

The (Jean) Nouvel Other: Primitivism and the Musée du Quai Branly

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The Musée du Quai Branly, located beside the Eiffel Tower in Paris, opened in June 2006. Constructed to house France's important collection of non-western art, the museum has been promoted as 'decidedly post-colonial' and a place of 'reconciliation and sharing'. Historians have situated the creation of the museum within political debates over the restructuring of several of France's museums and, more broadly, the country's position in a post-colonial world, while focusing little critical attention on the building itself. The author argues that Jean Nouvel's architectural program for the Musée du Quai Branly—a 'primitive shelter' surrounded by a 'sacred wood'—gives physical form to a primitivist aesthetic. The unproblematised binaries of self versus other and culture versus nature evident in Nouvel's design reveal a surprisingly unsophisticated theoretical standpoint. As a frame in which to view and understand the objects on display, the Musée du Quai Branly invites a primitivist—and colonial—reading of its collection.

On 20 June 2006 French President Jacques Chirac inaugurated the highly anticipated Musée du Quai Branly, characterised by many writers as his *grand projet*.¹ In front of an audience that included United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Rigoberta Menchú Tum and noted anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, Chirac lauded the creation of 'un lieu original qui rende [*sic*] justice à l'infinie diversité des cultures', where France can pay homage to '[des] peuples humiliés et méprisés, auxquels on allait jusqu'à dénier qu'ils eussent une histoire. Peuples aujourd'hui encore souvent marginalisés, fragilisés, menacés par l'avancée inexorable de la modernité'. He continued the impassioned speech by stating that at the heart of the new museum was the refusal of ethnocentrism, 'cette prétention déraisonnable et inacceptable de l'Occident à porter, en lui seul, le destin de l'humanité' (Chirac 2006).²

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The Musée du Quai Branly, which promises visitors the opportunity to see ‘[des] “chefs-d’oeuvres de l’humanité”’ (Dias 2002, p. 17), was an immediate success, according to the congratulatory reviews published in the international press and interviews with some of the nearly 30,000 individuals who visited the museum during its opening weekend (Dargent 2006; Selignan 2006; Wecker 2006). Yet the new cultural institution for the art of Africa, Asia, the Pacific and the Americas, situated in the dense urban fabric of Paris next to the Eiffel Tower, has already spurred heated debates among anthropologists, art historians and even the news media;³ the manner in which objects are exhibited and the provenance of some allegedly looted works have come under fire (for example, Dias 2001, pp. 92–95; de l’Estoile 2003a, p. 358; Sancton 2003, p. 68; Sherman 2004, p. 702).⁴

The creation of this museum has been problematised by cultural historians such as Herman Lebovics. In his book *Bringing the Empire Back Home*, Lebovics discusses the ‘repositioning’ of several museums in France and the installation of ‘primitive’ art in the Louvre in anticipation of the Musée du Quai Branly’s inauguration in terms of the ‘representation of the French national heritage’ to France itself and to the world at large (2004, p. 143).⁵ The Musée du Quai Branly, he argues, ‘is being positioned to advance a new French claim: France has a special relationship, a special concern, a special respect, for the cultures which will be on display there’ (2004, p. 158). He suggests that France’s current endeavour to create post-colonial institutions simply ‘updates the old “we” and the “other” of the colonial era’ (2004, p. 176). Lebovics and others are right to situate the founding of the Musée du Quai Branly within the political debates still raging over the restructuring of several of France’s museums and, more broadly, the country’s position in a post-colonial world, particularly after the riots of 2005 in the suburbs of Paris. However, little critical attention has been focused on the building itself.

The press lauded French architect Jean Nouvel’s design for the Musée du Quai Branly when he won the architectural competition in 2000, and it has received high praise since the museum opened (for example, Edelmann 2006a; Ouroussoff 2006) (Figure 1). In the six intervening years, museological issues inherent in displaying objects from the collection have been the focus of intense criticism, shifting attention away from the building to the works inside.⁶ This article expands the critique of the new museum by discussing the problematic ways in which Nouvel’s architectural program frames both the objects on display and the institution’s larger cultural program.⁷ I argue that the design for the Musée du Quai Branly gives physical form to a primitivist aesthetic, ‘reveal[ing] more about the interests and motivations of observers [and, I would argue, producers] than [. . .] about whoever is notionally represented’ (Thomas 1994, p. 22). The press has unwittingly identified the ideology behind Nouvel’s project: the building has been described as embodying both presence and absence, pointing to the otherness embedded in the fabric of the building (D. 2000, p. 46).

The pressures on the project were great, given the complex and delicate issues inherent in erecting a museum of art of other cultures in post-colonial France. The country’s decision to do so required an extraordinary sensitivity to the objects in its collection—inevitably founded on colonial spoils—and the peoples they represent



Figure 1 Jean Nouvel, Musée du Quai Branly, Exterior View. Courtesy of Ateliers Jean Nouvel, Paris. Photo by Philippe Ruault. © Philippe Ruault

(see Marin 2006). Jan Nederveen Pieterse stresses that '[e]thnographic museums can no longer afford to be colonial museums, display windows of empire, indirect testimonies of national grandeur'. He continues: '[t]he time of ethnographic museums might be past altogether [...]' (Pieterse 2005, p. 164). In order to avoid the pitfalls of the traditional ethnographic museum, the founders of the Musée du Quai Branly envisioned it as an art museum (Figure 2); according to Chirac, 'il n'existe pas plus de hiérarchie entre les arts et les cultures qu'il n'existe de hiérarchie entre les peuples' (Chirac 2006). The construction of a twenty-first century museum created a singular opportunity to address the myriad difficulties of displaying the collection's objects while avoiding an aestheticising exhibition strategy that literally (re)produces 'the colonised as a fixed reality which is at once an "other" and yet entirely knowable and visible' (Bhabha 1986, p. 156).⁸ The building was intended to provide both a symbolic



Figure 2 Jean Nouvel, Musée du Quai Branly, Interior View. Courtesy of Ateliers Jean Nouvel, Paris. Photo by Philippe Ruault. © Philippe Ruault

new beginning for these collections and a way to escape the ghosts of the past (de l'Estoile 2003b, p. 41).

Museums are not—nor can they be—neutral spaces (Duncan 1991, p. 90). They are texts (Silverstone 1994, p. 166), inflected and formed by ideologies. Similarly, curators, anthropologists and ethnographers must work within their own subjective and cultural limitations, constantly “facing the impossibility of delivering [the other’s] presence, reproducing it *as it is* in truth, reality and otherness” [Trinh Minh-ha, quoted in Marcus 1991, p. 16, emphasis in the original]. Creating a space in which to exhibit the productions of the other(s) is a similarly loaded proposition. In post-colonial times, a museum for non-western cultures cannot ‘[ignore] other options—such as recognising difference without exoticism, others as counterparts in dialogue, or oneself as an other’ (Pieterse 2005, p. 165). Of course, museum buildings themselves act as frames in which to view and understand the objects on display (Duncan 2005, p. 81). Instead of nurturing a sensitive reading of non-western art, Jean Nouvel’s new Musée du Quai Branly insists on a colonial gaze, encouraged by the unproblematised binaries of self versus other and culture versus nature evident in the building’s design.⁹ Like the structures built for the Universal and Colonial Expositions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the new museum denies textual complexity, inviting a primitivist reading of its collection.¹⁰

Primitive Architecture in the Colonial Expositions

The history of primitivism—as a colonial construct and as an underpinning of modern art—has been discussed at length elsewhere (for example, Foster 1985; Price 1989; Miller 1991). In the domain of architecture, the most significant precursors to the Musée du Quai Branly were the architectural confections created for the French Universal and Colonial Expositions.¹¹ These Expositions not only displayed the industrial strength of the country, but also highlighted its colonial riches; by stressing the differences between France and the cultures represented in the expositions, the sense of French national identity was strengthened. Starting in 1889, they included pavilions constructed in the architectural styles of the colonised lands, such as Tahiti, the Congo and Senegal, importing ‘natives’ to inhabit these villages. The most elaborate series of buildings was perhaps the 1889 History of Human Habitation, designed by Charles Garnier, architect of the Paris Opéra. Twenty-three full-scale houses were ‘recreated’ on either side of Eiffel’s new tower, including a prehistoric stone home, an Egyptian home from 1400 BC with hieroglyphs by the front door (Garnier & Ammann 1893), an Arab house from the eleventh century and a Sudanese house. These were divided into either prehistoric or historic eras; the latter were further subdivided into ‘Civilisations primitives’, ‘Civilisations nées des invasions des Aryas’ (such as Persia and Greece) and ‘Civilisations contemporaines des civilisations primitives, mais qui [...] n’ont exercé aucune influence sur la marche générale de l’humanité’ (such as China or Japan) (*Exposition Universelle*, 1892–93, II, pp. 2–3).

In a later example, at the 1931 Colonial Exposition, people ‘were exhibited like exotic specimens’ in front of the French West Africa Pavilion and forced to dance for gawking spectators, while caricatures of their features graced the broadsheets advertising the exposition (Degli & Mauzé 2000, p. 95). Meanwhile, its lead organiser, L. H. G. Lyautey, stated that the exposition was meant to show that “colonial action, so long misunderstood, deformed, sometimes shackled, is a constructive and beneficial action” (Lyautey, quoted in Morton 2000, p. 3).

Ultimately, the Colonial Expositions were a microcosmic display—a collection—of colonies, with all its attendant implications (Morton 2000, p. 10). The individual pavilions were to the colonising country what the follies of the aristocratic garden were to the Enlightened individual: a *Kunstkammer* or *cabinet de curiosités*. An interest in understanding was there coupled with a desire to possess, and the very process of collecting—a collection coming “to exist by means of its principle of organisation” (Susan Stewart, quoted in Sherman 2004, p. 698)—denies contextualisation. Anthony Vidler suggests that the fantastic structures of the French expositions were the descendants of the eighteenth-century garden folly. He writes:

The realm of the folly [after 1867] was the great exposition, the world exhibition, the trade fair. [...] [F]antasies were elaborated on every style and building type in the Far East and the Far West, adapting them to the needs of pleasure and leisure. In this world of marketable objects, the folly became the subject, not to liberty of permutation or creation, but to liberty of fabrication. (Vidler 1983, p. 12)¹²

Evident in the manipulation of other cultures in the Colonial Expositions is the fact that French architects were ‘limited by their ethnocentrism in attempting to gain knowledge about other cultures; whatever their expertise, the artists’ own culture invariably skews the image’ (Benjamin 1997, p. 7).

Musée du Quai Branly

Financed by the Ministère de la Culture and the Ministère de l’Education nationale, the Musée du Quai Branly combines the existing collections, totalling 300,000 objects, of two of France’s most important museums for non-western art: the Musée de l’Homme and the Musée National des Arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie.¹³ The founders had considered calling the collections’ new home the Musée des Arts et Civilisations or the Musée des Arts Premiers before ultimately settling on the Musée du Quai Branly; the ambitious new museum’s incongruously innocuous name, which provides an address but no hint as to the type of art to be found there, reveals the difficulties inherent in establishing such a museum in post-colonial France. The museum administration is obviously struggling to create a non-controversial and non-threatening context for its collection; an early promotional brochure, for example, stated that the museum would be ‘decidedly post-colonial’ and a place of ‘reconciliation and sharing’ (*Musée du Quai Branly* 2000, pp. 23, 34).

One of the architect’s imperatives in the Musée du Quai Branly’s design is to nurture the interaction between viewer and object in order to intensify the emotional tenor of

the experience.¹⁴ Nouvel—described as one of the most ‘progressive’ thinkers of the day (Hayes 2002, p. vii)—states that in this new museum, ‘everything is done to stimulate the blossoming of emotions aroused by the primary object, [. . .] everything is done to protect it from light and to capture that rare ray of sun needed to set vibrations in motion, to spark off a feeling of spirituality. It is a place marked by symbols of forests and rivers, by obsessions with death and oblivion’ (2000, p. 27). Nouvel’s interest in the ‘communion’ between visitor and object (Nouvel 2000, p. 27)—and his belief in the power of architecture to nurture this experience—betrays his outmoded and problematic idea of the universality of the primitive. Writing about Le Corbusier’s system of symbols at his proto-Brutalist complex at Chandigarh, Steven Hurtt patronisingly characterises primitivism ‘as idealising folk, rural, village, primitive, and even marginal peoples (gypsy, circus, etc.) as pure and natural [. . .] and deriv[ing] its artistic language from their primitive, naive, expressive art. The goal of Primitivism is an artistic language that is accessible to all people because it is based on a universal phenomenology’ (1999, p. 94).¹⁵ The ‘artistic language’ of primitivism in architecture was most clearly defined by Marc-Antoine Laugier, who famously expounded ‘the time-honoured *topos* of all architectural speculation on primitivism: the primitive hut’ (Berry 1987, p. 57) in *An Essay on Architecture* from 1753. In the Musée du Quai Branly, Nouvel combines this focus on structure with an experiential primitivism which seems to rely on the kind of ‘universal phenomenology’ described by Hurtt.

Nouvel has portrayed the Musée du Quai Branly as a ‘primitive shelter’ (Nouvel, quoted in Such 2000, p. 62) surrounded by a ‘sacred wood’ (Nouvel 2000, p. 27).¹⁶ The museum is connected to the city’s Haussmannian fabric on its western end by a series of administrative buildings, which gently meet the existing structures on the edge of the site; in the first instance of the museum’s subordination of culture to nature, botanist Patrick Blanc covered the external wall of the northern administrative building with vegetation. The brightly painted and highly visible hallways of the southern building, which contain the museum’s workshops and bookstore, were decorated by eight Aboriginal artists from Australia in a gesture conveying the museum’s interest in reaching out to contemporary artists from other cultures.¹⁷ The museum itself, which projects gracefully eastward as it echoes the curve of the Seine, is nestled in the centre of an artificial forest.¹⁸ Nouvel attempts to maintain this simulacrum of wilderness throughout the visitor’s encounter with the building. One can enter the site at five distinct points, but these openings do not provide direct access to the museum. The visitor must step through an opening and, in a mode of ‘progressive discovery’ (D. 2000, p. 46), find a path that leads through the garden to the building itself. In order to create a museum that is unpretentious and non-monumental (Martin 2000), Nouvel has designed the site so that visitors must wander the wood through dense vegetation in order to find the structure (Nouvel, quoted in Fèvre 2006, p. 5). To further confound the visitor’s approach to the museum, it rests two stories above ground on randomly arranged pilotis designed to resemble tree trunks or totem poles (Nouvel 2000, p. 27). In other words, to avoid monumentality, the building is not easily accessible.

The garden, the first point of contact between visitor and museum, is perhaps where the critique of Nouvel's plan should begin. Designed by Gilles Clément, landscape architect of the Parc André Citroën and the Jardin planétaire at La Villette in Paris, it occupies 18,000 square meters and is planted to evoke the 'ecologies' of the art's origins (Lebovics 2006). Once again, the analogy of the garden folly is useful; eighteenth-century French aristocrats were fond of those that mimicked oriental architectural styles, such as the pyramid and the mosque. Strolling through the formal garden, the aristocrat would happen upon a folly and delight in the unexpected experience of the picturesque; Nouvel intends his visitors to thrill in much the same way to finding the Musée du Quai Branly within its 'paysage mystérieux' (Nouvel, quoted in Fèvre 2006, p. 5). In the eighteenth century, the word 'folly' held 'connotations of libertine, eroticism and pornography' (Vidler 1983, p. 11). As it happens, the garden folly eventually came to be known as a site for clandestine amorous encounters—its name aptly, if inadvertently, hinting at one of its only functions.¹⁹ The siting of the lustful, base and erotic in the folly, then, could point to the locus of the other, the counterpoint to the civilised. Its potentially illicit function adds another layer to the implicit meanings of Nouvel's building. In an interesting parallel, one of Nouvel's own competition drawings shows an amorous couple walking in the garden of the new museum (see D. 2000, p. 47).

The high glass wall on the quai side shields the garden and museum from the sounds and smells of traffic, while creating a separate, cloistered space.²⁰ As Auer notes, a 'fence draws a boundary between in and out, identity and alterity: Is the person enclosed by the fence protected or held captive? Is the person outside of the fence a victim or the master of the situation?' (1989, p. 44). Once mature, the garden will hide the museum from view from the river (Martin 2000), diminishing the presence of the museum and its contents in the cityscape.²¹

The museum also partially dematerialises within its 'sacred wood' through Nouvel's inventive use of glass.²² Evolving technology increases control over materials, according to Nouvel, who theorises a 'Darwinism of architecture': 'One of the main ways of controlling material is through light, and so one of [...] the most evolved, is glass' (Nouvel, quoted in Morgan, 1998, p. 149). The architect titled the essay accompanying the Musée du Quai Branly competition design 'Presence–Absence or Selective Dematerialization'.²³ He states:

Out with structures, atmospheres, 'carpentries' of the façade, emergency staircases, handrails, false ceilings, projectors, pedestals, displays, ornamental frames. If it is necessary to retain their function, they should be out of sight and out of mind, they should step aside for the sacred objects in order to encourage communion. [...] But the means are of no importance... Only the results count: the matter sometimes seems to disappear, giving the impression that the museum is a simple shelter, without a façade, standing in a wood. (2000, p. 27, second ellipsis in the original)

The dematerialisation of the building can be similarly understood to negate the presence of this museum in the cityscape, just as 'ces civilisations—dites primitives', to quote Jacques Chirac, '—ont été oubliées de l'histoire et de l'histoire de l'art' (2000, p. 3).

At the Musée du Quai Branly, the windows are either inscribed with images or frame the cityscape in deliberate ways. The 26 small rooms that jut out of the building's north façade are framed by a wall of windows that is 'décoré des motifs arborescents' (Edelmann 2006b, p. 25) (see Figure 2)—the material itself speaks the language of primitivism. Wooden *brises-soleil* line the south façade; seen from the garden, these shades evoke images of primitive dwellings (D. 2000, p. 47) or Japanese swords (Edelmann 2006b, p. 24). From within the museum, the garden is framed by the narrow bands of window visible between them. This horizontal view enhances the illusion of a natural landscape created by the constructed garden, while obscuring its place in the centre of a vertical city. It seems significant that, although most of the photos currently circulating in the press juxtapose the museum with the Eiffel Tower (see Figure 1), Nouvel only included it in one of his competition drawings and then only as a background element without any apparent relationship to the design of the new museum.²⁴ The architect confirms that '[a]u pied de la tour Eiffel', the Musée du Quai Branly buildings 'ne pouvaient pas avoir de silhouette affirmée' (Nouvel, quoted in Fèvre 2006, p. 5). Nouvel's deliberate suppression of the relationship between his and Eiffel's structures is symptomatic of the unproblematised nature of Nouvel and Clément's landscaping. A more direct contrast between the Champ de Mars, the geometricised French garden at the foot of the Eiffel Tower and the uneven terrain of the 'paysage mystérieux' of the Musée du Quai Branly would have made quite explicit the dialectical relationship between the two.

The grounds of the Musée du Quai Branly are designed so that, once the trees are fully grown, the building will gradually become visible to visitors as they approach through the garden.²⁵ Once inside, visitors enter the gallery spaces via a sinuous ramp as though "following the river upstream", in Nouvel's words (*Building Design* 2006). Colours on the floor indicate passage from one continent to another as visitors meander through the brightly painted labyrinthine space. The path is lined by a high partition of uneven contours, resembling the wall of a cave or grotto; one writer compares it to the rocks of the Parc Zoologique de Paris in the Bois de Vincennes (Biétry-Rivierre 2006, p. 31). The partition contains touch-screens and text panels that provide information about the objects on display.²⁶ The deployment inside the museum of organic materials, such as leather and linoleum (Biétry-Rivierre 2006, p. 31), is matched outside by Nouvel's unironic use of primitive symbols, such as the jungle and the totem pole, confirming that, as James Clifford points out, 'the idea persists that tribal people are closer to nature' (Clifford *et al.* 1987, p. 143).

Nouvel calls the rooms that protrude from the north façade 'micro-architectures'—Carol Duncan might label them instead "aesthetic chapels" (Duncan 2005, p. 85)—which provide opportunities for 'communion' with small groups of objects organised thematically (see Figure 2). The aforementioned *brises-soleil* on the south façade block almost all of the natural light in order to protect the fragile works on display (Biétry-Rivierre 2006, p. 31). A restaurant—predictably named 'Les Ombres'—stands on the roof deck, bordered on all sides by basins of water. No railing separates visitors from the surrounding environment—the 'sacred wood' below and the breathtaking vistas of

Paris beyond. It is here perhaps that the distinction between the 'primitive' and the 'civilised' is most apparent.

Swiss *philosophe* Jean-Jacques Rousseau's famous dictum is invoked in the promotional brochure of the Musée du Quai Branly, which states that 'les chefs-d'oeuvre du monde entier naissent libres et égaux' (*Musée du Quai Branly* 2000, p. 4).²⁷ In the museum's egalitarian spirit, the collections are organised simply by continent. One critic writes: 'Dans cet espace, les objets, eux aussi, semblent agglutinés, jetés là sans ordre ni hiérarchie. Ils dessinent au sol une cartographie des cultures mais par l'absence de cheminement imposé demande à chaque visiteur d'établir sa propre carte mentale' (Dumas 2000, p. 54). This unguided tour gives viewers *carte blanche* to assign their own meanings to the works, which are helplessly divorced from their original contexts. Anthropologist Maurice Godelier, first director of the scientific and educational departments of the museum, anticipated potential reactions to the objects in this new museum and responded in advance: 'Nous sommes toujours devant le mystère de l'objet, mystère d'un sens qui est nécessairement attaché à une forme, alors que la forme peut se détacher de son sens. Le musée est le meilleur lieu pour approfondir la réflexion sur ce mystère' (Pomian 2000, p. 88).²⁸ Of course, the objects' 'mystery'—along with the 'mystery' of nature (Nouvel, quoted in Fèvre 2006, p. 5)—is the 'the oldest cliché of ethnography' (Pieterse 2005, p. 166).

The decontextualised display is particularly problematic in the case of objects from other cultures, because it suppresses the colonial relationship, 'the determining weight of History' (Barthes 1957, p. 101).²⁹ As Lebovics argues, such an exhibition strategy 'flattens' the artworks' histories and cultures and, in an unwitting reversal, exposes the west as the fetishist, a label so often applied to the very cultures the museum purports to be honouring (Lebovics 2006). Nouvel's architecture makes evident the romanticisation of other cultures that is also present in the objects' decontextualised exhibition that emphasises formal qualities; it should be noted that Nouvel was an important collaborator in defining the museological program. In the eloquent words of Hal Foster, the 'artifact is evacuated even as it is elevated'; he goes on to describe primitivism as:

an imaginary resolution of a real contradiction: a repression of the fact that a breakthrough in our art, indeed a regeneration in our culture, is based in part on the breakup and decay of other societies [...]. And the final contradiction or aporia is this: no anthropological remorse, aesthetic elevation, or redemptive exhibition can correct or compensate this loss *because they are all implicated in it*. (Foster 1985, p. 61, emphasis in the original)

Museums serve as 'institutions of memory' (Gurian 2005, p. 76)—the colonial past that is seemingly effaced in the aestheticisation of the object cannot help but re-emerge. The relative strengths and weaknesses of the collection have already been correlated directly to France's colonial expeditions (de Roux 2006, p. 25). With a focus on aesthetic form, the 'civilisations oubliées' represented in the Musée du Quai Branly, to paraphrase Chirac, must go on waiting to be remembered.

Creating a museum to honour the cultures of Africa, Asia, the Pacific and the Americas with a new building designed by one of today's most important architects was a laudable gesture on the part of the French President. Chirac opened the Musée du Quai Branly on a note of hope, sharing its 'message de paix, de tolérance et de respect des autres' (Chirac 2006). The Australian Aboriginal artists who decorated some of the building's spaces were optimistic as well that the museum would bring 'continents and cultures' together (*BBC News* 2006). To that end, the museum has planned an ambitious program of temporary exhibitions, dance, theatre and lectures and has established fellowships to attract scholars and researchers from the cultures represented in the museum (see Dargent & Biétry-Rivierre 2006, p. 30).³⁰

It remains to be seen whether the visitor's experience of the building will be at odds ideologically with the structure itself. It seems, however, that France's new museum for other cultures represents a missed opportunity to create a space conducive to '*reflexive representation*—reflexive in the sense of self-questioning, problematising the politics of representation itself', a space that looks at 'the process of *othering*' (Pieterse 2005, p. 165, emphases in the original). Echoing this sentiment, Nouvel asserted that 'we need to set aside places, areas that can be destabilised' (Baudrillard & Nouvel 2002, p. 9). Trinh T. Minh-ha, whose work is represented in the Musée du Quai Branly (Héliot 2006, p. 30), writes that 'one can never point to the other without pointing to oneself, and a superficial understanding of the other always entails a superficial understanding of oneself' (Clifford *et al.* 1987, p. 148). Indeed, the Musée du Quai Branly depicts oppositional relationships in explicit terms, within a specific system of representation, placing Nouvel at the end of a long line of French colonialists.

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Notes

- [1] Unfortunately the author did not have the opportunity to visit the museum, which opened as this article was going to press. When asked about changing the name of the museum to the Musée Chirac, President Chirac told Louis Laforge that it would be 'un grand honneur' (Laforge 2006). Stéphane Martin commented that renaming the museum is 'parfaitement

- légitime', but that usage requires that 'les grands établissements' do not carry the name of a living individual (Martin, quoted in Dargent & Biétry-Rivierre 2006, p. 30).
- [2] I am not implying in this article that Chirac's interest in other cultures is insincere; from his harsh words during the events celebrating the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus's 'discovery' of America to his lifelong fascination with 'primitive' objects, it is clear that Chirac has had a longstanding interest in other cultures. However, as a major player in selecting the competition-winning design of the Musée du Quai Branly, he is implicated in what I see as Nouvel's neo-colonialist project. For more on Chirac's history with these objects, see Gouilliaud (2006). Of course, building a major new museum in France is a loaded enterprise. As Duncan notes, for hundreds of years, public 'art museums could demonstrate the goodness of a state or municipality or show the civic-mindedness of its leading citizens' (Duncan 1991, p. 88).
 - [3] The Musée du Quai Branly's collection of Asian art consists principally of nineteenth-century and twentieth-century textiles and quotidian objects, complementing the important collection of the Musée national des Arts asiatiques-Guimet in Paris (de Roux 2006, p. 25).
 - [4] One of the most vocal critics has been Bernard Dupaigne, director of the ethnology laboratory at the Musée de l'Homme from 1991 to 1998, whose book was published as the museum opened. See Dupaigne (2006a, b).
 - [5] For more on the Louvre installation in the Pavillon des Sessions, see Dias (2002) and Lebovics (2004, pp. 144–148).
 - [6] The polemics surrounding the opening of the Pavillon des Sessions in the Musée du Louvre also distracted from the future Musée du Quai Branly. See note 5 above.
 - [7] The Musée du Quai Branly comprises four new structures. I concentrate my critique on the gardens and the museum building itself, although I briefly address the administrative buildings that have also been erected at the site. Some articles in the recent press have echoed my critique of the museum. These include: 'Heart of Darkness' (*Building Design* 2006), 'A Heart of Darkness in the City of Light' (Kimmelman 2006) and 'Musée des Bogus Arts' (Gibbons 2006). Most critics, however, speak of the building using terms from the primitive paradigm that Nouvel has employed: for example, Ouroussoff writes, in relation to the 9,000 or so musical instruments housed in a glass tower within the building: '[...] the instruments are like exotic birds perched just outside [*sic*] of reach' (2006, p. E7). Even Nouvel himself is described as a 'chaman' in Prat (2006).
 - [8] I do not take a stance as negative as Dominguez, who states: 'When we assert the need to salvage, rescue, save, preserve a series of objects or forms, we announce our fear of its destruction, our inability to trust others to take appropriate action and our sense of entitlement over the fate of the objects. Our best liberal intentions do little other than patronize those slated for cultural salvage' (Dominguez 1987, p. 131). I believe that it is possible to create respectful museums of objects from other cultures, but both the works and the cultures are belittled in Nouvel's conception.
 - [9] Bhabha writes: 'The taking up of any position, within a specific discursive form, in a particular historical conjuncture, is [...] always problematic—the site of both fixity and fantasy' (Bhabha 1986, p. 164).
 - [10] I have chosen to discuss the Musée du Quai Branly as 'primitive', as opposed to 'exotic'. The romantic and mystical qualities of the latter, potentially seen as a modern-day Garden of Eden, mostly do not apply in this case. Of course, as Sweeney notes, primitivism itself can contain two different but related tropes: 'a regressive, untamed atavism versus the state of plenitude and harmonious simplicity of the exotic primitive' (Sweeney 2004, p. 13). Nouvel, it seems to me, plays with both in his new building.
 - [11] Of course, many ethnographic museums originated in the Colonial Expositions; see Pieterse (2005, p. 164).

- [12] For more on the relationship of the garden folly to Nouvel's architecture, specifically to the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris, see the author's Master's thesis (Ruiz-Gómez 2001). The present essay is a significantly revised excerpt from this work.
- [13] These museums' collections are comprised of objects culled from ethnographic expeditions, colonial conquests and private donations. For more on the repercussions of their closing, see Lebovics (2004, pp. 169–174). As de l'Estoile points out, the Musée du Quai Branly is also inheriting the collection of the Musée des Colonies, which gave its collection to the Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie (2003b, p. 41).
- [14] The emphasis on communion between object and viewer is a direct result of the aestheticisation and attendant decontextualisation of the art object in the twentieth century. For more on its history, see Duncan (2005, pp. 84–86).
- [15] A more sensitive reading of primitivism can be found in the essay 'Back to the Beginning Place' by Yoichi Iijima (1995), in which he discusses the binary of lightness/weightiness (of history), the relationship between 'matter and nature' and the notion of shelter. In his search for a sympathetic architectural form, Iijima moves away from the centrality of man in European humanism and towards the fusion of nature, life and architecture. He concludes that any move away from architecture must tap into the unconscious and the 'world of instinct', in order to fuse matter and life.
- [16] *The New York Times* reported that Nouvel did not want 'to create a parody of tribal architecture' (Ouroussoff 2006, p. E1). The Musée du Quai Branly could be productively compared to Renzo Piano's Centre Culturel Tjibaou in Nouméa, New Caledonia (completed 1998). One of President François Mitterrand's *grands travaux*, this centre and museum were the result of negotiations intended to quell thoughts of independence from the French protectorate. Piano's project has been universally praised for its sensitivity to the culture, to the works on display and to the environment. See Blanc (1998), Findley (1998) and M. (1998).
- [17] Stéphane Martin reported that Jean Nouvel invited these artists to collaborate in the decoration of the museum not because he was interested in Aboriginal culture, but only because he wanted 'colour' (Cosic 2006). Aboriginal artist Judy Watson's *Museum Piece* (2006) is a subversive work, which consists of etchings on the bookstore's glass façade 'based on drawings she made of Aboriginal hair, bones and other artefacts either bought, stolen or traded by British museums. Her piece for the Musée Quai [*sic*] Branly aims to turn the tables by freeing the items from their glass cabinets in Britain and allowing everyone to see them' (Hudson 2006).
- [18] The museum's siting caused an artist from Guinea to exclaim: "What! Visitors will enter the museum of African art through a jungle!" Did they plan, he asked, to play recorded parrot and monkey calls? (Response to Stéphane Martin, director of the Musée du Quai Branly, speaking at the New York University Maison Française on 26 September 2000, cited in Lebovics 2004, p. 151).
- [19] The ancient word 'folle' meant "'lewd, unchaste and wanton' behavior" (Vidler 1983, p. 11).
- [20] The competition drawings labelled the high wall on the quai side the 'grille végétale "occidentale"', but this title seems to have been lost in the finished work.
- [21] In the absence of a mature garden, this is evinced in the computer-generated images of the museum produced for the competition.
- [22] It should be noted that the ambiguity between inside and outside that Nouvel proposes is very different from that at, for example, the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia Museum in Vancouver, British Columbia, where the new works on display outside the glass walls of the museum impart the message that 'tribal works are part of an ongoing, dynamic tradition' (Clifford 1991, p. 220). For a comparison of Nouvel's use of glass here and in the Fondation Cartier in Paris, see the author's Master's thesis (Ruiz-Gómez 2001). For a more detailed discussion of Nouvel's glass façades in the Fondation Cartier, see Fierro (2003, pp. 107–125).

- [23] See also Nouvel's comments on dematerialisation and its function in Baudrillard and Nouvel (2002, pp. 7–8).
- [24] Lebovics writes: 'If the Eiffel Tower were to topple sideways on the Quai Branly, its peak would fall precisely in the center of France's first museum of the global twenty-first century. I found this strange description of the location of the new museum for the art of Africa, Asia, the Pacific, and the Americas going up next to the Tower in the planning report for the museum's construction. The prime symbol of the nineteenth-century republic triumphant will forever loom over France's first museum of globalisation. [...] But implicit in the image of the old and the new monuments is the recognition of a constant of French culture: in France, there is always the danger of the old structures crushing the new' (2004, p. 143). One of the computer-generated images on the museum's web site during its *préfiguration* showed the strong presence of the Eiffel Tower in a depiction of the museum's rooftop restaurant. The image seemed clearly intended for the tourist. Many of the writers commenting on the building's inauguration mention the views of the Eiffel Tower from the windows of the southern building, where it is strikingly juxtaposed with the commissioned Aboriginal paintings on the walls.
- [25] As photographs of the newly opened museum show, the landscaping is still rather sparse—time will provide the landscape that Martin envisions. Edelmann suggests not only that the 'rideau d'arbres [...] viendra, avec le temps, troubler encore l'image de l'édifice', but that Nouvel's building 'finit par se dissoudre dans le charme des savanes tropicales [...]' (Edelmann 2006a, p. 25).
- [26] At the time of this article's publication, it does not seem that all of the explanatory materials have been installed; therefore, the depth of contextualisation remains in question. The quality and volume of the information provided about the objects on display may mitigate the aestheticisation inherent in the museum's decontextualising exhibition strategy.
- [27] This is likely a direct reference to the manifesto published in *Libération* on 15 March 1990 by Jacques Kerchache *et al.*, who compiled under the title 'Pour que les Chefs-d'oeuvres du Monde Entier Naissent Libres et Egaux' almost 300 signatures demanding the entry of 'primitive' art into the Louvre; Kerchache, who was a dealer, became Chirac's friend and adviser on the subject. For more on Kerchache, see de Roux (2000, p. 19) and Lebovics (2004, pp. 144–146). In response to Kerchache's role in the creation of the new museum, Aminata Traore, former Minister of Culture and Tourism in Mali, stated critically: 'Je conteste le fait que l'idée de créer un musée de cette importance puisse naître, non pas d'un examen rigoureux, critique et partagé des rapports entre l'Europe et l'Afrique, l'Asie, l'Amérique et l'Océanie dont les pièces sont originaires, mais de l'amitié d'un chef d'Etat avec un collectionneur d'oeuvres d'art qu'il a rencontré un jour sur une plage de l'île Maurice' (Traore 2006).
- [28] Godelier was unceremoniously relieved of his duties during the *préfiguration* of the museum, possibly because he focused too much on both the ethnographic aspect of the collection and its relevance to a post-colonial French society. See Lebovics (2004, pp. 154–157).
- [29] It should be noted that this type of display, typical of the contemporary art museum, may be in part a result of the fact that most of the 'équipe' of the new museum 'vient [...] du monde de l'art contemporain, et notamment du centre Pompidou' (Stéphane Martin, quoted in Geoffroy-Schneiter 2005, p. 58).
- [30] The research opportunities at the new museum have been a topic of serious discussion since the Musée de l'Homme was forced to give up its ethnographic collection; for the current status of this debate, see Huet (2006, pp. 3–4).

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