

## What else to say about the MQB?

Re-centring anthropology in art and French museum practices:  
A vision from an ex-boursier

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**ABSTRACT:** This short piece investigates how “art” and “ethnography” have developed as two separated practices in ten years of existence of the Musée du Quai Branly Jacques Chirac (MQB) and how “politics” has been widely missing. Writing from a personal experience as a postdoctoral *ex-boursier* and building on recent essays about the genesis of the museum, the author seeks to identify points of raptures existent not only in the MQB as a cultural institution but also within the system of French ethnology, which does not leave sufficient space for art to dialogue with ethnography, nor for politics to dialogue with aesthetics. Rather than depicting the MQB as a “post-ethnographic museum” (de L’Estoile 2015), the author identifies in the *Musée* a good terrain for creating an “ethno-art-graphic” museum, where creative ethnographic collections will eventually make both art and anthropology.

**KEYWORDS:** ART, ETHNOGRAPHY, POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION, MUSÉE DU QUAI BRANLY, FRANCE.

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*What else to say about the MQB? Re-centring anthropology in art and French museum practices:  
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When I was asked to write a short essay about the 10 years of the Musée du Quai Branly Jacques Chirac (henceforth MQB), I did not hesitate to accept but immediately after I wondered: “what can I say about the MQB? Why me? Am I the right person to talk about ten years of activities of this institution?” Much has been written about the MQB and too many have already described its exhibition space (di Lorenzo 2006; Amato 2006; Lebovics 2007; Clifford 2007; Price 2007; Clemente 2008; Lusini 2004), explained its wider departmental structure (cfr. Taylor 2006), critiqued its institutional choices (cfr. Price 2007; Clifford 2007), contextualised its existence within the history of anthropology, museums and the French public (cfr. de L’Estoile 2007, 2015) and discussed its politics within the global dispute between ethnographic museums and postcolonial history (Lusini 2004; Phillips 2011; Lattanzi et al. 2013; Rossi 2015). Reviews of reviewers already exist (cfr. Thomas 2008; Shelton 2009). Hence, what else to say about the MQB?

The colleague who asked me to write this piece then told me, “you can write a review from your position as an ex-boursier”. I then stopped for a second, felt an emotion and attachment to the Musée and its research department and got persuaded. My view certainly differs from other commentators but also from others ex-boursiers. In the “genealogy” of fellowships provided by the MQB for young scholars, I have been one of the very few who has been selected without coming from the French academic system. As an Italian by birth and primary education, who studied and worked in England and found herself working (and now permanently living) in France, with time I have realised to have developed a particular regard on the relationship between anthropology, cultural institutions, art practices, postcolonial and postmodern theories as they exist and are practiced in France vis-à-vis other parts of the world and surely the Anglo-Saxon academic world. It is from this position that today I feel I can actually discuss ten years of existence of this museum. There is in fact the need to change the “lens” of the existing analyses of the MQB and pay attention to the role that French ethnology (and thus the research department of the museum) has (or has not) played in continuously divorcing “art” from “anthropology”.

As the pioneer director of the MQB research department, Anne-Christine Taylor, explains in a 2007 essay, the research department has always had a minimal importance within the wider structure of the museum. This became evident during my MQB fellowship. For example, if we, *boursiers*, wanted to conduct a new research inside the museum which was not about the museum collections, or to apply for internal funding to develop “theories” in anthropology rather than museum practices, we were obliged to justify such

choices. Proposals had to be approved by the head of direction (and not from the research department) and were not to harm the museum's visibility. In other words, it was as if the research department had to work *for* the MQB (and hence the departments of conservation, communication, collection) rather than *along with* other departments and even with the direction of the museum (with the possibility to influencing the politics of representations of the museum).

According to Benoît de L'Estoile, the limited power that the research department may have inside the museum is probably due to the initial drive of the MQB – that is, to make an end to the traditional anthropological paradigm of the French *musée-laboratoire* (as promoted by the historical Musée de l'Homme) for what de L'Estoile has more recently called a “post-ethnographic” museum (de L'Estoile 2015). As far as I have experienced in numerous conversations with French anthropologists directly or indirectly connected to the MQB, today this view is widely shared and accepted. Nevertheless, de L'Estoile's point may be limiting for those who have been closely interested in the late 1960s Parisian explosion of the market of “arts premiers”, or in the international debates concerning the role of ethnographic collections in museum practices. In this case, the de-centralisation of the research department of the MQB should rather be connected to the entrance of “objects from the ex-colonies” into the Parisian galleries. These objects attracted the attention of Euro-American collectors who started to “invest” on this “new form” of art (by strongly impacting on museum policies and practices) and from the 1980s onwards, also fostered the development of international debates concerning the “ethnographic” value of museum collections (cfr. Somé 1998; Bonnain 2001; Lusini 2004).

Whilst the MQB has been already discussed from multiple perspectives, what is still missing is a review, interpretation and commentary coming from the annual *ex-boursiers*. In the following pages I shall focus on this lacuna. I will pay attention to my own vision as an *ex-boursier* and build on de L'Estoile's (2015) argument that sees the MQB as a “post-ethnographic” museum. While questioning such definition, I shall discuss a much more complex and persisting problematic that concerns the *separated importance* that “ethnography”, “art” and “politics” continue having inside the museum at an institutional level vis-à-vis a possible *interconnection* between the three. In addition, I will highlight how this separation also persists inside the discipline of anthropology, as it is practiced in France, and thus inside the MQB research department. It is precisely the lack of interconnection between art, politics and ethnography that, I will eventually argue, fosters a de-centralisation of the research department (and hence anthropology) in the institutional roles and choices of the museum.

### *A vision from an ex-boursier*

In the years that followed the opening of the MQB an extensive polemic arose. The international dispute was mainly focused around the “aesthetics” vs the “scientific” use and value of museum objects and collections and its corollary debate about the role of anthropologists, *conservateurs* and art-collectors in the “spectacular” exhibition choices pursued by the museum (cfr. Amato 2006; Lebovics 2007; Clifford 2007; Price 2007; Clemente 2008). The polemic also developed around questions of “cultural diversity” and the “dialogue between cultures” as pronounced by Jacques Chirac with the opening of the museum in 2006 (cfr. Lusini 2004; Di Lorenzo 2006; Clifford 2007; Price 2007; Dias 2008; Clemente 2008; Digard 2008). Finally, the debate concerned the specificity of the French “cultural” public (Clifford 2007; de L’Estoile 2007, 2015) and interrogations about the residues of colonialism and thus of ethnocentrism and French universalism (cfr. Amato 2006; Price 2007; Dias 2008; Thomas 2008; Shelton 2009).

In contrast, among the French cultural and scientific debate, the polemic was rooted on the history of French ethnology (cfr. de L’Estoile 2015), interconnected with museum practices or what was known as *musée-laboratoire* (see also Taylor 2008). In fact, part of the dispute was a sort of “comparison” between the aesthetic and academic role that the collections played at the “new” Musée du Quai Branly vis-à-vis those of the “old” Musée de l’Homme. As Benoît de L’Estoile clearly explains, with the MQB the French ethnology has enlarged the possibility to go beyond the Levi-Straussian legacy of “ethnographic collections” for an approach based more on “creation” coming from the “human soul” (2015: 86). In other words, the emphasis was no longer on “exotic objects” but on how to give voice and light to the soul of those *œuvres* exhibited in museums like the MQB – that is, to the human forms of “creations”, rather than “facts” coming from a distant other (cfr. also Ingold 2011).

If we follow the analysis of de L’Estoile (2015), we may say that with the MQB we have experienced the end of the ethnological paradigm of French anthropology connected to museum collections and hence to the “illusion” of “representing” a particular culture and creating an “encyclopaedic knowledge” of human cultures (Taylor 2008: 681). In other words, we enter a paradigm based more on “creativity” and “interpretation” as for other existing “genres” of museums – namely, the museums of modern and contemporary art (cfr. von Bismarck *et al.* 2017). De L’Estoile identifies in this shift a new era of museums, which he precisely calls the “post-ethnographic museums”. Yet, to what extent this was true from my experience of a *boursier* at the MQB?

During the period of my 2013-14 postdoctoral fellowship at the MQB I felt that focusing only on my own research and yet being based in a nice office along with other (post)doctoral scholars, also focusing on their own research, was a bit limiting for that context. Hence, along with Arnaud Dubois (who at that time was still working for his PhD on anthropology of colour), we decided to complement our individual research, with a small project about the museum itself and its way of including “images” in its institutional discourse and departmental practices. Between 2013 and 2014, we then conducted a fieldwork inside various departments of the museum, investigating the role that “images” played in this cultural institution. It was not easy to “enter” other departments of the museums and pose questions about their conceptualisation and use of “images” in their practice (e.g. the image of an object for the *conservateurs*; the image of the cultural institution or of a particular collection for the communication department; or the image as a concrete object of art as for the curator of the photographic collection, etc.). While individuals were very pleased to share their work and perspective with us during informal meetings that we organised in the museum over several months, they were quite reluctant to put in question institutional choices publically. This became clearer when after our data collection, we selected a number of interested speakers for a panel that we coordinated at the British Museum for the 2014 RAI photography and anthropology conference and asked them to write an abstract for such event. In the process, we were warned that our project risked not to be approved by the head of direction – we would have not been funded to participate in the conference in London. This was because the project did not aim “to study” a collection of images at the MQB but “to interrogate” and “analyse” the *value* that “images” played vis-à-vis objects in the *discourses* and *practices* of different departments of the museum. In other words, there was the risk that through our project the image of the MQB at an institutional level could be questioned.

After several months of debates, visits and negotiations with different individuals and departments, we managed to obtain funding for our research and presented our work at the RAI conference at the British Museum. Among other things, what emerged through the debate was that in the MQB institutional discourse persists a dichotomy between “creative arts” vs “objective ethnography”, which strongly impacts individual departmental practices. Our research demonstrated that there was no *synthesis* of the “ethnographic creation” and the “ethnographic collection” across departmental practices, as de L’Estoile’s (2015) put forward in his analysis. Rather, we found that the MQB’s institutional choices continue to hierarchically *separating* these two

approaches, impacting on departmental practices and discourses as well as on the use of images in the *Musée's* exhibition space. Why such enduring separation then? A detour through the MQB's original development will help us to elucidate.

After a crucial dispute about the nature and form of the upcoming museum, when the project of the MQB was approved, the idea eventually received a "blessed" by two important (but discursively oppositional) personalities, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Jacques Kerchache. Lévi-Strauss and Kerchache were respectively representatives of two schools of thoughts *separated* from each other: the "French ethnology" and the "*arts premiers*". In line with this "separation", the names of these two personalities have given birth to two important MQB auditoriums. In other words, "art" and "ethnography" found for the first time in France a place where to coexist together. Yet, if they started to co-exist in the same cultural place, I would argue that they have also continued to be kept *separated* as two distinctive spaces.

This is the reason why despite the co-existence of these two practices, the MQB has over the years continued falling into the enduring debate of "ethnographic" vs "artistic" interpretation. And this is also why, images continue to be used as "supportive" materials to objects or as abstract installations disconnected from the rest of the environment, as our 2013-14 research inside the museum also proved<sup>1</sup>. As Clifford (2007) among others, pointed out, ethnographic information is only present in the audio-guides and on some "instructional" ethnographic films placed next to the objects. Yet, neither audio-guides nor "instructional" ethnographic films are necessarily something that visitors like to consult when they visit a museum. Instead, other commentators have added, an emphasis on the "beauty" of an object along with abstract visual installations seems to be privileged, "misguiding" the visitors via the world of "spectacle" rather than science (cfr. Di Lorenzo 2006; Lebovics 2007; Clifford 2007; Price 2007; Digard 2008; Clemente 2008). Today, anthropologists like myself specialised on contemporary visual art practices, may instead criticise that images and sound should neither be treated as "supportive" materials to objects nor abstract installation but as also *objects* themselves of both aesthetic and ethnographic value which constantly calls for serious anthropological attentions (cfr. Cox *et al.* 2016; Fourmentaux 2016; Battaglia 2018).

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1. I have further developed this point on a paper called *Ethnographic Film in Museum Practices: Image, Object and Archive* presented in 2015 for the symposium *Film in Ethnographic Exhibitions* held at the National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen. Cfr. [www.academia.edu/20430946/Ethnographic\\_Film\\_as\\_Image-Object\\_in\\_Museum\\_Practices](http://www.academia.edu/20430946/Ethnographic_Film_as_Image-Object_in_Museum_Practices)



Things have been gradually changing in the museum but not yet to overcome the classic dichotomy “art vs ethnography”. In this respect, I would say that until unless art stops being perceived as separated from ethnography (and vice versa ethnography separated from art), the MQB will continue being quite far from making a change in museum paradigms and rather marginalise anthropology (and hence the already existent research department where I worked) from wider institutional choices. Rather than seeing the MQB as an example of “post-ethnographic museums”, as for de L’Estoile (2015), I would be much more inclined to see in this cultural institution a good terrain for further expanding an “ethno-art-graphic” museum, where creative ethnographic collections can make both art and anthropology. In an implicit (or cautious?) way, Benoît de L’Estoile (2015) himself seems to identify two limitations of his recent proposition, which I think need to be made explicit here. These “limitations”, I believe, are central for understanding the role of the MQB today and its relation to anthropology.

The first and most important point is the contradiction existent between the shifts of paradigms within museum institutions (from the Musée de l’Homme to the MQB – that is, from a museum of “collection” of facts to a museum of “creation” and interpretations, as mentioned above), and the enduring paradigm of classic French ethnology. De L’Estoile explains that as a “post-ethnographic museum” the MQB stands today too much in contrast with the Lévi-Straussian discursive paradigm on which the French ethnology *is still* based. Following Lévi-Strauss, the anthropological paradigm of French ethnology is certainly based on a clear distinction between the collection of facts (ethnography), the first level of synthesis of these facts (ethnology) and the comparative study of human beings (anthropology). Each of these three levels determines as well the jobs that scholars can find in the field of French ethnology. As a result, in the recent years, the third level, precisely anthropology, has been increasingly something practiced by (or left with) disciplines other than anthropology – namely philosophy and art history. Building on this analysis, I would say that within this Lévi-Straussian trilogy, art is perceived as something closer to anthropology but not to ethnography (reason why in France “*l’anthropologie de l’art*” is also practiced, or re-appropriated, by art historians who do not necessarily conduct ethnographic fieldwork).

Following de L’Estoile we can therefore say that despite the MQB attempt to re-unite art with ethnography (marked by the shift between the traditional “ethnographic” Musée de l’Homme to the “creative” MQB), over the past ten years art has continued being something separated from ethnography. This enduring separation has also been marked by the way in which French

ethnology has continued articulating the concept of “ethnography” as for the Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS) also based, on the classic Lévi-Straussian tri-partition, “ethnography”, “ethnology” and “anthropology”, influencing various anthropological practices in France, including the research department of the MQB. In this respect, it is as if over the past ten years, our potential museum of “creative” interpretations (or, “post-ethnographic museum”?) has lacked support from the practice of French ethnology (and hence from the research department of the museum) which, following this analysis, has continued seeing “creativity” in “anthropology” *but not* in “ethnography” and “ethnology”.

The second level of critical evaluation, advanced by de L’Estoile (2015), is the fact that, as many other commentators have pointed out, the MQB lacks postcolonial critique. Much has been said about this lacuna and by and large, reviewers have analysed it in relation to Jacques Chirac’s national politics and the politico-philosophical concept of French universalism and *integralisme* vis-à-vis questions about multiculturalism, post-colonialism, globalisation and the much proclaimed “cultural diversity” (cfr. Lusini 2004; Amato 2006; Di Lorenzo 2006; Clifford 2007; Price 2007; Dias 2008; Clemente 2008; Digard 2008; Thomas 2008; Shelton 2009). To me though, if at an institutional level it is important to understand this lacuna from the perspective of national politics (as many scholars have already done), on the other hand it is also important to link this debate with that of French ethnology mentioned above. In the past ten years of the MQB, the postcolonial critique, in fact, has also been missing in most of the institutionalised discourse of French ethnology, promoted by the CNRS. In other words, if it is true that at the level of national politics the MQB has “forgotten” to include postcolonial debates in its practice, at the level of research practice, by and large based on the CNRS’ paradigm, the museum has also dismissed this discourse.

By making explicit and linking together these two points of criticism raised in the most recent essay written by de L’Estoile’s (2015), we can therefore say that in the past ten years not only the research department *but also* “French ethnology” has remained marginal within the wider structure of the MQB. Questions of art, ethnography and postcolonial critique are indeed interconnected. Engaging with the postcolonial critique in museum practices means engaging with questions of aesthetics *as also* forms of politics (of representations). In other words, it means being able to make “visible” the “opacity” of representation, as Louis Marin (1989) would say, in both art and ethnography and going towards what I have called an “ethno-art-graphic” museum, where ethnography, art and I add now politics, can dialogue *together* beyond the classic separation between French ethnology and the rep-



resentation of *arts premiers*, as originally conceived by the MQB. On the contrary, keeping questions of politics of representation *out of* the museum, and ethnography and art as two *separated* entities, means continue reinforcing the idea that art can only be a “display of ethnography”, ethnography as only the “contextualisation of art”, politics as something different from aesthetics, and by and large research departments of anthropology as something to remain marginal within cultural institutions.

In conclusion, my experience of an *ex-boursier* of the MQB has taught me that until the discourse around *art*, *anthropology* and *politics of representation* does change in *French ethnology*, a museum like the MQB is still far to become a “post-ethnographic museum”. The research department will in fact continue being marginalised within the wider museum’s structure with no (or limited) impact on institutional choices. Nevertheless, because of the questions that the museum has provoked over the past ten years, the MQB will remain a cultural institution with much potential and several contradictions to remind some reluctant scholars the need to reflect on such missing interconnected triangulation, and some others to better centralise (with a specific local touch connected to the French ethnology) the role of the MQB within international debates on anthropology and ethnographic museums (cfr. Phillips 2011; Lattanzi *et al.* 2013; Rossi 2015). Yet, is there a way out?

The increasing growth of temporary exhibitions (*vis-à-vis* permanent exhibitions) is proving that there is, perhaps, a way to bypass traditional paradigms in both French ethnology and museum practices, and begin to take what I have called an “ethno-art-graphic” direction. Less compelled by institutional rules and with the potential to dialogue with other actors (e.g. external curators, external artists, external anthropologists, etc.), temporary exhibitions (which, have become so much *en vogue* in France) are gradually overtaking permanent exhibitions and pushing the boundaries of museum practices and discourses. While for the MQB some may like to interpret them as a sort of “furniture” for its impressive architecture, aimed to attract even more a Parisian public (de L’Estoile 2010, 2015), I would also say that temporary exhibitions can be the way to bypass institutional, historical and discursive constraints. Arguably, going to a museum is becoming almost synonymous with going to a temporary exhibition, and in the French language going to a temporary exhibition has already become part of the possible cultural activities to be done in a day: “*faire un expo*”.

If this is the case, and thus if the direction of museums is increasingly going towards temporary exhibitions, we can then find in the recently finished MQB *Persona: Étrangement Human* (2016), curated by anthropologist (including Emmanuel Grimaud and the MQB’s ex-director, Anne-Christine Taylor), a

good example in which art, anthropology and politics dialogue and mix with one another. Through a combination of historical and contemporary collections coming from the “western and non-western” worlds associated with the human experience (from the practice of shamanism, to the creation/reincarnation of new/old gods, to domestic uses of familiar objects, to robots, machines, computers, etc.), the anthropologists-curators pushed the spectator to reflect during the exhibition about the relationship between “human” and “non-human” and the intimate relationship that humans create with objects transculturally. The exhibition goes beyond cultural stereotypes and cultural specificities. It treats art-objects and beliefs coming from different parts of the world no longer as distant practices/objects made/done by a distant “other”. The spectator is placed in a condition to think of a form of “proximity” between his/her experience and the tradition of a specific practice connected to an apparently “distant object”. Thanks to this proximity the spectator is then invited to also think at the multiple and complex lives that objects/practices do have in the global human experience – making that apparently distant object/practice no longer distant.

Similarly, and even more explicitly, the recently finished exhibition MOF (2017-18)<sup>2</sup>, curated by an anthropologist *ex-boursier* of the MQB, Arnaud Dubois, and held at the Musée d’Arts et Metiers, is another useful example to start going towards an “ethno-art-graphic” direction<sup>3</sup>. In this case, it is the whole process of creation that gets materialised. Through a combination of the display of historical objects of the museums that have never been shown from the nineteenth century, and a fieldwork experience with contemporary French “best” artisans across the country, the anthropologist-curator creates “zones of frictions”, as he himself explains (Dubois 2018), between the research, the selected objects, the techniques of creation, the artisans’ corporeal knowledge and the real human-bodies in movement and in action. The “mise-en-place” of the overall exhibition becomes the architectural space where to highlight all these elements through different sensorial but interconnected moments – e.g. through an entire room for stand-alone photography, or another room for stand-alone sound, one for stand-alone objects, a side-space for stand-alone audio-interviews, another room for stand-alone video-art, and a fictional live-stand for stand-alone live-performances (made

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2. The MOF are the best artisans of France (*Les Meilleurs Ouvriers de France*) which artisans can get as a title from a national competition lanced every three years in France.

3. Although belonging to a different history, I consider the Musée d’Arts et Métiers as similar to classic ethnographic museums because traditionally also based on collections of “objects as facts”.

by invited MOF every afternoon of the weekends). In other words, *each art practice* (made in collaboration with experts from each field of art) and *each piece of ethnographic experience* (done by the anthropologist himself) get its own *unique* moment to connect to the public in the overall exhibition. In this way, the “opacity” of the “process” of creation (Marin 1989) becomes visible. Precisely as for the “object of art” always made by “operational cycles” of “sequences of actions”, as the anthropologist-curators tries to tell us in his MOF, the overall exhibition functions as the “container”, the “form” (or even as the object of art itself) for all the other “processes of creation” that constitute it.

To conclude, allow me to pose a final interrogation: would these examples mean that in order to understand the MQB’s (or other similar museums) implication in art, politics and anthropology we must today overtake permanent exhibitions and only focus on temporary exhibitions? I would let the years to come to answer such question.

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