the ethnographic disposition partook of a certain privilege, a luxury to explore one's own coming apart, to work with fragments. But I think it would be wrong to reduce this set of critical and quasi-documentary attitudes to a negative stereotype of "postmodern" relativity and self-absorption. For those representing marginal, or populist, modes of life and expression it offered a place, albeit circumscribed, in the wider, public debates. And for those coming from sites of relative privilege there was, and is, a genuine openness to a broader world of popular and non-Western possibilities and agencies here. I would like to think that, at its best, the "ethnography" which emerged across many fields in the 1980s rejects quick and dirty symptomatic analyses. It reflects a willingness to look at common sense, everyday practices - with extended, critical and self-critical attention, with a curiosity about particularity and a willingness to be decentered in acts of translation.

Alex Coles: One thing that you have been slightly brought to task for, at times by those same art critics, particularly Hal Foster in 'The Artist As Ethnographer', is the way you loosen up the notion of what an ethnography can be. In other words, you re-define the parameters of what constitutes field-work, participant/observation, etc. But are the methodologies of ethnography infinitely expandable? Or do they snap when pushed too far?

James Clifford: Of course all methodologies, which in the interpretive/historical studies are always modes of partial translation, first get you somewhere and then run out of gas. "Ethnography," whether in its strict anthropological or expanded cultural-critical sense, is no exception: it involves recognition and mis-recognition. Hal Foster, reacting against its sometimes uncritical popularity in art practices of the early 1990s, cuts "ethnography" down to size. And in this he's part of a necessary, counter-trend. (There have been regular flare-ups, too, in a border war between anthropology and cultural studies over what counts as real ethnography.) But I would caution readers of Hal's several pages (in *The Return of the Real*) on "the new anthropology" that he provides a very truncated account. His direct references to the movement under discussion are limited to a couple of my essays from the early 1980s. And in a common dismissive move, the new anthropology is reduced to textualism and hyper

reflexivity. This freezes a particular moment of what has been a complex, ongoing critique and decentering of cultural representations and relations of power. There's so much more to the ferment in socio-cultural anthropology during the 80s than a (selective) reading of *The Predicament Of Culture* can register!

Even that book's most "textualist," and often-cited, chapter, "On Ethnographic Authority," is a critique of the modes of critical authority Hal properly questions. To see it as reducing everything to text or - a rather different thing - to discourse, slides over the essay's central proposal that anthropology's former "informants" be thought of as "writers." This proposal argues that the space of cultural representations is populated by differently situated authorities, producers, not simply conduits, of self-reflexive "cultural" knowledge. For there is no longer a standpoint from which one can claim to definitively administer, or orchestrate, the textualisation of "identity," "tradition," or "history." A heteroglot, overlapping and contested public culture--including indigenous writers, readers, and performers-- characterises the post-/neo-colonial context which the self-critical work of the late seventies was beginning to reflect, in Western academic contexts. By the late 1980s it was inescapable that anthropological fieldwork would never again be a matter of an outsider scholar interrogating insider natives and emerging with neutral, authoritative knowledge. The "textual" critique of older, classic ethnographies showed that there had always been more going on: more negotiation, translation, appropriation. But now the politics and the poetics were in the open - not only because of the new theoretical self reflexivity, poststructural concepts of textual indeterminacy and dialogism, but more profoundly because of pressures from decolonisation and feminism.

The chapter in *The Predicament of Culture* on Marcel Griaule was centrally focused on the colonial context, seen from the post-war perspective of its contestation, and emphasising the issue of African agency in a negotiated ethnographic co-production spanning four decades. The book's later sections critiquing modernist primitivism and the history of collections were equally focused on bringing into view the socially and politically fraught nature of cross-cultural representations. And so expanding the range of activities qualified as ethnographic, or as art/culture-collecting, was an attempt to decentre canonical Western styles. And if this was all done from within a changing "West," and with theoretical tools of self-critique, it was done with an ear out for non-Western, and partially-Western, voices.

Routes, a 1990s book, assumes this mix of location and receptivity, tracking the conjoined practices of travel and translation. It assumes that while one's geo-political, worldly itineraries and encounters are powerfully constrained they are not ultimately determined. Location isn't a prison; it's comprised of material, but unfinished, maps and histories. In this book the ethnographic trope is replaced by a "travel" metaphor - similarly a source of insight and blindness, a translation term that needs to be cut down to size. Displacement, forced and voluntary, exists in an always-unresolved dialectic with different forms of dwelling, of staying put. Clearly this all has to do with the phenomena too hastily

gathered under the rubric of "globalisation," a matter of transnational flows, the making and remaking of cultures and places. *Routes* argues against closures in our struggle to understand the present historically. The structuring context of "late capitalism" troubles (but does not erase) the context of decolonisation that organized *The Predicament of Culture*. *Routes* tries to inhabit a tension, an antinomy, of neo- and post-colonial narratives.

Alex Coles: In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in artists that developed an understanding of an ethnographic site in their practices in the late 1960s (particularly Robert Smithson and Lothar Baumgarten). Today the notion of the ethnographic site is being further expanded by a number of artists. This is interesting given that a grasp of site-specificity has always been crucial for ethnographic field-work and textual ethnographies. Indeed, in "On Ethnographic Surrealism" (1981) you attest to the fact that "exploration of ethnographic activity" must always be set in "specific cultural and historical circumstances." Is this a definition of an ethnographic understanding of site-specificity?

James Clifford: It's interesting to connect an "ethnographic" approach with "site specificity" in art. Both are ways of decentering established centers of art/cultural production and display, and so I would be tempted to locate them in the general context I've just outlined. But it's important to recognize that turns to the specific and the local occur in contexts of "complex connectivity," to adopt John Tomlinson's substitute for the diffusionist term "globalization." (Globalization and Culture, 1999) I'd always want to stress, as in the case of Paterson, the entanglement of the particular, not with Williams's modernist "universal," but with networks of power and communication. If this means we can no longer speak of the "merely" local, then we need to interrogate the performative specificity of any ethnographic or site-specific production. Such productions make sense only given audience access (physical access, or written, photographic representations). People have to know, somehow, about Spiral Jetty, or Lothar Baumgarten placing the names of Indian groups in a Caracas botanical garden, or Ana Mendieta burning her body outline on the earth. Nowadays a video camera is an integral part of any site-specific, or local, performance, whether it's Guillermo Gomez-Peña and Coco Fusco infiltrating major museums as caged New World "savages" or the opening of a tribal museum in Alaska. The same goes for any ethnographic work, always already caught up in modes of representation and reception. I suppose that's still Writing Culture's message: we are talking about concrete, relational, articulations of "specificity."

You suggest that something similar applies to temporal contextualizations. The cultural and historical circumstances of "ethnographic surrealism" were, I argued, a Europe putting itself together after a war of unprecedented scale and brutality, and a modernism whose access to the non-Western "primitive" was going through quantitative and qualitative shifts. "Ethnographic surrealism" named a critical formation which made sense in this conjuncture--not an avant-garde method or a precursor of postmodernism. But by recognizing and naming it, I was positioning myself and my readers in the

culturally decentered, corrosively self-critical, post-60s. Specificity, whether of site or historical moment is always relative to its representations. A local formation, or a temporal conjuncture, is part of some larger projection of relevance or meaningfulness which makes sense in "contact relations" which are never transparent or free of appropriation. This is the basic performativity which an ethnographic poetics and politics assumes.

Alex Coles: In your writing you often take the ethnographer (and the discourse of anthropology) as your primary site. A neat quote from Paul Rabinow attests to this, "Clifford takes as his natives, as well as his informants, anthropologists." (You even quoted this passage in *The Predicament of Culture*.) What do you think of if? Is it less true now than it was a decade ago?

James Clifford: Well, my relations to anthropologists, whom I have never considered to be "my natives," have been complex. A kind of fraught, shifting colleagueship would be more like it. Paul's quip was meant to say that I couldn't, as a critic, escape the structures of authority I analyzed in anthropological fieldwork. To which I responded, by making his text an epigraph: "of course." Nor were the predicaments I thought I could see with special clarity in a changing anthropology peculiar to one discipline. But socio-cultural anthropology--perhaps because of a certain historical exposure, because it was so inescapably located in changing (decolonizing, recolonizing, modernizing, re-localizing etc) cross-cultural domains--lived through crucial problems of authority in a very public way. And anthropology's experience, its "crisis," became a paradigm for other fields where similar pressures were being felt.

I think that anthropology has grappled with the historical changes in its relations with its "objects" of study in a generally positive way. The process has not led, as some feared, to self-absorption and hyper-relativism, but to much more complex historical accounts of an expanded range of socio-cultural phenomena. As I've already suggested, the occasions of ethnography have come to be articulated in ways that necessarily include discrepant and ongoing processes of cultural representation and reception. Given these developments in socio-cultural anthropology, I find myself now more a participant than an observer. I particularly value the textured perspectives from geo-political "peripheries" and "marginal" places that anthropological ethnography still delivers. The discipline offers a critical corrective to global-systemic projections of the planet and its future. I'm always astonished and chagrined to find how little ethnography and ethnographic history people in the academy and art world at large actually know. (Some read me--or Johannes Fabian's *Time and the Other*, but never his many ethnographies--and think that's all they need.) I keep running into sophisticated scholars, artists, and intellectuals who still assume that the spread of McDonalds in many world cities, or the arrival of English, Coke, country music, anthropology and tourists in places like New Guinea results somehow automatically in a wholesale destruction of local affiliations, a homogenized world culture. Cross-cutting agencies, and the contradictions of everyday life, just disappear. Such a partial, Eurocentric view. . . and so satisfyingly tragic!

Alex Coles: In your most recent book, *Routes*, you develop the idea that a site is not necessarily defined by fixed spatial and temporal boundaries. Specifically, you suggest that a site can be a "contact-zone;" i.e. a place located between fixed points, one that is constantly mobile. How did you arrive at this expanded definition?

James Clifford: "Contact zone" is, of course, derived from Mary Louise Pratt's Imperial Eyes (1992). She adapts the term from sociolinguistics, the notion of "contact languages" (pidgins and creoles which emerge in specific historical conjunctures) as well as from the work of Fernando Ortiz on "transculturation." These are perspectives that do not see "culture contact" as one form progressively, sometimes violently, replacing another. They focus on relational ensembles sustained through processes of cultural borrowing, appropriation, and translation - multidirectional processes. And if the productions of modernity are exchanges, in this perspective, they are never free exchanges: the work of transculturation is aligned by structural relations of dominance and resistance, by colonial, national, class, and racial hierarchies. Nonetheless, a "contact zone" can never be reduced to cultural dominance or (more positively) education, acculturation, progress, etc. The concept deflects teleologies. In *Routes* I found it useful to think of museums (and a wide range of heritage, cultural performance sites) as "contact zones" because it opened them up to contestation and collaborative activity. It helped make visible the different agendas - aesthetic, historical, and political - that diverse "publics" bring to contexts of display. The sometimes fraught politics of representation that now trouble museums, particularly those which feature non-Western, tribal, and minority cultures, appeared as part of a long, always unfinished, history. Museums as we know them were integral to the expansive "West," its imperial and national projects. The wholesale movement of exotic collections into "artistic" and "cultural" centers, involved appropriations and translations now being re-inflected, and even, to a degree, reversed. In a contact perspective, which complicates zero-sum relation between "tradition" and "modernity," museums become way stations rather than final destinations.

Alex Coles: This is different to the way you discussed museums in the 1980s. Can you flesh out this development in your thinking a little more?

James Clifford: In *The Predicament of Culture* I was primarily concerned with a critique of Western institutions. This took two general forms: 1) questioning modes of authority both in academic ethnography and in art-world contexts such as the Museum of Modern Art's provocative exhibit, "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art" 2) looking for counter-discourses such as the "ethnographic surrealist" work of Michel Leiris, or the Caribbean surrealism of Aimé Césaire. The book tried to destabilise Western traditions and discourses from within--though the decolonising pressures it registered (from without) had already undermined this location and, indeed, any permanent inside/outside border. The career of Césaire, passing through Paris, in and out of the West, makes this

clear. Looking back on *The Predicament of Culture*, I tried, with limited success, to mark some of its locations - by geography, race, and gender - by re-collaging the "Ethnographic Surrealism" essay ("Documents: A Decomposition," in Sidra Stitch, ed. *Anxious Visions*, 1990).

And I worked to deepen the shift of perspective that was latent in the book's last chapter devoted to the Mashpee Indians' inconclusive "tribal" identity trial. There I had confronted an ongoing New England contact history and a native reality that constantly escaped anthropological "culture" and continuous "history," categories that formed my common sense. Moreover, there was nothing radically nomadic, deterritorialised, or rootless about the Indians who persisted in and around this Cape Cod town. I wasn't portraying "postmodern" prototypes. I was trying to bring my primary audience - enlightened, Western-educated skeptics like me - to a realization that we were missing something: a reality of Native American existence that our received notions of culture and history couldn't grasp. The trial made me a lot more sensitive to indigenous movements with their complex rearticulations of tradition and history. One of the first things I published after *The Predicament of Culture* was an essay comparing "Four Northwest Coast Museums" in Vancouver. Two of these were "tribal" museums/cultural centers. The essay, reprinted in *Routes*, marked a crucial discovery for me. I began to see the museum, that most stodgy and Eurocentric of institutions, as a dynamic, disseminating institution which could take a diversity of forms in particular local/global conjunctures. Of course the critics of "heritage industries" and "identity politics" see this phenomenon as a characteristic of the superficial cultural politics of postmodernity. And I think there's no doubt that a globalizing system of cultural commodification is at work. But it's terribly inadequate to reduce the emerging subaltern and local productions that articulate with museums, cultural centers, and (inescapably) tourism to epiphenomena of a late capitalist, postmodern or "Americanized," world system of cultures.

Tribal museums, a proliferating movement, fulfill distinct, if connected, functions. They often perform heritage for both "insiders" and "outsiders," differently. They are part of markets in native art which are unlike the older, ongoing economies in "primitive art" - exclusively governed by Western taste and distribution. The new "tribal" cultural productions are often significantly under native control. (One thinks of Aboriginal acrylics and video-making.) They are "articulated" (a term I much prefer to "invented") traditions: specific linkages of old and new, ours and theirs, secret and public, partial connections between complex socio-cultural wholes. To perform identity, to play the culture-game, is to be alive in postmodernity. But the terms of this liveliness vary. And it's possible to articulate quite old, non-Western things, through the new languages of culture and identity. If a good deal of this becomes commodified, isn't it capitalist hubris to assume that's the end of the story? A closer, more ethnographic, look at particular sites of heritage collecting and performance than one gets from the political-economy systematisers often tells an ambiguous, open-ended story. There is, undeniably, a systematic aspect to the proliferating politics of heritage, ethnicity and tourism. But it's a system of worlds in contact rather than a world-system.

Tribal museums/cultural centers, I argued in *Routes*, are innovations in a long history of cultural (re)appropriations - situations of ongoing, but always contested, inequality. My contact perspective also touched on sites of discrepant heritage like Fort Ross (the reconstructed Russian/Alaskan outpost in Northern California), on performed heritage and museum-collecting in highland New Guinea, and on the Mayan ruin and tourist site of Palenque. In each case I tried to focus on histories of local/regional/global articulation rather than on systemically produced, commodified identities and differences. The "world of museums" whose byways I began to follow (not just an expanded "museum world") led me out of places like Paris and New York, modernist centers, and into a range of contemporary sites that can't be rounded up historically under the stop-gap language of "posts."

Alex Coles: In *Routes* you devote an entire 'experimental' chapter to the Susan Hiller installation you saw in London From the Freud Museum. How did you arrive at Hiller's work? As a fictional museum it is very different to the other museums you visit in *Routes*: where you consciously trying to play off the differences between the two?

James Clifford: I first learned about Susan Hiller in the early 1980s through the American poet, Barbara Einzig, who has since edited an important collection, *Thinking About Art: Conversations With Susan Hiller*. It was Hiller's anthropological/archaeological background, and her incorporation of issues from those disciplines in her painting, photography, videos, and installations, that most interested me. I suppose I assimilated her to my utopian category of "ethnographic surrealism." She is deeply concerned with "cultural" grounds for ways of perceiving and feeling, for the assumed real. She has worked with dreams, as everyday forms of knowing, in ways reminiscent of Leiris in his "oneirographic" writings from *Nuits Sans Nuit* (translated by Richard Sieburth, *Nights as Days, Days as Nights*, 1987). Hiller is interested in expanded notions of writing and inscription. Her work draws - in anti-Primitivist ways - on tribal and other non-Western sources. Moreover, she has been very interested in matters of taxonomy and collecting, sometimes in ways similar to what Bataille and Co. were doing in the journal *Documents*, at least as I reconstructed it. Crucially, for me, she adds a strong woman's perspective to this very masculinist tradition. I don't know whether Hiller would be happy or not to be aligned this way. There are plenty of other sources. But it's how I came to her beautiful and unsettling work.

You say my piece on Hiller is about a kind of "fictional museum." Maybe it seems so because of its fragmented, subjective voice. But I see her presence in the Freud Museum as helping transform a shrine into a "contact zone." So the stakes there are the same as in the other museums visited in *Routes*. And the chapter is actually quite documentary in all its evocations; it doesn't make anything up. I happened to be in London and read about Hiller's installation in the newspaper. She used objects and texts arranged in archaeological collecting boxes to interrupt Freud's famous collections of Egyptian and Classical antiquities. She provided other "origins," other "sources" of meaning and

"civilization." Drawing from Australian aboriginal materials, from female cults in Greece, from Joanna Southcott, from water-witching, from Mayan traditions, from African tourist art, from Sephardic Jewish history, etc. Hiller supplemented Freud's masculine, European, world view in a way that gently, firmly pried open that tradition. It was never a question of consigning Freud to the junk heap of history, but rather of placing him in a complex intersection of histories. I felt immediately at home with this project, and thought it was a model of what I had, in different ways, been trying to do with Western anthropological discourses and institutions such as the museum.

I started out just trying to describe and appreciate Hiller's intervention. But, under her spell perhaps, I became as interested in the Freud Museum itself as in her poignant collection boxes. I heard a woman's voice wafting across from another room. Anna Freud, narrating home movies about her parents - films shot by Marie Bonaparte. Freud at Burlington Gardens, dying, surrounded by women. In the present Museum, Anna's work-room rivals her father's. And her own life - with its travels, friendships, and clinical, intellectual work - pervades the space. Freud's own death here, a victim of Hitler's ethnic cleansing, writing a book, Moses and Monotheism that undermined race purity (Moses the Egyptian), his struggle to sustain a kind of lucidity in the gathering obscurity, and the need to find a home, a garden, in exile - all this is intensely moving. It's moving even as, indeed because, one knows that the civilisational world Freud collected and cherished was crumbling around him and would be forever altered by world war and its aftermaths. (I feel similarly about another great "end of the West" work of erudition written in exile during the war, Eric Auerbach's *Mimesis*.)

And then London itself--"postcolonial," "diasporic"--crowded into the essay, which was already faceting almost out of control. I had to find a place, somehow, for Blake's transformative vision, and for another museum, of the city of London, which was just then holding a special exhibit called "The Peopling of London" (nothing but immigrants from the Romans on). So the piece turned into a kind of intersectional meander which, I'm afraid, is formally quite precarious, but where most of my book's obsessions are going on. All the balls in the air - for the reader to catch! *Routes* makes some demands on reading. It changes voice, rhetoric, and genre from "chapter" to "chapter." Reviewers have complained about having to shift gears all the time; and of course different critics like half the pieces and hate the other half, - for opposite reasons. But I thought it worth risking some confusion in order to - as my friend Jed Rasula put it - "aerate the academic text" while making explicit the different, serious registers (analytic, poetic, subjective, objective, descriptive, meditative, evocative, etc.) of thinking. We operate on many levels, waking and dreaming, as we make our way through a topic; but then we foreshorten the whole process in the service of a consistent, conclusive, voice or genre. I wanted to resist that a bit.