Editorial

Is art universal? Among the current debates within the international heritage and museum community, the contemporary pertinence of that question has extended beyond the professional field to capture the attention of governmental authorities. The question has profound implications for the mission of museums and the role of governments in supporting them. Indeed, the very future of the museum is bound up in this critical question.

Complementary to the public debate which was organized by the MUSEUM International journal at UNESCO on 5 February 2007*, this issue addresses the notion of the collection in the 21st century. From a perspective fixed within the academic tradition, we will examine the aims and practices of the collection, the significance of this founding act of the museum.

To guide us in these reflections, we have invited Isabelle Tillerot as Guest Editor. Through her formal training and publications, Isabelle Tillerot represents two academic traditions: Anglo-Saxon and French. She holds a doctorate in the history of art from the Université de Paris X – Nanterre and, from 2002 to 2004, she was the recipient of a pre-doctoral fellowship at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles (USA). She teaches 18th century French art at the University of California – Los Angeles (UCLA).

The Stakes of the Collection in the 21st Century

What are the political, moral, artistic and philosophical issues of the collection in the 21st century? That is the subject of this issue of MUSEUM International. The intention of the collection is always to accumulate, protect and exhibit – to make visible and to explain. However, the distinction between the nature and the role of museums has undergone significant evolution, compelling us to study anew how the question of universality has been addressed in the past, and how it is addressed today. Restitutions, for example, have unveiled a new chapter in the history of museums, which can no longer avoid this matter. It is because of this that there has been a change in direction and in this issue we reflect on the mechanisms and purposes of the collection.

Note: This is an amended version of the Editorial that appeared in the printed version of MUSEUM International 59.3.
change in perspective induced by the return of works of art requires more than ever an understanding of the reasons which govern the collection.

This means reflecting on the invention of the collection within Western thought and what the notion represents to different cultures. Describing the specific nature of other collections facilitates an awareness of the changes in the values of the collection and restores the exception which it can constitute. The first section of the issue is dedicated to studying the functioning, scope, and role of contemporary collections. Significant relationships and differences between collections emanate from their specific histories, as well from History in the broadest sense of the word, the conditions for the development of older collections and the mechanisms at work in their development today.

This is why it is important to determine the links of convergence and divergence between the practices and conceptions of the collection, in order to perhaps better understand the changes they caused in the status of artworks. Can we discern among contemporary examples new models of the collection and, from these, extrapolate valid paradigms for current and future practice?

The issue opens with Kathleen Berrin’s account of the unprecedented agreement made in 1981 between the National Institute of Anthropology and History in Mexico and the Museum of Fine Arts in San Francisco. The history of this collaboration and restitution demonstrates that when the laws of nations clash with the ideas of the ownership of artworks, museum agents can go beyond the differences and determine viable principles of exchanges and loans.

Africa, and particularly Cameroon, represents the reverse side of the Western model. Steven Nelson describes the historical and political issues of two events which were intertwined at the beginning of the 20th century during the colonial era: the first exportations of Bamum art to Europe, and the creation of two museums on the African continent.

The next two articles echo the links between contemporary practices of art and the museums that host them. The three authors of the conceptual group, *Art & Language*, analyse the response of artists to museums, as well as the emergence of the artist-curator, and the consequences of changing the place of creation from the artist’s studio to the museum. For his part, Matthew Jackson studies the new forms of art
which integrate museums, and the growing space for discourse on art within the
different modes of constituting collections of contemporary art.

Our intention is also to address the stakes, aims and significance of collections,
which is the subject of the second section. The relationships between private and
public domains on the one hand, and those maintained between collections of the past
and of the present on the other, all merit our attention. Similarly, the articulation
between the individual history of the collection and the collective history of the
museum, as well as the notions of local art and universal art, are the main themes for
exploring the contemporary meaning of public collections within a significantly
modified political and cultural context.

The Louvre, by incarnating the model of the revolutionary museum, was the
first to conceive the dream of the universal museum. The recent Declaration on the
Value and Importance of Universal Museums doubtlessly proceeds from such an
ambition. Nonetheless, how can we abide by this aspiration when confronted with the
legitimate nature of restitutions? To what extent does the inalienability of a collection
protect the artworks which it contains? The act of collecting comes down as much
to relinquishing as acquiring, and is predicated more than ever on the mobility of
works which the collection harbours. It is therefore important to rethink the notion
of the singular work of art, the universal virtue of art, and of the collection that
articulates such values.

The history of art, law and philosophy contribute their thoughts and ideas to
these questions.

The universal value of art and the museum, a utopian ideal from the Age of
Enlightenment, is analysed by Roland Recht who examines 18th century debates
concerning artwork in situ and artwork in museums, the place and function of the
monument in the development of an awareness of cultural heritage, the symbolic value
specific to the artwork and the role of the museum in its uncertain status of universality.

Cézanne’s painting and Heidegger’s philosophy lead to a reflection on the
presence and site of the artwork. The incidence of a painting within a collection and the
distinction which it establishes allow Éric Marion to explain the different meanings of
the artwork and the change it undergoes within a collection. Measuring the distance
which separates the artwork from the collection reveals their deeper significance.
Jean-Louis Déotte proposes an interpretation, supplemented by theorists of the collection from the first half of the 20th century. The museum becomes a device capable of organizing productions and visions, leaving aside the sacred value of artworks and their specific time, but reinventing a shared sensibility.

The issue concludes with a text by Cécile Marceau, who reflects on the commercial destiny of artwork and the museum and the resulting erosion of universal value. By linking the controversies which followed the aforementioned Declaration and the creation of the Louvre Abu Dhabi to the notion of nation, the author examines the crisis of authority within the museum world. The artwork becomes in some way the means to understand what each nation means by “universal”.

A journal, unlike an anthology, inevitably leaves shaded areas in order to emphasize others. The partiality, the scope inherent in this sort of publication, nonetheless enlightens the aims of the collection in the 21st century. The conception of the collection can no longer remain quite the same. This difference is due to multiple factors which the authors of this issue describe and explore.

The quality of the collection depends on its incompleteness, on its ability to relinquish artworks in order to receive new ones. The value conferred on an artwork in a collection is attributed by the gaze. In receiving shapes and sensitive gazes, its design is what Gérard Wajcman called “the universal singularity” of art.

Three full-page illustrations convey the rhythmic movements of this issue. In Jean-Luc Godard’s film, “Bande à part/The Outsiders”, the collection is a separate and suspended place and serves as a prelude for its vocation. The protagonists of the film, who seem to least respect the museum, perhaps provide it with the finest praise, that of an open space, accessible to everyone, two thousand years after Cicero and Pliny the Elder pleaded in their favour against the appropriation of artworks within private residences. The partisan collection is at the heart of time, whether in the short or long-term. The open collection is the space for art to come, for artwork in progress. This explains the presence here of the work of Jian-Xing Too, since it is from the collected and exhibited artwork that the new work of art emerges, in turn finding its place within the collection.

Isabelle Tillerot

Few gifts could have been more unexpected than the Wagner Bequest of over seventy painted wall fragments from the ancient civilization of Teotihuacan. This windfall bequest came in the summer of 1976 when I was assistant curator in the department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas at the M. H. de Young Memorial Museum.¹

The first time I saw the Teotihuacan mural fragments, there were some 300 square feet (28 m²) of them. They were spread out on the floors of several rooms in the home of the late Harald J. Wagner. For most of his life (1903–76) Harald Wagner had been an avid collector of many types of art, though none of our museum staff seems to have ever met him. Standing in his home and gazing down at the mural fragments, I saw thick, crumbling walls of variously sized adobe pieces, with bold images painted upon them in true fresco technique. The images appeared to depict élite personages wearing head-dresses, chanting priests, warrior birds, feathered serpents, and anthropomorphized jaguars and coyotes. A few of them were mounted on corkboard or had plaster infill, but they were for the most part unsupported, ranging in size from fragments the size of a large coffee table to pieces the size of crumbs. Most
rested tentatively on the floor as if some unknown person, taking a break, had been working on a giant jigsaw puzzle.

I was asked by the museum administration to thoroughly research the provenance, authenticity, storage, and conservation needs of the Wagner mural collection. The Wagner building was soon to be sold to pay the costs of administering the estate, and in a matter of weeks the murals were to be packed up in custom-built crates and transported to our museum storage. We quickly learned that there were no prototypes to follow. There were less than a dozen other Teotihuacan murals to be found in institutional collections in the United States and Europe. These murals in museums – much fewer in number than the Wagner corpus – had been individually removed from the Teotihuacan site as early as the 1940s.

The mural collection and the moral, political, philosophical and artistic issues it raised were so multifaceted, enmeshed, and sometimes contradictory, we had to proceed slowly, checking and rechecking our data. We realized that the museum could not operate in a vacuum, but that very few assumptions, other than the physical
reality of the collection itself, could be taken for granted. Problems ranged from delicate issues of legality or ownership, to historical or iconographic questions of interpretation, to the correct treatments for preserving the mural fragments, questions of international protocol, involvement of government agencies, and what should be the ultimate disposition of the collection. We anticipated that Mexico’s position would be that the murals were national patrimony, unlawfully unearthed from Mexican soil. Our museum also considered them to be world art treasures, unfortunately looted but legally present in this country according to US law and released by a California court to the City of San Francisco and the de Young Museum. What follows is an overview of what happened between San Francisco and Mexico, regarding the care, preservation, and disposition of the Teotihuacan murals, and a discussion of other collaborative projects that have taken place during the last thirty years.2

Harald Wagner and the Teotihuacan murals

Some background is required to understand the importance of Teotihuacan and its mural traditions.3 In its own time (0–600 C.E.), Teotihuacan had been an ancient superpower, a planned urban complex with vast avenues, monumental structures, and more than 2,000 residential compounds. Depending upon their status — some were more elaborate than others — many of these ancient compounds had rooms of repetitive painted wall murals. When Teotihuacan underwent an apparent civil war around 600 C.E., the ceremonial centre of the city was razed and burned. Most of the people of Teotihuacan living outside the centre gradually relocated; the ancient buildings disintegrated and collapsed, and the forces of nature, above and below ground, over eons of time, had their effect. For centuries the Wagner murals lay untouched and buried. In modern times, people built their homes on top of the buried ruins of the forgotten compounds, creating yet another layer of human settlement and human life. The murals would not be rediscovered until sometime in the mid twentieth century, when farmers were perhaps laying foundations for houses or planting rows of maguey cactus on their land.

Enter Harald Wagner, an only child and a native of Falls City, Oregon, who came to San Francisco in 1927 as a young man and obtained a job as a draughtsman at the prestigious architectural firm of Bliss & Faville. Under his mentor William Faville’s influence, Wagner developed an enthusiasm for painting and sketching, collecting art, and living a life of style and taste. He became a serious collector of the work of American artists Arthur and Lucia Matthews; he also collected many types of Asian art.

In the 1950s Harald Wagner, then a somewhat affluent and sophisticated man, made his first trip to Mexico. Probably it was love at first sight; Harald Wagner began spending half of each year in Mexico and became a fluent Spanish speaker. He bought a hacienda in Jalisco that had been damaged during the Mexican Revolution and made enthusiastic plans to restore it. Then he surrounded himself with pre-Columbian art, Spanish colonial paintings, and watercolours of all kinds. Between the mid-1950s and his death in 1976 he maintained a dual residence in San Francisco and Mexico.4
The sales receipts left by Harald Wagner indicate he actively collected Teotihuacan mural fragments in Mexico between 1963 and 1968. During those years Teotihuacan mural fragments were widely available, casually bought, easily found in public markets. They were perfectly acceptable as collectibles, but people generally avoided them because they were dirty, had a tendency to disintegrate and were difficult to handle. With his passion for art and his architectural training, Harald Wagner may have seen himself as a steward for these neglected fragments and perhaps wanted to save as many as possible. He seems to have had dreams of gathering them and eventually reconstructing them. Whatever his intention, Harald Wagner had the mural fragments trucked to San Francisco between 1966 and 1967. In the following two years he showed them to many of his friends.

Once the murals were in San Francisco, Wagner and friends worked sporadically to stabilize and refit the pieces. Apparently it was Wagner’s eventual plan to sell the murals as a group. Between 1967 and 1972 he tried to sell them to various museums. He was never able to find a buyer – perhaps because he refused to separate individual pieces from the collection and insisted that the collection be kept together in its entirety. Perhaps another difficulty for Wagner in the early 1970s was the growing sense of public consciousness and unease about looted sites and archaeological treasures. In declining health and unable to find a buyer, Wagner decided once and for all to leave all the fragments to the de Young Museum. He stated his wishes in a handwritten will and never told the museum of his plans to bequeath the collection.5

Mexico and the Teotihuacan murals

As the twentieth century unfolded, Teotihuacan became a major tourist destination, a prestigious archaeological zone, an immense tourist attraction, and foremost national symbol. By 1963, the site had grown so important, it was to be enlarged to almost twice its existing size by presidential decree. This was an enormous undertaking that involved studying and restoring major archaeological structures. It also required building a ring-shaped super-highway to provide maximum public access to the newly enlarged site.

Many changes were happening to Mexico’s cultural institutions in the early 1960s. The National Museum in Mexico City was to be inaugurated in September 1964. In the vicinity of the established Teotihuacan zone, the Mexican Government had purchased tracts of land owned by surrounding citizens and townships in order to enlarge the Teotihuacan archaeological park. Because all natural resources and archaeological objects are by Mexican law owned by the Government of Mexico, it would not have mattered exactly where the murals were removed to. Wherever they were found, they would have been considered as the property of the Mexican nation.

A period of concentrated art historical and archaeological research on the murals by a team of experts in the late 1970s had revealed that the Wagner murals were of exceptional quality and condition and many of them formed interrelated groups. However, because of the unprecedented nature of the mural donation – its size, importance, and attitudes about cultural patrimony in Mexico, our museum wanted to take the initiative to
approach the Mexican Government and create a co-operative programme of care and restoration work.

Our museum had a definite plan in mind. We believed that a voluntary return of a significant portion of the murals to Mexico would be ethically warranted and important. We also wanted to retain permanently a select group of Teotihuacan murals in San Francisco. We hoped to educate the public and call attention to the problem of looting by providing an educational exhibition telling the story of the murals and explaining the necessity of preserving the crumbling fragments. We intended to create a joint public conservation exhibition, utilizing conservators both in Mexico and the United States.

Having clearly established the legality of the murals in California according to US law, but not that of Mexico, our museum had the delicate problem of deciding whom to contact in Mexico. The de Young Museum, like many American museums, had considerable autonomy, albeit belonging to the City of San Francisco. But Mexico’s cultural institutions and collections are all owned by the state. No museum there could speak for Mexico without involving several branches of the Mexican Government. Everyone said that the primary agency in charge of antiquities was Mexico’s Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH).6

The first issue that became immediately apparent was the problem of a city museum in negotiations with the Government of Mexico. To bridge the gap, we engaged the United States Embassy in Mexico City. This enabled us to work government-to-government and keep our relationship evenly balanced. But there were also issues of protocol and cultural differences to be breached.7

All these delicate negotiations took years – and required the active involvement of the museum’s board of trustees, director and staff, San Francisco’s Deputy City Attorney’s office, and government officials at INAH. Opposing American and Mexican attitudes about the ownership of the murals were really at the crux of the problem.

Working with all attendant cultural and political sensitivity, all parties ultimately had to ‘agree to disagree’ on the issue of ownership. We could agree, however, on the importance of the mural collection and the necessity to join together to protect and preserve them and this became the basis for our collaboration. There were many versions of agreements – it took months of negotiations, face to face, back and forth, in Spanish and in English.

An unprecedented, primary Joint Agreement was finally signed on 7 December 1981. At this point, our trustees had agreed to voluntarily return at least 50 per cent of the murals to Mexico in order to create a positive moral climate and precedent. INAH had agreed to pay for the transportation costs of the murals that were returned to Mexico. We had established that our museum would be responsible for raising funds to pay for all the conservation costs and that INAH would provide conservators from Churubusco to engage in a joint conservation effort in San Francisco.
Reconstructing the Wagner fragments

The most vital questions regarding the curatorship of the collection were concerned with research, establishing interrelationships between fragments, and making comparisons with other existing pieces in collections throughout the world. Library research yielded sparse results as it was difficult to find research materials. The few existing publications on Teotihuacan murals were limited in scope, accessibility, and images. Even among pre-Columbian specialists, firsthand knowledge of Teotihuacan murals was limited.

Art historians and archaeological experts had pored over the fragments and attempted a reconstruction. Because the fragments were crated and not easily available, extensive storage space had to be found to uncrate them. The space we finally found had limited availability. But we defined a window of time when the murals would be uncrated and made them available to everyone who needed to see them. Our colleagues from Mexico came to San Francisco. Everyone connected with the Wagner estate received a viewing. museum trustees, government officials, Wagner’s friends, and scholars – all were invited to come.

Once the murals were unpacked and available for study, scholarship on the murals accelerated and we could see subtle physical evidence proving which fragments were contiguous or related. Probably the most exciting part of our research finally came in 1983/84 when René Millon and the archaeologists of INAH did a surface analysis of the portion of the Teotihuacan site from which they suspected most of the Wagner murals derived. Our museum has never supported archaeological work directly but, for the first time, we provided the archaeological funds for Millon’s field season. So with this support, as well as that of the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Department of Anthropology at the University of Rochester, INAH and archaeologists and conservators in Mexico, the team was able to go forward. After clearing surface vegetation and performing intensive surface collection of mural fragments and looters’ pits in the area in a subterranean compound called Techinantitla, the project established the original location for most of the major mural paintings in the Wagner collection.8

Conservation issues and disposition of the collection

It had taken four years to complete the Primary Joint Agreement. But there were still complex issues to discuss regarding conservation treatments for the collection. Since 1976, all unearthed Teotihuacan murals in Mexico had been routinely treated by Mexican conservators, eliminating all the adobe backing down to the delicate lime layer holding the painted surface, and replacing it with a new permanent support of synthetic manufacture, composed of polystyrene pearls, epoxy resin, and volcanic ash. The resulting mural was much thinner and lighter, showed no tendency to crumble, and could easily be handled or stored.

Other conservators believed fervently that such an irreversible method of treatment was absolutely not indicated, particularly if the murals were treated with special adaptations and careful handling. For the larger fragments they suggested a custom-fit aluminium framework that would
follow the rough perimeter of each one. Interlocking fragments, such as a 14-foot (4.27 metre) long feathered serpent, would be constructed with welded joins and include structural clips for support.\(^9\)

This difference of opinion over removing or preserving the adobe backing placed tremendous pressures on our joint conservation project, which was planned to take place in 1984 in the form of a public conservation exhibition involving a team of Mexican and American conservators.\(^10\) There had been a number of face-to-face meetings in San Francisco and Mexico, but no compromise ultimately proved possible and both sides were polarized. We decided to reconcile the conflict through administrative channels. An INAH representative was designated to come to San Francisco to mediate the situation. He met with us and a jointly authored proposal of 7 February 1985 was the eventual outcome. This proposal described the two diverse treatments and acknowledged that ‘some murals may require special considerations in their treatments and several choices may be possible. If we cannot agree on a technical point, then the opinion of the conservator to whose institution that particular mural will ultimately be disposed will be the opinion to be followed in the treatment’.\(^11\)

This conservation proposal was finalized none too soon, since a second phase of public collaboration was about to take place in a matter of weeks. Now all that remained was to divide the collection into those murals that were to be returned to Mexico, and those that were to remain in San Francisco.

Although we thought that the disposition of the collection might be problematic, it turned out to be much easier than agreeing on conservation procedures, given the size and repetitive nature of the Wagner collection. Our rationale for distributing the collection was based on several factors. Because there were twelve ‘themes’ in the collection and generally several examples on a given theme, it was possible to split the holdings and divide up the collection so that each side had a representative selection. We were always of the view that the most
important and highest quality art historical examples should stay in San Francisco, given the mission of our institution as a museum dedicated to diversity in the fine arts. And we were candid about sharing this information with Mexico. We also knew that there were already hundreds of Teotihuacan murals in Mexico that were not publicly available – unpublished and inaccessible. So we argued that because there were such tremendous mural riches already in Mexico and so few in the United States, we were justified in retaining the most important art historical examples of the Wagner collection for San Francisco. For Mexico, the quantity of mural fragments that San Francisco voluntarily returned was more important. We apportioned the collection, using photographs, in the space of a morning and documented it in another written agreement. Ultimately, Mexico received from San Francisco over two-thirds of the Wagner collection.

The public conservation exhibition took place in 1984 in a prominent upstairs gallery at the de Young Museum. It was like working in a fishbowl, but the visiting public loved it. In February 1986, once the murals were all conserved, Mexico’s share was returned to INAH in a celebratory manner. Soon after, INAH and the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City showcased the returned murals in a special exhibition entitled Exhibición de Recuperación de Frescos Teotihuacanos which opened on 19 February 1986 at Mexico’s National Museum of Anthropology.

Subsequent collaboration

Having collaborated for nearly twenty years with Mexico on the Teotihuacan murals, our museum was enthusiastic about the possibility of developing a major exhibition on all the arts of Teotihuacan, which would be drawn primarily from Mexican national collections. The Teotihuacan murals project had paved the way, for even though there had been major obstacles and areas of disagreement, our relations had been largely amicable and gratifying. We had made many friends in Mexico. Although the cultural leaders tended to change along with changes in the presidency, we had developed strong and trusting relations and both sides were enthusiastic about the honesty with which we could resolve the inevitable future issues.

Thus the concept of the exhibition Teotihuacan: Art from the City of the Gods was born. We spent the years between 1987 and 1993 at various negotiation levels. What became immediately clear as we eagerly requested important loans from Mexico (we called them art objects – Mexico termed them national patrimony) was that in order to obtain major loans, it would be necessary to provide some type of reciprocity or cultural exchange to Mexico. For reciprocity, San Francisco ultimately supported the production of a new film about Teotihuacan for the National Museum of Anthropology. We also provided major institutional support for the new Teotihuacan Murals site museum.

In 1988, a new agency, the National Council for the Fine Arts (CONACULTA) was created in Mexico by presidential decree. This decentralized agency was and continues to be of major importance, although it was initially unclear how INAH and CONACULTA would interact. Again we relied on the US Embassy for guidance and to help define the political terrain. There were
even more government officials with whom we would need to meet but there was also more creativity. Today, over eighteen years later, CONACULTA and INAH continue to work together to protect Mexico’s tremendous antiquities and artistic resources.

The 1993 exhibition and catalogue, *Teotihuacan: Art from the City of the Gods*, was a bilateral collaboration, with Mexico’s active participation in the bilingual storyline or interpretation of the objects, the production of the catalogue essays, and the object entries. I remember numerous meetings about all aspects of the project at the prestigious National Museum of Anthropology and History in Mexico City. As complex as it was, the collaboration process was extremely worthwhile because it forced us all to see beyond our respective positions and made us work towards mutual understanding and an optimum outcome.

Integral to the success of these *Teotihuacan* negotiations was the central role played by the United States Embassy in Mexico City. Most of the artworks in the exhibition had never before been shown outside of their respective countries. The San Francisco exhibition was so
important that we received a personal visit to San Francisco from the President of Mexico, Carlos Salinas de Gotori.

We continued visiting Mexico and maintained our friendships during the 1990s. Then a complex acquisition opportunity arose. In 1999 our museum was offered a Maya stela of unknown provenance that could have originated anywhere in the Central Maya region, but most likely in Mexico or Guatemala. After many months of diligent research, we had proved beyond a doubt that the stela had been in the United States legally according to US law and that it could have originated anywhere in present-day Mexico or Guatemala. Our director, with the approval of our board of trustees, nevertheless made several trips to Guatemala and Mexico to hold face to face talks with cultural leaders and make sure neither country would object to its future acquisition. Both countries thanked us for bringing this matter to their attention in such a forthright manner and eventually found it acceptable for us to move ahead. We now exhibit the stela in San Francisco with the credit-line stipulating that it is part of the national patrimony of either Mexico or Guatemala, and we acknowledge deep appreciation to both those countries.13

In the late 1990s we decided that it would be desirable to put on a Maya exhibition and produce a publication jointly with Mexico.14 *Courtly Art of the Ancient Maya* was a joint exhibition by our museum and the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., requesting some of the most important ancient Maya monuments and ceremonial objects from the Government of Mexico. To reciprocate, the Mexican Government requested a loan of 300 works of African art from San Francisco’s permanent collection, which could be featured in Mexico City’s National Museum of Anthropology. We were in the process of rebuilding a new de Young Museum in Golden Gate Park and much of our collection was packed up, so the timing of this request was perfect. Mexico’s designated African curator came to San Francisco several times to work with the collections. We lent over 300 African works two years before the Maya exhibition contract was finalized. The spectacular exhibition, *AFRICA*, was inaugurated by President Fox at the National Museum of Anthropology and History in September 2002. It circulated to Monterrey, Mexico, the following year.15

On several other occasions San Francisco has lent important collections to Mexico. During 2004/05 we lent the exhibition *American Accents* to the Museo Amparo in Puebla. A selection of paintings from the Rockefeller Collection was splendidly installed at this prestigious institution. During 2004/05 our museum also sent a large show of Henry Moore sculptures and drawings to the Museum of Anthropology in Xalapa (Jalapa), an institution less well known in the United States but one that compares in majesty to the great National Museum in Mexico City.

Then in 2004, when plans were under way to re-open a new de Young Museum in Golden Gate Park, our director asked Mexico for the loan of a monumental work of art to celebrate the opening of the new building. We suggested a colossal Olmec head dating from 1200 B.C.E., a six-foot (1.85 m) tall basalt object, weighing in at 10,000 lb (4,600 kg). The loan request was favourably received and soon granted.
Olmec Colossal Head No. 4 from San Lorenzo, Veracruz, one of Mexico’s largest and most important works of national patrimony, remained in San Francisco for a loan period of fourteen months. Over 1.6 million visitors had the privilege of viewing this amazing treasure. It was of course given a central place – both aesthetically and symbolically – designating the heart of our museum’s permanent collection of art of the ancient Americas. Colossal Head No. 4 was one of the most popular artworks featured in our museum that first inaugural year. A special gallery devoted to documenting San Francisco’s historic Wagner mural collection lay only a stone’s throw away. It was a fitting juxtaposition to have the Olmec colossal head and the Wagner murals in close proximity.

In retrospect, during the last quarter of the twentieth century, the Wagner collection of Teotihuacan murals triggered a domino series of collaborations and exchange relationships between San Francisco and Mexico that have been extremely gratifying and satisfying for all concerned. We also see, in retrospect, that there were perhaps other historical factors working in our favour. This was, for example, a period of increased interest in improved international relations for both countries. Economic needs on both sides paved the way for NAFTA in 1993. We shared a mutual desire to use international exhibitions as a way to gain increased status and attention.

We didn’t know it in 1976, but the Harald Wagner Bequest of Teotihuacan Murals changed the history of our museum. The resulting years of collaboration changed us and refined our institutional identity. These projects had an impact on the way the art of Mexico was studied or understood in many parts of the United States, and on Mexico’s subsequent relationships with other American museums. These projects also changed perceptions of ourselves and our place in the global museum network.

The gains from these collaborative projects were, of course, both measurable and
immeasurable. We have a special permanent Teotihuacan gallery dedicated to documenting San Francisco’s unprecedented collaboration with Mexico, which will always be on view for visitors to see. We have prepared a number of scholarly publications and public programmes or films documenting the projects and our relationship over time. The demands of the Teotihuacan murals project in the early years eventually netted a full-time conservator for arts of Africa, Oceania and the Americas, an important position that has remained a permanent one since 1983. The negotiations also updated our museum’s collection and in 1983 we added a seven-page appendix of Principles to Insure Legal, Moral, and Ethical Acquisition Decisions.

There were many intangible benefits to these projects. The Teotihuacan mural project gave our department of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas a more scholarly emphasis and helped us to a better understanding of issues of collection ownership that will challenge us all in the twenty-first century. The Teotihuacan negotiations taught us the importance of approaching each collection situation methodically, on a case-by-case basis. These cumulative experiences also taught us to respect multiple points of view, to bring in a variety of outside advisers, to gather as much information as possible, and to deal in a forthright way with tough issues involving cultural objects. We learned that there is a difference between legal and ethical actions, and that joint collaboration can yield unexpected benefits. Perhaps most of all we have a much better and more solid understanding of collection issues in the twenty-first century. And we will honour and value our very special relationship with Mexico in years to come.

| NOTES |

1. The M. H. de Young Memorial Museum, located in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park, is one of two buildings comprising the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. The other building is the California Palace of the Legion of Honor in Lincoln Park.

2. A project like this always involves a large number of talented individuals too numerous to name. It was my privilege to serve as the project curator or co-ordinator; however, the success of the Wagner negotiations had more to do with a particular point in history and the interaction of a specific group of individuals than it did with any single individual. For a full account of our initial situation see Braun, Barbara (1982) Subtle Diplomacy Solves a Custody Case, Art News, Summer.


4. Investigative reporter Ron Russell has written an insightful article about Harald Wagner. See the unfortunately titled ‘Looted: rare murals from Mexico, plundered from an ancient site, were donated to the de Young Museum by an intriguing S.F. character’, San Francisco Weekly, Vol. 25, No. 31, 30 August–5 September, 2006, pp.17–23.


6. INAH or the National Institute of Anthropology and History is the Federal Government agency responsible for research, preservation, protection, and promotion of prehistoric, archaeological, anthropological, historical and palaeontological heritage of Mexico. Created in 1938, under the Ministry of Public Education, it was subsequently reinforced in 1970 by the Federal Law on the Cultural Heritage of the Nation, which provided for its legal status over built and movable archaeological property throughout Mexico. Today INAH has authorization over 348 museums in Mexico (national, regional, local, site, community) as well as 600,000 archaeological objects, 1.5 million photographic archives, and also documents and manuscripts.

7. Our primary liaison – to whom we will always be grateful – was Bertha Cea Echinique, now senior cultural affairs specialist at the US Embassy in Mexico City.


Collection and Context in a Cameroonian Village

by Steven Nelson

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In 1971, Paul Gebauer published the following recollection about his 1931 visit to Foumban, the capital of the Bamum kingdom: ‘The art of the Bamum has received wide publicity ever since the Germans encountered Sultan Njoya around the turn of the century. This most enlightened ruler had a private museum in his [Foumban] palace, where yet another museum stood at the highest point of the [Bamum] capital’s avenue of craft shops. The best of Bamum arts and crafts were displayed there for the benefit of both apprentices and visitors.’

Perhaps the most stunning thing about this passage is the revelation that by this time there existed two museums in this Cameroonian town. Why, in 1931, would Foumban sport not one, but two museums? How did it come to have a museum that, according to Gebauer’s recollection, was not a royal affair, but rather a public place, one catering to artist apprentices and visitors? What does this reveal about the importance of the collection and the museum in this particular place?

Discussions concerning the practices of collecting with respect to non-Western objects usually focus on the removal of items from their
places of origin to become art, artefacts or relics in Western collections (or homes). Rarely, outside the actions of colonial administrators, does the literature on collections – by both Africans and non-Africans alike – concentrate on the formation and political importance of collections on the continent itself. Most often, when one reads about museums in Africa, the concentration is on their relationship to a supposedly authentic heritage, their relevance as centres of activity for local communities, or the benefits of development on the continent. Such foci miss a critical opportunity to understand the complicated nature of collection practices, particularly those of Africans, on the African continent. Today, the collections of African museums, like their Western counterparts, very self-consciously aid in the active construction of heritage, a construction that always revises notions of the past according to present concerns and desires. These collections also announce that an individual, a group, a community or a modern nation-state indeed possesses a viable ‘culture’ that the viewer can understand through the world created by the collection itself.

While there are countless museums around the world (including Africa) that proffer collections that move the viewer towards an exotic and exoticized past, and while there are countless museums around the world (again including Africa) that point to the agency and status of their collectors, this discussion does not offer a comprehensive survey of collection practices in Africa. Along such lines, it goes without saying that there are as many variations on this theme on the African continent as there are in the West or anywhere else. This discussion, rather, centres on Foumban, located in the Cameroon Grasslands, as a case-study that allows for a consideration of the complex nature of the collection and needs served by it in a colonial and post-colonial African setting.

Both of the museums mentioned by Gebauer still function in Foumban. The first, the Palace Museum, occupies the second floor of the Bamum palace, built by the renowned King Njoya between 1917 and 1922. The second, the Museum of Bamum Arts and Traditions, founded by Mosé Yéyab in the 1920s, remains at the top of Foumban’s Avenue of artisans and their shops. Although the Palace Museum dwarfs its cousin in holdings and space, the two museums provide a provocative glimpse into the act of collecting and its ideological importance in the Bamum kingdom during French colonization. Along with King Njoua’s own text, entitled Histoire et coutumes des Bamum (History and Customs of the Bamum), as well as contemporary art in Foumban, they too give insight into the very construction of Bamum heritage.

King Njoua’s rule, which spanned the years from about 1886 to 1933, marked both the apex and nadir of the Bamum kingdom. While the king was the inventor of a script and, as patron and innovator, the greatest influence on the kingdom’s royal arts and architecture, perhaps his greatest talent rested in his ability to protect his kingdom during decades marked by attempts by outsiders to conquer him. As the very young ruler of a weak kingdom, Njoua beseeched neighbouring Fulbe rulers to assist him in putting down an 1894 revolt led by Gbengkom Kdombu, a retainer of Njoua’s mother Njapundunke. In appreciation, the king and his mother gave gifts to the Fulbe, and the
king, along with his entourage, subsequently converted to Islam.5

Njoya’s use of others to preserve his kingdom and legitimate his rule would be a successful strategy for the next twenty or so years. When the Germans arrived in 1902, instead of active resistance, Njoya chose to become their allies, and in his Histoire he credits himself with preserving the Bamum race. He writes:

One day the whites appeared in the country. The Bamum told themselves, ‘Let us wage war against them’. ‘No!’ said Njoya, ‘because I saw in a dream that the whites mean no evil against the Bamum. If the Bamum wage war against them, then that will be the end of their race, and my own. There will only remain a few surviving Bamum; this would not be good.’ He, Njoya, snatched the arrows, assegais, and guns from their hands. The Bamum obeyed, they were not opposed to the arrival of the whites. He, Njoya, helped the Bamum and they remained in peace.6

Under the Germans, the Bamum kingdom thrived. Njoya enjoyed a mostly positive relationship with the German colonial leaders. Although they did not allow him absolute rule over his dominion, they rarely interfered with the Bamum state. Alongside the Germans’ somewhat laissez-faire attitude towards Njoya, the ruler and the Germans staged a joint military expedition

against the neighbouring Nso kingdom, which murdered Njoya’s father, King Nsangu, in battle. The Nso king kept Nsangu’s head as a spoil of war. Upon defeating the Nso, a condition of the peace treaty written by the Germans was the return of Nsangu’s head to the Bamum. The return of Nsangu’s head, as Christraud Geary notes, legitimized Njoya’s reign. In these and other events under German rule, Njoya used the Germans to his advantage; under them, Njoya’s kingdom was no longer subject to threats from its Grasslands neighbours. For the most part, as far as the Germans were concerned, they perceived these actions, as well as Njoya’s granting of royal art objects to German leaders and collectors, the ruler’s reproductions of German military uniforms, and his innovations in commerce and governance as friendly gestures, as acts of friendship and emulation.

For Geary, most important about this phase of Njoya’s reign, which lasted until 1915, are the beginnings of a non-Bamum clientèle for Bamum art objects. She rightly understands this moment as marking the beginning of an enormous shift in the meaning of Bamum art from royal object to work of art that occurs as a result of Njoya’s religious shifts as well as the changing colonial situation in the Cameroon Grasslands.

Fleeing the British during the First World War, the Germans left Foumban and the Bamum kingdom in 1915. While the British briefly occupied the Bamum kingdom, it was the arrival of the French in Foumban in 1916 that marked the beginning of the end for King Njoya. Unlike the Germans, who saw Njoya as an enlightened ruler, the French saw the king as one of the worst examples of an African despot. While the king and the French administrators enjoyed reasonable relations in the first couple of years of French colonization, with the arrival of Lieutenant Prestat in 1919 as chief of the Foumban subdivision, Njoya’s situation deteriorated quite rapidly. As Claude Tardits details, soon after his arrival, Prestat began to attack the very structure of Njoya’s monarchy on the grounds of servitude and polygamy. Prestat writes: ‘Bamum country belongs in its entirety to the sultan and to around 1,200 of his notables... Nowhere else do we have such an example of servitude imposed on a people; the lesser of the notables have 100 wives, the sultan for his part has more than 1,200.’

Soon after his arrival in Foumban, Prestat hired Mosé Yéyab, a distant relative of Njoya, who did not support the throne, as his interpreter and as an intermediary between the Bamum and the French. Yéyab, who was sent to a mission school in 1906, became both an excellent student and a devout Christian. Eventually he translated certain...
biblical texts from German into Bamum; he later became a teacher at the school. According to Tardits, when the palace embraced Islam with the Germans’ departure, Yéyab remained staunchly Christian. As a result, he was forced to leave the palace, which, in part, gave birth to his opposition to the palace. Yéyab left Foumban for Douala where he learned French. Subsequently he joined the French administration. Upon his return to Foumban and his employ with Prestat, he would work to aid the French in undermining Njoya’s power, and, in the process, increasing his own.

As time wore on, the French would go further on the offensive, continuing to attack the king’s polygamy, objecting to the system of slavery used on Bamum plantations, and banning the system of tribute paid during the Bamum ngoun festival. Combined with new positions created by the French in the kingdom – chefs de région, chefs supérieurs – this offensive successfully undermined both the economic and political power of the Bamum monarchy. By 1924, as Geary notes, Njoya was rarely in Foumban, instead spending his time on his plantation in the Bamum village of Mantum.

Part of the story of Njoya’s fall is a dramatic tale of colonialism, palace intrigue, and local rivalries exploited by the French. In their thirst for control, the French dismantled kingdoms, created new ones, and played a decades-long game of divide and rule. The Cameroon Grasslands were no exception. Within these intrigues, how the collection, and, by extension, the museum enters into the fray is key. Geary’s detailed studies of the Palace Museum and the transformation of its objects, have opened the door for understanding the construction of what we recognize as a museum culture in a specific African locale. By contrast, this discussion (following Susan Stewart’s) considers the collection as an object in its own right, one that is self-consciously constructed in the service of myriad desires.

While it is likely that the Bamum court had storehouses containing royal objects for centuries, the collection (as we might regard it) is a product of the intersection of the Bamum and colonial powers. Although Njoya was indeed the leading patron of the arts in Foumban (he also had control over the use of royal symbols), many royal lineages had their own storehouses of objects. This situation might have been the case for the royal lineage of Mosé Yéyab. Whether or not this is the case, Yéyab began to amass Bamum royal objects, giving rise to the first modern collection of Bamum art. Geary notes that by 1920 he had already installed this collection in a mud house. That collection would eventually form the Museum of Bamum Arts and Traditions.

At this time, outside of its role in annual festivals of the kingdom, Bamum art, a tool for the upper social strata to distinguish themselves from commoners and slaves, had a power that was buttressed by its place in closed storage. As such, for Yéyab to establish and exhibit his collection was a radical move, an overt act of aggression that threatened to demystify the objects for a village that did not see such materials very often. In this process, the object, while changed, loses its individual importance, and in the collection, as Stewart reminds us, the exact function (her italics) of the object is less important than is the object’s service to the collection as a whole.
the ideological frame in which viewers – including the king – might understand both Bamum art and the monarchy itself, Yéyab’s collection is an ideological weapon that stands not as an aesthetic, but rather as a political object that attempts, by exposing royal art, to undermine the aura of the king and his dominion.

Moreover, the collection in the hands of Yéyab also points to the interpreter – and the colonizers – as collectors. As such, the collection, which by 1925 included not only objects but also disaffected artisans who once worked for the king, points to an overt attempt on Yéyab’s part to garner personal gain and status with the colonial officials who supported him in this endeavour. Geary puts it quite succinctly:

While European observers have often seen Mosé Yéyab’s collecting as an enlightened activity inspired by French concepts, it can also be interpreted as his strategy to manipulate the visual sphere following the example of the Bamum kings, and to exploit the power of objects in order to create for himself the conditions necessary for leadership within and outside the kingdom.16

Yéyab’s collection is an ideological weapon, a self-aggrandizing one that through the assembled objects created a world that spoke of local rivalries between the distant relatives and of the collusion of a Bamum subject with the French.

However, Yéyab’s collection was only the first, and Geary insists that one has to understand the formation of the Palace Museum in connection with this first collection. In that sense, by making a museum out of what is so commonly referred to as ‘things of the palace’, King Njoya sustains – through the collection and museum – the bitter rivalry between Yéyab and himself. In responding to a collection with a collection, Njoya also changes the rules of engagement. His own ideological weapon points to himself as absolute monarch (it does not matter that this is no longer the case), and as a private space, it attempts to remystify, albeit differently, Bamum royal art, and, by extension, the Bamum monarchy.

In this new context, in this remystified world, the power of the new collection emanates, like objects in a storehouse, from the secrecy that shrouds the objects. Like Yéyab’s collection, Njoya’s collection speaks of its creator, of his poor relationship with the French and of his obsession to preserve his kingdom and, perhaps more importantly, his throne. The collections constitute a war of symbols, a war that is fuelled by French Imperialism.

One can also look at Njoya’s collection, even though a result of his adversary’s work, as a self-aggrandizing move, one important for his self-image as well as his image for the French. In his Histoire, Njoya is the centre of the Bamum kingdom, and in the world of that text, this particular king takes centre stage as diplomat, as warrior, as intellectual, as artist and as architect. For example, in his Histoire, Njoya takes credit for having built an extraordinary palace: ‘The king of the Bamum, Njoya, has constructed a palace in Bamum country. This palace surpasses all of the houses of Cameroon. There is not in Cameroon a similar building; it is a building of forty-one rooms.’17

Although Njoya never addresses the collection per se in the Histoire, the collection is the
world of the king in the late 1920s, and in this sense, the collection is a visual analogy to the *Histoire*: it is a source of status and an articulation of the king’s subjection and ability, albeit waning, to control the symbols that articulate Bamum royal concerns. In this context, too, the collection works, like the palace, as something that articulates the eclecticism and (in a private fashion) visual distinction of the king.

Ultimately, King Njoya lost the war of symbols. During the latter part of his reign he did away with the laws that dictated access to and use of royal symbols. He also lost his power. By the end of the 1920s, Njoya’s power was a shadow of what it had been under the Germans. He was exiled to Yaoundé, the colonial capital, in 1931, and he died there in 1933. To completely demystify King Njoya, as well as Bamum kingship and court life more generally, the French administration, no doubt aided by Yéyab, displayed all the court’s and secret societies’ objects in a public exhibition. Geary suggests that this act, which she describes as ‘traumatic’, irrevocably changed the Bamum kingdom, and the public showing of these things, which likely included Njoya’s private collection. It ‘brought the traditional court life to an end,’ Geary concludes.18

The Palace Museum, now installed much like art museums around the world, claims to nod to a grand narrative of Bamum history. However, like the statue of King Njoya that sits in front of the palace he built, like the historic and contemporary king lists that serve as one of the staples of Foumban’s small tourist industry, like the books mostly published by members of the royal family, the Palace Museum’s objects and large-scale photographs point to King Njoya’s reign as the apex of Bamum history. Going through the museum, the viewer does not see its relationship to the other museum, the viewer does not see Njoya’s fate at the hands of the French. Moreover, the viewer does not get a clear picture of the Bamum kingdom in the very complex and complicated twentieth century. The collection points to a king who seemingly enjoyed a long, successful reign, one that was unmarked by Yéyab, one that was undamaged by the French. In fact, in claiming the date of 1892 as the founding of the Palace Museum, Aboubakar Njiasse Njoya further ascribes agency to his relative, thus erasing

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18 Geary (2008: 184)
both the impact of colonization and the rivalry between Yéyab and King Njoya, two factors instrumental in the collection’s formation.\textsuperscript{19} As such, Mosé Yéyab may have won the battle, but, and this is a wonderful paradox, King Njoya won the war.

Along these lines, Njoya is a paramount part of contemporary Bamum identity, and like the king, contemporary Bamum people understand history as an active force that aids in the construction of the self. While the collections really point to histories of those in the highest ranks of Bamum culture, the ability to see these objects (or to know that they can be seen) allows for all the culture’s members to journey into the past, not as slaves but as royals. Like other cultural institutions that produce ‘heritage’, this trip backwards underscores the collection’s role in the construction of identity or in a feeling of belonging not only for those who have made this world, but also for those who construct a community (or nation) of subjects who interact with it.
ALTERITY AND PHILOSOPHY OF THE COLLECTION

NOTES


6. Ibid., pp. 63–70.


11. Ibid., p. 246.


17. Njoya, (1952) op. cit., p. 258.


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A Place to Work

by Art & Language (Michael Baldwin, Charles Harrison and Mel Ramsden)

The name Art & Language represents the artistic work of Michael Baldwin and Mel Ramsden and the literary and theoretical work in which they are joined by Charles Harrison. Recent exhibitions of the work of Art & Language have been held at the Lisson Gallery, London, ZKM, Karlsruhe, and Distrito Cuatro, Madrid. In the spring of 2006 a collection of forty years’ work by Art & Language was installed at the Château de la Bainerie, near Nantes, France. The journal Art-Language was first published by Art & Language in 1969. Recent publications by Art & Language include a collection of writings since 1980 (2005) and the monograph, Homes from Homes II, published in association with the Migrosmuseum, Zurich (2006). The work Homes from Homes I was recently installed at the Pompidou Centre, Paris. Charles Harrison is co-editor of Art in Theory (Blackwell Publishing, 1998–2002) and author of Conceptual Art and Painting: Further Essays on Art & Language (MIT Press, 2003), and of Painting the Difference: Sex and Spectator in Modern Art (University of Chicago Press, 2005). He is professor of history and theory of art at the Open University (United Kingdom).

Art & Language is the name of a practice whose origins lie in the critical cataclysm that modernist painting and sculpture underwent in the mid-to-late 1960s. One of the effects of this cataclysm was that the material traditions of painting and sculpture ceased to provide the unchallengeable categories of fine art upon which curatorial practice was predicated. It was a consequence of the expansion of what were sometimes called ‘new media’ that the boundaries or edges that served to distinguish the work of art from the institution ceased to be marked or embodied by a physical or virtual barrier or frame. Indeed, such edges and boundaries and their perceptible signs were now called into question as merely long-established conventions. The attack on ‘the frame’ was propelled by the literalizing modernity associated with Minimalism, and by practices that were able to generate and to exploit contradictions associated
with the very conventions that the frame partially exemplified. The museum, which had for some time enjoyed the ideological status of refuge from the world’s unaesthetic occasions, was now a focus for concerns with regard to its apparent isolation from matters of ‘racism, war and repression’.

The attack on ‘the frame’ was for many artists indistinguishable from a critique of the larger institution, whether that institution was identified with capital in general or with any of its specific structural and superstructural forms. Previously, the site of production had been the studio, while the gallery and the museum were the sites of conservation, display and consumption. The paradigm of the relationship between artist and institution had been a transaction centred on the transferable and portable object, whose notional content was seen to be relatively immune to inflection by context. There were very few ambiguities in the relations involved. The responsibility of the museum was to preserve the work in its material particularity and to display it to its best advantage. The architecture of the museum largely reflected this purpose, and in so far as ‘best advantage’ meant making the work look serious and important, the appropriate architectural forms signified permanence, substance and security.

With the post-minimal art of the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, a new transaction came to typify the relations between artist, gallery and institution. Once the conventionally autonomizing edge or frame had been successfully contested, the boundary between work and institution became a matter of debate, contingency and negotiation. The real site of production moved from the studio to the institution or gallery. The artist was now presented with the opportunity to take on the role of curator, and the curator that of the artist.

This post-modern settlement has created an expanding and often confusing range of difficulties and opportunities, affecting the interests of both artists and institutions. A typical opportunity might be characterized thus: a partnership – that is, a collusion – between a sponsor, a curating institution and an artist. The curating institution (call it Tate Modern) gets a crowd-puller and the publicity attendant upon spectacle; the sponsor shares the publicity that speaks of innovation and high culture; and the artist receives the opportunity to work in a grander than grand manner, and the consequent public status of a minor celebrity. There are many other forms of this relationship. Indeed, we might say that the fabric of the art world has been largely composed of them for some time.

These were conditions that bore upon the emergence of our own practice and that afforded us our own earliest opportunities. Here were new opportunities for career development, for the formal and material expansion of the work, for development of an aesthetics of critical complexity, and for upward social mobility as the artist was liberated from the requirements of craftsmanship to order belt-way technology by phone; opportunities also to exploit the distributive potential of the institution, and to develop new managerial and organizational skills. At the same time, the effective convergence of interests between artist and institution led to erosion of the privilege associated with the autonomous and contained artwork, and to the consequent displacement of the Wollheimian gentleman – the ‘adequately sensitive, adequately informed spectator’ – from his [sic] role as the
prime arbiter of significance and value in the experience of art. What could go wrong?

This is what went wrong. This moment of liberation was also a moment in which a plethora of unwanted and unbearable determinations began to press. As artists are remade in sparkling white-collar mode, they join the ranks of the institutional management. Far from producing a critique of the institution, they become complicit in creating the falsehood that the institution is the cure and not the disease – that the critique of the modern art institution is something best left to its functionaries. The fact that these functionaries may have been among the dissenters from a previous cultural ethos does not mean that the institution’s socially negative effects will be overcome. Management supplies a discursive and practical frame in which curiosity and inquiry are understood only in terms of its own instrumental closures. The consistent and predictable one-idea artwork is readily conscripted to these ends. The consequence is a neurotic compact between artist/curator and institution. The institution demands a predictable form of excess as an embellishment or furtherance of its hegemonic interests, and the artist/curator strives unself-critically to supply it, in the process struggling to outdo the last spectacle to which his or her name could be attached.

There are no failures possible here. So long as the goods are as specified and described, they are guaranteed to rule out the horrors of alienation and deflation, save in the picturesque of the abject and its cognates. The institution has demonstrated its democratic power. In abandoning all memory of education, deflation and critical negativity, it procures the artist as a minor enabler of its new status as celebrity venue. Armed with public relations, the artist waits for his or her share of that celebrity or, if he/she somehow outranks the institution in this regard, is flattered by its further confirmation.

Contemporary art institutions continue to conceive of themselves as expansive. As varieties of multimedia and film join the objects paraded in the exhibition space of the museum, new technical and real-estate requirements emerge. It is not easy to tell whether this is an expansion driven by the demands and productions of artists relatively independent of the promptings of the institution, or whether it is driven by the expansionist pressures of the institutions themselves. Unquestionably, there are art practices, such as the Critical Art Ensemble, that see themselves as socially and politically ‘critical’ or ‘oppositional’, for which the expansive museum and the expansionist view of art that it harbours represent opportunities exploitable for their non-Wagnerian purposes. These are practices whose oppositional voice is dependent on the institutional frame at its limit. In the case of the Critical Art Ensemble, the targets attacked are for the most part corporate. The principal reason for the practice’s identification of itself as ‘artistic’ is precisely that the art museum or high-profile gallery as institutional frame provides a source of funding and a platform of sorts. The privilege associated with this frame is thereby put to oppositional use. But the same conditions provide structurally similar opportunities for practices that could under no stretch of the imagination be regarded as oppositional: both the Guggenheim Museum in New York and the Royal Academy in London have played host to the Armani brand.
The institution’s capacity to accommodate these two contrasting types of display is indicative both of its liberal self-image and of its power. And it is the necessity for expansion under conditions that harness liberality to power that defines the life of the modern institution. Once this process of expansion is set in train, failure can only lead to a fatal ebbing of sponsorship and support. Capital, whose interests have been previously served by expansion, will simply bestow its largesse elsewhere.

The drive to expansion in the contemporary art institution is inexorably connected to the erosion of boundaries between artistic media – those specialized categories that have traditionally served to contain curatorial ambition. Similar processes may be seen at work in the institutions of higher education, where expansion entails erosion of the distinctiveness of disciplinary subject-matter, and of the detailed study that this tends to require, in favour of topicality, interdisciplinarity and thematic work responsive to the promptings of the market. Here, failure to expand similarly entails loss of prestige and of funding. In both cases, it is in the name of the ideological label ‘democracy’ that suppression of the demands of specialization is typically justified. The suppression is in fact determined by the demands of distribution and business, and by capital’s self-serving cant that what the customer requires is that which is consumable without critical exertion. Just as the contemporary art institution fears the deflationary power possessed by certain forms of art and tends to camouflage it by trivial topicalization, so the higher educational institution fears the difficulty attendant upon specialization and responds accordingly. In the one case what is feared is loss of audience, in the other it is diminution of student numbers. Both of these are symptoms and causes of contraction. The pervasiveness of these inescapable conditions is such as to bring despair to the most resolute of Theodor Adorno’s supporters.

As we write, biennales are expanding exponentially and art fairs are being set up in more and more preposterously improbable locations across the globe. The up-market shoppers who control and haunt the latter make donations from funds that link the art fair to the institution. A fund controlled by one such band of socialites has been set up specifically to purchase items from London’s Frieze Art Fair for donation to Tate Modern. Artists now often save their most ambitious, largest and most spectacular work for the art fair – a phenomenon no doubt already subject to limp post-modern connoisseurship both in the art institution and in the cultural studies department of some university or other.

We ourselves have been implicated in this development, both in the attack upon the paradigmatic status of painting and sculpture and on the types of spectatorship and consumption that were associated with Fine Art – and a fortiori in the idealizations of the museum that were supportive to both. We were involved, in other words, in that moment of crisis that has been called Conceptual Art. One of the difficulties faced by Conceptual Art – which had initially conceived itself as highly portable and distributive, aggressively allophoric and indifferent or hostile to the conventional art market and its associated modes of exhibition and display – was that the institution had begun to identify qualities in it that the majority of the artists...
had been either unable or disinclined to foresee. Critics like William Rubin, of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, had voiced fears that the post-minimalist movement would lead to the elimination of the museum – as some of those involved might indeed have fantasized that it would. Meanwhile, however, a number of artists had found sympathetic galleries in continental Europe, where a tradition of the peripatetic intellectual avant-garde had persisted – albeit associated more with literature and politics than with art. Coincidentally, the idea of the national museum of modern art had spread throughout Europe, based on the successful model established in New York between the wars. Given these conditions, it was a cause of powerful attraction that the post-minimalist or Conceptual Art movement was the most completely international avant-garde tendency that the history of art had witnessed. We saw, then, a movement whose very *raison d’être* lay in a putative critique of privilege and autonomy, welcomed by museums that were under pressure to demonstrate the seriousness and cosmopolitanism of their commitment to new artistic developments, and which had finally recognized that Conceptual Art was not going to go away.

We might say that the museums of modern art – fired on the one hand by the memory of 1917 and the rejection of Marcel Duchamp’s urinal, and on the other by the same artist’s apotheosis in the 1960s – were presented with the chance to relive the earlier moment and this time to get it right. For reasons that were in many instances far from dishonourable, the directorates and curators of these institutions saw in Conceptual Art a degree of newsworthiness and discursive refreshment of their culture – to the extent of absorbing some of the institutionally critical content of the work in question.

However, once it became clear – as it had by the 1980s – that there existed virtually nothing so base as to have the museum’s doors closed against it, the intellectual and material resources and grounds of opposition were, to say the least, depleted. It is possible that there were those within the curating institutions who, either explicitly or intuitively and vaguely, perceived in Conceptual Art the catalyst essential to their expansion. That is to say, they saw in Conceptual Art a property necessary for the erosion of those categorial boundaries by which institutional expansion had previously been curtailed. It is also possible that those same or other individuals and institutions understood that these were the conditions for considerable expansion and upward mobility in the role of the curator – the curator as avant-garde *über*-practitioner.

Under these circumstances a great deal appeared to be on offer, especially to those whose stake in Conceptual Art had been the establishment of an avant-garde niche or brand (an achievement normally predicated upon a crudely successionist view of art history). If it was indeed a brand that the artist had established, then the liberal modern art museum would furnish almost all in the way of distribution and expansion that might be required for its success.

Among the potentially undesirable effects on artists of this development in the culture and politics of the museum were the inhibition of self-change and of the risks of inconsistency that
it entrains, the discouragement of those types of internal complexity that fare badly under conditions of rapid distribution, circulation and consumption, and the identification of the signifying power of the artwork and of the morale of its production with the life of the institution itself, so that any artwork emerging from a social practice in some way independent of the controlling ambit of the institution was liable to be derogated as a failure. As the site of production moved from the studio to the institution, the artist was made bereft of that productive privacy and relative independence without which institutional critique tends to be implausible – and is at worst the result of connivance in fraud.

It is by now a virtual truism that artistic practices that had their origins in the aesthetics of liberation have been accommodated to the orthodoxies of the free market, and that this has been achieved in large part through the agency of the art museum. The institution has acquired a power to determine coercively the form of the work of the artist. We do not pretend that an absolute and unqualified resistance to this determining power is possible in practice. There remains the question of what a qualified resistance might amount to.

The dawning of our own perception of these as the prevailing conditions of artistic practice coincided with the production and exhibition of the Documenta Index (Index 01) of 1972, and with the
increasing ratification and expansion of the Conceptual Art movement during the 1970s (a development that has culminated in the contemporary use of the term Conceptual Art to identify more or less anything not painting and not sculpture that is possessed or seen to be possessed of some kind of avant-garde aspect).4 One of the critical propositions actuating the Index concerned the stereotypes of artistic identity that had persisted even as the Duchampian generic object had begun to take its position as the paradigmatic art-object. What the Index proposed was that a discursive practice was not only conceivable but also sustainable, so long as the conversation involved had a necessary recursive dimension; that is, concerned with the nature of its own processes and internal situation as a condition of awareness of its situation in the world. Here was a discursive possibility – a sort of conversational pragmatics – that could not be subsumed by the public purposes of the museum, even if bits of the conversation could be reified and lopped off as exhibitable swatches that invited the viewing public to join in and to contribute to the larger body of work.

While the social aspect that the annotated and self-indexing conversation of the Documenta Index seemed to promise may have proved intractable – a conversational space not necessarily being a workable model of community – the practical habits, needs and tendencies the Index engendered seemed very much worth maintaining. And it followed that what was required was a place of work. The studio has of course always been as much an ideological construct as a physical location, the image or description of the studio always an active reflection of the artist’s self-image, whether substantial or mythical. Our place of work would in some respects be virtual. But it was at least distinguished by its very difference with respect to the museum. This difference is not to be defined simply in terms of literal place, rather in terms of the sets of determinations that the conversational and essayistic practice regards as welcome, as against those it regards as inimical to its existence.

Of course, most artists have studios in which ‘the work gets done’. In the era of the expansionist museum, however, this is generally work in a relatively reduced and mechanical sense: either nailing and sawing and so on, or the prosecution of some professional purpose. In the studio of the typical museum-active artist, wherever there is another person present besides the artist, that person will tend to be either an assistant, or an entrepreneur, agent or curator. It follows that the conversation will be characterized either by the passing on of instruction in a manner reflecting the hierarchical division of labour, or by questions of presentation, distribution and consumption reflecting the aims and purposes of the institution. But the pattern that the implications of the Documenta Index established for the present practice of Art & Language was a) that conversation was far more than a contingent by-product of that practice – that it was not possible to conceive of a productive moment in the studio (except mechanically) where only one person was present; and b) that to qualify as relevant to the practice, the conversation had either to play a necessary part as work or as an agent in its production, or to bear critically upon the conditions of its presentation, distribution and consumption, or both. (In speaking of the presence of another, we do not necessarily imply literal presence, but rather virtual presence in so far as
the type of conversation we have described provides the sustaining morale of the practice.)

It has to be acknowledged that the resulting practice is one whose relationship with the institution is inefficient, in so far as it is indecipherable by the management. There are very few who would hazard a characterization of an item of our work, let alone of the conversational performance of which that item forms a part. In an artistic culture in thrall to slogans and short-term shibboleths, our tendency to self-dismantling complexity is liable to be seen as impenetrable, and to exhibit all the characteristics of menacing failure associated with the supposedly transcended forms of specialization. While the institution feels bound to take seriously work that emanates from a long sustained career of sorts – one prefaced by the authenticating formula, ‘among the founders of Conceptual Art’ – the work in question resolutely refuses to appear to take itself seriously, and thus to satisfy the persistent Romanticism that still makes the link between artist and capital.

An example might serve both to clarify the circumstance and to map a connection between the *Documenta* Index of 1972 and a subsequent kind of studio practice with (admittedly broken) heir-lines to a tradition. In 1982 we produced a pair of paintings titled *Index: the Studio at 3 Wesley Place Painted by Mouth I and II*. This was work that took up the genre of the Artist’s Studio, making particular reference in terms of scale and figurative ambition to Gustave Courbet’s *Atelier de l’artiste* of 1855. Courbet described his work as ‘a real allegory’, and as showing ‘the whole world coming to my studio to be painted.’ It was, then, a work of elevated historical purpose: the artist’s reflections upon his studio rendered as high genre. Our studio paintings are haunted by the bathetic indexation,
'painted by mouth', which provokes the thought that the artists were somehow impaired and that the status of the genre is consequently lowered. The physical impairment of the artist implies the possibility of a consequential incompetence in technical execution of the work. Any perceived distortion may have to be seen not as intentionally expressive but as accidental and unfortunate, the artist not as romantic and heroic, but as disabled and pathetic. The genre becomes connected to the catalogue advertising Christmas cards produced by 'mouth and foot artists', to be sold for charity. Indeed, for an ambitious genre, painting by mouth might suggest not so much mere bathos as total loss. Are the Studios at 3 Wesley Place merely exercises in burlesque? Might an exhibition still take these works seriously? They certainly look serious. They are large and highly populated with figures and referential detail, but could it be that the artists were just fooling around to no serious purpose?

The conversational and essayistic practice has always been a dialogue with impairment and disfigurement. After all, such a practice will always be formed of such things – of fragments made to seem like a whole for a moment, only to risk abandonment as ill-formed. Though these fragments are what can be housed in institutions, they will always be things that strive, albeit with limited success, to supply a context for themselves. In recent years we have made exhibitions of such
fragments in various institutions of modern art, notably in 1999 at the Antoni Tapies Foundation in Barcelona and at PS1 in New York, and in 2002 at the Musée d’art moderne Lille Metropole at Villeneuve d’Ascq. Designed in response to the demand for retrospection, these have been assemblages of works and representations of works, each so ordered by ourselves as to provide for the internal conversation of fragments a potential context beyond the reach of the institution within which they have been no doubt comfortably lodged.7

NOTES

1. An ‘Art strike against racism, war, repression’ was staged by the Art Workers’ Coalition in New York in May 1970, with demonstrations mounted outside the major museums.


3. The nature of this involvement is discussed at some length in our article ‘Voices Off: reflections on Conceptual Art’, Critical Inquiry (Chicago), Vol. 33 No. 1, Autumn 2006, pp. 113–35.

4. The Documenta Index – otherwise Index 01 – is so-called after its first exhibition at ‘Documenta 5’ in Kassel in the summer of 1972. In its physical aspect it was composed of eight metal filing cabinets mounted on four plinths. The cabinets contained some 87 texts written by those then associated with Art & Language or with the journal Art-Language. The surrounding walls were papered with a Photostat enlargement of a typed index. Under each of the 87 separate entries the remaining texts were listed according to three possible relations to the text cited: a relation of compatibility, a relation of incompatibility or a relation of transformation, signifying that the relevant documents did not share the same logical/ethical space and were not to be compared in advance of some notional transformation. Ten names were publicly associated with the exhibition of the Documenta Index, though not all of these had been involved in its working-out or installation. The adoption of a principle of collective responsibility was not simply a matter of strategy in the face of public exposure. It had been an informal assumption of Art & Language interchanges from the start that the materials of discourse were open to being differentiated on more powerful grounds than those of authorship. In the design of the Index this informal assumption was elevated to the status of an organising principle.

5. The two paintings were first shown together at ‘Documenta 7’ in the summer of 1982.


Para-performative Practices and Late Modernism: on contemporary art and the museum

by Matthew Jesse Jackson

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Which works of contemporary art belong in museums? Which modes of collecting and display are likely to secure the most appropriate access to such works in the future? Such quandaries are all too familiar to curators of contemporary art. As art institutions turn more aggressively to collecting recent art works, whether to boost attendance, attract younger visitors or simply to chart the current state of cultural production, the museum is increasingly entering into uncertain institutional terrain.¹ In this environment, the museum administrator confronts a vexing question: Can it be said with any real confidence which activities are likely to constitute the most important art of our time? In the wake of structural transformations in the global art world, and the ongoing abandonment of conventional art media, one wonders if the display of the static art object, or even the projection of the moving image, will remain the museum’s principal task.

A theory installation

It is 2004. At the Getty Center in Los Angeles, the Jackson Pollock Bar (Peter Cieslinski, Martin Horn, Anna Wouters, and Christian Matthiessen),...
an art collective based in Freiburg, Germany, presents a performance entitled *Theses on Feuerbach*. The event belongs to a genre of performance art that the Jackson Pollock Bar calls the ‘theory installation’. Concerning the ‘theory installation’, the Bar writes: ‘The theories of theoreticians, and indeed the theoreticians themselves, no longer form a neutral abstract background to the aesthetic. They have developed so as to constitute its material. The ‘aesthetic’ has become discursive and ‘discourse’ has become aesthetic.’2 The statement itself echoes Marx’s *Theses on Feuerbach*, which laments an ‘idealism that does not know real, sensuous activity as such . . . but regards the theoretical attitude as the only genuinely human attitude. . . .’3

*Theses on Feuerbach* unfolds in a small lecture hall behind a conference table that has been set up for an apparent appearance by Charles Harrison, Michael Baldwin and Mel Ramsden (long-time members of the conceptual art group Art & Language; see previous article). However, instead of Art & Language, the Bar’s members sit down at the table and begin lip-synching to a track of voices and sound effects that the audience eventually assumes to be a recording of Art & Language discussing the conditions of production in the contemporary art world. (It is, in fact, a recording of hired actors reading a script produced by Art & Language.) What is more, the Bar performs the ‘theory installation’ while members of Art & Language look on from the audience. Afterwards, the Jackson Pollock Bar and Art & Language participate in another panel discussion that fields questions from the audience about the just ‘performed’ panel discussion. At the conclusion of the event, the viewer is left with the uncanny (and immensely satisfying) feeling of having watched the art world performed, rather than having watched yet another performance in the art world. The event was artful, but difficult to describe in the terms of art. As such, it brought to mind the now hackneyed invocation of Tony
Smith's nighttime car ride on the unopened New Jersey turnpike that appears in Michael Fried's 'Art and Objecthood'. However, it also reminded me of an offhand remark made by the Getty Research Institute's director, the art historian Thomas Crow.

**Surfing, music, art**

Crow once stated, not without irony (the following is a rough paraphrase): 'I like surfing more than music, but then again I like music more than art.' For me, this otherwise unremarkable observation has been crucial in coming to terms with the Jackson Pollock Bar's performance in that Crow's off-the-cuff hierarchy of cultural forms more or less replicates the progression in Marx's *Theses* from pure sensuous activity to engaged theoretical practice. In the end, for Crow, 'A September Swell in the Pacific' is the greatest. The singer free-styling over a funky backbeat is great. But art – well, art is something else. I think that we need to understand why.

What surfing and popular music might be said to share is the orchestration of experiences located beyond the constraints of a static built environment; for simplicity's sake, let's call this environment 'The Museum'. Surfing and popular music outrun the institutional discourses that would otherwise isolate them for analysis, discussion and evaluation. In other words, surfing and popular music generally do not require museums, galleries, donors, curators, administrators and the paraphernalia of organizational self-seriousness embodied by the academic event and the museum exhibition. In fact, to the extent that surfing and popular music appear within such settings, the substance of their attractiveness rapidly evaporates.

Here the panel discussion seems to be the key. Just consult the Zeitgeist barometer that is Google: 'panel discussion' and 'contemporary surfing' (one hit on a good day); 'panel discussion' and 'contemporary music' (about 25,000 hits); 'panel discussion' and 'contemporary art' (well over 130,000 hits). Of course you can panel discuss surfing or music; you can evoke their textures through power point presentations, discussants' remarks, and heated 'question and answer sessions', but these efforts tend to come up short. In fact, it is those 25,000 hits for 'panel discussion and contemporary music' that initially spurred my ruminations on this theme.

**The problem with music**

The panel discussion is exactly the sort of phenomenon that the independent recording icon Steve Albini had in mind when writing his landmark 1993 essay, 'The Problem with Music'.

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According to Albini, a parasitic promotional infrastructure was killing contemporary recording. Albini claimed that the alternative music scene was most threatened not by over-commercialization and major-label avarice, but by the overwhelming influence of the ‘A&R rep’ (that is, the music industry’s talent scouts, its ‘Artist & Repertoire representatives’). For Albini, the A&R rep is odious not because he does not enjoy or understand the music, but because he never doubts his understanding and he never questions his enjoyment. For the A&R rep, music plays an allotted and obvious role within a larger culture of detached urban coolness. And for Albini, that very obviousness, that lack of critical self-reflection, defines ‘the problem with music’.

Like Albini, Crow grasps that the most vital forms of popular music thrive in the fugitive interstices of culture, usually its bars and backrooms; spaces lacking the administrative rootedness that has accompanied contemporary art practice and the museum space. In this respect, Crow’s hierarchy of surfing, music and art speaks to the ‘American’ aesthetic described many years ago by one-time Los Angeles resident Theodor Adorno, who writes: ‘In America, I was liberated from a naïve belief in culture, [and] acquired the ability to see culture from the outside. . . . in America, where no reverential silence reigned before everything intellectual as it does in Central and Western Europe… the absence of this respect induces the spirit to critical self-reflection.’ In other words, the paradox of the situation is the following: Thomas Crow would not be such an insightful art historian if he did not prefer surfing and music to art. These peripheral enthusiasms continually spur his mind towards critical reflection on art’s possibility and culture’s meaning; in Adorno’s terms, such forces constitute the playful, anticultural elements that make a self-reflective, mature culture possible.

Pleasure and performance

The widely celebrated art criticism of Dave Hickey (specifically in his *Air Guitar: Essays on Art & Democracy*) follows a trajectory diametrically opposed to Adorno, though Hickey focuses fully on cultural phenomena as wide ranging as Crow’s surfing, music and art. For Hickey, a former Nashville songwriter, art-viewing really is not that different from watching a musical performance at the local watering hole. Hickey argues that there are no particular demands on the competence of the art viewer: whatever you know is potentially enough to ‘get art’ because – and this is one of Hickey’s big arguments – there is nothing particularly important ‘to get’ in the first place – at least nothing that an inventive viewer cannot trump by productively misviewing the work. In Hickey’s universe, art thrives on inappropriate interpretation and off-beat application. For Hickey, art is about getting it wrong the right way. The underlying model here is that of the secular person who looks at a religious painting, has no interest in its theological significance, but falls in love with the painting.

Hickey’s approach is appealing: unpretentious, anti-hierarchical and free of debilitating cynicism. Hickey exalts the stand-alone interpreter; the rebellious viewer who scoffs at the museum’s wall texts; the hermeneutic outlaw who prefers anarchic sensual intelligence to the
educator’s pedantic rectitude. Yet Crow’s casual remark on surfing, music and art grasps implicitly what Hickey’s writing obstinately does not: art must not be confused with our pleasurable pastimes. This is not to say that art is devoid of its pleasing aspects. None the less, art is not in the first instance related to entertaining the senses or stoking idle value judgements, nor can art succumb to the fiction of its supposedly infinite interpretive flexibility.9

I believe that art achieves true significance when it is adversarial to mere self-satisfaction, because in its most deft manifestations art does not lend itself to the vehement solipsism of personal intoxication. Rather art must find its way to the modest contestatory arena that the Jackson Pollock Bar investigated in Art & Language’s Theses on Feuerbach. This is the enduring negativity at the core of contemporary art-making that Hickey ignores: art has a propensity for making one sit in nearly empty rooms, listening to meandering speeches, and yet one can still sincerely say at times, ‘I liked doing that.’ And art, alone among contemporary cultural endeavours, has the capacity to generate 136,000 hits for panel discussions.

The ‘Artist & Repertoire’ aesthetic

The expansion of graduate schools in North America and Western Europe – particularly terminal Master’s degree programmes in art-related fields – has created a younger, more professionalized art world.10 This community is more apt to think of art in the same terms as film, fashion and music, rather than, say, literature, history and philosophy. As a result, half of the most talked-about work in the last few years has been neither painting, nor sculpture, nor video, nor even performance, but rather an amalgam of themes and forms derived from film, fashion and music. What is more, artists are now confronting Steve Albini’s ‘problem with music’ as ‘the problem with art’: How does one proceed when art’s critical discourse and theoretical complexity have been overtaken by the curatorial and administrative rhetoric of marketing, promotion, and institutional positioning?11

In response, many younger artists are approaching their work today not as if they were Hickey’s wilful aesthetic rebels, but rather as if they were taking on the roles of Albini’s benighted ‘A&R reps’. When the Danish three-person collective Superflex (Jakob Fenger, Bjornstjerne Reuter Christiansen and Rasmus Nielsen) starts its own record company as an art project, or when the artist Dave Muller organizes one of his ‘Three Day Weekends’, in which invited artists and guests participate in an institutional happening; or when Maurizio Cattelan (with the assistance of Massimiliano Gioni and Ali Subotnick) sets up The Wrong Gallery (a miniscule gallery space that perpetually seeks out more expansive locales) as an art project, these artists draw directly on the skills of the successful A&R scout: the ability to identify talent, to provide appropriate venues, and to secure positive publicity. Similar mechanisms are at work in Harrell Fletcher’s collaborative exhibitions, such as his 2004 gallery installation that was devoted exclusively to a nearby exhibition by the artist Shaun O’Dell. Further examples are easy to find: consider Andrea Fraser’s Little Frank and His Carp, a short video that focuses on the artist’s quasi-erotic engagement with the
Guggenheim Bilbao’s audiotour; Jorge Pardo’s controversially banal architectural/design/art projects for spaces, such as the Dia Centre for the Arts in New York, as well as Liam Gillick’s meeting rooms and public spaces designed to host – appropriately enough – panel discussions.

What we see here are practices that appropriate the processes that make art available to the public, but not as a form of ‘institutional critique’. Today, the art work is dependent upon a lot of ‘stuff’ in order to be seen, much as popular music depends on the artist and repertoire infrastructure to be heard. These artists, rather than denying the realities that impinge on art-making and art-viewing, have embraced an ‘A&R’ aesthetic: at present, distribution, promotion, commentary and display are no longer means to aesthetic ends; they are art’s primary media themselves. The Jackson Pollock Bar writes: ‘The conventional show, or exhibition, is no longer linked by necessity to the process of exhibiting.’ Rather, the Bar argues that: ‘Theoretical models which develop a consciousness of their own positioning. . . must begin to pay attention to the concrete ways in which they are observed.’ This takes us back to the exhibition display, the public art talk and the panel discussion.

Para-performativity

Once one begins to search for them, panel discussions are everywhere in the history of recent art. There is the Modernism and Modernity conference in Vancouver, MoMA’s Art of Assemblage symposium, the notorious semiotics debate at the Picasso and Braque symposium, the Duchamp conference in Nova Scotia, and so on. Rosalind Krauss recalls first meeting with Clement Greenberg ‘at a panel’ in 1963. Sidney Tillim describes a ‘special panel’ in 1966, where Michael Fried was anointed as the heir apparent to Clement Greenberg. Thomas Crow explains that his ruminations on modernism were first given voice on a panel in 1980. Even Branden Joseph’s recent study of Rauschenberg’s art begins by describing Rauschenberg’s inability to acclimate himself to the strictures of the panel discussion. Notice also how the roundtable discussion became the centrepiece of the journal *October*. In a broader sense, perhaps we should view the panel discussion and artist’s talk as the return of the repressed verbal field that all but disappeared after having been so prominent in the art-making of the 1920s and 1930s. The panel discussion could also be interpreted as the sustained administrative temporalization of the modernist grid and a kind of structuralist appropriation of Pollock’s performativity. Concerning the grid, Rosalind Krauss writes: ‘As we have a more and more extended experience of this grid, we have discovered that one of the most modernist things about it is its capacity to serve as a paradigm or model for the antidevelopmental, the antinarrative, the antihistorical.’ Obviously, the panel discussion displays all of these traits in its antidevelopmental, neutral, all but unchanging format; its scientistic juxtaposition of contrasting verbal and visual information hostile to overarching narratives; and its lack of self-consciousness towards the historicity of its own forms. That is, we have seen very few panel discussions that contemplate panel discussions. Thus, the panel discussion would appear to have functioned as one of the final bastions of modernism in the visual arts.
In other words, sometime around 1970 modernism did not vanish. Instead, at least one strain would develop out of Robert Morris’s 1964 performance 21.3 (in which the artist lip-synchs to a recording of his reading of Erwin Panofsky’s ‘Iconography and Iconology’), through Andrea Fraser’s artist-centred panel projects of the 1990s, to Art & Language and the Jackson Pollock Bar’s recent theory installations.18 In retrospect, it appears that the panel discussion became a definitive late-modernist medium in the visual arts, much as post-structuralist theory became the era’s crucial zone of literary experimentation.19 If, as Rosalind Krauss argued, ‘Barthes and Derrida are the writers, not the critics, that students now read’, then is it not true that Krauss became the performance artist, not the art historian, that students wanted to see? Following Krauss’s terminology, one might describe the zone that she occupied as the para-artistic space of late modernism.

**Artist-historian and art museum**

It is often noted that many artists of the 1960s acted as though they were art historians. In fact, many were art history students.20 However, few commentators have deduced the larger symmetry here: if the artists of the 1960s became art historians who produced objects, then is it not similarly true that art historians began to act as performance artists who expanded the scope of modernism through lectures, panel discussions and other modes of public performativity? We may even eventually realize that these art historians were mobilizing ‘the history of modernism’ as a kind of artistic medium itself.21

In a rarely quoted passage from his 1953 essay ‘The Plight of Culture’, Clement Greenberg writes: ‘The only solution for culture that I can conceive of under these conditions is to shift its center of gravity away from leisure and place it squarely in the middle of work. Am I suggesting something whose outcome could no longer be called culture, since it would not depend on leisure? I am suggesting something whose outcome I cannot imagine.’22 Today, it appears that the outcome that Greenberg ‘could not imagine’ has in fact transpired: those activities that had once seemed to represent merely utilitarian labour around the edges of the art work have finally come to occupy the very centre of contemporary art. Institutions and commentators – as well as the organs of art publicity...
and art pedagogy – have gradually come to resemble active, productive entities rather than dispassionate, neutral bystanders.²³

To employ the terminology of the literary theorist Yuri Tynianov, here we are dealing with the evolution of new ‘artistic facts’ – much as Tynianov described the historical transformation of verbal material into new ‘literary facts’.²⁴ Tynianov demonstrated that literature frequently adopts a mere ‘social fact’ found in language (such as the friendly letter in the eighteenth century) that it then transforms from an extra-literary form into a ‘literary fact’ (e.g. authors gradually incorporated the friendly letter into their writing as literary material, eventually producing the genre of the epistolary novel). In fact, according to Tynianov, literary renewal most often takes place through the introduction of extra-literary verbal material into a literary situation. A similar process seems to be at work in the field of contemporary art.

From this perspective, we may eventually realize that Art & Language’s Charles Harrison who has straddled the zone between conceptual artist and modernist art historian for over three decades may not have been alone – perhaps he simply realized and made explicit the strangeness of his position much sooner than most. That is to say, we may not have been dealing with a generation of historians of art, but with a band of artist-historians all along. And in the coming years, the museum will undoubtedly begin to archive and exhibit a range of new artistic facts, from the verbal theatrics of the theory installation to the para-performative practices of the artist-historian.

| NOTES |


2. The Jackson Pollock Bar, communication with author. 24 January 2005.


11. On this topic, see the article ‘A Place to Work’ in the current issue.


15. An aspect of Michael Fried’s ‘Art and Objecthood’ that has escaped much attention is its peculiar construction. The text actually reads as if it
were the transcript of a panel discussion between Donald Judd, Clement Greenberg, Robert Morris and Tony Smith with Michael Fried acting as the overbearing moderator/discussant.

16. As Irving Sandler wrote long ago, one of the major innovations of the New York School (and post-war American modernism) was its decoupling of the verbal and visual mingling that had been definitive of the Surrealist project. See Sandler, Irving (1970) The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism, Praeger, New York.


20. The sculptors Donald Judd and Robert Morris, in particular, were advanced students of art history.

21. Yves-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss’s exhibition L’Informe: mode d’emploi at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris in 1996 represented an explicit effort to treat the history of modernism as a kind of medium. The accompanying catalogue essay makes this clear: the exhibition curators sought to ‘put the formless to work in order to sift modernist production, we wanted to start it shaking—which is to say, to shake it up’. Bois, Yves-Alain & Krauss, Rosalind E. (1997) Formless: A User’s Guide, p. 40, Zone Books, New York. Consider also that the journal October favoured art practices that closely corresponded to the professional activities of the art historian: Marcel Broodthaers curating art exhibitions; Dan Graham publishing materials in art magazines; James Coleman sequencing slide shows; Hans Haacke investigating provenance records; Michael Asher printing catalogues; Andrea Fraser giving gallery talks. Benjamin Buchloh once referred to these works under the rubric of ‘the aesthetic of administration’, yet perhaps it would be more accurate to call this the aesthetic of the art historian.


23. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht argues that there has been a profound bias towards ‘interpretation’ and ‘meaning-complexes’, a bias that has impeded the academic’s ability to describe aesthetic experiences provoked by academic procedures. Gumbrecht, Hans Ulrich (2004). The Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey. Stanford University Press, Stanford, Calif.

What is it that makes a work of art attain the status of universality? The claim for the universal character of all great works of art arose during the 18th century. The philosophers of the Age of Enlightenment held faith in knowledge and progress, which would naturally confer an eminent position to the work of art in the transmission of these values. However, three events, of apparently unequal historic value, largely contributed to this new definition of art.

First came the publication in 1764 of Johann Joachim Winckelmann's *The History of Art in Antiquity*. Here the author made an unprecedented effort to apprehend the artistic evidence left by the ancients, starting from the formal qualities of art works, attempting to classify them according to a systematic order and, ultimately, to reveal the main principles that link these works to the societies from whence they emerged. Through a remarkable effort of analysis and interpretation, Winckelmann gave birth to a form of art history. This was certainly made possible because the gods had left the precinct of the temple, as Friedrich Schiller said, though the temple still remains sacred to our eyes. When Quatremère de Quincy reproached museums for having deprived works of art of the ‘intellectual harmonies’ that attach them (when in situ) to their environment, he was inspired by Winckelmann's work.
Second came the French Revolution and its consequences. The plan to open a great museum in the Louvre Palace was already underway when the Revolution broke out. Definitions very quickly became a preoccupation: What should a museum produced by the Revolution contain? What place should be given to the manifold evidence of monarchical oppression and clerical obscurantism? Should only works of art be exhibited or the testimony of technology and industry as well? Lastly, according to which principle should the works of art be displayed, for the pleasure of looking only or for instruction too? All these questions stimulated theoretical debates. In his Instructions sur la manière d’inventorier et de conserver (Directions on the Manner of How to Inventory and Conserve) of 1793, Félix Vicq d’Azyr decrees that the people are ‘the depository of a property for which the great family has the right to ask an account’. Yet Boissy d’Anglas argues: ‘Preserve the monuments of the arts, sciences and reason... they are the prerogative of centuries and not our private property: they can only be disposed of in a way that ensures their conservation.’

It is no longer the original function of a work of art that determines its value; it is its universal character which it has acquired by its existence. Louis Emeric-David suggests opening a museum to show ‘a collection of masterpieces by skilful living workers in all the arts’. He justifies his choice thus: ‘The establishment of the museum that I propose is a sure and easy way to encourage the arts; to lead them to the highest achievement through emulation and destruction of all systems; to illustrate the republic by showing the genius of its artists to all of Europe; to elevate the character of the people; to increase business related to the arts; to enrich the nation through the proprietorship of a great and precious collection that does not yet have a model.’

Moreover, Vicq d’Azyr considers that what he calls ‘the arts of imitation’ – architecture, painting, sculpture – should aim at ‘prolonging the recollection of useful actions and grant long life to the memory of the benefactors of humanity’. This is what Chateaubriand later formulated in his Mémoires d’outre-tombe (Memories from Beyond the Grave): ‘The great monuments are an essential part of the glory of all human society: they bear the memory of a people beyond its own existence, and make the memory contemporary with the generations that come to settle in the abandoned fields.’

Quatremère de Quincy and Michelet both considered the museum to be an institution that detracted from the understanding of works of art. Michelet, however, was not as severe as de Quincy because he granted a special status to Alexandre Lenoir’s depot in the Convent of the Petits-Augustins. Different from other museums, this ‘musée d’ambiance’ (or museum of atmosphere as we would say today) was for him a veritable melting-pot of historic sensibility. For Millin, it even evoked a kind of ‘sweet melancholy’. Lenoir knew, in Michelet’s eyes, how to deliver a very truthful historic tableau of the Middle Ages, which, in a way, allowed the works housed there to assume a new life. Paradoxically (it should be mentioned), it is the fictive nature of the museum discourse that stimulates this new life, there where it is pushed to the limit.
Quatremère could obviously not admit such enthusiasm, he who propagated keeping works of art in situ. For the author of *Lettres au Général Miranda* (Letters to General Miranda), museums are made by and for historians of art, only for critical judgement. Works of art that touch us are those that have remained in place, organically attached to the sites where they were created. The displacement of works of art is a crime. The transport to France of treasures seized from northern and central European cities by General (later Emperor) Napoleon Bonaparte’s armies, and again by the successive transfers after the treaty of Tolentino, made Paris the centre of the world. Here one could admire the great works of art, both antique and modern. To such an extent that the English painter Thomas Lawrence, in 1814, on the eve of the restitution of a large number of these works, described the museum as ‘the most noble collection of works of human genius that has ever been presented to the world’. The predators were convinced that they legitimately held, for the good of humanity, the most beautiful creations of the human spirit.

The third event that contributed to the new definition of art was the creation of historic monuments. It is unnecessary to recall the role played by the most progressive politicians – Guizot, Vitet, Mérimée – in the institutionalization of their definition, protection and conservation. On the other hand, up until the years 1820 to 1830, an essential link was missing for the emergence of a national awareness of heritage. To the nearly exclusive interest in antiquity, which is still manifest in the choice of primary protection measures, should be added the consideration of the Middle Ages even if, as early as the beginning of the seventeenth century, Abbot Duchesne had selected medieval buildings not only because of their ‘antiquity’ but also because of their beauty. Because of the Norman antique dealers of the 1820s, inspired by their English counterparts, Roman art sparked increasing interest. Since the revolutionary era, the taste for Gothic architecture had spread amongst the ‘profane’, that is to say, those who did not practise architecture and had not yet had the occasion to grasp the significance of Gothic structures for modern builders like Jacques-Germaine Soufflot, their role model.

None the less the institutional birth of historic monuments is closely linked to the sentiment of the need to protect national property. The awareness of heritage implies that the national community is responsible for transmitting artistic and symbolic values and that this action itself must have a universal value.

For Victor Hugo, in *Notre-Dame de Paris* (The Hunchback of Notre-Dame, 1831), ‘each surface, each stone of the venerable monument is a page not only of the history of the country, but also of the history of science and art’. And in this chimerical organism which is Notre-Dame, Hugo continues, ‘man, the artist, the individual is erased on these great masses without the name of an author; human intelligence is summarized and totalled.’ Hugo thus formulates the Enlightenment philosophers’ final expectation, that which also led Goethe to write fifty years earlier, as he stood before the cathedral of Strasbourg: ‘How many times have I not returned to savour this joy both celestial and terrestrial, to embrace the great spirit of our elder brothers as manifested through their works.’
This proximity between the work of humans and the work of God (or Nature) is also invoked by William Gilpin, English theoretician of the picturesque: ‘One hardly considers a beautiful ruin as an article of exclusive and individual property, upon which one could exercise the fantasies of an unbridled imagination. One considers the ruin as being placed on deposit, as a lease on an object that one must preserve for the amusement and admiration of posterity. A ruin is almost something sacred.... We see it more as a creation of Nature than of Art.’ This is the reason, Hugo proclaims, that ‘monuments belong to their owner, their beauty to everyone’, and that the Charter of Venice adopted this decree in 1964, establishing our obligations in modern times before the historic monument.

Yet the notion of ‘monument’ is even older. In 1691, Charles d’Aviler defined it as a ‘building which serves to preserve the memory of time and the person who had it built or for whom it was built’. For Dezallier d’Argenville, it possesses three functions: ‘to preserve the memory of things past, to immortalize a hero and to illustrate a nation’, to which Millin adds the artistic value. The memorial function of buildings will moreover progressively fade, in a way directly proportional to the interest that the Commission des Monuments Historiques de France invests in them. The value of the art of the monument, having become preponderant, implies the effort of rationality, which John Ruskin judges in a completely negative manner. For Ruskin, the respect for these monuments should be expressed by an absence of intervention: ‘The conservation of monuments from the past is not a simple question of convenience or sentiment. We do not have the right to touch them. They do not belong to us. They belong in part to those who built them, in part to the generations that will follow us.’ If for Ruskin the historic monument addresses itself to all humankind, at least in old Europe, for William Morris, the concern for its protection should extend well beyond to encompass all artistic testimonies, including those of distant civilizations.

One could give many reasons for which a human work of art could claim universality. Its
aesthetic quality is a reason frequently invoked, but also its historic value; the ethical or philosophical value of which it is the support; its physionomic value, or the specific silhouette that it has acquired over the course of time and which facilitates its inscription in our collective memory. I am certainly forgetting others. Yet these qualities can only make a work of art universal if all humans share the values upon which it is founded. This is clearly impossible. If we speak of the universal nature of a work of art, we form a judgement based on formidable presuppositions. There would be, on the cultural level, symbols that would be shared by all peoples across time. This would signify, obviously, that our values would constitute a reference for the entire world. This is the utopia of the French Revolution and the Empire.

Universal would perhaps be valid for a work of art that returns humans, whatever their origins, to an essential part of their humanity. This again is an illusion. A painting by Van Gogh from his final period does not touch all people in the same way – the symbolic value of the colours used by the painter, the myth of the cursed artist constitute over-determinations that strongly influence our interpretation as Westerners. The masks and statues of Africa or Oceania did not ‘speak’ to Europeans, other than as curiosities, the same as a narwhal’s tusk or as a dentrite. Even when objects from Africa, which we consider today primarily as works of art, began to spark the interest of European artists in the first ten years of the twentieth century, it was for very different motives. Picasso, for example, criticized Matisse for not being, like he was, sensitive to their magic powers. Picasso himself did not consider them primarily as works of art, for the same reason as the painting by Douanier Rousseau.

The increasing mobility of people who have easy access to the heritage of countries unfamiliar to them (up until recently, except through reading material or films) has led countless objects to acquire not a status of universality but a familiarity that progressively erases their singularity and inherent symbolic values. The obligatory itineraries, established by the tourist industry, do not contribute to greater knowledge of monuments as artistic or cultural testimonies: they consecrate a kind of patrimonial anthology whose elements suffer from over consumption, with all the harmful consequences of which we are aware. It is not the number of knowable works that increases, but rather the most well known works that are most visited. It is always the most frequented museums that attract an ever-increasing number of visitors.

What is striking today is the contradiction between an ever-increasing rational effort at the service of heritage conservation and restoration (of either monuments or museums) and the economic, even industrial, packaging and management of this heritage. Responsible politicians too often have every right to decide arbitrarily on the survival or death of heritage testimonies. The reserves of museums are pried open by the most disrespectful, who consider them as potential sources of revenue.

The globalization of the culture industry is only just beginning. Already in 1992, Françoise Choay drew our attention to this dark perspective in *L’allégorie du patrimoine* (The Allegory of
Fifteen years later we must face the evidence that, in an increasingly clear manner, globalization tends to erase what we call the universal nature of a great work of art because the universality of a work is not an acquired thing, as curious as that may seem. The imaginary museum consistently and regularly wears out the aura of a work of art. Little by little, the work of art is no more than a simple image, so flat that the illusion of relief is lost, without any tactile value. That is to say that the work of art does not exist except through its reproduction on flat paper or screen. A recent publicity poster showed the interior of a museum with, in the foreground, a dozen mobile phones displaying paintings on their screens. This promotional poster was not advertising a mobile phone company, but the Musée du Louvre! With the help of a minute screen, the paintings of the great Renaissance masters are thus consumed, and this consumption is proposed as the real mandate for the visit.

The project for a book to trace the evolution of architecture, from the Temple of Solomon to the monuments of the Baroque age, developed in the milieu of architects such as Christopher Wren and Fischer von Erlach. In 1721 Von Erlach published the *Project for an Historic Architecture*, the model for numerous attempts (until the early 20th century) to display a collection of universal masterpieces, encompassing all civilizations. Books and manuals dedicated to the general history of art therefore evoke a certain number of universally famous works of art. If the authors of these books only mentioned little-known works, unfamiliar to their readers, they would be rapidly perplexed. These books form multiple reference points within a much larger ensemble to which, in reality, very few people have access. A museum visit is the occasion for them to verify whether these reference points are confirmed in a way through the presence of other similar works. If not, they are disoriented. The success of famous museums is due in large part to the possibility offered to visitors to confirm the existence of these reference points. One could say that visitors therefore find themselves in familiar territory, pleased to discover in the galleries the confirmation of what they thought they knew about the history of art or art in general. The imaginary museum, whose merits Malraux once praised, is a collection of postcards that reproduce the most famous art of all time. Still today, certain teachers dream of furnishing their students with manuals in which a succession of photographic reproductions of a hundred or so ‘emblematic works’ thus provide an authoritative lesson on the masterpieces to facilitate the assimilation of notions of style and the history of art. This art at the pinnacle stems from an extremely pernicious conception of the history of art, introducing and establishing in the student’s mind a standardized aesthetic and a teleological history of art.

Lastly, there is another factor to be taken into consideration. The perception of the heritage of the past is neither fixed, nor transmitted with a definitive interpretation. The art of which we are the living witnesses offers us a new perspective on the past, whether we are conscious of this or not. The notion of masterpiece has lost its former meaning, linked not only to the medieval guilds, but also to most of the aesthetic standards. As during all previous eras, the art of our period produces unequal works of art for which a clear...
lapse of time is necessary in order to determine their innovation, interest, and power of anticipation. Which works realized in the second half of the 20th century can now claim to possess a universal value? Because of the easy access to information, are art works more numerous, more immediately accessible to societies distant from those that produce them? Certainly not. Yet they possess an undisputable power: that of making the notion of universality relative, in its turn.
The Phenomenology of Art: the site of the work of art, the place of the collection

by Éric Marion

Éric Marion is a professor of philosophy.

‘Colours – listen closely – are the brilliant tint of ideas and of God. The transparency of mystery, the iridescence of laws. Their pearly smile reanimates the deadened face of the unconscious world. Where have all our yesterdays gone? The plain and the mountain that I saw? They are here in this painting, in these colours. Even more than in your poems, because more materialized senses participate, the consciousness of the world lives on through our canvases. They mark the stages of Man. From the reindeer on the cave interiors to Monet’s cliffs on the walls of the butcher’s shop, we can follow the human journey.’

Joachim Gasquet thus relates his conversation with Paul Cézanne. The world endures on the walls of Lascaux, and within the space of a Monet painting. Cézanne’s path continues the long journey of the everlasting peoples of the world. And it is of fundamental importance here to question this connection between the work of art and the world that Cézanne’s remark emphasizes. How is the work of art situated in relationship with all that exists? What is the site or the space of the pictorial work of art? Visitors leaving an exhibition may well exclaim: ‘That was something!’ Aren’t they precisely signifying that what was seen
has nothing to do with a ‘thing’, as we usually refer to it, as any part of reality in its entirety? Indeed, in a way, the work of art is not a part of it. The painted reindeer, Monet’s cliff or haystack, Cézanne’s apple or mountain do not belong to the category of the ‘real’. Not because it would be a question of ‘representing’, re-creating, simulating, or even imitating this ‘reality’, but because ‘reality’ shows us a much vaster world than that of objects. In the same way, granted, painting somehow extends into space, as does everything that exists in the world. However, this expansion at the core of the painting, its own dilation, its deployment, can in no way be reduced to what is usually called three-dimensional space. ‘It is this that the painting should first offer us,’ Cézanne confided once again to Gasquet: ‘a harmonious warmth, an abyss into which the eye plunges, a voiceless germination. In order to love a painting, one must first absorb oneself in it. One must lose consciousness, descend with the painter into the dark, tangled roots of things, resurface with the colours, blossom in the light beside them.’

The work of art is a nocturnal interval, a return to the dawn, an orphic descent to the origin of things. Mallarmé spoke to Verlaine of the earth’s deployment, ‘fold upon fold’, the poet’s duty being ‘the orphic explanation of the earth’. Sinking down into its very origins, painting escapes the world of things of which we usually have the most meagre experience. And this uphill return that takes root relinquishes the shapes and figures of geometrical space, to join an original, unperceived spatiality.

Henceforth, the space of the world over which man has control, the world of Galileo and Newton, received its metaphysical determinations from Descartes at the beginning of the modern world. Thought starting from a subjectum, the surface, in width, length and depth, is the attribute of the reification of external things; the duration, the order and the measure of those constituting the modes of this attribution. ‘The extension,’ writes Descartes, ‘in width, length and depth, constitutes the nature of the corporal substance.’ This reality specific to the body, uniformly susceptible to all calculations and measurements, constitutes the condition of the scientific project of modern times. This apparently inoffensive inflection in the understanding of what is, and which for us goes almost without saying, performs a critical transformation in our relationship to the world. Indeed, everything that lies outside the subjectum, as represented from this starting-point, appears as the totality of objectum, objects here capable of being fully analysed and measured. This extension, including any earthly object, reveals an absolute uniform dimension, without privileging any places or sites. Bodies without distinction, odourless, colourless and insipid, are in substance what they are because of their quantitative determinations. And this project of measuring and analysing all that surrounds us makes possible the progressive establishment of a universal transformation of all things, to be used for and by man who has become lord of being, or according to the expression at the conclusion of the Discourse on Method ‘as master and possessor of Nature’. This phrase, in keeping with a long scholastic tradition, still preserves the primacy of God over created things, but constitutes a decisive advance for the human subject, becoming the centre of all that can be represented. The world is thus configured from a space suitable to a desire for exact research and constant exploitation of all that exists.
This space distinctly conceived from Cartesian geometry is not that which underlies the vision of the painter, who would like to weave ‘all the infinite network of shades of blue and brown’.

Let us listen to the artist’s rage expressed against his own time which is also fundamentally our own: ‘How can they imagine, the others, that with plumb lines, academies, and predetermined, inflexible measurements, we can capture changing, iridescent matter? ... They become idiotic, hardened... a block in the brain, a window, a geometry’. The shimmering substance, the impulse towards the light, the iridescence of Cézanne. The iridescence is not that of a substance whose chemical and geometric analysis will be the final word. On the contrary, matter essentially belongs to the iridescence of an original light, to the first appearance of what becomes manifest, to the clearing which comes from the origins. Cézanne’s hylozoism is not derived from a laboratory. His
Cézanne could have adopted, as Matisse did, Delacroix’s phrase: ‘Exactitude is not truth.’ The site of the work of art escapes the space of objects, as well as their exact familiarity. What appears in the work of art is a primordial phenomenon, which hides the world of familiar things, on which, however, this world depends. Martin Heidegger constantly addresses this primordial phenomenon throughout his intellectual development, situated within an experience avowed to be similar to that of Cézanne. ‘I found here,’ he wrote in Aix-en-Provence in 1958, ‘the path of Paul Cézanne, to which, from its beginning to its end, my own way of thinking corresponds in a certain manner.’ François Fédier reminds us that Heidegger had encountered Cézanne’s painting soon after the war and that he wrote a text entitled ‘Cézanne’ for René Char in 1970. This correspondence might also be conjectured from the following passage in his 1952 summer lecture entitled ‘What Do We Call Thinking?’: ‘We are now aware of the impact of the mountainous mass, not from the perspective of its geological structure, nor from the perspective of its geographical site, but only from its presence (Anwesen).’ The original phenomenon is that of its entry into presence. The work of art allows the phenomenon of the advent of presence to become manifest. The site of art, like that of thought, which is not forgotten in the desire for exactitude, is the working out of truth, the narrow and bright escape from the space of objects into the land of truth. Cézanne does not see Mont Sainte-Victoire as something before his eyes to be represented, recaptured on the canvas according to the painter’s fantasy. It is the mountain in its very be-ing that is shaped before our eyes, in its very deployment. What the
painter’s eye sees in order to celebrate it, to bring it to the threshold of his visibility, to its just legibility, is a virginal and deep-rooted harmony, the very decompartmentalization of the presence, which arranges, shapes and assembles all that constitutes a world. The truth in nature of which Cézanne claims to be the witness is this donation or this offering that leads every existing thing into its own being.

That which the Greeks called phusis, nature, is precisely the assembly of this divine ordering. According to Cézanne, ‘reading nature’ is what is meant by ‘seeing’ in painting. The French word lire (to read) comes from the Latin legere, which also means ‘to gather’, ‘to harvest’, ‘to collect’, which in turn corresponds to the Greek verb legein, which also signifies ‘saying’ and thinking. Logos is the word for ‘thought’ at the dawn of the West, the dawn of philosophy. The painter’s gaze is no less pensive. It collects and receives that which gathers at the heart of the deployment of presence. The painting draws its own configuration from the very configuration that is offered. The work of art is reception and collection. And that which it gathers in itself in no way concerns the decision of the artist, but the very revelation of appearance. The poetic state is a means of collecting oneself, a state of meditation and acquiescence. And the painter’s consciousness is the prayer of the eyes. Léa Larguier evokes this phrase of Cézanne: ‘Art is a religion’. Matisse wanted art to express his almost religious awe towards life.

Art is the implementation of truth, a work whose site is the phenomenon of the entry of presence. This primordial phenomenon, instituting the world, grants each object its being according to a configuration, a meaning, an invisible order that defines this world by rights. Dispensation leads to presence, this place being in no way simply any site containing an object, but the site of a free relationship of each thing to itself in a co-belonging to the world. This concession of being spaces out and harmonizes all that is in it. In his remarks concerning art and space, which followed his January 1962 conference ‘Time and Being’, Heidegger ventures to listen to language. ‘What does language mean by the word “space”? Evoking the opening of a space, spacing. This means: weeding, clearing the undergrowth.Spacing creates freedom, openness, spaciousness, for the establishment and residence of man.’ The open topos of the painting, its spaciousness, its release, receives and allows the spacing specific to the deployment of presence to manifest itself. Is this not what Cézanne refers to when speaking of ‘a kind of deliverance. The radiance of the soul, the gaze, the externalized mystery, the exchange between the earth and the sun, the ideal and reality, the colours! An elevated colourful logic abruptly replaces the dark, stubborn geometry. Everything harmonizes, the trees, the fields, the houses. I see. By patches of colour.’

Each of us can test what Cézanne experienced. The gaze of the spectator in turn has meaning only as reception or meditation, so that nothing is less devoid of meaning or signification than the ‘space’ even when it is possible for us to look at Cézanne’s canvases.

Today the space dedicated to pictorial works of art is found in the museum, the private or public collection, exhibition and gallery, which,
each in its own way, assembles art works together, displaying them for visitors. The Latin word ‘collectio’ means to assemble, to collect, to unite, but also to reason and to argue. The assembly of art works can of course be a mere accumulation or even a historic or geographic grouping, according to the date and provenance of paintings and their authors. Other choices, evidently more subtle and enlightened, and better argued, can be made to design the order of a collection, according to aesthetic motives, informed by a profound knowledge of the history of art. Yet under its different guises, the museographic space unites pieces in order to make them available to the spectator, to preserve and conserve them. What becomes of the work of art and its site in this transplantation that places it within a collection? This transplantation could be a significant transformation of the works found there. In his Origin of the Work of Art, Heidegger writes that the control taken by the diverse actors, official authorities, critics, philosophers, connoisseurs, art historians, visitors and dealers, ‘all this bustling activity around works of art, as extensive and as impartial as can be, never attains the works of art other than in their being/object’. Becoming part of the collection thus transposes and installs the painting in the space of objects.

This objectifying transformation is actually not obvious or deliberate. The space of the visibility of art objects is inseparable from the manner in which all that is, in the era of modern technology, begins to appear. Meditating on the essence of modern technology, which in its be-ing is not at all technical, allows the indistinct meaning of being, as we constantly encounter it, to be perceived. This essence of technology is a metaphysical phenomenon, which Heidegger names Gestell, which in German commonly means a shelf or a bookcase which may contain a collection of books. Stellen means to place, to install, and the prefix ‘ge’ (like ‘syn’ in Greek and ‘cum’ in Latin) adds the idea of a collection, a set, an assembly. Gestell makes available all that is in its entirety. Being presents itself as being entirely and constantly available and usable with a view for something else. The Gestell is the collection of the being ordered ‘according to the unitary mechanism of consumption’. The word ‘consumption’, cum-summare, is similar when its meaning is not restricted to the market of business and profit. The French word often chosen to translate this meaning is ‘arraisonnement’, the fact of being subject to calculating reason. All that is placed, installed within the mechanism, appears to be totally calculable, analysable and exploitable, within the project of modern technology. The Gestell is the collection of the world controlled by calculating, objectifying. The ‘real’ Mont Sainte-Victoire, like all things, becomes a reserve of energy available for various industries, a resource for business and tourism, an object of study or a place of leisure activity. And the pictorial work is transformed by its exhibition, by becoming part of the collection, into an aesthetic object, placed at the spectator’s disposition. This assembly of the mechanism with a view to a universal exploitation of the being covers, conceals, and seals the assembly at the core of the phenomenon of the presence, deliverance and spacing of the being. The possibility of even seeing the state of being in its be-ing is here annulled. All that remains is the state of being there before an object displayed.
where the richness of the original phenomenon of appearance is annihilated.

Concerning the Sistine Madonna, Heidegger points out that the ‘mode of museum representation levels everything in the uniformity of the “exhibition”. Here, there are only places and no longer a site.’ The establishment of the collection and the museum organization assign to the art work, which has become an object, an emplacement which becomes the substitute for the very site of the work. Even the possibility of seeing is affected and significantly modified. The space of the exhibition threatens the work as a site of the visible, and art as the working out of the truth. The accessibility of art objects threatens the possibility of collection and inner self-collection, of meditation and contemplation, the offering of the phenomenon of presence. This imperceptible tension actually results from the greatest of antagonisms, a conflict that is in fact worldwide, a silent antagonism that involves our relationship to the world. What is at stake here is the very shape of possibilities offered to our gaze, for example, when we discover paintings by Cézanne at the Musée d’Orsay because the placement planned in advance, and arising from the mechanism that controls the visible in its entirety, harms its own site. This can prevent us from seeing. The aesthetic pleasure derived from the painting thus disposed does not harmonize with the test of the truth of being embedded within this work.

This worldwide struggle between the place and the site of the painting that it endangers does not mean that a true experience of the gaze is henceforth impossible. Otherwise, how could we make our point? And how could Heidegger’s footsteps have followed Cézanne’s path? ‘One only speaks well of painting when standing before painting,’ said Cézanne on a visit to the Louvre. A great admirer of Cézanne, the poet Robert Marteau, in Le Louvre entrouvert and Le message de Paul Cézanne, allows us to meditate on what is perhaps the specific richness of the museum and the exhibition. He writes:

The hazards of an exhibition are such that when Five Bathing Women’ (1885–87) from Basle are placed next to Three Bathing Women’ (1879–82) from the Petit Palais [Paris], one notices that something has happened along the way. If, because of the number, we are nearer in the second [painting] to the original fable, the first accentuates the volume and the presence of bodies more, not in the sense of a sensual naturalism, but along the lines of what is glimpse in the Immortals. Also, in the Three Bathing Women, nature, in the guise of water and woods, appears as a jewel case to protect the terrestrial flesh whose lustre has not yet opened the space where the divinities roam. It is not the representation of a bathing scene in a shaded river. In fact, the intention, which we see realized in the painting from Basle, concerns music whose rhythm places the dwelling on earth within the reality of the heavens. Through the various paintings dedicated to the same theme, we can follow the path: we can then verify, if we take heed to listen and look, the evidence of what has slowly emerged unheeded, as if by mistake, and perhaps as a reward for having simply paid attention.

In the encounter of art works thus collected, what inadvertently holds the gaze is not the additional link to the works made by the collection directing the spectator’s reception to help grasp their differences and points in common, and to embrace the totality of the artist’s production by specifying points of continuity or rupture. The expression ‘the work of the artist’, in
its dual meaning (the part and the whole), is burdened with this relation of a posteriori synthesis. The richness of a collection is not to propose a chosen, superimposed reading of paintings, but rather to allow, in an imperceptible way, the display of their intimate relationship, their always indistinct proximity, far from the manifest similarities or differences. The gaze that then retraces the course and thread of the works of art is the opposite of that which compares and evaluates the series of pictorial productions, even with the greatest finesse and soundness of taste. The gaze in waiting is not the view of an aesthete. The Louvre can revealingly open in a moment of grace when the intimate and hidden tie secretly linking the works of art precisely frees them from any superimposed order or any oppressive accumulation. The job of the collector would then be the complete opposite of an art because it does not produce or propose anything, preferring the retreat into the line of composition. Claiming more than erudition, but all the same the most intimate experience of what is displayed, this virtue of reading, which first unties more than it ties, allows the art works to weave (as if by themselves) their relationships and to correspond starting from this ‘open Same’ that reveals itself as a grace, relentlessly unique each time, the release of things which have come to be.

The secret correspondence between paintings thus enriches the gaze that beholds each of them. François Fédier provides us with the secret meaning of the gaze: ‘in order to see the light, the eye of the night is necessary, keeping the eye of the night, in order to look’.19 The eye of the day, on the contrary, allows itself to be blinded by all that is in the light, without ever seeing it. In the night, nothing monopolizes the eye, distracting it from an obscurity that becomes revealed. The gaze in painting is perhaps always this nocturnal eye open to the brilliance of the painting, which is most piercing when it experiences the night extending between the works of art. A shared presence, writes René Char. Starting from the art works, the bathing women speak silently among themselves and speak to those who listen to them. The source of the conversation between the painter and the poet – and the words of Cézanne are also the words of a poet – between the thinker and the latter, between the painted canvases, is thus the same. Through their differences, the art works receive and display the discreet and joyous salutation of be-ing, the entry into presence, which always subsides and restrains itself. The veritable collection is a co-reading, a silent correspondence, which is not first that of the museum. The collection of the Muses precedes that of the museum.

One only speaks well of painting when in front of painting. Yet painting for Cézanne is a kind of reading, ‘reading nature’ in its secrecy. It is not the exhibitions and the institutions that preserve works of art, but it is they that save them, and that save our world from forgetting being and natural disclosure. Only the art object can be maintained against the effects of time. However the salvation of the work of art is not first and foremost in the conservation of its being-object. On the contrary, it is the work of art that possesses that which saves because the world at its root perpetuates itself there. The painting which gathers in its be-ing the secret of the unveiling preserves the possibility that man truly has to inhabit the earth. It then exposes the person who looks at it more than it exhibits itself. The fate of the world
and humankind is at stake, in the gaze that only beholds the object or, on the contrary, allows itself to discover what the painting deploys. The thought that ‘opens up to the secret’20 of our technological era, that of Heidegger, has also understood remaining on the alert, enduring the truth of the work of art and rescuing the site of the art from places where the unitary mechanism of consumption leaves us. This state of meditation is that of the painter, but also of the poet, such as Friedrich Holderlin, and the message they deliver to us: ‘But there where danger lies, there also thrives that which saves’.21

| NOTES |


2. Ibid., p. 132.


6. Ibid., p. 164.

7. Févier, op. cit., p. 19. Concerning all these points, see the excellent text by the same author. Voir sous le voile de l’interprétation [Seeing Under the Veil of Interpretation].


10. Ibid., p. 15, quoting Léo Larguier.


16. Heidegger, M. Apports à la philosophie [Contributions to Philosophy], §238 (trans. by François Févier), Poésie, No. 81, Summer.


The Museum, a Universal Device

by Jean-Louis Déotte

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It was my intention to show, in *Le musée, l'origine de l'esthétique*,¹ that the question of art is only possible because of the existence of that special institution we call a museum, because it suspends, or puts in parentheses, the cult destination of the works, that is to say, their aesthetic capacity to create a community and create a world. Thus, for the first time, the works, becoming suspended, can be contemplated aesthetically for themselves, on the condition, as Benjamin indicates, that one remains three metres away from them.

From whence comes the Kantian idea of a necessarily contemplative and disinterested aesthetic judgement, because my existence is no longer a problem of the work (so art is not intended for man from the outset!), because my existence does not depend on that of the work, which would have been the case, on the contrary, if it had been a cult object, cosmetic in the true sense, theologically or politically speaking: a point of analysis, which remains that of M. Heidegger (*The Origin of the Work of Art*).²
The museum, then, is a device that invents art in the modern sense of the aesthetic. But let us first consider the question of art. It was only from the end of the eighteenth century, as a result of the Jena Romanticism of the Schlegel brothers, Schleiermacher, Novalis and others, that the question of art was posed as such. Previously, in Kant, for example, the aesthetic judgement did not concern a work of art, but an object of nature (something presented in a collection, and his *Critique of the Faculty of Judgement* begins with an ensemble of collections that consist of so many series of objects exemplifying this or that notion), and the aesthetic section of the *Critique* concludes with the relatively academic reprise of a hierarchical fine-arts system according to the traditional opposition of form and matter.

Somewhat earlier, Lessing, in his *Laocoön*, wrote an introduction to aesthetics in the sense that we understand it today. In emancipating the spatial arts (essentially painting and sculpture) from their traditional subjection to poetry, the text became itself the paradigm of the arts of the time. Lessing thus marks the end of the former cosmetics, the former cult functions of the arts, in so far as he introduces the distinction between a work destined for cult and that same work delivered over to aesthetic judgement through the simple fact of its suspension in a museum. All German aesthetics from the middle of the eighteenth century are in fact a museum aesthetics, from Winckelmann to Hegel’s *Lectures on Aesthetics*, passing through Hölderlin et al. The same is true in France for the art criticism of a Diderot or the history writing of a Michelet.

When we question ourselves, as does the American modernist critic Greenberg among many others, about the essence of painting, sculpture, music and so on, we should never forget to isolate a sort of ‘transcendental impurity’ (Adorno), which is necessarily technical and institutional, and which opens up the field of the question of art and is thus at the heart of the ‘aesthetic regime’ of art in Rancière’s sense of the term. We can characterize the device of the museum by saying not that it invents art from any sort of matter, which would be a fatuity constantly contradicted by experience (art does not depend on a consensus of experts in the discipline), but that it isolates the ‘materials’, if we conserve this term over impressed upon by Aristotelian hylomorphism, as cited by Simondon.

Let us take an example of the invention of a ‘material’ outside the plastic arts, in contemporary music. If the ‘sound’ is the minimal element of this music since post-war musique concrète, and no longer the ‘note’, we can see clearly that it is indivisible from contemporary inventions, such as the tape recorder and the technical methods of recording, and electronic-acoustic studio production, the disc, the compact disc, and other devices.

In addition to the museum for plastic arts, the ‘aesthetic regime’ would not have been possible without the invention of patrimony by Quatremère de Quincy, without another rapport with the ruin (Riegl), without the romantic idea of a *Symlitterarur* that implies the library, which Flaubert would demonstrate brilliantly, first with the *Temptation* and above all with *Bouvard and Pécuchet*. 
Before being a new relationship between the sayable and the visible, as Rancière writes,⁴ the ‘aesthetic regime of art’ implies a revolution of common sensibility, of the distribution of the sensible in the eighteenth century: implying a recognition of the equality of the faculty of judgement. This presumes in everyone the same faculty of judgement: everyone can judge without the distinction of belonging, be it works of art (the exhibitions held in the Salon Carré of the Louvre in the mid-eighteenth century), or political events (the French Revolution). Our modern devices, like the museum, did not invent equality, but, more paradoxically, they discovered/invented it. They shaped common sensibility. In this sense, we must turn to them to unearth the creation of a world and the creation of an epoch.

Of course, people did not wait until the end of the eighteenth century to discuss art. It existed in the seventeenth century, and even earlier in Italy, with the so-called fine-arts academies, as evinced for example by the debate around couleurisme in France.⁵ But these debates about techniques and the relationship of drawing to colour, about content, etc., are made possible by the fact that academicians share the same certainties, which make up the epoch, that of representation in the largest sense: that the arts should convince and persuade the men who should be persuaded, and entertain the others (the common man, the people). Besides this social and political necessity that Rancière indeed analyses as the ‘representative regime of the arts’, these academicians share the same imperative: that one must represent according to the canons of the device of perspective. Their programme was established, generally speaking, from Alberti’s Della Pictura: the device of perspective establishes the rules of the legitimate construction of the representative scene. It is this that is ontologically and technically primary and not l’Istoria through which the appearance is rendered possible.

Artisans, and the artists they became from the fifteenth century onwards, could, as Vasari tells us in his Lives, debate these issues, but they all shared the same belief in the destination of their art because they equipped it in the same way. In sharing therefore the same cosmetic (in the true sense of a prescription according to the principles and order of the cosmos), that is, sharing the conviction that one identical appearance technique must lie at the heart of their savoir-faire so as to generate a community whose expectations they knew, they could not stage debates relevant to what we today call aesthetics. Because as soon as art enters the era of the aesthetic, the public to whom it is destined is unknown. Each new work is as if laid before the eyes of a public that does not exist, whom it must sensitize to recognize it as a work of art. Here we have a loop. The question of art involves that of the public, from whence a permanent crisis surrounding the equation of art and public. If there were no risk of being misunderstood, we could say that the debates of the ‘classical’ artists were ‘academic’, because these debates, ideally, could be settled by a tribunal, whence the necessity of academies to intervene in litigations between artists! As a result, the different ‘quarrels of the images’ (e.g. disputes in Byzantium between iconoclasts and iconodules, disputes between Protestant Reformation and Catholic Counter-Reformation⁷), do not result from the
aesthetic in our own sense of the word, but rather from the onto-theocosmetic, which is a mode of metaphysics and technique in the broad sense. What they have in common is a presumption of a norm for the image: incarnation or incorporation, whereas since the Renaissance, the legitimate norm is that of representation, where this is separated from that which it renders legitimate or visible as object. Consequently, only cosmetic differences of opinion, in the sense of Lyotard’s \textit{Differend}, can exist between these norms: no tribunal is able to settle the argument, from whence came the fights to the death and the destruction of works in Byzantium as in the wars of religion. This has nothing to do with the aesthetic debates provoked by modern avant-gardists. Questions about the effective existence of God in the image, or of God as image or representation, or his absence or withdrawal from the sensitive, etc., involve radical divisions at the heart of communities. These divisions bring into play theoretical and practical devices, and institutions, because every time the definition of the being-together is at stake, the definition of common sensibility and thus consequently the definition of the ordinary being (the singularity). The norm of incarnation (and for the types of discourse, of revelation) can only conceive this being-together as a body, that of representation (and for types of deliberative discourse), only as an ideally rational object (deliberative politics). The error of certain contemporary iconophiles is to fold back incarnation on to representation or to criticize representation in the name of incarnation (a certain Levinas), to desire politically that societies that stand legitimately as proof of division (democracy) be incarnated in a body (totalitarianism).

It is devices like the museum that give their balance to the arts and impose on them their temporality, their definition of common sensibility, like that of the ordinary singularity. Let us look at some other examples of devices and limit ourselves to modernity, which is indivisible from perspective projection: perspective itself, the camera obscura, the museum, photography, cinema, video, etc. It is these devices that create an epoch and not the arts. This destroys the pretension of establishing knowledge of the image, a general semiology of the image for example, as if one could compare the Lascaux cave paintings and the drawings of Magritte. What matters is the study of the image and its support or surface of inscription (Lyotard: \textit{Discours, Figure}, 1971). A Byzantine icon results from a destinatory programme that is necessarily technical: one does not produce an icon as one painted an ideal city in fifteenth-century Italy! But, in the centre of the list of these devices, the museum has a special place: it is the museum that prevents the other devices from accomplishing their task, which is to configure a world and define an existence. Consequently, pieces from an absolutely different origin can cohabit in a sort of ‘peace of the braves’ aesthetic, all the cosmetic differences being removed, the museum will have been alone in realizing the universal concord. One should recover its imprint in all the universal peace projects since the end of the eighteenth century.

But let us return to the \textit{appareillage}, or device-system, of the arts: in doing so, we do not reduce the arts to materials (line, colour, etc.), which take form thanks to epoch-making devices. We should be particularly sensitive to this when we state that the arts always exist as devices. Let us
take the example of drawing and how it was turned into a device by the destinal imposition of perspective from fifteenth-century Italy onwards. At that moment, drawing became indivisible from this device. The emergence of the notion of disegno in Italy is proof of this, a notion which through its dissemination, its polysemy, shows us that the drawing was not only subjected to geometry as Lyotard wrote. Indeed, with the authors of the Treatises, from Alberti onwards, passing via Vasari to Leonardo, disegno would open up a semantic field irreducible to the concept. The field of disegno is that of the sketch, of the trace on a sheet of paper, of the line shaping a figure, of the contour becoming a shadow, almost a colour, to the figure realized, to the archive, passing through the quasi-linguistic sign of nomination, to the drawing – that is to say the project – then to the a priori idea of the work aimed at by the artistic genius from a quasi-Platonist perspective. One can clearly see that it is not a matter of graphic material, as opposed to colour, brutally invading the whole pictorial field. Conversely, the device of perspective cannot legitimately be employed, displayed, theorized to give the maximum of its constructive power, unless it is traced on a wall for a fresco and above all on a piece of paper which will retain all that is unrealized, all that is regretted, working thus for cultural memory and transmission in the studio. We cannot therefore distinguish drawing from device for pure analytical reasons. The disegno was even the condition for the demonstration of the device as, for example, for any demonstration of a problem in geometry. Being a perspective device, the disegno is thus the realization of this device and the necessary production of this act on an indispensable support: paper. We cannot imagine the disegno without paper, which also breaks away from the condition of a simple material. Paper retains its supremacy more from the device of perspective than from printing. The disegno is situated between the device and the work of art: its temporality can only be complex.

The devices that we have analysed have in common their being projective, and it is for this reason that we can say that they are ‘modern’. They distinguish themselves from devices submitted to the norm of incarnation, as well as from more archaic devices, like those submitted to the norm of markings on the body and the earth (and for types of discourse, narrative or story). These ‘modern’ devices are perhaps devices par excellence: we can analyse them by representing them, because we can place them squarely in front of us. They have an aspect of prosthesis, which those that succeed them (digital devices) will no longer have, by perfectly innervating the mind, thus becoming invisible.

The very principle of the device is to make similar, to match, to equate what was hitherto heterogeneous. This principle is of course at the heart of a museum collection, but it is the same for all devices. It is for this reason that for the ‘moderns’, since the Renaissance, phenomena are only known because they are objectifiable (representable) by the device of perspective that introduces a receptive space, which is quantifiable, homogeneous, isotopic: rational. From here comes the new physics from Galileo onwards and the principle of reason according to Leibniz. The same is true for artists (painters, sculptors, architects, etc.), who would only be able to represent the world and invent new devices on this basis. Hence,
as was said above, the privileging of the design as project, sketch, layout and completed delineation of a figure. And the subordination of colour, above all in Florence (less so in Venice).

The museum is often made up of private collections. There are two different modes of collecting objects, if we believe G. Salles’ fine book, *Le regard*, on collecting and collectors. Salles describes the gaze of a collector in front of a group of objects laid out in no particular order: his practised eye is capable of picking out empirical likenesses where the museum curator, who is no more than a university educated art historian, would be subjected to a principle of analytic recognition according to the schema of sameness. With the collector, as Salles lets it be understood, it is a principle of texture that wins: the reason behind his collection is not analytic. His objects, which can belong to very different artefactual registers (furnishing, engraving, painting, sculpture) have the same texture, while the pieces acquired by the curator are acquired due to analytic, historiographic criteria: same producer, same period, same school, etc. In making this distinction between the similar and the same, between a real collection and a museum collection, Benjamin, considering the case of E. Fuchs, a nineteenth-century German collector and art historian, accords the collector a quasi-artistic faculty of assembling things, a faculty denied to the curator.

What distinguishes the device from other similar technical entities like the dispositive is that only the device invents/discovery a temporality, to the extent that the analysis of the temporality of the arts will itself, too, be conditioned by the devices. If we concern ourselves only with the temporality of drawing as art, as to some extent does Derrida in *Mémoires d’aveugle*, we will insist on the non-immediacy of the drawing and the motif. This is because in drawing, the draughtsman cannot avoid looking at his moving hand and not at the external motif. To draw, the draughtsman must blind himself to the motif! The drawing is thus always late in relation to the present of the motif: between the event of the motif and the inscription of the trace, there is a delay: the temporality of the drawing, roughly speaking, is that of the Freudian aftermath. This is what we are confronted with when we want to describe time: wishing to describe T0, I can only do so by dissociating myself from it, condemning myself to T1.

If, on the other hand, I am only interested in the temporality of the perspective device, following, for example, Alberti’s description of the geometric dispositive – where fabrics hold an eminent position, since everything in the visual pyramid is thread, canvas, shape etc. – then I would reduce the temporality to that invented by Alberti: a picture is a shape of the visual pyramid, this shape can be none other than instantaneous. In short, the perspective device invents an extraordinary temporality, that of the instant, which is something completely different from the infinite shape of the continuum of movement well known to the Greeks. Yet, as we have seen, perspective has been the condition of the arts since the fifteenth century, its temporality of the instant is imposed. Now, what about the museum and its temporality?

If it is commonplace for aesthetics since Lessing to compare the arts from the point of view...
of temporality (for example, Adorno comparing painting and music), the same does not apply to
the arts in so far as they are conditioned by devices. We have distinguished those devices which, having
projectivity in common, given that their common
ground is perspective, can be said to be ‘modern’.
This qualification enables us to sense, from another
common ground or surface of inscription, the
numeric and the ‘immaterials’, so dear to Lyotard,
another temporal era, that of the Lyotardian notion
of ‘postmodernity’ \(^{15}\) approximately characterized.

These projective devices can be coupled according
to a principle of contemporaneity: perspective at
the unique point of flight/camera obscura,
museum/photography, analytic cure/cinema,
exhibition/video.

Indeed, on the other side of the perspective
device, that of its projections and its
subjectivization, there is a more archaic device,
without origin, which the Arabs have employed for
a long time: the camera obscura. Its philosophy is
that of immanence (Bergson rather than Leibniz),
its temporality is that of continuous duration with
neither beginning nor end: the reversed images
of the phenomenal world flow over the reversed
surface, opposite the pinhole. The spectatoral
singularity, placed at the heart of the camera,
remains indifferent, pre-subjective, adhering to the
flux of images, necessarily shaded. The two devices
are opposed in every respect, like the instant to the
uninterrupted duration. Recently, Didi-Huberman
was able to show that the conception of an
immanent and continuous duration was elaborated
by Bergson not so much against cinema, of which
he knew little, as against the chronophotography of
E. J. Marey. \(^{16}\) Now, chronophotography most
closely recaptures the conception of the
discontinuous creation of a world that remains
faithful to the laws of physics, dear to Descartes,
The museum and photography form the
latter pair. They are almost contemporaneous
(end of the eighteenth century, beginning of the
nineteenth) and projective, but they signal an
inflection with regard to previous devices, as if
the dimension of the project and the idea made
room for that of grief, even melancholy. This is
the paradox, and it lies at the heart of the
French Revolution: \(^{18}\) the more the circle of
equality widens, the more the sans-part
Rancierians of \textit{La Mésentente} \(^{19}\) climb on to the
political stage and impose new demands and
thus a new distribution of the sensible, the less
men can remain outside humanity because of
one handicap or another (blindness, deafness,
dumbness, retardation, even dementia). Thus the
more the conditions of integration and equality
assert themselves (Tocqueville) on the one hand,
the more the bottomlessness of revolutionary
legitimacy becomes obvious on the other. Of
course, the heart of power is indeed at the centre
of an ideally empty place according to the
powerful analyses by Lefort, but since the
beheading of the French king and the ensuing
dismemberment of the body politic, the search for
the \textit{arché}, the archive (with the sense of origin,
beginning, foundation, what constitutes
authority, etc.) entails a dissociation of the
project and its temporality: on the one hand revolutionary ideology, on the other restructuring archaeology. The Louvre (and all museums since then) will be thought of as that which, on the one hand, frees works from the past, reduced up until then to the obscurity of princely or monastic collections, finally delivering them to the full visibility of limitless communication, and, on the other hand as that which attests to the ideal permanence of French political unity (and all museums will have the tendency from then on to affirm the idea of a people or nation). The political necessity of refoundation that all the post-Gaullist presidents of the Fifth Republic would take up: Pompidou would be at the origin of the eponymous centre, Giscard at the Musée d’Orsay and the Parc de la Villette, Mitterrand at the Louvre pyramid, Chirac at the Musée du Quai Branly. Yet the temporality of the museum device is paradoxical: the ‘newest’ works are also absorbed in so far as they have the capacity to preserve the past. This is a strange retroactivity where the most recent discovers what was already there, in the reserves, for example, and declares it to be its material cause. In fact, the temporal loop of the museum is at the heart of all history writing. In a way, the issue is the establishment of historical truth,20 that we can not attest to objectively, even if we had all the documents to do it (material truth). The museum is indeed the device that, separating a work from its former destination, its former cosmetic, delivers this work to the aesthetic, being aware that a copy disturbs contemplation like a phantom: the trace of ‘historical truth’. Such is the theme of Sokourov’s film, Russian Ark, where former factual or destinatory belongings constantly interrupt the aesthetic wanderings of the ‘Western’ visitor to the interior of the Hermitage in St Petersburg.

In appearance, then, museums are national, cultivating a regional and historical identity. But in fact, this is not at all the case. If we remember that the force of the works’ destination does no more than inhabit the museum imagination, paradoxically, then, the museum is not a place of memory. The best way to break with the force of memory evocation of a piece for the future (not for the present), is to suspend it. Because the museum is a device that generates forgetting. Consequently, artworks are conserved and endure in the future because they are detached from any identity, be it ethnic, political, social or whatever. The museum is the device that generates the universal, a universal by default, and which encounters, in addition, the recipients (the public), who all have the same capacity to judge the works aesthetically (which does not mean recognizing them in the same manner as scholars do).

It is different for photography, even if historical truth is attested here by the clue-giving nature of the image. It is the temporality of the ‘it has been’, which Barthes took over from Benjamin, that imposes itself. There is something incontestable about this: for the image to exist, it was necessary in the past for an object to reflect a beam of light and for the latter to capture it on photo-sensitive film, in spite of possible erasings, despite the codes that image semiologists describe. But there is more, when the photograph was taken, the photographer on the one hand, but above all the object captured on the other, were well aware that they were working for the future. They were not ignorant of the fact that they were addressing
themselves to a future stranger of whom they were asking for something simple but imperious, of the order of duty and thus of law: to name them. He who looks at you in a photo, necessarily from the past, expects just one thing: that you rename him! Each photo is for Benjamin a utopia, not from the past, but lying in the past, waiting for us. 

Since the nineteenth century, it is not only ‘modern’ artworks, that is, those subject to projective devices, that have entered the museum, but also many works of incarnation and incorporation, such as those of the cult of Christianity, or the works more widely submitted to the norm of revelation (Judaism, Islam, even Buddhism, etc.) or even what we unfittingly call the ‘primitive arts’ or those of the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris, as if it were a matter there of a civilizational era.

Those works entering the universal museum, and all museums are in essence universal since they give rise to the universal aesthetic value (unlike cosmetics which are always specific and regional), are thus also modern devices (perspective, photography, cinema, video), incarnational devices (altar paintings, icons, gothic illumination, stained-glass windows, etc.) or ‘savage’ devices (masks, sculptures, fabrics, etc.) which find themselves absorbed by the museum device. The destinatory force in play in these pieces from the fact that they were under the condition of devices in turn finds itself suspended. Do we ask ourselves...
whether we can still kneel before a Virgin and Child (imagine the reaction of the Louvre guards faced with such a situation, in the middle of a crowd of hurried visitors!)? Do we ask ourselves if an art work set in perspective still has the power to generate subjectivity? Do we still enter into a flux of anonymous perception before a Dutch canvas? Will we always have the feeling of waiting for the name in front of this or that photograph? Cinema itself being integrated into installations as is often the case in contemporary art museums, does it leave us pondering the question of how we carry on? On what long-sequence? And videos, do they still suggest to us the feeling that a new law must be pronounced and that a moment of the past will never be recaptured? The power of the museum is such, like that of patrimony, that it brings all the works, even the artefacts – and also their technical and institutional conditions of possibility, the devices – into the circle of universal inclusion. Because these devices destined singularities and beings in common to take on this or that direction, is it not likely that the museum will become a philosophical machine whose objective will be to isolate that which precedes the differentiation or dephasing described by Simondon between singularity and psycho-social being in common, or what he calls pre-individual being (which is a mode of organization of the psycho-social and the individual before any differentiation)?

Simondon, in his 1989 work describes the dephasing of the vital process between techniques and religion, a dephasing that succeeds a ‘magic’ organization of the natural and human worlds, he retains a central, is to say nodal, position for what he calls ‘aesthetic’, a place between technique and religion. For him, aesthetic stands in between technique and religion and has the task of calling to mind, even the future restoration, of the lost magic unity. At the very least, in this situation of remembering the origin and the intermediacy between technique and religion, the aesthetic can be neither totally anti-technique, nor totally anti-religious. It must conserve an essential part (this is the beauty of a suspension bridge or the technical nature of a priest’s ritual). Between ‘the in-excess of unity’, which every religion opens up in its capacity of totalizing particularities and ‘the less than unity’, which organizes each necessarily particularizing technique as no matter what savoir-faire acting upon the world and the others, the aesthetic indeed forges a space, but as memories and potentialities, to all the possible destinations that have configured or will configure the singularity and the being in common. There is just one very slight difference between what Simondon understands here by ‘aesthetic’ and what subsists of the former destinations once their works have entered the museum. What is prefigured by the aesthetic, is conserved by the museum: the museum aesthetic is thus universalizing indeed. And it is so in two senses: preserving the testimony of former destinations, which are at the same time technical and religious (the devices), but also accompanying the dephasing continued from religions and techniques, plus the techniques themselves in theory and practice (ethnographical museums, the Musée des Arts et Métiers, technical museums, aviation museums, automobile, space and maritime museums, and so on). The museum constitutes an immense reserve of material culture, the possibility of historical reflection, as in modern art. Furthermore, it is the development of the philosophy of culture and thus of any genetic philosophy in Simondon’s sense, for whom a technical object is none other than its genesis.

To conclude, in suspending all destinations, all cosmetics, the museum also suspends all the forms of temporality they invented. It thus gives access to the pre-individual temporality which is an omni-temporality, from which all the others emerged. This omni-temporality is certainly more consistent than the spectacle of universal peace to which every visitor to the universal museum can testify. Which implies that the temporality of the museum flâneur, that of his fleeting approach, is in a way archaic: it embraces and precedes all the temporalities that arise and will arise in the future!

| NOTES |


The Ethics of Collecting: universality questioned

by Cécile Marceau

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‘Museums are permanent non-profit institutions open to the public, serving society and its development. They acquire, preserve, disseminate and exhibit tangible and intangible testimonies of peoples and their environments, for purposes of study, education and pleasure.’¹

The end of the twentieth century saw a burgeoning of ‘memory sites’, and among them museums. The role of the museum, as a ‘permanent institution’ is to act as a link between past, present, and future generations. This task of remembering materializes in the collections. The cultural identity of a people is built up around this, and their story is told. Alongside private collections, museums have been the main focus of public collections since the end of the eighteenth century in France. They act as ‘passers-on’ by preserving and transmitting a cultural heritage. The study of the concept of the collection today must necessarily question the very nature of the museum as an institution. This institution is at the core of a modern paradox. While everyone agrees that museum visitors are increasing as never before, and the number of museums is growing, as a Western expression of the ‘democratizing’ of culture, at the same time the meaning or essence of the institution is being fundamentally questioned,
both by art theorists and by artists such as Marcel Duchamp. This fluctuation, between, on the one hand, the level of success and growing number of museums and on the other hand, their criticism, and the questioning of their legitimacy, creates tension that can be analysed from many different perspectives. Here we look at this tension to reflect on the consequences of the crisis faced by museums as an institution over their institutionalized public collections and their works of art. One of the most remarkable results of this crisis of the museum’s institutional authority lies in a movement that goes beyond the realm of art. It consists of the modification of the regulation modalities pertaining to the circulation of works of art and is expressed moreover by self-regulation and privatization mechanisms. These transformations, corollary of the globalization of exchanges and of the market, consequently alter the sense of universalism that governed the creation of museums. Therefore, a study of this evolution should be preceded by an examination of the ‘universal’ character of museums, now more than ever doubted.

The stamp of universality

The museum, if defined as a place of memory, is also a place where a form of power is brought up to date. These two aspects are not contradictory, but must on the contrary be contemplated jointly in order to understand the underlying logic of this institution, of its power and its weaknesses. The idea of universality is the cornerstone of this reflection, which allows us to reconcile and reflect upon the two facets of the museum as an institution. Admittedly, the idea of universality cannot be dissociated from the Enlightenment, it is the centre of Kantian philosophy and the Declaration of Human and Citizens’ Rights of 1789 is its first political incarnation. The twentieth century pursued this ideal by proclaiming, at the end of the Second World War, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, as a hymn to peace and fraternity. The idea of a universal museum follows the same course. After the British Museum, created in 1753 and opened to the public six years later, the Louvre became one of the first revolutionary museums to endorse this ambition of offering its visitors access to former royal collections. The spirit of 1789 nourishes this concept of universality which is conveyed by the willingness to share encyclopaedic knowledge.

In December 2002, some twenty European and North American museum curators signed a ‘Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums’. This document of decreed norms, of which the authors are also the addressees, has no binding power. As an expression of individuals who are not entitled to produce international legal norms, it is a declaration of intent that is morally binding for its authors. This process of self-regulation leads to self-legitimization. It aims above all to justify the major museums’ possession of other civilizations’ treasures and to legitimize their role as the ‘passers-on’ of a universal culture. Its principal objective is to protect a heritage acquired over time in a more or less open manner and which could be or already is grounds for requests of restitution. Certainly, international and national laws concerning the circulation of cultural goods are applied in this complex field, but it is the self-proclaimed character of universality of these museums that is the problem here, inasmuch as it
implies the inalienability of their collections. It is
difficult in fact not to wonder about such a
qualification, which could result in excluding
certain institutions from the label ‘universal
museum’, which they could well claim. If the
concept of universality is substantial along with
that of museum, this dimension is not reserved for
a few, and one may wonder in what manner the
ideal of the Enlightenment lives on in the minds of
the signatories. The existence of a declaration on
the importance and value of universal museums
conveys the fear of seeing the legacy of the major
museums reclaimed and their collections
threatened. This fear of a possible dislocation is
one of the symptoms of the authority crisis that is
striking the museum institution. Even though
museums are flourishing and the number of
visitors is growing, the foundation of universalism
which, by instituting itself in the museum, relies
upon the nation, is crumbling and into these
cracks surge growing requests for restitution, also
in the name of the nation.

Through its permanent collection, the
museum distinguishes itself from international
exhibitions, fairs and even galleries. For the
constitution of public collections creates a national
heritage whose destination is the universality of
citizens (or human beings). That is what
G. Abungu emphasizes with finesse when he states
that the British Museum should be called the
‘Universal Museum of Britain’ if it wants its
universal character to be known and extend
beyond the realm of the nation. This connection
between the nation and heritage could be risky if
reduced to the idea of cultural nationalism, but it
regains its meaning if placed in a democratic logic.
What does it become within the context of an
internationalization of culture? What connection
can we make between that which is local and that
global? What should universality mean? Take
Africa, for example: an estimated 90 per cent of its
art is found outside the continent, it becomes
important to know what the African people believe
is universal.

Here again, we are faced with a complex
problem, where opposite approaches co-exist: on
the one hand, the definition of heritage as seen
by the countries who have acquired these riches
over the centuries, and on the other, a
willingness to consolidate a cultural identity that
retains next to little trace of its history,
particularly because it is foreign to the Western
museum tradition (which is the case of
continental Africa). Through this opposition, the
museum can appear as an expression of hidden
nationalism, of which universalism is the
instrument, but at the same time, its national
character remains a way of reaching
universalism. This can be illustrated by the
inauguration, on 1 March 2001, of the National
Museum of Australia, in Canberra. The official
reason leading to the creation of this museum
was the commemoration of the centenary of the
independence of the Federation of Australia. This
museum becomes ‘the appropriate and lasting
incarnation of history and national identity’.
This is why the national dimension of
universalism needs to be taken into account
before considering how it can overstep its limits.
This national dimension of universalism is itself
the very condition of its survival, ‘because the
universal feeds on the singular, and there is no
universal culture that is not at the same time a
culture of diversity’.
The shared knowledge of works of art and collections is one of the fundamental factors that allows us to get close to a universalistic ideal. The globalized society in which we live is witnessing an intensification of the speed and quantity of the circulation of cultural goods. A new balance will appear based on the nature of these exchanges.

The study of the regulations pertaining to the circulation of works of art is also a prism that allows us to put collections and the notion of universality into perspective. The recently signed contract for the creation of the Louvre of Abu Dhabi illustrates one type of circulation of works of art in the twenty-first century, a type that is worthy of interest because it is one that will probably multiply. Admittedly, it is not the first time that a museum is relocated, a Guggenheim Foundation can already be found in six countries throughout the world (in Italy, Spain, etc.). However, placed within the French Jacobin tradition of centralization, this process leads to questions, anxiety and even deep shock.

Why is it that the art world (art historians, curators, etc.) is unanimously reluctant to share its knowledge and to circulate works of art that contribute to France’s influence?

Furthermore, the creation of a Louvre in the Emirates represents a financial godsend that will enrich collections with new treasures, restore works of art, and undertake refurbishment work to improve their exhibition environment. This case has particularly attracted our attention because it is a museum that is said to be ‘universal’ and the unprecedented nature of this transaction in France raises a variety of questions concerning public collections: To whom do they belong, to the nations that possess them or to all of humanity?

On 6 March 2007, France and the Emirate of Abu Dhabi signed an intergovernmental agreement that provides for the creation of a new universal museum that will be called the Louvre of Abu Dhabi. The terms of the controversy can be
summed up as follows: the defenders of the project emphasize that France’s influence will grow through this dissemination of its art and of the know-how of its specialists, who are included in the transfer, but also the legitimate and necessary circulation of cultural goods, which is one of the fundamental missions of universal museums; the detractors of the project raise the idea of the unwarranted character of the transfer on the grounds of the other definition of universal museums, in that the agreement will deprive the visitors to the Louvre in Paris access to these national treasures, an access that the institution is supposed to provide. This could be seen as a diversion of one of the fundamental missions of the state, which is to keep acquired works within the national territory. Of course, works are loaned (at a price) for a fixed period of time but they are no longer permanently there, accessible and available for consultation by its citizens. Admittedly, the stamp of universality, as a worldwide ideal, exists so that the same works are available for consultation by everyone. Whereas we may accept the ultimate purpose of such transfers, the terms of this method of regulating the circulation of cultural goods must be questioned. Have cultural goods become ordinary commodities like any other? While it is true that works are bought and sold on the open market, it has been customarily accepted that a work of art, once it is removed from the market and has entered a public collection, becomes a part of the national heritage. This notion is being challenged today.

Several logics underlie the physical movement of works of art:

- the logic of decentralization: this is seen as legitimate when taking place in a national context (there was little protest against the creation of a branch of the Louvre in Lens), but it becomes the source of sharp criticism when it goes beyond national borders (the controversy around Abu Dhabi and Atlanta).
- the logic of the globalization of cultural goods, which is accompanied by the privatization of public property. This idea is embodied in the nature of contracts: even where they bind entities under public law,
they resemble private contracts signed between private individuals since they contain a clause of no competition, but also a clause governing the sale of the use of the Louvre’s name and brand.’ In fact, this duplication of a national ‘historical’ institution is new to the French art world and even if it draws its inspiration from the Guggenheim, it cannot be compared to the many duplications of that institution around the world. The nature of the French transfer is different because of the very nature of the above-mentioned institutions (the Louvre is a public institution whereas the Guggenheim is a private foundation). Admittedly, it is an intergovernmental agreement, but a preliminary parliamentary consultation could have been expected. A senate inquiry commission alone approved the transaction.

Therefore, even though the creation is based on a cultural agreement between countries and the French Government stays in control of the transaction, the deal resembles in many ways a commercial transaction. The transition from the public to the private realm is certainly accompanied by guarantees: the reversion of any financial yield back to the public institution (a clause stipulates this), but it also attests to a will on the part of the state to disengage itself from the cultural sector on behalf of private sponsorship. This evolution is not new, but here it takes on unprecedented dimensions. Moreover, we need to emphasize that the collections are not in themselves the main issue of the debate; the stakes are on the general concept of national heritage, and the collections have become a bargaining tool. The transactions concern objects from the past, but what will happen to works collected in the future? In this context, we may wonder about the meaning of public ‘collecting’ of works of art: should their selection process include this parameter of their value as currency?

Back to the universal, unique and singular work of art

We can imagine that to conform more to reality a new definition could take the place of the one discussed when we started out. It would be on
these terms: a museum is a place without a place, nomadic, multifaceted, reproducible, requiring funds to propose objects to entertain the public. The permanent character of the institution, indeed the two words, ‘institution’ and ‘permanent’, can also be questioned. Even without going so far as speaking of misappropriation, which would be an exaggeration, can we not speak of dispersal, even diversion or denaturation, when we compare the lofty mission assigned to museums, in their initial definition, with the financial stakes that underlie cultural policies? Is not the threat facing museums one of becoming mere showrooms for consumer products? In other words, the crisis facing the museum as an institution could represent a real danger for works of art. The disappearance of a work of art would be the evidence of the world’s dislocation, the exhaustion of thought, drowned in the mercantile flow.

However, even if the breach caused by the legitimacy of the institution being called into question has continued to grow and manifest itself in different ways, the museum still lives on as a place where works of art can be gathered and displayed, and where the most singular and nonconformist artists find their place.

If the crisis of the museum institution rebounds on the act of collecting, does this necessarily call into question the work of art itself? Contemporary artists have taken ownership of this question and the institution continues to be a source of revolt and criticism.

While Marcel Proust describes the museum as the ideal place for contemplation, Paul Valery considers that the juxtaposition of works of art prejudices their influence, that a museum is a ‘house of incoherence’ where ‘we move about in the same vertiginous miscellany, which tortures the art of the past’. Pierre Klossowski goes even further by imagining a hidden collection, which would be hidden from the public, who could only gain access to it by breaking and entering.

Because the work of art is not of this world, the means taken to contemplate it do not matter, its force stays intact. ‘In ancient times and ever since, works of art, unseen as such, were hidden in their original setting which gave them sanctuary. Then their universe crumbled, and they came to us in the historical movement of other worlds, which required of them another hidden presence, and they now offer themselves to us for the first time, seen as works of art, in their short-lived conspicuousness, their radiant solitude, the secret essence of their own reality, no longer housed in our world, but homeless and worldless.

| NOTES |


2. On a religious level, the question of universality is already present in Christian thought. It is not surprising to find traces of a ‘universal museum’ in medieval history, at the end of the fourteenth century, imported by Manuel II Palaeologist. Eastern Roman Emperor from 1391 to 1425. After visiting the West, he decided to reunite all the teachings in the same building, the Universal Museum (Katholikon Mouseion), which was run by one of the four general Roman judges. Philosophy and rhetoric were taught there as scholars strived to grasp the deep sense of ancient texts.
3. Krzysztof Pomian distinguishes four models of public museums: the traditional model which is based on acquisition (the Hermitage Museum, the Fine Arts Museum of Rio de Janeiro, etc.), those which are founded by decree of revolutionary power (the Louvre, Paris, but also other museums created by the nationalization of property in the former Soviet Union and China); museums created by donations or legacies of collections given to the nation (the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York) and finally by the purchase of private collections, which is the model termed ‘commercial’ (the British Museum); see Collectionneurs, amateurs et curieux, Paris, Venise: XVI-XVIII siècle, pp.296–303, Gallimard, Paris, 1987.

4. List of signatories and the declaration can be found on the ICOM website (http://www.icom.museum).

5. On this subject, see Abungu, George (2004) The Declaration, a controversial question, les Nouvelles de l’ICOM, No.1, dedicated to ‘Musées universels’, available on http://www.icom.museum, and the pertinent of these frequently asked questions ‘Do not all museums share a common vision and vocation? Universal museums claim themselves universal because of their size, their collections or their riches?’. The author is a consultant in cultural patrimony and the director of the National Museum of Kenya.


7. According to Alain Godonou, director of the School of African Patrimony in Porto Novo (Benin): ‘Museum professionals as well as enlightened African politicians would share without hesitation the concept of universality of cultural patrimony if they were sure that there was no ulterior motive.

8. Here we find the list of signatories of the Declaration of the Importance and Value of Universal Museums.


11. The elements of the debate about the Louvre of Abu Dhabi and Atlanta are available on the website of La Tribune de l’Art (http://www.latribunedelart.com).

12. A precedent exists but in the domain of higher education; a branch of the Sorbonne was created in the United Arab Emirates in the autumn of 2006.


14. To accompany the formation of the Emirate collection, French experts propose an acquisition strategy and ethical advice: their mission will be to transmit knowledge to help in the setting up of this museum, which in thirty years should attain total autonomy and will have acquired its own identity (the name Louvre having been given for a duration of thirty years).

15. ‘No identical or analogical deal consisting of the right of use of the Louvre name shall take place during the duration of the agreement made in the following countries: the other United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Iran and Iraq.’

16. The agreement represents a total of one billion euros over thirty years, which will benefit the Louvre and other French museums for new scientific projects, without a decrease in their actual budget.

17. From Dadaism and performance art but also from ‘art in the street’, at the end of the 1960s and from many artists that refuse to institutionalize their art.

18. Bernard Réquichot makes this declaration: ‘Paintings, some I have destroyed because they were too beautiful. When I saw them I feared being a victim of an aberration: a wonderful, troubling one that seemed to be too important, too secret to be shown without shamelessness: what touches us deeply can not become public without being profane’. See Réquichot, Bernard (2002) Écrits divers, p. 125, Les Presses du Réel, Paris.

