

Performing the Red Carpet:  
Pop Culture Melancholy and Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum

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Illustrations

<http://www.nyu.edu/classes/bkg/tourist/images/sifuentes.htm>

Tourist Productions Fall 2003  
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According to the *New York Times*, The Tussaud's Group, owners of Madame Tussaud's Wax Museums, began negotiations for a New York City site in early 1995, to be included in the city's urban renewal effort in Times Square; the Madame Tussaud phenomenon was London's biggest attraction at the time, bringing in 2.6 million visitors a year (Pulley 1995: B3). Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum in New York City officially opened on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, Times Square in November 2000, to a gala opening of real-life celebrities along side their wax doubles. Since its opening, the museum has attracted both media and tourist attention due to its engaging additions, like the interactive Jennifer Lopez, its controversial inclusions, like Yasser Arafat, and with the exhibit *Hope: Humanity and Heroism*, a tribute to the firefighters of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. While these specific portraits (as Madame Tussaud's calls the wax figures) have caught a great deal of attention, the museum continues to attract new and returning visitors with constant additions of new wax portraits. The portraits embody human virtuosity and creativity, though I do not believe this is why they are so appealing. I propose that Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum produces for its visitors<sup>1</sup> the experience of "performing the red carpet," by evoking from its visitors what I am calling pop culture melancholy, that is, the recognition of an unattainable celebrity lifestyle. In response to the melancholy of the unattainable, visitors to Madame Tussaud's are able to perform as celebrities. The ultimate paradox of the museum is that it is simultaneously producing separation and inclusion by showing people how they are not celebrities, in order to sell them the experience of being celebrities. The wax portraits evoke interactive responses from visitors by supporting the visitors' enactment of Celebrity; standing next to a celebrity, a visitor becomes a celebrity. Madame Tussaud's is not a traditional museum where visitors view exhibits; rather, visitors interact with the exhibits and create exhibits out of that interaction. Through an explication of the site, I will reveal how certain rooms and portraits evoke specific affects from visitors, causing visitors to perform differently. The data sources I used to explore the museum included on-site observations and

discussions with visitors and staff, post-visit interviews, photographs taken by and of museum visitors, and my personal narrative of the experience.

Finding a way to stand out in Times Square is no easy feat, though Madame Tussaud's has certainly tried. The huge sign announcing the museum to the world runs vertically along the side of the building and is held aloft by large golden hand (see fig. 1). The street-level display window alternates celebrities, though I have most often seen Whoopi Goldberg and Robin Williams. On the street near the entrance to the museum is very often the portrait of Samuel L. Jackson. His figure is certainly one of the most accurate and is constantly surrounded by photo-takers, thus the experience of Madame Tussaud's begins<sup>2</sup> just outside of its doors. Upon entering the museum, visitors find themselves on a red carpet, surrounded by velvet ropes and looking at an enormous spiraling staircase (see fig. 2). According to museum staff<sup>3</sup>, the staircase is open only on their busiest days, which is certainly a shame because the majesty of the stairs only heightens the experience of grandeur (see figs. 3, 4). After climbing up what feels like several flights, visitors are presented with a stunning panoramic view of 42<sup>nd</sup> Street before entering the museum elevator. On the days the staircase is closed, velvet ropes and signs dissuade visitors from approaching. After purchasing their tickets, visitors must wait for an elevator to take them to the exhibits. The grandeur, the red carpet, the velvet ropes, the waiting, even the steep ticket price (\$25 for an adult) perpetuate feelings of exclusivity and the hope that something very special is about to happen.

Before October 2003, museum staff wearing purple and gold uniforms would greet visitors at and in the elevators and at each modest souvenir stand throughout the museum. Near Halloween 2003, the museum began hiding staff in one of the exhibits to scare people. According to staff this was so popular that the museum incorporated several members of the "Experience Crew" throughout the museum. One member of the Experience Crew can be found on the red carpet at the entrance to the

museum. He wears shiny sunglasses, an outrageous polyester suit a-la-Studio 54, and carries a microphone. When I asked him about the microphone he told me that he was there to “interview celebrities on the red carpet,” and those people he was interviewing were the arriving visitors to the museum (see fig. 5). In the elevator up to the first exhibit, this flashy gentleman introduces himself as Frank and tells visitors that they are on their way to an opening night party that has already begun, and that the visitors are fashionably late. While there are two other members of the Experience Crew, whom I will address shortly, I would argue that Frank is the most important for nurturing the exclusive, celebrity experience. Within the first few minutes in the museum, Frank tells visitors who they are—important enough to be interviewed on the red carpet—and tells them why they are there—to attend an exclusive party. Frank invokes a fantasy life that is virtually unattainable to most.

The elevator opens into the first room, the Opening Night Party, and excited visitors find themselves at a glamorous event, surrounded by celebrities. In the center of the room, as her own Venus Rising, is performer and drag queen RuPaul standing on a half-shell atop a flowing fountain. According to the Madame Tussaud’s website, the party is in fact an opening night party for a Broadway show, “hosted” by RuPaul (see fig. 6). The brochure<sup>4</sup> for Madame Tussaud’s says:

“And this is, as they say, a “tough room.” Liz Smith, Larry king, Ivana and Joan Rivers. There’s Brad Pitt, Nick Cage, and Cher. This gathering possesses enough talent, power, wit, and pure chutzpa to light up all of Manhattan. Movers-and-shakers; people ‘who matter.’ Oozing charm, style, glamour and grace, these celebrities are the New York cognescenti, and you’re invited to mingle and shmooze.”*[sic]*

The language of the brochures and website, along with Frank’s preparatory remarks to visitors, ensure an excited crowd, who is ready and expecting to participate in the party. The language is also reflective of the visitors’ desires to be included in, welcomed at and deserving of such a party. These first moments in the museum invoke the desires of the visitors and present them an opportunity to fulfill those desires. Between the desire and the fulfillment of the experience is the melancholic realization that this is perhaps the closest one can ever get to real Celebrity. Madame Tussaud’s uses that

melancholy to produce a simulated Celebrity experience—while visitors are not actually kissing actor Brad Pitt or actor-singer Jennifer Lopez, they are as close as they might ever be. Madame Tussaud’s offers its visitors a moment removed from their pop culture melancholy. It offers them the experience of being part of the “people who matter.” Visitors quickly forget the moments of being ordinary, the steep ticket price and long wait for the elevator, as they are included in this extraordinary event. In the late nineteenth century, wax museums like Madame Tussaud’s London and the Musée Grévin were popular because they gave visitors the unusual experience of seeing “familiar events, people and stories in exacting detail at a time when photographs were not easily reproduced and had yet to accompany newspaper reports (Boyer 1996: 14). The experience of the Opening Night Party is quite the opposite in that visitors are seeing celebrities, and even outfits, they have seen dozens of times on television and in photographs. The wax figures are no longer proxies for media coverage, but rather validate and are validated by media coverage. Visitors are able to essentially insert themselves into the images they have seen many times over, by taking their own photograph with the wax figure.

By making the very first room, indeed experience, that of a party, visitors are encouraged to act accordingly. As I will describe later, other rooms evoke very different responses from the visitors. The figures in the Party room are standing and sitting, posed to look like they are in conversations or just watching. In this, the static wax figures create performers out of their visitors, as they are encouraged to hug, kiss, pose with, talk to and otherwise interact with the figures. Visitors are able to move from one figure to the next, posing for photographs or just getting a closer look. Visitors also inspire and entertain one another with their own dynamic poses and interactions. The Party room, unlike other rooms, has many places to sit, so visitors are able to watch other visitors as they interact with the wax figures. In some ways, posing with the wax figures is more dynamic than posing with the real celebrities. Visitors

can and do kiss the portraits, touch them in scandalous places, and have humorous moments with them. The experience is limited only by what the visitor, not the celebrity, wants to do.

While many of the figures throughout the museum have motion-sensored voice boxes to make them more interactive, perhaps the most intimate interactive experience is with the portrait of Jennifer Lopez, located in the Opening Night Party room. Her portrait stands in what one of the staff members calls “The Diva Exhibit,” along with the portraits of actress Julia Roberts and pop singer Shakira. Upon her unveiling in May 2003, Michael Brick of the New York Times wrote:

“Behold the woman, her hair pulled back, eyes slightly narrowed, her head cocked somewhat rightward in a mirrored Mona Lisa pose, watching what is behind her rather than what is before her. A pendant dangles from her neck and the tan silk of her gown reaches modestly to the floor. And now speak to us of the confluence of the male gaze and the eye of the camera, of colliding cultural infatuations. Give us a framework to comprehend this object of desire.” [2003:B3]

For all his evocative description of the portrait’s physicality and his acknowledgement of her problematic existence, Brick failed to comment on the most significant feature of this portrait—she blushes. The Jennifer Lopez portrait blushes if a visitor whispers in her ear, or touches her body, specifically her rear. A darling of New York City and a Bronx native, Jennifer Lopez is by far the most popular portrait, according to several museum staff. Her new type of interaction is very special and quite significant for the museum, as it brings a visitor one step closer to a real-life experience. While motion-sensored voices are fun to hear, the JLo portrait speaks to her visitors in an intimate, physical way. The response of blushing can signify embarrassment but also, and perhaps more significantly considering the source, arousal. Madame Tussaud’s deepens the connection between visitor and fantasy by creating a figure upon which visitors can enact their fantasies, and which will physically react, in a positive way, to that fantasy. That the specific act of whispering in her ear or touching her causes JLo to blush predetermines the kind of interactions visitors will have with her—if the effect is blushing, then the cause must be embarrassing or intimate (see fig. 7). Many of the portraits are becoming more interactive; the new thinner Al Roker will have a green screen so that visitors can do the weather reports

with him; visitors can hear the voices of the Osbournes speak when they sit next to them. The significance of the JLo type of interaction is that the interaction (whispering or touching) evokes a physical, visceral response that is inherently bodily and sexual. Visitors are then performing not only as celebrities, as people who matter, but as desirable celebrities who have the power to make Jennifer Lopez blush.

According to staff members, the Party room is the most popular because it has the most current, living celebrities and has the best lighting for taking pictures. In fact, if visitors forget to bring a camera, cameras are available at a booth in the Party room. Some might wonder what could be the purpose of attending a wax museum without a camera because indeed, the camera is a crucial element in the wax museum experience. During one visit, a teenage boy wearing all black, with spiked hair and about 30 pins on his sweatshirt, handed me a disposable camera he had just bought and asked me to take a picture of him and “Julia.” Julia Roberts, in an Academy Award style dress and up-do, is leaning over a chair in which visitors sit; it seemed, however, that even Julia’s formal wear was not intimidating to this teen. Because so much of the event is performing as a celebrity, with and also to a celebrity, the photograph becomes validation of that experience. According to several of the people I spoke with<sup>5</sup>, the best photographs were the ones that looked the most real, meaning the wax figure looked like a real person (see figs. 8, 9). One visitor I interviewed told me that his first impetus to take a picture was how real the figure looked and his second consideration was how real the photograph looked. He also told me that he would never pass off a photo as a genuine celebrity encounter, though he did think the photos added kitsch value to his photo collection. Two of the visitors I spoke with told me that their photos were “proof.” I asked them for what and for who the proof was, and they couldn’t actually explain it to me. They told me that they knew the photos were not of an actual celebrity encounter, but that this was as close as they would get, so the photos were somehow proof of that; but they were still quite unclear for

what or for who the “proof” was. The significance of the photograph is that it captures a still moment, rather than passing time, as a video would. Visitors who brought video cameras seemed less comfortable with their experience because the construction of the situation was revealed. People did not quite know how to respond to a friend or family member videotaping them with the portraits. While visitors had little reservation posing for a still shot, the video seemed like a less satisfying medium.

Dean MacCannell wrote of “stereotypical travel posters which appear to portray fiery sunsets or white-sand beaches but are actual portrayals of the viewing subject’s desire to be somewhere else.” He claimed that, “they are not objectified by the viewing subject. Rather it is the viewing subject that is caught, manipulated, captured in the field of vision“ (MacCannell 2001: 30). The Opening Night Party portrays a celebrity experience, but could be seen as actually portraying visitors’ desire to be someone else—to be a celebrity at such a party. The photograph of the experience serves to fulfill that desire by literally capturing the visitor in the field of vision—the wax figure, no longer the object, becomes incidental. Filmmaker David O’Rourke said in an interview, “Photography is now a part of our whole cultural ethos. We know that to take a photograph is much more than recording. It is an act of making a representation, of objectification“ (Lutkehaus 1989: 429). Specific to Madame Tussaud’s, the act of inserting oneself into a photograph is to make oneself the object of desire, admiration and value. One visitor I spoke with told me he saw no value in photographing wax figures by themselves, the photograph was only interesting if there were a real person in it.

The second member of the Experience Crew can be found at the Opening Night Party. He calls himself Fabu, has worked at Madame Tussaud’s for two and a half years, and became part of the Experience Crew in October. Fabu wears gold aviator sunglasses, a shiny gold tuxedo jacket and a purple boa (see fig. 10). During an informal conversation in the Party room in November 2003, Fabu told me that most of the interactions happen in the Party room, and that his job is to interact with the

visitors. He often does this by standing still and waiting for people to come close to him, thinking he is wax, and then scaring them. He said many times that Madame Tussaud's was trying to move away from being known as a museum and towards being an attraction, and that the management felt the best way to do that was to have more staff in costumes. As he spoke about "doing experience," as he called it, he would constantly refer to the museum as an attraction. He felt as though his presence helped amplify the experience of the room. He mentioned that often times he would see shy children in the "Diva Exhibit" and he help them feel more comfortable by letting them wear his boa and sunglasses. According to him, his job is to make people feel more a part of the experience. He also intimated that for most people, this was the closest they were ever going to get to something special, and that being there (in the museum) gave people the chance to be part of something. Madame Tussaud's has tapped into society's melancholic, ordinary life and offers them a chance to perform as a celebrity, to enact a fantasy, to be a diva.

The third member of the Experience Crew works in an offshoot room of the Opening Night Party. Brian, dressed as a Mad Scientist, shares a strobe-lit room with the largest wax figure ever created, a portrait of the Incredible Hulk. The Hulk is posed to grab any person who comes through the tiny room, and Brian helps kids and adults alike to pose with the Hulk (see fig. 11). Often Brian can be found in the adjoining hallway of mirrors, posed to look like a wax figure and scaring visitors as he jumps out at them. The fun-house style hallway of mirrors leads to a brief dioramic history of Madame Tussaud's and the French Revolution. As this section of wax figures is behind glass or within a diorama, visitors do not seem to pose with them as much as the first room. The graveyard, included in the history of Tussaud's life, was the location of the original Experience Crew during the weeks surrounding Halloween (see fig. 12). Dressed as zombies and prisoners, the Crew would stand still and then jump out at passing visitors. The history of Madame Tussaud's leads to "Behind the Scenes," a

gallery of half-completed heads and body parts, with a looping video of “how they do it!” These few sections are different from the other rooms because the exhibits are less accessible, and more reminiscent of a traditional museum (see fig. 13).

After exiting “Behind the Scenes,” visitors pass into The Gallery of historical figures. One visitor called the room “The Pantheon Room” because elements in the room include Greek columns and painted clouds. Upon entering the space, visitors see an array of figures both alive and dead, and arranged without consideration for when or where they lived; Abraham Lincoln stands next to George Washington and Pablo Picasso sits near Princess Diana. According to the museum brochure,

“Another party, but a much different kind of evening [than the Opening Night Party] is underway across town... Peacemakers, presidents, pioneers, authors, social scientists, world leaders and holy men whose influence is felt on a global scale, often impacting millions—and sometimes billions—of lives.”

Madame Tussaud’s makes an important choice to call this room “another party,” thus reinforcing a certain mood with which the museum associates itself. This room however, unlike the Opening Night Party, is quite reverent. The music sounds like elevator-style classical, rather than cocktail party music. The mood, though exciting because of the variety of figures, seems more introspective and respectful. The visitors posing in this room seem more polite with the figures, though, I did notice one young woman pushing Jackie Kennedy away, as she posed with John F. Kennedy. The figures in this room evoke a more reverent type of response from the visitors, because the mood room is much different than the Opening Night Party. It also seems significant that the people in this room are considered influential on a global scale; no one could argue that Michael Jackson has not been influential on a global scale, though he was not included in The Gallery. One woman I interviewed believed that Americans let celebrities influence their lives and decisions, while they should be looking to the people in The Gallery for inspiration. While a distinction could be made between historical figures and celebrities, I would argue that many of the featured historical figures could still be considered celebrities. In particular, those imbued with icon status, such as Jackie Kennedy-Onassis or Princess Diana, would likely be

considered celebrities. During an interview, one visitor told me that he believed that celebrities in the Opening Night Party were like American royalty. Royalty, as the original popular (or unpopular) icons, evoke a sense of charisma, influence or power and many contemporary celebrities are popular precisely because they possess those attributes. Dr. Martin Luther King or even Fred Astaire, both found in the Gallery and both American icons, could certainly be considered a type of American royalty. These types of icons evoke a different type of performance from the visitors than the celebrity icons from the first room. Visitors are still performing as “people who matter” as they are allowed access to this new room, but they are often respectful and reverent, taking on the assumed characteristics of the people in the room, rather than enacting their fantasies upon them.

Many of the figures are not from the United States, but they all are a type of icon— Fidel Castro, Pope John Paul II, Mahatma Gandhi, and Yasser Arafat are all icons that represent an ideology or lifestyle. While The Gallery seems to have a historical, or even political slant, perhaps it should have been called the Gallery of Icons, as each portrait seems to evoke the feeling of something larger than simply the identity of one person (see figs. 14-16). The portrait of Yasser Arafat, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, was raised to a different icon status in May of 2001, when he became an unknowing representative of all things un-American—several politicians and many protestors believed that the wax Arafat should be removed from the museum. New York Governor George Pataki called Arafat “a terrorist” and said, “I don’t think it’s appropriate to have any image of Yasser Arafat that portrays him in a positive light” (Mahoney 2001:4). Assembly member Dov Hikind (D-Brooklyn) said that it is “an affront to decent law-abiding citizens for Arafat to be welcome in any way, shape or form” (Mahoney 2001:4). Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver (D-Manhattan), who did sign a petition to have the figure removed, told reporters he was not advocating censorship. He told reporters, “They [Madame Tussaud’s] censor themselves. They have chosen not to do Adolf Hitler in New York because they

obviously didn't think it was appropriate" (Dicker, et al. 2001: 003). Adolf Hitler is an important example of an icon who influenced billions of lives on a global scale, but who has not been cast in wax. Janine Scarpello, the general manager of Madame Tussaud's said in a statement, "Madame Tussaud's New York features life-size portraits of people who have captured worldwide attention." The decision to portray an individual is irrespective of any political or religious stance" (Ibarguen 2001); the wax Arafat was never removed from the museum, except for its routine cleanings.

While many of the museum portraits in other galleries are of beautiful people, Madame Tussaud's constantly reinforces the importance of making a difference in the world on a more-than-aesthetic level. According to the brochure, the portraits in The Gallery are people who want or wanted "to make the world a better place." The Gallery is a strange combination of influential people; F. Scott Fitzgerald, Annie Leibowitz, Maya Angelou and the Dalai Lama are all included. While some of the icons might not be considered celebrities in the contemporary sense of the word, they evoke the same type of admiration, desire, power or even magic that many of the contemporary celebrities do. The concepts of royalty, icon, celebrity, charisma, leadership, virtuosity and religion are all conflated within the consciousness of one museum. The museum brochure says of The Gallery, "this gathering is something special, indeed; a magical evening like no other in history" and asks visitors to "imagine the conversations." When the Musée Grévin wax museum opened in Paris 1882, founders Arthur Meyer and Alfred Grévin "intended th[e] museum to mimic the newspaper, offering a random juxtaposition of tableaux similar to the manner in which newspaper columns presented readers with a series of unconnected stories" (Boyer 1996: 14). This random juxtaposition remains in The Gallery, as time and space converge into one present moment where non-contemporaneous figures exist together.

Down several staircases and through many hallways, visitors make their way towards the gallery of Popular Culture. Along the way, visitors pass several full-length, framed mirrors. Mirrors play the

important role of reflecting the visitor in that moment, whereas a photograph will reflect a visitor's past moments. The mirrors make portraits out of visitors, thereby inserting visitors into the galleries as worthy additions. After passing the mirrors, visitors enter a larger hallway sponsored by cable television's *A&E Biography*. The hallway has over a dozen television screens that essentially play commercials for *Biography*. *Biography*'s sponsorship of Madame Tussaud's could be considered problematic, as it creates an authority out of a television show. Rather than highlighting actual research, Tussaud's highlights a television show as historical validation for their product – representations of famous people.

After descending one more flight of stairs, visitors find themselves surrounded by painted walls, constant music and voice-overs, and new celebrity portraits (see fig. 17) in Popular Culture. According to the brochure, the museum distinguishes the members of this gallery as “the Celebrities—those actors, athletes, musicians and artists who have captured our collective imagination.” This gallery should have been called American Popular Culture, as it reflects mostly that (perhaps Brazilian soccer player Pelé being an exception), but likely there was fear that a culturally specific name would dissuade or alienate international visitors. Almost all of the figures in the room, though not all from the United States, exist in an American consciousness that defines what America is and loves. The affinities seem to occur specifically within the genre of entertainment, examples being Charlie Chaplain, The Beatles or Bob Marley.

One of the first figures visitors see in the Popular Culture gallery is a young woman taking a photograph of Josephine Baker. At first, the young woman seems real, but after a few moments, visitors realize she is a wax figure. The tourist is one of two wax portraits holding a camera, in the act of taking a photograph—the other is Annie Leibowitz. Visitors can have their photos taken with the portraits of the tourist or Leibowitz, and the result is a photograph of the visitor being photographed by the portraits

(see fig. 18). Just as Leibowitz takes photos of the most spectacular celebrities and tourists take photos of extraordinary moments, each portrait then perpetuates for the visitors the experience of being extraordinary.

The Popular Culture gallery constantly reinforces in its visitors the melancholic realization that celebrities are something more spectacular than the visitors themselves, and then produces for its visitors the opportunity to overcome that melancholy by performing not only as, but with celebrities. Unlike the Gallery, figures are chiefly arranged by decade and are featured in spectacular costumes or iconic attire, such as sportswear or spacesuits. The Popular Culture gallery offers its visitors many opportunities for performance, as there are many stages, sets and seats for visitors to pose. Visitors can stand on the Olympic platforms, in second or third place next to multiple gold-winning swimmer Mark Spitz, sing and dance onstage with Tina Turner, or walk on the moon with Buzz Aldrin and Neil Armstrong. This gallery is interesting because visitors are interacting with the portraits in a much different way than in the Opening Night Party or in the Gallery. Instead of posing next to celebrities or historical figures, and depending on their own creativity for interesting and dynamic poses, visitors insert themselves into an already-dynamic situation. By getting on stage next to Michael Jackson, visitors are essentially performing with him—at least that is what the photograph will show. Visitors posing with pop singer Lenny Kravitz in the Opening Night Party are at a party with him, not on stage with him. This is an important distinction to make because in most of the galleries, the creativity lies with the visitor to create the interactive, performance moment. In the Popular Culture gallery, the addition of sets and stages creates a celebrity-specific diorama into which visitors insert themselves. The Opening Night Party is a thematic room, whereas Popular Culture is presented as individual thematic scenes within a room. Many of the figures in the Popular Culture gallery are also posed in more dynamic positions and are wearing pertinent outfits. Whereas celebrities in the Opening Night party are posed naturally and are

wearing formal attire, the portraits in Popular Culture are posed as though they were singing and dancing and are wearing exciting sports gear or costumes for performing (see figs. 19-22).

According to the brochure, “we’ve watched [celebrities], mimicked them, and, in some cases, even worshiped them.” By using the word “worship,” Tussaud’s acknowledges that there can be a fine line between religious zealotry and celebrity zealotry. Even the term “icon” confuses religion and popular culture. There is an assumed connection between the Opening Night Party and Popular Culture because of the designation of Celebrity, but as I have addressed, The Gallery could also be seen as having celebrities. If the lines began to break down in The Gallery, by putting Gandhi in the same room as Fred Astaire, then Popular Culture’s Richard Nixon next to Andy Warhol surely perpetuates confusion. In this way, Popular Culture becomes more similar to the Gallery than to the Opening Night Party. There are moments that recall the dynamics of the Opening Night Party, however. Marilyn Monroe wears a glamorous sparkling red dress and has her back to her ex-husband, Joe DiMaggio (see fig. 23). There is a clear distinction between the two exhibits, as Marilyn is in a section with television and movie stars, whereas Joe is in a sports section, but they do share a wall and have been placed in obvious opposition to one another as they might be if at a party with one another.

The status of icon is of particular significance in the gallery of Popular Culture. Just as the icons in The Gallery evoke feelings often larger than the identity of one person, the Popular Culture icons do the same. The Popular Culture portraits of, specifically, those icons who have passed, evoke nostalgia for talent and beauty, determination and willpower. The portraits of those who have passed are also what one visitor called “perfect moments” meaning they were when the person was the most famous, most beautiful or most successful—and thereby most iconic. For the living icons, some are updated while others are not. Both Elton John and Madonna have two figures on display, one from the earlier part of their careers and one more contemporary, while Bob Dylan only has one from his youth. The

portraits in the Opening Night Party are updated to keep the party looking contemporary—for example, the current Al Roker will be replaced with a thinner Al Roker to reflect his body change. The portraits in The Gallery are iconic in that they reflect our contemporary ideas of who these people were, based on their incorporation into a contemporary American consciousness; Gandhi is not pictured as a young man, but rather as an elderly man and George Washington’s portrait looks as though he walked right off of the one dollar bill. While the Popular Culture portraits are similar to those in The Gallery because they are iconic, they are different because they preserve youth, whereas many of the Gallery portraits seem to preserve age. Perhaps a characteristic of those included in Popular Culture is an assumption of youth because beauty, power and strength are equated with youth. Those attributes can be important for athletes and entertainers alike. The last few portraits are of the very young musical groups, the Spice Girls and \*Nsync (see fig. 24). After seeing the powerful, youthful portraits of Muhammad Ali or Judy Garland, the inclusion of these bands as relevant additions for the 1990s seemed anti-climactic for me. For several of the teens I witnessed, these two sets of portraits were the most exciting in the entire Popular Culture gallery, eliciting many screams and frantic photo-taking. In the museum brochure, the last two descriptions for Popular Culture say,

“Before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the only people who achieved international fame were artists, politicians, military leaders and serial killers. With technology, mass media and the internet anyone can be famous, if only for a few minutes... To join the ranks of the elite attributed with defining popular culture you need to do something important or monumental or both! The dawning of the new millennium gives everyone that opportunity. That’s what’s so great about the future: We don’t know how it’s going to turn out or who will be the next superstar, celebrity, and the mover-and-shaker of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond. Maybe it will be you...”

Just as visitors exit the \*Nsync exhibit, they pass through a short hallway, towards a cafeteria. If there was any doubt as to what Madame Tussaud’s was producing, this one hallway subtly reflects that production. No longer than 25 feet or so, this hallway is painted a light blue color (see fig. 25). Written in white along the ceiling and walls are the questions,

“Would you like to see your name in lights?”  
“If fame is your dream how will you make your dream come true?”

“Who will be famous next?”  
“Will it be you?”

The question, “will it be you?” is written on the walls several times, and is written in the museum brochure. These questions are exceedingly important for the experience of Madame Tussaud’s as they reflect both the desire of the visitor and Tussaud’s offering toward realizing a dream. In their brochure, Tussaud’s tells their visitors how to “join the ranks of the elite” and visitors can think back on the world leaders, politicians, entertainers, athletes and holy people they were able to visit. The paradox of the museum is that it is simultaneously producing separation and inclusion by constantly reminding its visitors that they are ordinary people who have gained access to extraordinary people, and are then able to become momentarily extraordinary because of that access. By evoking the melancholy of the ordinary visitor, Tussaud’s is able to respond to that melancholy by offering the experience of Celebrity. Celebrities would likely enjoy the wax figures from a critical perspective, that is to analyze the likeness, and could appreciate the virtuosity of the wax artists, but the effect would likely be different than for regular visitors to the museum. Of course, celebrities are star-struck by other celebrities and would likely enjoy the portraits of those who have passed, but for a regular person, standing in a room of celebrities is not a normal occurrence – Madame Tussaud’s counts on that. It is crucial for the museum to constantly remind its visitors that they are ordinary people for the spectacle of access to function. When the museum staff makes visitors wait behind velvet ropes for an elevator to the exhibition, they also escort them on a red carpet. By perpetuating the alienation of the ordinary visitor from the extraordinary world, Madame Tussaud’s can then offer access to that world. When the museum asks “would you like to see your name in lights” they respond by offering you lunch with the stars in the Celebrity Café (see fig. 26).

The Celebrity Café gives visitors the opportunity to “Dine with the Stars<sup>6</sup>” and rotates different celebrity portraits with which visitors can eat. On the occasions I went, a contemporary Elton John,

Barbara Streisand and Woody Allen were all in the café (see fig. 27). Also in the café are several televisions along a wall, playing *Biography* commercials and a set of fun-house style mirrors that warp and distort reflections. The fun-house mirrors are located at the far end of the café, towards the hallway to the next and last exhibit. On several occasions I noticed young children passing by everything in the café and running to the mirrors to see how they looked in them (see fig. 28). These are the only distorting mirrors in the museum, though there are several sets of regular mirrors. The inclusion of these particular mirrors is quite interesting as they distort body image, thereby manipulating perception. Within the context of a wax museum, these mirrors reflect another interesting paradox. The wax museum both manipulates perception, by juxtaposing non-contemporaneous figures and by producing situations, and tries to reflect an accurate portrait of the subjects. The mirrors illustrate that Madame Tussaud's is producing both accuracy and distortion within itself. Watching children dance in front of the mirrors shows me that distortion can be just as exciting as accuracy.

Just past the fun-house mirrors is the entrance to the final exhibit of the museum, which opened September 4<sup>th</sup>, 2002, called *Hope: Humanity and Heroism* and subtitled *Images of American resolve, strength and unity*. Just a few feet from the doorway to the exhibit is an enormous sign, bedecked in an American flag, with a placard directing uninterested visitors to an alternate exit (see fig. 29). Next to the enormous sign is a staircase that overlooks the exhibit and visitors can hear patriotic music playing, such as *Proud to be an American* (see fig. 30). The staircase leads down to the floor, where several benches are set up for people to sit and look at the exhibit. Unlike any other room, the exhibit itself is raised several feet off of the floor and is the only display in the room, aside from several photographs that line the hallway toward the exit. The entire room is dark, while the exhibit is spotlit from several angles (see fig. 31). Upon seeing the exhibit from the top of the stairs, several people I witnessed turned toward the alternate exit. Of the nine people I interviewed, six said they used the alternate exit, two passed through

the exhibit without stopping and one said he stopped and looked for a few moments before continuing. One school group I witnessed split into two groups, one group used the alternate exit and the other group went to the exhibit, sat for a few minutes and then left. Many people were taken by surprise by the exhibit and most people hurried through it. The *Hope* exhibit is not included in the Madame Tussaud's brochure, though it does have its own separate brochure at the entrance to the exhibit.

The exhibit is essentially a diorama, as the wax portraits are set amongst what could be considered set pieces and props. This exhibit, unlike other portraits that focus on an individual or group of people, captures a specific moment in time – 5:02pm, September 11, 2001. The wax portraits are of three firefighters, unnamed in the brochure, erecting a flag amongst the rubble at Ground Zero (see fig. 32). Also unmentioned in the brochure is that the image is actually a reproduction of a photograph taken by Thomas Franklin of the *The Record*<sup>7</sup>, a New Jersey paper. According to the *Hope* brochure, “HOPE captures our emotions in a compelling visual display centered around a lifelike wax portrait of the three firefighters raising the flag at Ground Zero. Visitors will stand with the firefighters as they stood at 5:02 on September 11, 2001.” While the brochure seems to encourage interaction with the figures, according to staff, interaction with the figures is actually discouraged. During my visits however, there were no visible placards, nor staff to discourage people from inserting themselves into the diorama. One staff member told me that when the exhibit first opened there was a staff member down there who did have to tell people not to touch the exhibit. He also told me that one man asked if the museum had a fireman costume so his son could stand in the exhibit with the firemen. This staff member seemed particularly disdainful of the exhibit, as he told me “it would be like putting this in Six Flags.” He told me that people come here [to the museum] to be entertained and to have fun, not to be sad, and that it [the *Hope* exhibit] just did not belong. The eight people I interviewed who all skipped or passed the exhibit felt the same way as this staff member—they just did not want to feel sad and really

did not believe that exhibit belonged in the museum. One visitor told me that he skipped it because being in Times Square surrounded by cartoonish excess simply did not feel appropriate. The one young man who did view *Hope* told me that while it didn't do much for him, he could see how it could be important for other people. He also subscribed to Tussaud's mission of recording history. According to the *Hope* brochure,

“For 200 years, Madame Tussaud's has chronicled history and current events by creating and exhibiting portraits of influential individuals and significant moments in time. Madame Tussaud's New York decided to represent September 11 by focusing on the increased sense of patriotism and resolve of the American people. This exhibition is our way of thanking and honoring all those who devoted themselves to the recovery of our city and our nation.”

Using this statement from Tussaud's, the choice to reproduce this moment seems logical and even reasonable. However, the only other physically inaccessible, diorama-style exhibit in the entire museum is that of the French Revolution, and that exhibit is exciting, scary and fun, and encompasses the entire Revolution, not simply a moment, as in *Hope*. There are dozens of “significant moments in time” that could have been created: a diorama of Rosa Parks refusing to get up from her bus seat, or even the raising of the flag at Iwo Jima, would be moments just as, if not more, significant. Iwo Jima is an interesting example of a historical moment, captured in photograph and then recreated as a monument. Many people believed that the photograph was actually a reenactment of Iwo Jima, so Madame Tussaud's has essentially created its own Iwo Jima-type monument out of the moment at Ground Zero. Unlike Iwo Jima, The *Hope* exhibit is significant for New York because it depicts a moment in New York City history, though a staff member and visitor, both from New York City, told me that they did not feel the exhibit was for them. They both believed, with disapproval, that the exhibit was for “tourists,” of which they did not consider themselves as New Yorkers.

The *Hope* exhibit offers an interesting point of comparison and contrast within the structure of the museum. Because it is not interactive, in that visitors are not allowed to interact with the figures, the room is reminiscent of more traditional museums—this is not unlike the hallway to the History of

Madame Tussaud, in which many of the portraits are behind glass. The mood is reverent as in The Gallery, but unlike the hopefulness in The Gallery, *Hope* is specifically mournful. The exhibit also reinforces the museum's assertion that anyone doing something monumental can "join the elite who define popular culture"—these unnamed firemen did something monumental enough to be cast in wax. The museum also offers visitors an alternate exit from both the *Hope* exhibit and the French Revolution exhibit, though the French Revolution exhibit is specified as particularly violent. It is likely that people have genuine emotional responses to the exhibit, but it is hard to escape the knowledge of the production. The exhibit seems counter-productive to the museum's goal of being an interactive attraction, and they seem to acknowledge that by offering an alternate exit. It is important to note that the alternate exit and the exit through the *Hope* exhibit (see figs. 33, 34) lead visitors directly into the gift shop.

The gift shop is the final scene in the museum's production. Visitors are surrounded by the usual gift shop fare including clothing, games and useless (but thematic) trinkets such as "ACTOR" and "ACTRESS" license plates (see fig. 35), but are offered one last genuine opportunity to prove themselves—they can have their hands cast in wax. A red carpet leads to a station where a staff member will cast visitors' hands in wax (see figs. 36, 37). The implication is quite clear, as visitors have witnessed throughout the museum, anyone who is anyone has been cast in wax. Therefore, visitors should also be cast in wax, not only to be special enough to be cast, but also to keep a piece of those extraordinary moments to which they were given access.

At its greatest moments, Madame Tussaud's produces for its visitors the feeling of being exceptional and extraordinary and at its worst moments, the museum reminds its visitors of their melancholy unexceptional ordinariness. These two feelings are not mutually exclusive, and in fact, serve to reinforce the very experience Madame Tussaud's is selling. By feeling ordinary, people are

more impressed by the access they gain to extraordinary people. Interactivity is a crucial aspect of the experience because it is through the interaction that visitors embody and then become Celebrity. The visitors perform with the portraits with the portraits serving both as performance partners and props for the true performer, the visitor. Each room, and in fact each portrait, evokes different responses from visitors constantly blurring the lines between popular culture and history, celebrities and fame. Somewhere between a museum and an attraction, Madame Tussaud's is a site of collective desire, fantasy and memory where visitors can overcome their ordinary selves and be a part of "making the world a better place," or can be a part of doing "something important or monumental" simply by standing next to a wax figure.

The gift shop is the last stop in the museum and visitors must wait one last time for an elevator to take them down to the exit. In the elevator, a uniformed staff member asks visitors if they had fun, and invites them to return again soon. A short dark hallway leads visitors to an unimpressive set of exit doors that reflect none of the spectacle at the entrance to the museum. As visitors walk out into Times Square, they are once again ordinary people, once again jostled about by anxious crowds.

## NOTES

*Acknowledgments.* I wish to thank Roberto Sifuentes for his photographs and suggestions and Chris Andersson, Scott Troost, and André Thompson for the contributions of their photographs and their insightful interviews. I also wish to thank Katie Dunkel, Lilly Copeland, Shannon Fillion, Morgan Fleming, Del Wright, Jody, Frank and Linda for their interviews, conversations, and time.

1. I have chosen to use the term “visitor” to describe the people in the museum because in the vernacular with which I am familiar, people who go to museums are “museum visitors” or “museum goers.” This is no judgment on the term or vocation of the “tourist.” One of the figures in the museum is a wax portrait of someone I have chosen to call a tourist, because that is what she looks like to me. I do also cite a visitor and staff member who specifically used the word “tourist,” to distinguish themselves as New Yorkers from the others to which they are referring, though again, I am placing no judgment on the use of the word.

2. This paper consists of several elements (including history of the site, theoretical interpolations and on-site experiences of myself, visitors and staff), all organized around a room-by-room tour of the museum. I have chosen to write the tour element of the paper in the present tense to create more experiential description.

3. All references to staff include the three Madame Tussaud’s staff members I spoke with on site, in November 2003. Two of the staff were members of the Experience Crew, and the third worked at a camera stand. Our conversations were held informally in the rooms or areas where they worked.

4. The brochure is called Madame Tussaud’s New York: The Inside Story, and is available in the gift shop for five dollars.

5. I interviewed a total of nine museum visitors who visited the museum in a group in September 2003 (before the Experience Crew had been established). Any references to people I interviewed or spoke with refer to these nine visitors. We had several informal conversations about the museum between their visit and the formal interviews, which took place in November. Many of them brought their photographs to the interview, so we were able to reference specific moments. I interviewed three of them at the same time, two together and two together. The last two interviews were individual. I chose to conduct the interviews this way because many of the interviewees seemed more comfortable speaking in conversation, rather than to me individually. I was able to spark conversation with questions and the interviewees would talk to one another and build off of what another was saying. I found this to be extremely useful, dynamic and supportive, especially with the less elaborate types. Instead of giving me short answers, they were responding to a conversation. Three of the people I interviewed also filled out an in-depth survey regarding the experience.

6. As quoted from the sign at the entrance to the Celebrity Café.

7. The photograph ran on the cover of *The Record*, September 12, 2001.

## ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1: Madame Tussaud's sign on 42<sup>nd</sup> St. Times Square. Photo by Lián Sifuentes.

Figure 2: The red carpet entrance to Madame Tussaud's. Photo by Roberto Sifuentes.

Figure 3: The grand staircase. Photo by Lián Sifuentes.

Figure 4: The grand staircase from the top landing. Photo by Lián Sifuentes.

Figure 5: Frank interviews the interviewer, Lián Sifuentes. Photo by Roberto Sifuentes.

Figure 6: Visitor posing with portrait of Morgan Freeman and RuPaul. Photo courtesy of André Thompson.

Figure 7: Visitor interacting with Jennifer Lopez portrait. Photo courtesy of Scott Troost.

Figure 8: Author's example of a good photograph. Photo by Roberto Sifuentes.

Figure 9: Author's example of a bad photograph. Photo by Roberto Sifuentes.

Figure 10: Fabu and staff member at Opening Night Party. Photo by Lián Sifuentes.

Figure 11: Brian posing with author and the Hulk portrait. Photo by Roberto Sifuentes.

Figure 12: Author posing in graveyard exhibit. Photo by Roberto Sifuentes.

Figure 13: Visitor sees how it is all done. Photo by Chris Andersson.

Figure 14: Visitor poses with portrait of George W. Bush in The Gallery. Photo courtesy of Scott Troost.

Figure 15: Author poses with portrait of Malcolm X in The Gallery. Photo by Roberto Sifuentes.

Figure 16: Visitor poses with portrait of Pope John Paul II in The Gallery. Photo courtesy of Scott Troost.

Figure 17: The entrance to Popular Culture. Photo by Lián Sifuentes.

Figure 18: Author get picture taken by portrait of tourist. Photo by Roberto Sifuentes.

Figure 19: Visitor poses with portrait of Elvis in Popular Culture. Photo courtesy of Scott Troost.

Figure 20: Author poses with portrait of Elton John in Popular Culture. Photo by Roberto Sifuentes.

Figure 21: Visitor poses with portrait of Judy Garland in Popular Culture. Photo courtesy of Chris Andersson.

Figure 22: Author with portrait of Michael Jackson. Photo by Roberto Sifuentes.

Figure 23: Marilyn Monroe and Joe DiMaggio, in Popular Culture, facing away from one another. Photo by Lián Sifuentes.

Figure 24: \*Nsync and message from the President. Photo by Lián Sifuentes.

Figure 25: “Will it be you?” Photo by Lián Sifuentes.

Figure 26: “Dine with the stars!” Photo by Lián Sifuentes.

Figure 27: Visitors have lunch with portrait of Woody Allen. Photo by Lián Sifuentes.

Figure 28: Visitors pose in front of distorting mirrors. Photo by Lián Sifuentes.

Figure 29: Entrance to *Hope* and alternate route. Photo by Lián Sifuentes.

Figure 30: *Hope* from the top of the stairs. Photo by Lián Sifuentes.

Figure 31: Spotlit *Hope*. Photo by Lián Sifuentes.

Figure 32: *Hope* detail. Photo by Lián Sifuentes.

Figure 33: Exit from the top of the stairs. Photo by Lián Sifuentes.

Figure 34: Exit detail. Photo by Lián Sifuentes.

Figure 35: Souvenirs from the gift shop. Photo by Lián Sifuentes.

Figure 36: Be cast in wax! Photo by Lián Sifuentes.

Figure 37: The red carpet leads visitors to be cast in wax. Photo by Lián Sifuentes.

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