

## **Mapping New Trajectories: The Case of the Exhibition Frontières at the Musée des Confluences in Lyon, France**

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This paper offers a critical reading of the exhibition Frontières produced in 2006 by the Musée des Confluences in Lyon, France. Using a post-structural framework, it compares the museum intent, the exhibition, and the public reception, in order to tease out questions of authoring, representation in the context of identity formation and global culture.

I was recently invited by the Musée des Confluences in Lyon, France to write a critique of their temporary exhibition, *Frontières*. This invitation is part of a continuing collaboration between the Musée des Confluences and the UBC Centre for the Study of Historical Consciousness in Vancouver, Canada.

The subject of the exhibition immediately intrigued me. The idea of the museum addressing the topic of geo-political frontiers on four continents embodied an intrinsic tension. On one hand, the topic echoed the ambition of the Enlightenment's museums to document, display and explain the world. On the other hand, it seemed to offer a counterpoint to the current discourse of cultural homogenization and "border flattening" often associated with globalization.

I should acknowledge at the onset that I never visited the exhibition. The way I came to understand it was through films, photo-documentation and the artefacts of exhibit production. The museum provided me with the text and visuals pertaining to the concepts and physical production of the project. It also supplied the press coverage and evaluation reports made both in-house and by a third-party research center. In addition, I interviewed and corresponded with museum staff. The nature of this analysis was exploratory; I anticipated that not viewing the exhibition in person would be limiting at times and yet, could potentially compel/force me to consider the exhibition differently.

This paper will provide a brief description of the exhibition. It will then launch a critique, in which I compare the museum intent, the exhibition, and the public reception, in order to tease out questions of authoring, representation in the context of identity formation and global culture.

## The Institution

*Frontières* is a 700 m<sup>2</sup> temporary exhibition co-produced by the Museum d'Histoire Naturelle de Lyon (recently renamed the Musée des Confluences) and by the Centro de la Cultura Contemporanea in Barcelona. It was displayed in Lyon for four months in 2006 and in Barcelona for four months in 2007. The exhibition was recently presented in Université de Lille (November 07) and is now touring in several cities in Spain. It is important to note that in this collaboration, Musée des Confluences clearly played the role of initiator, leader and producer. For this reason, my analysis will concentrate on the Musée des Confluences' agency.<sup>1</sup>

It is essential to introduce the Musée des Confluences, however briefly. It is a publicly funded institution administered by the Département du Rhône. It has recently undergone a revitalization program by broadening its focus from natural history (collections in mineralogy, paleontology, entomology, and ethnology, to name a few) to a conceptual premise encompassing two thematic axes: science and society. Founded as the Musée d'histoire naturelle de Lyon in 1772, the museum is now constructing a new identity. A name change and a building change are part of the schema<sup>2</sup>. The museum experienced, in an accelerated mode since 2001, a paradigm shift from positivist to post-modernist ideals. These ideals favour Lyotard's (1984) "incredulity for the meta-narrative" by being wary of changeless, foundational relationships that escape the contingencies of time and space. *Frontières*' role in consolidating this new identity is manifest through various strategies that will be discussed in this paper.

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1 The reverse situation took place with *Harem's Fantasies and new Scheherazades* (2005) in which the Barcelonian institution played the leading role. The Director of the Musée de Confluences qualified the relationship as "one of complicity and trust" animated by a desire to continue developing these interdisciplinary collaborations (based on interview with Michel Cote, Sept. 15, 2007).

2 The museum will be moving into in a brand new facility in Lyon in 2009.

## The Exhibition

The aim of the project, as stated in the exhibition text, was to interrogate the notion of geo-political frontiers in ways that expose its complexities and ambiguities. Frontiers are presented as both dividing and linking devices; they can be painful and yet they are necessary contact zones; they are ruptures and passages. They are natural but mostly artificial lines. “There is no identity without frontiers,” signals the guest curator-geographer who insists that a world without frontiers is not conceivable.

This complexity and the inherent paradoxes are eloquently expressed in the exhibitions by means of texts, maps and centrally, the *photo-reportage* (photo news reporting). The selected frontiers or frontier phenomena may be characterized by their social and political instability:

- The European limits: the flux of the European Community’s frontiers; zoom in on the “new neighbours” at the Oriental borders.
- World migrations and the European pre-frontiers: the migration fluxes, the hardening of European frontiers and the resulting illegal passages; zoom in on Kinsley’s clandestine journey from Cameroun to France.
- North Korea: the most hermetic frontier in the world; zoom in on the spectacle of a guided/controlled visit of Pyongyang with an official guide.
- The contentious territory: Kashmir, torn region, forgotten paradise. The territorial conflicts between India and Pakistan both claiming the Kashmir region; zoom in on images presenting the *mythical beauty* of the Pakistani Himalayan region and its people to contrast with the usual images of war.
- Uncertain, unrecognized frontiers: the Israel/Palestine territorial conflicts; zoom in on the plight of Palestinians living at the foot of the wall built by Israel.
- The world sanctuaries: The case of the Mexican-American border. A laboratory of economic globalization/corporatization. The frontier is both porous and repressive; zoom in on Mexicans and their complex relationships with the lines and the creation of a “third country.”
- The Rroms Diaspora: the *truly* European people; zoom in on families living in different parts of Europe.
- Exiles and refuges: evokes the notion of trauma and loss associated with leaving one’s country. Zoom in on (staged) nocturnal scenes inhabited by fluorescent human shadows alluding to the escape, illegal passage and loss of identity.

### **General Layout/Design Solutions (As Seen/Understood From Documentation)**

The exhibition layout consists of eight thematic zones, each zone introducing one frontier or a “frontier phenomenon” as a microcosm. Each zone is sub-divided into a “pre-world” where experts’ texts, maps, and soundscapes set the stage before penetrating “a world,” the frontier, contained in a stylized hut (*cabane*). Central to the exploration of each world is the photo-reportage. The eight *photo-reportages* emphasize a specific set of social consequences of these frontiers. The juxtaposition of a pre-world (introduction of a particular frontier issue) and a world (illustration of the issue through the focus of one frontier) creates a zoom out/zoom in effect and provides a rhythm to the visit. The *photo-reportages*, the central element of the exhibit narrative, depict people experiencing, under various circumstances, the political weight of the frontiers. These photographs were not commissioned for this exhibition. Instead, they were pieces that had been produced for magazines or other types of publication and were often owned or promoted by photo agencies or art galleries. In other words, these photographic productions and their authors were validated in multiple ways before entering the museum. It is important to mention that of the eight photo-reportages, two

were produced by photo-artists rather than by reporters. This aspect of the selection makes apparent the museum's intention to blur the distinctions between traditional disciplines, i.e., photography as artistic endeavour and photography as documentary.

The photographs appear to be the product of privileged relationships between the photographers and the photographed subjects. In many cases, the fieldwork involved in making these documentaries took several years to prepare and create. These images depict ordinary moments, waiting moments, moments of despair and hope, moments of fear.

The exhibit design concept offers elements of difference and sameness and conveys an impression of sobriety and sleekness. Each zone or frontier is given the same formal vocabulary to orient the visitor with particular exhibit syntax evocative of the frontier's anatomy: lines, thresholds, passages, transition spaces, and limits. The specificity of the frontier is conveyed by a different colour for each zone, and with an image treatment (scale, number of photographs, image substrate and montage) that varies radically from one zone to another. This contrast propels the photographic work in the fore plan. In many ways, the museography parallels the aesthetic of installation art presented in contemporary art galleries. It is a poetic rather than literal representation of the topic; the design solutions do not fall into a design that is explicit and didactic. Three aspects, the photograph as artefact (its sense of immediacy and reproducibility), the topic (its currency and criticality), and the museography (its poetic aesthetic) converge toward a representation of reality that insists on the "here and now," capturing a particular time and space. The photographs, like the representation of the topic in the exhibition space, are snapshots of reality that are rigorous in their argumentation and yet subjective and fragmented.

## Multitude of Voices, Similar Perspectives

In addition to the photographers- reporters' work, multiple actors are involved in the production of meaning in this exhibition.

The visitor encounters the experts' voices on three different panels:

- - The geographer-curator speaks about the frontier or frontier-phenomena;
- - A specialist (often a social scientist) offers another angle on the subject. Despite being written in the third person, these texts are not neutral; they explore, they denounce, and they read like short essays, not scientific abstracts;
- - The cartographer's maps are hand-drawn, emphasizing the subjectivity involved in map-making and frontier making. Specifically created for this exhibition, these maps emphasize conflicting views on territoriality and locate the site of tensions and tragedies related to frontiers.

These voices provide rich interdisciplinary perspectives and yet they converge toward similar positions about the existence of frontiers. As a visitor comments: "The frontiers are considered [in this exhibition] like a "necessary evil", we don't hear from people who say that frontiers are a great thing. I would have liked to see conflicting perspectives." (Le Marec, 2006, p. 13).

## Public Reception

### Who Came?

More than 29,000 people visited *Frontières* during the four months it was presented at the Musée des Confluences. This figure is in the norm of visitation at the museum. Visitor statistics indicated an increase in high school visits and adolescents visiting without adults. *Frontières* was a social activity for adults (91%) with 76% of them visiting in the company of

other adults. Visitors had a higher level of education than previously observed in past or concurrent exhibitions. Half the visitors were less than 34 years old: the age segment 25-34 was particularly well represented (34%) and the 18-24 represented (16%). There were a significant proportion of visitors who had never come to the museum before (38%). Almost half of the respondents had heard of the exhibition through word of mouth (40%); this supports the idea of visitor agency extending the museum experience by talking about it with others.

### **Press Coverage**

The extensive media coverage was very positive. They welcomed the choice of topic and the politically engaged approach. Visitor surveys indicate that press coverage had a positive impact on visitation; as much as 37% of the visitors had heard of *Frontieres* through media coverage. We could speculate that it contributed toward a favourable public image of critical work produced by the museum.

### **Public Response: Evaluation Results Highlights**

A survey (380 respondents), an analysis of the visitor's comment book (190 comments) and in-depth interviews (40 participants) were used to collect information about the public reception of *Frontieres*. Here is a summary of key findings taken from the evaluators' reports:

- Visitors invested time exploring the exhibition: 69% spent between one and two hours; 21% spent between two and three hours;
- The survey indicated that 56% of respondent had a high level of appreciation for the exhibition and (39%) were satisfied. Respondents were very satisfied (45%) and quite satisfied (45%) by the knowledge they acquired; and satisfied with the way the exhibition provoked reflection and questioning and stimulated discussion in the group (91%);
- The exhibition solicited visitor's emotions (78%); there were also elements of surprise (89%);
- Although the general reaction was positive and responsive to the museographic approach, a significant proportion of visitors (20%) expressed some level of dissatisfaction about accessibility of information: too much text, too expert-like, or not enough contextualization for the layperson;
- In-depth interviews indicated that visitors connected these images with media coverage. A few interviewees were frustrated by this "déjà vu" aspect, but for most people, it added to the interest of the topic;
- In-depth interviews reveal that people were aware of the multiple voices. Two visitors did comment on the consensual aspect of the perspectives and would have preferred to see conflicted views on the topic (Le Marec, 2007, p. 19-20);
- In-depth interviews indicate that visitors interpreted the exhibitions in two different registers: the geopolitical dimension (associated with the media) and the testimonials from the various exhibit voices.
- In-depth interviews that several visitors felt personally implicated by the topics: "It's demanding us to questions ourselves; it's happening close to us; it could be in anywhere." (Le Marec, p. 5); "At the beginning it was fine but at the end, I found it difficult to listen to people's experience immigrating to Lyon." (Le Marec, p.43)

Below are a few quotes illustrating the range of visitors' views in regards to the notion of museum's impartiality. An interesting aspect emerging from the visitor studies is the duality

of viewpoints represented by the quotes below. Some visitors welcome the critical stance of the museum, whereas others deplore its lack of neutrality and objectivity. The negative comments represented only a very small minority of visitors' response. Nevertheless they are indicative of the range of visitor's opinions. This contrast is related to the public's expectations relative to the museum's role in relation to knowledge legitimation. This point will be further developed in the critique section.

Fascinating- congratulations for daring to address this theme and for the way you address and comment it. Thank you for opening our horizon. (*CV 10. from public reception report p.19*).

When visiting a national or departmental museum we expect to have impartial information. I found myself confronted to biased politics. It's scandalous! [ . . . ] People bring their children in confidence and this confidence is exploited. It's scandalous. (*VC-DEC from public reception report p. 20*)

. . . Thank you for this intelligent and sensitive approach to the topic of economic, social, cultural, historical frontiers. It is after all also about our intellectual frontiers. . Great exhibition. Thank you. (*CV Jan. from public reception report p.21*).

It is disappointing to see that there are always biases when conflicts are evoked" Certain details have been omitted. It's shameful. . . (*S238 p. 20*)

The presentation of conflict should be impartial (*S.237 p. 20*)

### Critique: Collective Identity: Meeting the Other, Meeting Oneself

Frontières is congruent with the museum's intention to favour an interdisciplinary approach to develop thematic exhibitions, which intertwine scientific topics and contemporary societal issues. Frontiers and the related subject of immigration (legal and illegal) are topical in France, the public debate oscillating between exclusion, assimilation, and integration.

I was inspired by the geographer-curator's mantra that permeates the exhibition: "There is no inside without the outside" and realized that the effect of the exhibition is to create a vision of the world infused by European sensitivity. Indeed, by mobilizing French photographers, journalists and scientists to structure the exhibition, the performance situates the French nation in relation to the world. But unlike exhibitions of past centuries inspired by an imperialist agenda, *Frontières* is a reflexive exercise that acknowledges some of the negative consequences of nations' desires to divide and control territories and people. Moreover, the exhibit texts implicate France, the European Community, and the "Sanctuaries" (or rich countries around the world) in both the historical and current descriptions of these conflicted frontiers. The introductory text, for example, refers to Britain, France, Spain and Germany as having traced during colonial expansion more than 50% of the frontiers of developing countries or what used to be referred as the "Third World." Maps locating refugee camps in France and acts of violence perpetrated against the Roms throughout Europe are reminders that access to full citizenship in rich countries is not a right but a privilege. Consequently, the French visitor, in particular, is implicated. The ricochet effect begs the question: "Could we (the French, European Community) be who we are if it weren't for the frontiers, barriers, walls?" This idea is supported by the visitors' accounts and press commentaries that deplore social inequalities in France and Europe, express shame, support the critical aspect and a

desire to discuss the issue and understand it<sup>3</sup>. Visitor comments such as: “These could be our neighbours...”, “This is vicious . . . !” The proximity of refugees’ camps shocked me. . . !” are expressions of grasping at a redefinition of collective identity.<sup>4</sup> The exhibition, therefore, defines, however partially, contours of French/European identity by examining its outside -- the eight conflicted frontiers.

*Frontières*’ program is not about promoting a specific vision of the collective, but rather about provoking discussions on the politics of territorialisation. In a discussion on the challenges faced by contemporary museums to generate meaningful debates on the notion of national identities, Sharon Macdonald (2005) described features that made earlier museums privileged sites for the identity formation of the nation-state:

- 1) Having a culture legitimizes a collective. Museum objects and museum exhibitions were considered expressions of cultural identity;
- 2) Possession of artefacts from other cultures demonstrated the capacity to display and to govern, as well as signaled that the nation played a role on the global stage. It also became an effective way of representing the idea of cultural differences;
- 3) Museum’s capacity to articulate two temporal narratives. The national trajectory, and the successes of the nation in attaining progress;
- 4) Emphasis on material property. Possessing played a central role in the Western conception of identity; and
- 5) Particular ways of seeing that entailed a detachment by the viewer. This vision *objectified* reality and constituted schemata and topologies of the world, such as gender and racial differences.

These characteristics, evocative of Bennett’s concept of the *exhibitionary complex* (1995) promoted the image of an ordered community that visitors were part of, and conveyed a sense of both national stability and progress. Macdonald mentioned that even if not all museums were national, this identity model articulated by the nation played into local identities (municipal, regional). The question is now, how does *Frontières* adhere to but disrupt the features that shaped the early national museums, and shape many contemporary ones?

Cultural identity in *Frontières* was not expressed through “collection” but the nature of the questioning that was inherent in the exhibition. As visitor studies demonstrate, the exhibition was well attended and visitors were receptive to the theme, the museum’s critical stance and forms of presentation. These facts expose particular sensitivities and interests of the community that produced it. The ephemeral quality of this temporary exhibition and the currency of the frontier issues propose, I would argue, *defining moments* for the collective rather than definitive and monolithic expressions of national identity. *Frontières* did not display *objects* from other cultures. The photographs were artefacts originating from Western media culture, created by French photographers exploring the notion of “frontier as social phenomena.” The exhibition’s function was not to examine the individuals and cultures as objects of study but rather to observe *relationships* between Western and non-western nations, the privileged and less-privileged frontiers. In doing so, it positioned the “Sanctuaries” on the global stage not as master but as self-protected geo-political zones evolving interdependently with the most vulnerable nations. *Frontières* did not attempt to express celebratory temporal

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3 Newspaper headings such as “In Lyon, the art examine the walls that separate men” *Le Monde Francais* 19/20 November 2006 or “The finger on the wounds of the world” *Le Progres Francais*, Oct4, 2006 are evocative of this appreciation for the museum’s critical engagement with the topic.

4 These are shorter versions of the visitor comments in LeMarec, 2006.

narratives of the collective; instead, it was interested in debating socio-political problems defining the nations of the world. It was purposefully non-exhaustive, zooming in on the singular and the local. The reproducible quality of its main artefacts, the photographs, disrupted the cult of authentic objects associated with traditional models of museums, and aligned the museum with other media of contemporary culture, visitors' response converge toward this statement. *Frontières'* discourse rejected objective and evolutionary narratives by explicitly co-authoring the exhibition with multiple actors whose critical perspectives of the conflicted frontiers was largely achieved by subverting traditional ethnographic and cartographic practices.

This shift in presenting and shaping collective identity echoes the work of philosopher Bernard Deloche (2007). In his essay *La Nouvelle Culture*, he discusses how societal transformation, formed by new media technology, affects cultural institutions like museums. Deloche's "angle of attack" comprehends the many challenges shaping the current development of museums by insisting on the profound repercussions that new media have on social relations and on the process of knowledge legitimation. Deloche argues that the emergence of new media, although it did not initiate what he calls the *social mutations*, is partly responsible for the massive rejection of institutional frameworks, whether religious, moral or judicial. Instead, contemporary cultures seem to invent themselves away from established codes. The author sets the stage by identifying social mutations contesting Western values: the dislocation of the family, the transformation of language, the shattered sense of citizenship, and the collapse of axiological references (Greco-Roman/ Judeo-Christian axis). He suggests that the social transformation was able to proliferate through the media of communication. Television and newer forms of media technology are considered not only a vehicle to introduce these changes on a massive scale but to produce culture and generate social practices. Aware of some of the negative aspects of media consumption, Deloche is more interested in establishing how new media provoke change in the way people create and relate to each other.

The museum's initial structure was superimposed on the Enlightenment's models of knowledge production endorsed successively by the Church and the School. These two institutions had the monopoly on image production and distribution. The new media, on the other hand, have produced a new cultural model not by creating new images, but rather by the disorganized and non-structured way in which images (as representations of ideas) are presented and connected to other images. It is a definition of new cultural dynamics, reminiscent of Derrida and Guattari's concept of the rhizome that promotes, the notion of non-linearity, heterogeneity, multiplicity, ruptures and discontinuities (G. Deleuze, F. Guattari., 1994). Deloche demonstrates how new media fulfils many of the museum's functions such as preserving, displaying and educating. In that sense, the new media already compete with and surpass the museum. But the real competition, he argues, is that contemporary culture, is now receptive to *non-linear* ways of thinking and perceiving the world, while traditional museum productions are based on linear rationales. Deloche describes how, in order to compete and remain relevant, the museum had to invent a new function: that of *critic*. By engaging critically with key social phenomena, the museum is promoting a new relationship with its public: it is facilitating/supporting ways for collectives to adapt, understand and critically engage with dramatic social transformations shaping their lives. Deloche sketches what he conceives are potentially fruitful directions for the museum to contribute to contemporary culture. The directions are (a) a new recognition of other cultures, (b) the rejection of object fetishism, and (c) the prevalence of interrogation rather than the transmission of value. *Frontières* meets Deloche's proposal in many ways.

## **Institutional Identity: Charting New Trajectories**

The interpretive apparatus deployed in the creation of *Frontières* signals that the institution is committed to a new type of knowledge production; it is impressive in its originality and it is risk taking. The braiding of disciplines, the blurring of genres, the preference of topical issues over collection displays, and the criticality of the comments are symptomatic of new ways of staging knowledge in the museum in line with Deloche's proposition. It has rejected neutrality and has insisted on the de-centering of authority by sharing the interpretation of frontiers between an imposing cast of actors well established in their fields: journalists, photographers, researchers and museum staff; reaffirming a conviction that meaning is plural and negotiable.

The process of multiplying perspectives to enrich and add nuance to the interpretation does not however include, in significant terms, the insights of the "frontier-people." Although they occupy centre-stage with regard to their visual presence, they (or representatives who can speak of these cultural realities) had limited input in the interpretive process. The perspective of representatives coming from these realities is limited to two social scientists who offer their insights/or sensitivity on the Mexican and Israeli frontiers. There is also the incorporation of frontier-peoples' voices by means of recorded testimonies of new immigrants describing their experience<sup>5</sup>. However, these individuals have not taken an active part in the interpretive process of the frontiers. It is interesting to note that what I perceive as a perplexing absence or a lack of representation is not mentioned in any of the staff's or visitors' accounts or press coverage.

Admittedly, I am conditioned to conceive of exhibit production in certain terms. In the Canadian museological context, it is difficult and perhaps impossible to interpret the reality of the Other without the participation" of the represented collectivities. I refer here to individuals and groups who do not belong to the dominant gender, class, sexual orientation and ethnicity or, should I say, who do not belong to the privileged community of White heterosexual middle-class fe/males. In situations where it is impossible to work with the individuals, we work with elected representatives. The increasingly culturally diverse nature of contemporary Western societies and the tension between new immigrants and the majority populations are preoccupations, not only in Canada, but also in most rich countries.

Without going into detail, I would like to place this Canadian bias towards collaboration at the intersection of three phenomena<sup>6</sup>:

1. The late '60s, early '70s historiographic trends of social and public history that established a new agency for actors who had previously been marginalized in grand narratives (Seixas, 1998; Willinsky, 1998)
2. Issues of sovereignty and the self-representation of Aboriginal communities in Canada directly affected the ways First Nations' artifacts and stories were staged in museums (Ames, 1992; Karp, 1991; Mackey, 2002)
3. The 1970s government policies and the subsequent multicultural policies promoted differences rather than similarities between the cultural and ethnic communities in Canada (Bissoondath, 1993; Mackey, 2002).

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5 I do not wish to address the public programs designed to complement or offset lacks in exhibitions. I wish to focus on the exhibition experience itself.

6 Some distinctions could be made between English Canada and Quebec's sensitivity around issues of cultural representations. Nevertheless, the impact of First Nations' territorial and governance claims as well as the multicultural policies do affect the two museum communities in similar ways. Electronic correspondence 25-26 November, 2007 with Dr. Philippe Dube, Universite Laval, director of LAMIC.

The collaborative practices can be gratifying. They may even profoundly affect the way museums address certain topics and interact with different social groups. However, these practices can also be problematic. The nature of consultation between museums and groups can be superficial and merely repeat patterns of domination and control. The notion of inclusive and enriched interpretation then becomes compromised (Ames, 1992; Bennett, 2006; Hage, 1998, Shelton, 2001). Alternatively, the participation of multiple groups with conflicting interests and overlapping veto powers may threaten to bring design decisions to a standstill.

If the Musée des Confluences does not subscribe to the same interpretive practices as those observed in Canadian museums, nevertheless it still shares the same intellectual foundation, the ideals of the Enlightenment and a colonial past, as well as a commitment to move beyond that foundation. While recognizing this inheritance, I will now study the re-location of the photo-reportage in the museum.

Going back to the initial context of production, the work of the photographers and journalists consists in reporting international events by bringing images home to inform, satisfy curiosity and create awareness. The same images, once transposed to the museum, take on a new significance (Davallon, 1986; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; Schiele, 2002). Keeping in mind the premise that photographs are objects, i.e., images crafted by the photographer, a “slipperiness of meaning” takes place when these *photo-reportages* are repositioned in *Frontières*: I would argue that their ethnographic/ethnocentric quality emerges as the forefront. Once re-positioned in this institution, does the *photo-reportages* (largely represented through a scientific discourse that does not include the perspective of the more vulnerable frontier-peoples) echo the objectifying ethnographic collections of the traditional museum?

Does the exhibition exacerbate the asymmetry in power relations (e.g., the power and freedom to represent oneself) between the observer and the observed? Or perhaps the asymmetry, all too real between rich and poor frontiers, is made *more* obvious than when considered in the initial context of consumption. Indeed, the discourse demands a different type of engagement from the visitors than when seen in a journalistic context. The longer exposure, more intimate encounter with the images, and enhanced credibility of photo-reportage once re-located in the museum context may provoke a more critical encounter with the subject.

The *photo-reportages* are artefacts of Western media culture, created by Western photographers. The “tension” is not about cultural appropriation but about a layering of representations (the museum’s and photographer’s) that may or may not be successful in provoking new ways of thinking about frontiers and the “frontier-peoples.” These images emanate engagement, solidarity, concern and respect for the people photographed. Yet, are they not reproducing patterns of knowledge production that favour the dominant group’s sensitivity in order to explain the realities of the non-dominant groups? *If the aim was to interrogate the complexity of geo-political frontiers, shouldn’t the inclusion of contrasting views and cultural sensitivities be part of the project?* The fact that visitors were responsive and yet not surprised by the content may indicate that the content reiterates what they already know, i.e., extending their knowledge without shaking their perceptions and assumptions.

As a critic, I need to avoid sounding prescriptive. This project is fascinating and captures the possibilities of the exhibition’s ability to stage contemporary culture, both literally and conceptually. The perceived tension in this exhibition exemplifies the “conceptual knots”<sup>7</sup> defining museum practices today.

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7 The perceived “conceptual knot” i.e. the absence of “frontier-people” voices (in the person of expert, photographer, or witness) is not a perspective shared with members of the *Frontières* team who insist that

## Conclusion

Could it be that the many ruptures with museological traditions (emphasis on non-linearity and subjectivity, multiple perspectives, the selection of topical and sensitive topics, pluridisciplinarity and the *metissage* of museographic genres) act as a counterpoint with the reductive vision of the Other still common in our relationships with more vulnerable societies? Does it allow us to see the narratives of the frontier peoples more as “human experience” than the Other’s experience? I would argue that there is a real tension between the reification of the ethnographic gaze, the desire to define one’s culture by interpreting other societies, and the desire to enter in a conversation with others. I am not convinced that the latter, the more dialogical relationship, is achieved.

Nevertheless, *Frontières* has stimulated fresh discussion about the museum’s role in shaping collective identities by inviting visitors-as-citizens to explore other realities (the periphery, the margins, the physically and/or culturally remote), and their interrelations with their own lives.

By confronting contemporary and sensitive social issues using semiotic resources that are not part of the classical museography, the museum is involved in the process of producing culture rather than simply reproducing it. The animated discussions the exhibition stimulated among groups of visitors, the large number of visiting high school students, and the extensive media coverage lead us to think that museums can be what Bennett (Museum Frictions, 2006) calls “people movers”, by participating in the ongoing elaboration of social relations and perceptions of difference.

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the intent of the exhibition was to put forward a human dimension without necessarily involving collaborations in the interpretive process, with individuals from the concerned communities/frontiers. This most interesting conversation could be the topic of another paper.

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