Contact Networks for Digital Reciprocation

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What new possibilities do today's digital networks create for the contact zone approach as formulated by James Clifford (1997)?

What do we mean by contact? Does it always need to take place in the physical space of the museum with face-toface interactions and physical access to objects? What new possibilities are opened up when the parameters of the contact zone are extended beyond the walls of the museum to facilitate online engagement and interactions with digital objects? What differences are there in terms of duration and intensity of the engagements that take place? How are power, authority and access negotiated within the digital domain?

The authors will use recent examples of digital research network projects at the British Museum (BM) and the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA) to examine issues surrounding online museum/community interaction and the multifaceted nature of the digital contact network. Video footage will be shown from a live broadcasted theatre piece and online, real-time dialogue which formed the culmination of a pilot project, 'Digital Talking Objects', that networked the BM with student communities at Deakin University in Australia and the University of Amsterdam. This cross-disciplinary performance was created in response to a bark shield in the BM collections obtained by Captain Cook raising issues concerning object narratives and colonial histories and their representation within the museum. MAA's Artefacts of Encounter project, one that also concerns early voyages, is creating a discursive system for research access to dispersed collections. The focus of this work is a dynamic network of a number of museums and Te Aitanga-a-Hauiti, a Maori community from Uawa, New Zealand. Artefacts of Encounter will be discussed as a means to explore the potential of online spaces for catalyzing and hosting objectbased

contact whilst fusing numerous protocols for ownership, control and digital reciprocation.

The web creates an environment that is distributive, multidirectional and enduring, yet like physical contact spaces it is also constructed, potentially malleable and, for some, exclusive. How then can the contact spaces of the future, that draw on new technological opportunities, further and sustain these museum/object/community engagements?