

**THE EXHIBITIONIST**  
**NO. 11 / JOURNAL ON EXHIBITION MAKING / JULY 2015**

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**OVERTURE**  
**CURATORS' FAVORITES**  
**BACK IN THE DAY**  
**MISSING IN ACTION**  
**ATTITUDE**  
**ASSESSMENTS**  
**RIGOROUS RESEARCH**  
**SIX x SIX**  
**REAR MIRROR**

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# The Exhibitionist

NO. 11

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## OVERTURE



Jens Hoffmann, Julian Myers-Szupinska, and Liz Glass

A peculiarity of the current field of curating is an ongoing contestation over the very meaning of “to curate.” As Alice said in Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass*, “The question is whether you can make words mean so many different things.” Humpty Dumpty answers, “The question is which [meaning] is to be master—that’s all.”

On the cover of this issue is Thomas Ruff’s 1989 portrait of a young Hans Ulrich Obrist. This fresh-faced guy has done more than most to popularize the idea of curators as ubiquitous, cosmopolitan characters, tirelessly promoting themselves and whatever exhibition they’re organizing—indeed, as exhibitionists of the global age. But he has also presided over that identity’s confusion and multiplication. Is the curator, as Obrist often describes the role, a catalyst? Or is she, to quote Obrist’s frequent collaborator Suzanne Pagé, a modest *commis de l’artiste*, an “artist’s clerk”?

Curating has become a global concern, yet many languages still even lack a steady term for it. Meanwhile, in some circles, “curation” has gained a buzzword-ish currency, signaling taste and discrimination across a dizzying array of cultural activities, from so-called “data curation” to creating music playlists and dinner menus. The hope, it seems, is that renewed connoisseurship might discern value amid the profusions of a global market—separate the wheat from the cultural chaff—even if it means, too, that Kanye West now has as much claim on the term “curator” as Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev or Okwui Enwezor. The more we stretch the word, it seems, the easier it becomes to hijack. It is time for some clarity.

In **Attitude**, João Ribas meditates on this semantic drift of the word “curating” into marketing, where it is proposed as a cure-all for digital excess and consumer glut. Following John Searle, who warns that the terms we use control the field of meaning, Ribas argues that contemporary curators must battle to retain the understanding that “curating” has held historically in the field of art, beyond connoisseurship and mere selection. He emphasizes in particular the spatial and temporal character of exhibitions, which may still offer the possibility of resisting the behavioral paradigms inflicted by capitalist urbanism and digital technology.

Geopolitical space is a central concern for several essays in this issue. In **Back in the Day**, Clémentine Deliss contends with the Museum of Modern Art’s notorious 1984 exhibition “*Primitivism*” in *20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, which “remains bedeviled by criticisms and emotional refutations that are hard to dissolve.” Comparing that exhibition’s model of “formal affinity” to a recent exhibition by the Senegalese artist and curator El Hadji Sy, she argues for exhibitionary methods that might “effect a remediating affirmation” of

ethnographic objects in order to recover something of their “conceptual code.” **Missing in Action** republishes passages from Rasheed Araeen’s introduction to his 1989 exhibition of British Afro-Asian artists, *The Other Story*. By assembling the fragments of their collective story, Araeen dismantles the chauvinism of a “master art history” that had excluded non-Western contemporary artists.

In **Assessments**, Claire Bishop, Cristina Freire, Tobi Maier, and Octavio Zaya address the exhibition *Histórias Mestiças* (Mestizo Histories), a trenchant critique of Brazil’s racial democracy curated by Adriano Pedrosa and Lilia Moritz Schwarcz at the Instituto Tomie Ohtake in São Paulo. The writers find consonance around one remarkable installation that juxtaposed photographs of indigenous people by Claudia Andujar, 18th-century watercolors of the “discovery” of Brazil by Joaquim José de Miranda, and drawings from the 1970s by Taniki Manippi-theri, a Yanomami shaman. Says Bishop, “Such an anthropological gaze can diminish the present-ism of contemporary art and allow it to become a method or system of thinking. Would that more curators, in more countries, had the nerve to investigate so unflinchingly cherished national myths.” **Curators’ Favorites** asks contributors to elaborate on an exhibition that has inspired their thinking. Guy Brett describes a 1979 installation by the Brazilian conceptual artist Cildo Meireles, an allegory aimed at the military dictatorship in power at the time. Natasha Ginwala contends with *The One Year Drawing Project*, an experimental exchange of artworks across Sri Lanka meditating on the traumas of that nation’s civil war. And Vincent Honoré considers the Musée d’art moderne et contemporain in Geneva, claiming the museum itself as a “constant, ever-changing exhibition.”

**Six x Six** challenges curators to name the exhibitions that have mattered most to them. In this issue, Ionit Behar, Astria Suparak, Inti Guerrero, Gianni Jetzer, Sarah Demeuse, and Nikola Dietrich assemble their miniature pantheons. In **Rigorous Research**, the scholar Vittoria Martini deliberates the little-discussed 1970 Venice Biennale, a turning point for that venerable institution. In the gap opened by a political stalemate, the staff assumed control, and embraced experimentation and research. Research and reflection also connect the two essays in **Rear Mirror**. Ruba Katrib details the thinking behind her exhibition *Puddle, pothole, portal*, co-curated with the artist Camille Henrot at SculptureCenter, New York, describing their attempt to capture something of the weird, rambunctious spatiality of early Disney animations. Scott Rothkopf evinces, in turn, the extraordinary spatial and conceptual deliberations behind his recent Jeff Koons retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Across this issue, then, the *specificity* of curatorial labor emerges—the thought needed to build aggregate meaning from disparate things in space. The word “curating” is not infinitely plastic. This, for us, is what it means. We all know how Humpy Dumpty ended up.

## CURATORS' FAVORITES



*The One Year Drawing Project: May 2005–October 2007, by M. Cader, T. Shanaathanan, C. Thenuwara & J. Weerasinghe publication cover (Raking Leaves, 2008)*

### A YEAR OF 29 MONTHS

Natasha Ginwala

Might an exhibition be construed as a living organism rather than an inanimate scenography of objects? A drafting process rather than decisive architecture? Sitting now in a Berlin apartment with the previous night's snowfall outside, a project I witnessed as a master's student in Delhi one humid afternoon in 2009 carries these open-ended questions to me, as if through an atmospheric transfer. I recollect the anatomy of that show as one might detect fragmented body parts strewn in an exposed landscape.

*The One Year Drawing Project*, the making of which lasted from May 2005 to October 2007, is among the most significant initiatives in recent years to showcase leading Sri Lankan contemporary artists. Presented initially through a publication and then as a traveling exhibition project, it was shown at the Devi Art Foundation (Gurgaon, India), the 6th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (Brisbane, Australia), and the University of Toronto Art Centre. Conceived by Sharmini Pereira, curator and founder of the independent publishing organi-

zation Raking Leaves,<sup>1</sup> the book project featured an experimental drawing exchange among the artists Muhanned Cader, Thamoatharampillai Shanaathanan, Chandraguptha Thenuwara, and Jagath Weerasinghe. Spanning the geographic extremes of northern and southern Sri Lanka, this exchange was enacted while the civil war between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil Tigers, which had gripped the island nation for several years, was still ongoing.

How to convey a full picture of an exhibition consisting of 208 drawings and occupying two distinct material sites: a book and an art institution? Seth Siegelau's *Xerox Book* (1968) and the Berlin-based K. Verlag (Anna-Sophie Springer and Charles Stankievecch) have at different moments leveraged the "space" of the book-as-exhibition, reading the book as a quasi-gallery.<sup>2</sup> By building connections between book-space and exhibition scenography, *The One Year Drawing Project* shared but also departed from these approaches. The unity of the project relied, in both "spaces," on the rhythms of the correspondence



*The One Year Drawing Project:  
May 2005–October 2007  
installation view, Devi Art  
Foundation, Gurgaon, India,  
2009*

among the four artists, who responded to one another's drawings in sequence, evoking the Surrealists' exquisite corpse exercise. But instead of the privileged scenario of Surrealist play and chance operations, in *The One Year Drawing Project* each artist's studio became a site of routine dispatches, with the artists repurposing motifs drawn from Sri Lanka's built and natural environment to comment symbolically on militarism, disappeared bodies, curfews, and enforced migratory passages, resulting in a sort of conjectural map of the war-torn nation.

Installed in the angular brick architecture of the Devi Art Foundation, the rows of artworks revealed the medium of drawing as a metonymic space and a tool-in-transit across two cities: Jaffna and Colombo. The artist, activist, and arts educator Thenuwara contributed drawings that cast swirls of thorns into barbed wire-like configurations and adopted camouflage as an aesthetic device, creating scenes of shadow play between positive and negative zones that brought forth questions of freedom and constraint.<sup>3</sup> While the work was preoccupied with political events such as the anti-Tamil Riots of 1983—commonly referred to as “Black July”—the drawings also betrayed his training at the Surikov Academy of Fine Arts in Moscow. It was there that the artist developed an agitprop and constructivist sensibility that he has applied to his context-responsive installations and painting-based works since returning to Sri Lanka.

Nearby, Cader's drawings conjured the fragmentation and systemic containment of the landscape. Continually reinscribing the same fixed shape, Cader presented the notional “real” through exaggerated filters such as false mirrors

or smokescreens. In one drawing, he showed an island overrun with fecund botanical “excess”; this image was in direct dialogue with an adjacent portrayal of a decomposing digestive tract, with a pencil sketch of a bandaged animal-like figure scurrying away from the pictorial frame. As Pereira has elucidated of Cader's uncanny works: “They take us back, as it were, to a time when ideograms and hieroglyphs described the world through the associative power of the image.”<sup>4</sup>

In the drawings of the Colombo-based artist and archeologist Weerasinghe and the Jaffna-based artist and art historian Shanaathanan, tortured human figures took on a central role. Reflecting upon the prolonged repression of the Tamil community by the dominant Sinhala state forces, these artists' works revealed incongruities that exist across the ruptured social fabric, describing the internalization of violence and the estrangement of the self.<sup>5</sup> Seeing the individual bodies falling in the manner of striking missiles, headless torsos sprouting like mutant vegetables, and ancestral households mapping an alienated topography, I was reminded of the stinging words of the Tamil poet Cheran: “What happened? My town was set on fire, my people lost their faces; upon our land, upon the wind that blows upon it, an alien stamp.”<sup>6</sup>

*The One Year Drawing Project* reflected imaginatively the significant role of the 1990s artistic generation against the backdrop of Sri Lanka's modernist legacy, which was pioneered (and has since been dominated) by the 43 Group artists, who reacted against the Victorian naturalism of the Ceylon Society of Arts in the 1940s and advocated nonacademic free expression in

painting.<sup>7</sup> Moving beyond an oversimplified and outdated model of intergenerational conflict, the contemporary artists evidenced an agonistic and critical kinship with those artists; working with paint, dry pastel, charcoal, ballpoint pen, ink, and pencil upon a range of paper surfaces, their works bore no titles, but were marked instead by a combination of marginalia charted in letters, arrow signs, and numerical codes. These served to ground the exhibition further in a process of exchange and reciprocity, the accumulation of which emerged, across book and exhibition, as a total artwork.

Pereira's title would suggest that the project lasted one year, but in fact the exchanges extended over 29 months. Reflecting this span of time, in lieu of the standard curatorial essay, Pereira offered an edited timeline of events drafted by the artists. The timeline became a composite retelling of political news over the project's duration (including headlines such as "The Sri Lankan army closes the A9 highway to the north of the country. Curfew is imposed in Jaffna"); a personalized bulletin of art events ("The 12th Asian Art Biennale, Bangladesh, opens"); and a group memoir ("Chandraguptha Thenuwara submits his M.Phil thesis to the Post-Graduate Institute of Archaeology and Research, Sri Lanka"). As the exhibition traveled, events in Sri Lanka took an unexpected turn: the presentation at the University of Toronto Art Gallery in partnership with the 2009 Tamil Studies Conference coincided with the death of the rebel leader Velupillai Prabhakaran. Overnight, the art gallery and the city's public spaces turned into a space of communal mourning, with civic vigils providing a sense of freedom reclaimed after decades of wartime.

In a corner of the exhibition space stood a vitrine with a pile of brown paper envelopes. These functioned as evidence confirming that these artworks had crisscrossed the island territory, but they also embodied the transformative, gestural processes through which a culture lives beyond trauma. The display copy of *The One Year Drawing Project* book now bears the black markings of censorship, where its contents were deemed offensive by customs agents in the United Arab Emirates when the publication was transported there for a public launch. If these marks are a defacement, they also expose the book, with its vulnerable, portable, ephemeral form, as itself a migrant, grappling with diverse



*The One Year Drawing Project: May 2005–October 2007* installation views, at the 6th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia, 2005 (top) and the University of Toronto Art Centre in collaboration with the South Asian Visual Arts Centre, 2009 (bottom)

temporalities and politics. So too do they highlight the exhibition's radical possibility—as a representation of the defiant imaginations of artists living in uncertain times, and as a catalyst for new institutional possibilities across South Asia.

#### Notes

1. See [rakingleaves.org](http://rakingleaves.org) for an extensive archive of this project.
2. *Xerox Book* is the common name for Seth Siegel's Xerox exhibition-publication *Carl Andre, Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth, Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris, Lawrence Weiner*, self-published in 1968. See Patricia Norvell and Alexander Alberro, eds., *Recording Conceptual Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) and Anna-Sophie Springer, "Volumes: The Book as Exhibition," *C Magazine* 116 (winter 2012): 36–45.
3. I reference here an interview with the artist conducted by Saskia Fernando in the exhibition catalogue *Drawings: Chandraguptha Thenuwara & Jagath Weerasinghe* (Colombo, Sri Lanka: Saskia Fernando Gallery; London: Breese Little Gallery, 2012).

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4. Sharmini Pereira, *Muhanned Cader*, published to accompany the exhibition *MumbaiMutai* (Colombo, Sri Lanka: Saskia Fernando Gallery, 2010).

5. Thamotharampillai Shanaathanan, "Being Human; Being Tamil: Personhood, Agency and Identity," unpublished conference paper presented at the Third Tamil Studies Conference, University of Toronto, May 15–17, 2008, and the ICES 25th Anniversary International Conference, Colombo, Sri Lanka, 2008.

6. Cheran, "A Second Sunrise," in *In a Time of Burning*, trans. Lakshmi Holmström (London: Arc Publications, 1981), n.p.

7. Chief among them are the painters Harry Peries, Ivan Peries, George Keyt, Justin Deraniyagala, and Aubrey Collette, and the photographer Lionel Wendt. See [artsrilanka.org/43group](http://artsrilanka.org/43group).

Cildo Miereles, *O Sermão da Montanha: Fiat Lux* (The Sermon on the Mount: Let There Be Light, 1973–79) installation view, Centro Cultural Cândido Mendes, Rio de Janeiro, 1979



## FIAT LUX

Guy Brett

I want to write about an exhibition I never saw, or at least was never present at. I know it only from photographic records, a film, and the memories of some of the people who were physically there. But this has not at all diminished its effect on me. I thought, and continue to think, of this exhibition as one of the most brilliant, audacious, and thoughtful works of that time, or since, in any country. It featured a single work by the Brazilian artist Cildo Meireles titled *O Sermão da Montanha: Fiat Lux* (The Sermon on the Mount: Let There Be Light, 1973–79). On one level, the work constituted a unique response to living under a military dictatorship, as Meireles and all Brazilians did between 1964 and 1985. The critic Frederico Morais, an active defender of Brazilian contemporary art and artists, has described the general conditions in which avant-garde artists worked during that period:

[Artists] responded viscerally to the new events, engaging with the arts system in a sort of artistic guerrilla [tactic]. All but banished from museums and galleries, they sought the nomadism of the streets, transforming the city into a great exhibition space or taking advantage of the few opportunities offered by the art circuit—the *Bússola* (Compass), *Verão* (Summer) and National Exhibitions—in order to disseminate their radical work. They suffered every manner of difficulty, diving to the bottom of the well, risking everything—life itself.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the difficulties they faced, it was a time of close contact among artists, sparking a number of collaborative ventures, debates, and manifesto publications such as *Malasartes* (meaning something like *Badmischiefs*, published in 1975 in Rio de Janeiro) and *A Parte do fogo* (The Work of Fire, loosely translated, published in Rio in 1980).

On another level, *Fiat Lux* ruminated on the nature of the work of art, and the effects that it might have on society. Within Meireles's project, we can find traces of strategies and components borrowed from Minimalism, Conceptualism, sculpture, and performance. In fact, with extraordinary intelligence, it recast art's latest departures in the conditions of repression and fear under military rule, taking these trends beyond their own limits.

After two different attempts to stage the work publicly in the late 1970s were thwarted, *Fiat Lux* was finally shown at the Centro Cultural Cândido Mendes in Rio de Janeiro in April 1979. The event lasted just 24 hours and exists today only through its documentary records. Meireles's work played on the art world's traditional ritual of self-recognition: the private viewing or vernissage.<sup>2</sup> Newly arrived attendees descended a stairway into a claustrophobic basement where they were faced with a huge cube made up of stacked packages of boxes of familiar Fiat Lux-brand matches, which they would have recognized instantly. Given how they were stacked, the matches could have been brought there directly from a warehouse. But there was something odd going on. There was no sign at the entrance, and no receptionist or desk indicating that this was an art gallery and therefore transmitting the comfortable feeling that one was in the presence of an artwork. Instead, five men surrounded the cube, wearing the dress and demeanor of bodyguards, plainclothes government agents, or perhaps even members of a death squad. And they behaved aggressively, inspecting the packages and pushing people about. Furthermore, their shoes—indeed, the shoes of everyone present—rasped against a floor of rough paper of the kind used to strike matches, the sound of which was amplified through hidden loudspeakers. Additionally disconcerting was the presence of mirrors on the surrounding walls. If one looked into the reflection of the assembled company, one also caught sight of one of Jesus Christ's Beatitudes from the Sermon of the Mount, inscribed on the glass. The Beatitudes are Christ's critique of society and his elevation of the powerless.

The response of many was uncertainty, fear, and apprehension. Those who were there remember that it was impossible to tell at first what was real and what was fiction. Some were angry, thinking an art event had been invaded



Cildo Meireles, *O Sermão da Montanha: Fiat Lux* (The Sermon on the Mount: Let There Be Light, 1973–79) installation views, Centro Cultural Cândido Mendes, Rio de Janeiro, 1979

by the authorities, as an aggressive demonstration of the dictatorship's power: "Even here too?" they asked themselves. Others were fearful that the huge accumulation of phosphorus could explode. At one point this became a serious possibility, as a few rash spirits took matches from the packages and began striking them. The film documentation shows that during the evening, the military police arrived—real police, not the actors who were playing the bodyguards. But they too were uncertain what was going on. There was nothing for them to do, so they withdrew.

The brief duration of the piece, and its immediacy for those who were present to witness it, could disguise the multiple layers of meaning, wit, and rich ambiguities of Meireles's work. The biblical title begins this layering, mixing Old and New Testament references with cosmological and societal implications. The form of the work enacted a deft interplay between sculptural, spatial, and performative elements. There was a dual link with the historical avant-



Cildo Meireles, *O Sermão da Montanha: Fiat Lux* (The Sermon on the Mount: Let There Be Light, 1973–79) installation view, Centro Cultural Cândido Mendes, Rio de Janeiro, 1979

gardes, taking on the one hand the guise of a Duchampian readymade, and on the other the spatial arrangement of a minimalist sculpture—both precedents that Meireles sought to honor and to exceed. Meireles is of the generation that reencountered Duchamp and discovered further possibilities in his ideas. Employing the logic of the readymade, he simply went out and bought a commonplace commodity—boxes of matches—and shifted them into an unfamiliar context. Then he took the strategy a step further: by accumulating the boxes in excessive quantities beyond the pattern of their normal use, he transformed them qualitatively, from something evoking safety, domesticity, and containment to something eliciting illegality and danger. The work became an example of the polarizing differences between the one and the many.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the cube of matchboxes may have echoed visually the work of artists such as Carl Andre, Donald Judd, or Sol LeWitt—a monumental effort built from the incremental repetition of identical elements, which glory in the plain, self-evident, non-symbolic “objecthood” of their materials. But in Meireles’s case, the incremental process created a new state of the material, its explosivity.

This brings allegory into the equation—something that was anathema to the Minimalists. The central feature in Meireles’s work, the great cube, is a symbol of fire and light. The whole ensemble can be seen not only as a social critique but also as an allegory of art itself. This parable is a complex one, inasmuch as the presence of

the guards can be read in two ways. Either the cube is guarded because of the potential physical danger it poses to the audience, a reading that casts the presence of the guards in a benign light, or it is guarded in order to repress and inoculate enlightened and emancipatory ideas, which the cube can be seen to symbolize. It is precisely by means of its ambiguities—between a real and a fictional scenario, and between the actual and the symbolic function of art’s materials—that the piece sharpens our thinking and our ability to tell these two states apart.

Of the period of avant-garde artistic experimentation in Brazil under the conditions of dictatorship, Meireles has said that “things existed in terms of what they could stimulate in the social body. . . . At that time our objective was to reach as large and indefinite a number of people as possible.”<sup>4</sup> Made in 1970, the artist’s *Insertions Into Ideological Circuits: Coca-Cola Project* and *Insertions Into Ideological Circuits: Banknote Project* epitomized that aim by attaching themselves to preexisting systems of mass circulation. This involved removing the symbolic objects from circulation, altering them by adding new messages, for instance “Yankees go home!” then returning them to their ordinary “circuit” of exchange. They exemplify “a practice over which you could have no kind of control or authorship.”<sup>5</sup> *Fiat Lux*, on the other hand, seems devised—at least partly—to address the specific public of intellectuals and artists who were invited as if to a private viewing (whereas the notion of a “private viewing” of the *Insertions* would be absurd). Addressing the self-image of that particular, selected public in highly original terms, *Fiat Lux* continues to fascinate me as an allegory placed at a crossroads of thought about the work of art, its effects, its efficacy, and its potency. It is a work about potential, pressing sharply on a tension point between repression and release.

#### Notes

1. Frederico Moraes, “Retrato e auto-retrato da arte brasileira” (1984), in *Frederico Moraes: Pensamento Crítico* (Rio de Janeiro: Sebo Universitário, 2004), 5. Translated by Stephen Berg.

2. I am grateful to Paulo Venancio Filho, Lu Menezes, Luciano Figueiredo, and Meireles himself for sharing with me their memories of the event. Figueiredo described it as “an extraordinarily powerful experience, one of the most immediate and striking I have ever had with a work of art.”

## Curators' Favorites

3. The poster announcing the event reversed this relationship by showing a photographic image of hundreds of razor blades held together with a clamp. One blade cuts, but a large number bound together is harmless.

4. Cildo Meireles, from an unpublished interview with Antonio Manuel, quoted in *Gerardo Mosquera, Paulo Herkenhoff, Dan Cameron, Cildo Meireles* (London: Phaidon, 1999), 110.

5. Cildo Meireles, "Statements" (1981), in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 412.



*Hommage à Philippe Thomas et autres oeuvres*  
installation view, MAMCO, Geneva,  
2014, showing Jacques Salomon's  
*La pétition de principe*, 1988

## A MACHINE FOR EXHIBITING

Vincent Honoré

### 1. MAMCO

In 2014, Geneva's Musée d'art moderne et contemporain (MAMCO) celebrated its 20th birthday. The museum has been conceived as a "machine for exhibiting" since the start.<sup>1</sup> Everything—from collection displays to temporary projects—is part of an ongoing exhibition of the museum itself.

Housed in a former factory where the Geneva Society for the Construction of Instruments of Physics developed instruments of measurement, MAMCO's building reminds us that a museum is first of all a production site—a site not only for presenting and describing an existing context, but also for generating new contexts. A site where artists, curators, critics, and other stakeholders can produce, share, discuss, act, and interact, where visitors are co-producers, and where the machinery of exhibitions produces prototypes, experiences, and catalysts

for thought. In such a museum, thoughts are formed and visions transformed. Culture is disassembled, and the contemporary landscape redesigned. As it exists in a constant state of reconfiguration and hybridization, the dimensions of such a museum are impossible to measure, its boundaries extending far beyond its actual floor plan or elevation. The museum is at any one time a gallery, a laboratory, a studio, a workshop, an academy, a theater, a fiction, and a memory.

Selecting a museum rather than an exhibition for my contribution here—privileging the structure of programming and the machinery of presenting, communicating, and designing an art context in the duration, and how all these aspects of curation operate together over a long stretch of time, as the museum itself is a constant, ever-changing exhibition—is a way of insisting on the fact that curatorial activity is regulated mainly by measurement: of space, of time, of artworks.

As Christian Bernard, the founding director of MAMCO, here (and hereafter) explains: “Measurement is a reference, the comparison of a quantity against a unit. The museum is actually a provisional, fragile, uncertain model which is measured by its works, which in turn are measured by it and put in a sequence: the simple passing of their time, their creation and their production. The museum contains an almost allegorical dimension which is at the same time metonymic.”<sup>2</sup> The museum of contemporary art is a place of transformation, a place of production and processing. It is “a system of exhibitions communicating with each other. The museum can be thought of as an exhibition, as an exhibition system, or as an exhibition process. Whether it’s loans, storage lots, productions, or exhibitions, this is simply a continuum for the visitors.”

## 2. Process

According to Marcel Proust, “Museums are houses full of thoughts.” As a generator of contexts and criticality through its programs and use of space, MAMCO follows some fixed principles, among them: 1) the museum is conceived as a global exhibition alternating temporary exhibitions with the permanent collection; 2) different curatorial methodologies coexist in the museum, from the studio to the white cube to the collector’s flat, et cetera; 3) the galleries are dedicated to evolving solo presentations, often curated by the artists themselves, for instance Vito Accornci, Siah Armajani, Art & Language, Robert Filliou, Sherrie Levine, Dennis Oppenheim, and Franz Erhard Walther, among many others; 4) thematic displays mix artists of different generations, nationalities, and styles, and tend to avoid mainstream generalization or historicism; 5) the program privileges artists and styles outside the main commercial trends—for instance Claudio Parmiggiani, Michael Snow, or Jim Shaw—and gives precedence to temporary exhibitions centered around the 1960s and 1970s; 6) the institution engages durationally with artists, who continually reappear in the program, and presents and introduces local and national artists such as John Armleder, Sylvie Fleury, Olivier Mosset, and Rémy Zaugg; 7) the collection is founded on important long-term loans from artists and collectors; 8) public programming involves direct experience with the artworks; 9) the publishing

strategy focuses on books—essays, artists’ writings, and so on—rather than catalogues.

## 3. Intention

MAMCO promotes its exhibitions, and the museum itself, not as pre-established formulas or didactic presentations of items but as prototypes and experiences, as forums for discussion, as structures that act beyond the confines of an exhibition space, as generative sites that establish and support an informal cultural community in a unique context. “Contextualization allows for multiple significations, a type of ‘polysemy’ (meaning a sign with multiple meanings), which is achieved in the working. . . . The museum is the trigger of events which unleash polysemy.”

## 4. Mouseion

More than a collection of artifacts, the museum is a collective narrative, a cognitive theater that must be continually examined and confirmed through a variety of individual positions. After all, the word “museum” finds its origin in the Greek *mouseion*, a temple dedicated to the muses, housing activities that were akin to those of a university or philosophical academy, an institute for studies of various kinds and a community of scholars and thinkers. The pre-modern form of the museum was a space for musing, for the production and exchange of ideas. “The collection must rather be the effect and not the purpose of the work. The presentations of the collections that reflect the exhibitions have a critical function. . . . An idea that was at the basis of the birth of the museum was to not have spaces dedicated to temporary exhibitions and others to permanent ones. There are no different rooms for collections and exhibitions. Everything is an exhibition, everything is on show, so, at the time of their presentation, collections occupy the same space that could previously accommodate a temporary exhibition, and which may be used during the year only for the presentation of collections, which change as often as the temporary projects.”

It is crucial for the museum to consider a work as part of its collection not because the work belongs to the museum, but because it is contextualized by it. Hence, all works that potentially can be loaned to the museum are potential-

ly part of its collection, if the latter can be imagined as expanded, a moving territory, something akin to an archipelago, engendering complexity rather than similarity.

### 5. Against interpretation

“A work of art encountered as a work of art is an experience, not a statement or an answer to a question,” writes Susan Sontag. “Art is not only about something: it *is* something. A work of art is a thing in the world, not just a text or a commentary on the world. . . . Which is to say that the knowledge we gain through art is an experience of the form or style of knowing something, rather than knowledge of something (like a fact or a moral judgement in itself).”<sup>3</sup> If we consider a work not solely as an object but as an experience, we might also consider the gallery as a hybrid space in permanent reconfiguration: all at once a gallery, an auditorium, a screening room, and a performance space. Here all hierarchies are rejected, and a conversation is as important as a six-month display. The site can become a house of signs and the museum a mode of representation. In this space, everything is exhibition and any exhibition is experience. The museum is always on the move, reflecting on itself a permanent “transformation that forces us to rethink our values, our conscious and unconscious fetishes, our processes, our protocols, approve them again, examine the limitations they had met. . . . A contemporary art museum is nothing more than a structure which organizes its own crisis and never ceases to rethink the elements on which it is based. A museum is always in danger.”

### 6. Memories

Museums collect memories. Memory is present everywhere in MAMCO, not only in the preservation of its collections or the historical research it hosts. The museum replays former displays like a dance or a theatrical form, allowing the experience to resurface and be revamped, examining its own history and curatorial strategies. Each room bears a number and a numerical order of usage or state, to give an idea of the speed of its transformation and the number of situations it has allowed. MAMCO is a complex and inspiring machine for exhibiting—a grand, ongoing exhibition and conceptual system in which time



Partial view of *L'appartement*, featuring works from the permanent collection, MAMCO, Geneva, ongoing



*Hommage à Philippe Thomas et autres oeuvres* installation view, MAMCO, Geneva, 2014, showing Philippe Thomas's *readymades belong to everyone*, 1993

becomes tangible. “The perfect museum has the weight of a human head,” says the French writer Jakuta Alikavazovic.<sup>4</sup> Made of memories, the museum appears only as one leaves it. In its conceptual structure, MAMCO does not forget that exhibitions are made of time, that artworks are delayed actions, and that museums are systems of desires and fantasies built like fictions.

#### Notes

1. An adaptation of Le Corbusier's famous proposal, in *Vers une architecture*, 1923, that “Une maison est une machine-à-habiter” (A house is a machine for living in).
2. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotations in this text are extracted from a conversation between myself and Christian Bernard published in *CURA #12* (fall 2012).
3. Susan Sontag, “On Style,” in Elizabeth Hardwick, ed., *A Susan Sontag Reader* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983), 142.
4. Jakuta Alikavazovic, “Nocturne,” *Nouvelle Revue Française* 606 (October 2013): 129–35.



*"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* installation view, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1984

BACK IN THE DAY  
★  
**OBJETS ACTANCIELS /  
AGENT OBJECTS**

Clémentine Deliss

Even today, *“Primitivism” in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, which opened at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1984, remains bedeviled by criticisms and emotional refutations that are hard to dissolve. Some may still remember the physical exhibition, curated by William Rubin and Kirk Varnedoe; others will be more acquainted with the two-tome catalogue, edited by Rubin, which featured among its many essays a critical text by the art historian and critic Rosalind Krauss. Photographs of the original installation at MoMA evoke a sober atmosphere: vitrines are mounted into dark walls, displaying single paintings by Pablo Picasso, Paul Klee, Amedeo Modigliani, and many more surrounded by figures or masks and explanatory texts.

Drawing on protocols invented by the institution’s first director, Alfred H. Barr Jr., the exhibition was chronological and pedagogical—that is, it aimed to teach historical progress from one period to the next, through an arrangement of objects and rooms. At the same time, *“Primitivism”* was one of those early blockbuster exhibitions of the 1980s that sought to provide a didactic frame for MoMA’s famed collection of Modernist artworks, excluding whatever didn’t fit the story it aimed to tell. The politicized movements at the time of the Black Arts in London or New York, or Jean-Michel Basquiat’s entry into the scene through painting and graffiti, did not appear on its horizon. These exclusions made the curators’ rerun of Robert J. Goldwater’s 1938 thesis on “primitivism” appear retrograde from the start.<sup>1</sup>

In the three decades since, what persists has been a ferocious refutation of the show’s conservative art historical paradigm,<sup>2</sup> and of the fact that the exhibition was divorced from the living presence of artists from Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. The curators’ pairings of works by European artists with carvings by unnamed sculptors from North America, Africa, and

1. Robert Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Painting* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1938), later expanded and reissued as *Primitivism in Modern Art* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1986).

2. See for example James Clifford, “Histories of the Tribal and the Modern,” *Art in America* 73 (April 1985): 164–77, 215; or Rasheed Araeen, “From Primitivism to Ethnic Arts,” in Susan Hiller, ed., *The Myth of Primitivism: Perspectives on Art* (London: Routledge, 1991). Similarly, “Primitivism” can be seen to have sparked a chain of direct exhibitionary rejoinders, including Jean-Hubert Martin’s *Magiciens de la terre* (Centre Georges Pompidou and Parc de la Villette, Paris, 1989); Rasheed Araeen’s *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain* (Hayward Gallery, London, 1989); and my own *Lotte or the Transformation of the Object* (Styrian Autumn, Graz, Austria, 1990; Stadtmuseum Graz and Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna, 1991).



*"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* installation view, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1984

3. Kirk Varnedoe, preface, in William Rubin, ed., *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984), x.

4. A museum conglomerate in Germany, the SKD in Dresden (Staatliche Kunstsammlungen zu Dresden), whose collections include both anthropology and art history, has begun a process of cross-referencing and reidentification.

5. See the extensive objections articulated in James Clifford, "Histories of the Tribal and the Modern."

6. This "global turn" is identified with the fall of the Berlin wall and the aforementioned Paris exhibition *Magiciens de la terre*.

Oceania continues to contaminate discussions on what it means for a living artist to integrate past "tribal art" into his or her contemporary practice, particularly if the exercise involves painting and sculpture rather than forms of institutional critique.

Central to this enduring discord is the sense of misappropriation of these unknown artists' works, which is interpreted—not without reason—as the result of deep-seated racism, beleaguered evolutionary concepts of aesthetics, and the scramble for mystical paraphernalia that led to the constitution of 19th- and early-20th-century colonial collections. Ethnographic museums are notorious for the paucity of their records: even if some museum anthropologists traveled briefly to the countries of origin of their holdings, they remained essentially armchair historians whose task focused on the bibliographic, reconstructive portrayal and ethnological contextualization of the belongings of other people. All of this has led to a dogged polarization in exhibition making that pits the supposedly informative ethnographic display against the aestheticizing pedestal power of the art show. This reductionism on both sides of the curatorial coin is epitomized by the formalism of Rubin's show on the one side, and the inevitable sense of anachronism of ethnographic exhibits on the other.

In MoMA's case, this state of affairs was compounded by the exhibition's large-scale denial of authorship to the makers of the tribal objects it

displayed—of those recognizable, named artists from Africa or Oceania who once conceived these ingenious objects, and who provided Varnedoe in 1984 with the opportunity to declare that the “capacity of tribal art” lies in its ability to “transcend the intentions and conditions that first shaped it.”<sup>3</sup> Recently, new research has emerged that concerns itself primarily with reconstituting the missing biographies of the makers of ethnographic artifacts. This has started to transform former notions of provenance based on auction house trajectories and market values, or on whether Estée Lauder or John D. Rockefeller owned this or that statuette or mask, toward more thorough attempts at historical restitution.<sup>4</sup>

“Primitivism” did not take place in isolation. But in many respects, it signaled the end of a unidimensional, Eurocentric presentation of “affinities” between the “tribal” and the “Modern.” Inasmuch as the exhibition’s model of the relationship between artifacts—mute pairs that purported to describe a sympathy between the giants of Modernism and anonymous tribal authors, based on tenuous formal resemblances—was effectively dismantled in the show’s immediate aftermath,<sup>5</sup> a more constructive response might be to dwell for a while on some models of relation that “Primitivism” failed to consider. Concurrent with the New York exhibition, and before the so-called “global turn” of 1989,<sup>6</sup> an inverted relationship was being initiated in Germany. In 1985, the Senegalese artist and curator El Hadji Sy (born in 1954 in Dakar)<sup>7</sup> was commissioned by the Frankfurt Weltkulturen Museum<sup>8</sup> to assemble a new collection of contemporary Senegalese paintings. Aware of the need for serious art-critical reporting on Africa, Sy also coedited a trilingual anthology on art production in Senegal with a foreword written by Léopold Sédar Senghor, former Senegalese president and a close friend of Pablo Picasso and Pierre Soulages.<sup>9</sup> At the time, this synchronous double take on art and ethnography carried out in both New York and Frankfurt would have barely been perceptible. Nevertheless, it demonstrates the simultaneity of a certain zeitgeist. Whereas the MoMA show signaled the demise of an art historical myopia, the Weltkulturen Museum’s commissioning of a curator from Senegal, with free rein to acquire new works, signaled an inclusive reappraisal of contemporary, authored practice from Africa.

In 2014, the museum invited Sy back to Frankfurt to initiate a new conversation with its collection. The resulting 2015 exhibition, *El Hadji Sy: Painting, Performance, Politics* (co-curated by Philippe Pirotte) reactivated the discussion of the relationship between painting and ethnographic collections, in which “Primitivism” remains the signpost negative example. In his preparation for the show, Sy asked the museum to recognize the fragility of ownership that subtends its authority and the legitimacy of its discourse. Whether in Frankfurt or elsewhere in Europe or the United States, the majority of ethnographic objects, with their unauthored status, remain fugitive works of art

7. The practice of El Hadji Sy represents a conceptual and aesthetic nerve within post-independence African art. Having exhibited internationally since the late 1970s, he is equally known for his defiant attitude toward state cultural policy. In 1977 he squatted in an army barracks on the seafront of Dakar, which became the first rendition of the Village des Arts, a creative hub for 70 artists, actors, musicians, filmmakers, and writers. There, in 1980, he founded the multidisciplinary project space Teng, a Wolof term that signifies articulation, and continued to remodel this curatorial dialogue in other locations during the 1980s and 1990s. The international workshops that he organized under the same name in Saint Louis du Senegal (1994) and in Dakar (1996) enabled new networks to be forged between artists working in continental Africa and Europe at a time when web-centric communications and social media were nonexistent. To do this, Sy reclaimed a disused Chinese worker’s camp near Dakar’s airport and turned it into a second Village des Arts. As an active player of the Laboratoire AGIT’ART since the collective’s foundation in the mid-1970s, Sy was responsible for its visual staging and costumes, and also for its strategic interpellation of Senegalese cultural politics. He was an originator of the interventionist artists’ group Huit Facettes, whose work in rural Senegal was presented at *Documenta 11* in Kassel in 2002. His 2015 retrospective at the Weltkulturen Museum was curated by the artist, Philippe Pirotte, myself, and Yvette Mutumba.

8. Formerly known as the Museum für Völkerkunde, the Frankfurt ethnographic museum began collecting contemporary art from Africa as early as 1974, when no other European institution was engaging with it. Today, it holds more than 3,000 works by artists from the African continent, mostly produced before the “global turn.”

9. El Hadji Moussa Babacar Sy and Friedrich Axt (ed.), *Anthology of Contemporary Fine Arts in Senegal* (Frankfurt: Museum für Völkerkunde, 1989).

10. He speaks of *attrapes-conscience*, or “conscience-traps.” Conversation with the author, Dakar, December 2014.

11. Bruno Latour, “Networks, Societies, Spheres: Reflections of an Actor-Network Theorist,” presented at the International Seminar on Network Theory: Network Multidimensionality in the Digital Age, February 19, 2010, Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, Los Angeles.

12. William Rubin, “Primitivism” in 20th Century Art, 1.

held with tenuous entitlement in foreign collections—material migrants with partial knowledge and elusive identities, orphaned and incomplete.

In a series of experiments in the museum’s “laboratory,” Sy juxtaposed his paintings from the late 1970s and 1980s, as well as more recent works, with historical artifacts from New Guinea, South America, and West and Central Africa. These exercises provided the opportunity to workshop ideas and build new assemblages prior to the final display in the exhibition. In one instance, he positioned four carved stools, some with crocodile heads, on a floor painting made of jute sacking that he had produced in his studio in Dakar in 2014 especially for those objects. The grouping evoked invisible interlocutors who once sat on these seats—unnamed individuals from Papua New Guinea who were the artists who carved these works, and whose traces of creativity Sy now rendered contemporary. On the wall, looming over this imaginary conversation, a huge circular portrait of former Senegalese president Abdoulaye Wade appeared like a death mask with hollowed-out eyes. Painted on butcher paper that has been torn and repaired, glued and painted over again, its glazed surface, made to hold bloody cuts of meat, is pounded flat and glossy. Wade’s bewildered gaze, looking down onto the projected council of spirits, is a reflection of his political supersession: caught within the serpent’s tail of time and reflected by Sy as if seen through a rearview mirror.

In another test constellation, Sy positioned two carved chairs from Ethiopia and a ladder from Mali against a large jute hanging from 1992, framed with braided green and red silk cords, suggestive of a tapestry yet without the intention of class and decorum. Nothing in this assemblage is ornamental: it is not interior decor for a drawing room or a hotel lounge. Instead, it speaks of the “anxiousness” evoked by ethnographic artifacts, which capture the conscience of the onlooker.<sup>10</sup> A chair, for example, is primarily a utilitarian object. Yet today, these Ethiopian chairs from the museum’s collection—like the Papua New Guinean stools in the other experiment—are prescribed a form of physical closure and have become untouchable, nonfunctional exhibits. They demand to perform a new significance under alternative conditions. For El Hadji Sy, they cannot be reduced to museological possessions but instead must be *objets actanciels*—operative things, moving, in Bruno Latour’s words, from a “matter of fact to a matter of concerns.”<sup>11</sup>

Let me mark out the difference between this approach and Rubin’s model of affinity. A century after the Modernists’ fascination with “tribal art,” Sy chooses to engage with ethnographic items because he wants to participate in a transformation of their status into the here and now. Indeed, in his argument for “affinities,” Rubin inscribed a relationship that, apart from a few statements and documents of the period, was made rather *a posteriori*. Rubin regrets the ignorance of a “chronology of the arrival and diffusion of Primitive objects in the West,”<sup>12</sup> while Jean-Louis Paudrat, in his essay in the same catalogue, covers several pages working out when André Derain, Maurice de

Vlaminck, and Picasso actually saw certain masks or figures, and precisely when this may have influenced their new works.

Rubin and his cohort might have done better to turn to the writings of the anarchist and art historian Carl Einstein, a writer contemporaneous with the period of “primitivist” Modernism. His writing on African artifacts injected an acerbic, ironic concept into the formalist, cubic, and so-called African perception of space.<sup>13</sup> In 1912, Einstein declared that there can be “no authentic form that is not at the same time violence—to be precise, operative violence.”<sup>14</sup> In “looking,” he claims, “we change people and the world.”<sup>15</sup> Einstein’s transgression is perceptual and cognitive. Objects are organs: they cannot remain “preserve jars,” or a “medium for passive thinking” or else they

13. See Georges Didi-Huberman, “Picture=Rupture: Visual Experience, Form and Symptom According to Carl Einstein,” trans. C. F. B. Miller, *Papers of Surrealism* 7 (2007): 2.

14. Carl Einstein, *Politische Anmerkungen* (1912), cited in Georges Didi-Huberman, “Picture=Rupture,” 2.

15. Carl Einstein quoted in Uwe Fleckner, *Carl Einstein und sein Jahrhundert. Fragmente einer intellektuellen Biographie* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2006), 7.

*El Hadji Sy: Painting, Performance, Politics* installation view, Weltkulturen Museum, Frankfurt, 2015



16. Carl Einstein, "Revolution Smashes Through History and Tradition" (1921), previously unpublished manuscript translated by Charles W. Haxthausen and printed in *October* 107 (winter 2004): 141.

17. Sebastian Zeidler, "Life and Death from Babylon to Picasso: Carl Einstein's Ontology of Art at the Time of Documents," *Papers of Surrealism* 7 (2007), 20.

18. Uwe Fleckner, *Carl Einstein und sein Jahrhundert*, 338–39.

19. Paul Rabinow, *Marking Time: On the Anthropology of the Contemporary* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 33–39.

20. Conversation with El Hadji Sy, Dakar, December 2014.

21. James Clifford, *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 43.

"anesthetize, rigidify into a myth of guaranteed continuity, into the drunken slumber of the mechanical. Civilization represents itself in the storeroom of objects, memorized obstacles to function."<sup>16</sup>

Einstein's experiments with the tools and references of analysis in art parallel those of Picasso in painting. More so than Rubin's academic position decades later, Einstein's was a stance that was ready to flout disciplinary canons in order to make sense of artistic practice—an approach that brings him, ironically, closer to contemporary curatorial approaches than those espoused in the 1980s exhibition. The art historian Sebastian Zeidler writes: "As Einstein was reading ethnography while looking at Picasso, it must have dawned on him that in the former he had come upon a description of interaction and emergence of forms within a bounded field that was eminently transferable to the latter."<sup>17</sup> For in his work on African sculpture and Cubism, and then later in his articulation of images and ideas in the journal *Documents* (1929–30), Einstein's strength lies in manipulating objects and concepts based not on what already exists and is ordered, but on groupings that may introduce new ways of thinking of emerging art forms. Indeed, he consciously employs decontextualization in order to unburden the viewer of the past, and to introduce a new "visual punctuation" and "associative syntax."<sup>18</sup> Einstein is not engaging with the specificity of African artists' works as much as he is constructing a "space of adjacency, perhaps a heterotopic space"<sup>19</sup>—within which his theoretical analysis of the compression of form can lead to a crisis of perception and the invention of new objects of study.

El Hadji Sy's approach, a century later, bears some resemblance to Einstein's concept of "operative violence." Sy claims that artists who engage with objects in ethnographic collections, either directly or indirectly, effect a remediating affirmation of these objects' former authors.<sup>20</sup> From the moment that artists identify a particular artifact within the museum's holdings, a reassessment begins to take place that has the potential to cut through the classifications and hierarchies of museum ethnology, emancipating these collections from the discourses that have legitimized them until now. The right to renew the intellectual technicity—the conceptual code—of historical objects held in museums no longer lies solely in the hands of the museum's keepers or ethnological custodians. On the contrary, access needs to be opened to additional interpretations and renewed functions, garnered from different sources and disciplines, and resulting from experimentation. As the anthropologist James Clifford writes in his recent book: "No sovereign method is available, only experiments working outside the frozen alternatives of local and global, structure and process, macro and micro, material and cultural."<sup>21</sup> For Sy, it is the relationship to the ethnographic collection, which is mediated by the artist and activated by the viewer, that can generate a process of translation between past and present.

Today, the task that faces the ethnographic museum extends beyond the

*El Hadji Sy: Painting, Performance, Politics* installation view, Weltkulturen Museum, Frankfurt, 2015



question of restitution. Instead, it is about digging deep into their underground banks of works of art in order to provoke a seism of dialogic intensity, powerful enough to produce additional and alternative perspectives on this heritage. Again, Sy's approach is instructive. He speaks of "pruning the tree of earlier definitions" in order to enable a new sap to flow, a regrowth of these artifacts and their significance, one that is open-ended, open-source, and ready to engage with geopolitical and disciplinary challenges. He says, "The prejudice that surrounds the ethnographic museum is changing. Anthropology is leaving these museums and something else is entering them, something that has nothing to do with ethnography. I'm not sure what it is yet, but I sense that there will be discussions and confrontations around the question of functional objects, anthropology, and objects of performance."<sup>22</sup>

Paging through the "*Primitivism*" catalogue now, one is struck by the incongruity of so many of Rubin's aesthetic partnerships—as if his model of formalist affinity between the "tribal" and the "Modern" had lost its defining optic. Today, with different premises and exhibition technics, the African mask and the Spanish painting could work together, whereas in "*Primitivism*" this dialogue fell remarkably flat. Nor do photographs of the original installation seduce or provoke a reenactment along the lines of *When Attitudes Become Form*. What does remain, however, is the sense that exercises in cross-cultural, trans-aesthetic curatorial experimentation still have a long way to go.

**22.** El Hadji Sy in conversation with Julia Grosse in *El Hadji Sy: Painting, Performance, Politics* (Zurich and Berlin: diaphanes, 2015).



*The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain* installation view, Hayward Gallery, London, 1989

## MISSING IN ACTION



# WHEN CHICKENS COME HOME TO ROOST

Rasheed Araeen

Introduced by Chelsea Haines

“When chickens come home to roost” is the forceful opening essay in the catalogue for *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain*, a show that was on view at the Hayward Gallery, London, from November 1989 to February 1990. Written by the exhibition’s curator, Rasheed Araeen, the text—its heading borrowed from the subtitle of Malcolm X’s 1963 speech “God’s Judgment of White America”—sharply critiqued the prevailing values of art history and the British art world, providing historical and theoretical context as to why British artists from the former colonies have been effectively written out of art history. Penned at a moment when these artists and histories were largely invisible on the museum and gallery scene in London, Araeen’s writing ranges from a critique of Hegel, to the appropriation of the avant-garde as an anticolonial movement, to an analysis of the machinations of the British art system.

Born in Karachi in 1935, Araeen studied as an engineer before becoming an artist and a writer. He moved to London in 1964 and established his signature minimalist style of stacked, painted trestle wood frames, and later founded the magazines *Black Phoenix* (1978–79), *Third Text* (1987–present), and *Third Text Asia* (2008–10). All of these publications focus(ed) on art’s relationship to globalization through postcolonial theory.

*The Other Story* included the work of 24 first- or second-generation British artists who traced their origins to former British colonies in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and the Middle East. The exhibition encompassed works as diverse as Frank Bowling’s large Abstract Expressionist paintings, David Medalla’s kinetic foam sculptures, and Eddie Chambers’s searing anti-imperialist collages. Though wide

ranging and almost ungainly its inclusiveness, the exhibition was not without its limitations. Most of the artists were of an older generation, and the show was overwhelmingly male: only four of its artists were women. Yet, as is evident in the excerpts presented on the following pages, Araeen takes pains to demonstrate that he is narrating a story of confrontations and migrations—not establishing a history—making his exhibition more of a provocation than a decree, and perhaps following Hannah Arendt’s note that “storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it.”<sup>1</sup>

In a postscript to the catalogue not published here, Araeen discusses his decade-long struggle to gain funding and institutional support for the exhibition in Britain as well as his own ambivalence over the curatorial premise: Is it appropriate to present these Afro-Asian artists together as a relatively cohesive group, given the diversity of their work and already-ghettoized status in the art world? Does the exhibition challenge the assumptions of quality and taste concomitant with much conservative art historical analysis, or merely recapitulate those assumptions? These self-reflexive questions are left largely unanswered and unresolved. Araeen’s marked uncertainties toward the making of *The Other Story* reveal a significant tension regarding absorption, cooptation, and resistance between the artists of the so-called margins and institutions of power in the centers. It is a tension that today has all but been buried under the art world’s prevailing rhetoric of cheerful universalism. Certainly much has changed since 1989. Yet Araeen’s provocations continue to sound an unharmonious chord in the ostensibly smooth operations of the art world—one that, once exposed, becomes difficult to ignore.

1. Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1983), 147.

## WHEN CHICKENS COME HOME TO ROOST

1. Edward Said, "Opponents, Audience, Constituencies and Community," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster, Bay Press, 1983, p. 158.

2. Quoted in Partha Miller, *Much Maligned Monsters: A History of European Reactions to Indian Art*, ch IV, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1977.

This is a unique story. It is a story that has never been told. Not because there was nobody to tell the story, but because it only existed in fragments, each fragment asserting its own autonomous existence removed from the context of collective history. It is therefore a story of those men and women who defied their "otherness" and entered the modern space that was forbidden to them, not only to declare their historic claim on it but also to challenge the framework which defined and protected its boundaries. My attempt to tell this story, given my lack of proper expertise and insufficient discipline, aims to pay homage to this defiance. My own struggle as an avant-garde artist (in the West) has been fundamental in my realization of the issues, and without this struggle it would not have been possible for me to recognize the importance of this story. However, it is not the only story. There are many more, and I believe it is crucial, in our attempt to recover our place in history, "to tell other stories than the official sequential or ideological ones produced by institutions of power."<sup>1</sup>

My aims here are exploratory rather than critical, insofar as they are separable. However, this exploration must take into consideration the change that has taken place in the world since the last War, in particular the mass emigration of peoples from Africa, Asia and the Caribbean to the West, which has not only changed the demographic map of Europe but also challenged the old social structures that had been maintained by the geographical separation of the colonizer and the colonized. This challenge was part of the process of decolonization across the world, with its specific articulation in the metropolis.

It would be a mistake to emphasize only the socio-political determinants of mass emigration and not to fully understand the actual aims of individual artists who left their countries of origin simply to fulfill their artistic ambitions abroad. We should also recognize the peculiarity of these ambitions, which are not fulfilled merely by a success in the market-place but by the artist's entry into the history of art. It is this entry that allows his or her work to be discussed seriously and to be recognized for its historical significance. What we face here is the dominant ideology of an imperial civilization for which the racial or cultural difference of the colonized constitutes Otherness. And of course the Other is a part of its history as long as it stays outside the master narrative.

Would it be possible to inscribe this story within the master narrative of modern art history? Would not this have produced an unresolvable contradiction? A slap in the face of Hegelian metaphysics? Is not the history of art still being written according to the Hegelian historical framework in which only the Western subject is privileged? And is not this privilege achieved by arbitrary removal of other cultures/peoples from the dynamics of historical continuity? I should not perhaps have used the word "arbitrary" and should be more profound in this respect, but I wish to avoid a situation in which I might be dragged into accusing Hegel of racism.

A good example is the way Hegel looks at Indian art and inferiorizes it by comparing it with Greek art. What is the point of comparison here? Is there a rational discourse which can establish any point of comparison objectively, beyond and outside the mythical historicization of the evolution of different cultures? Hegel's world-view removes India from any dynamic of history because it helps establish the supremacy of Western culture. India is therefore "condemned to remain always outside history, static, immobile, and fixed for all eternity," because for Hegel "the Hindoo race has . . . proved itself unable to comprehend either persons or events as part of a continuous history, because to any historical treatment a certain objectivity is essential."<sup>2</sup>

The art historian John Ruskin, whose socialist credentials are often thrown in to support his humanism, did not hesitate to use strong words to belittle other cultures: “The reader who has not before turned his attention to this subject may, however, at first have some difficulty in distinguishing between the noble grotesque of these great nations, and the barbarous grotesque of mere savageness, as seen in the work of the Hindoo and other Indian nations; or, more grossly still, in that . . . of the Pacific Islands.”<sup>33</sup> [ . . . ]

John Ruskin is not alone in his views, nor are they now out of fashion. Such views may not today be expressed so openly, or they may not be influential in the way they were a hundred years ago. But there still exist assumptions and attitudes which consider other cultures/peoples outside modern history. These attitudes and assumptions are so pervasive, so intransigent, that the very presence of the others in the modern world is seen with suspicion. When it comes to the question of modernity of other people, the whole citadel of modernism begins to fall and the question is buried under its debris in the name of the new Father, postmodernism.

*A World History of Art*, which is claimed to have represented for the first time all the cultures in the world equally, does include in it all the cultures and treat them almost equally. But this pluralism ends by the end of the nineteenth century. As we enter the twentieth century, African/Oceanic sculpture is taken up again, but only in connection with modernism, the development of various movements and styles—in particular Cubism. After that everything non-European, both people and cultures, disappears. The West then shines alone this century, the whole world reflected in its image. [ . . . ]

In spite of all its claims it falls into an established pattern that obscures the achievements of other cultures in the twentieth century on the assumption that other peoples belong to historically receding cultures. We can fully understand the implication of this assumption if we return to Hegel, amongst others, who assumes that history is a narrative of the progress of ideas in the process of change, where the ultimate narrative is the narrative of Western civilization, from which others must be excluded.

Art history is peculiar in its function as a master narrative, not only in that it is fundamental in the recognition and legitimation of Art, with a capital A, but that it seems to be the only discourse (unlike the discourse of literature or science) which protects its Western territory so rigidly that we find hardly any exception to its Eurocentric rules.

We are confronted here by a discourse which is complex and ambivalent, for when the mask of its objectivity is lifted, what is revealed is not only a phony rationalization but a structure which is mythical. It is this mythic structure that hides the contradictions of the bourgeois/imperial society by the invocation of the magical power of the modern artist (white, male, individual, heroic. . .). Its ambivalence, expressed particularly in its fascination for the Other’s traditions, does not hide its re-affirmation of the centrality of the Western/white artist in the paradigm of modernism.

There is perhaps no internal contradiction here. If art history is an ideological presentation of Western civilization, it would be logical for it to produce a narrative which conforms to its assumptions, functions and ambitions. My concern here is not to denounce its imperial (and/or patriarchal) ideology. It would be more fruitful to interrogate the nature of its narrative; to reveal the underlying myth which disguises those contradictions inherent in its claim of objective superiority, both historical and epistemological. [ . . . ]

The smooth working of the myth had entailed the smooth working of the colonial system by which the imperial metropolis was successfully separated and insulated from the people of the colonies. But when the chickens began to come home to roost, the outer shell of the myth began to crack. [ . . . ] Europe after the War was in ruins, facing the anguish of unprecedented human death and suffering. There were no fruits of the Empire to be reaped. There were no roads paved with gold. Instead the cities of Europe had to be rebuilt; and this was the first stage in the process of demystification of imperial greatness and its humanism, on which the whole colonial apparatus had been built.

The colonial administration used both the stick and the carrot. Schools were set up on Western educational patterns, out of which emerged a middle class which served the Empire.

4. Quoted in K. G. Subramanyan, *Moving Focus: Essays on Indian Art*, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, 1978, p. 19.

Nevertheless there also appeared a modern consciousness which aspired to change, progress and individual freedom, and this consciousness was fundamental to anticolonial struggles. It was therefore no surprise that many artists in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean who adopted the framework of modernism for their artistic practice were also engaged in the anticolonial struggles of their countries. It was perhaps the anticolonial position held by many artists that helped them “appropriate” the ideas of rebellion and revolt inherent in the avant-garde. If the attack of the avant-garde in the West was directed at the affluent and dehumanized bourgeois society, the artists in the colonies were concerned with the lack of basic modern progress. [ . . . ]

The artists also had the double task of dealing with the prevailing situation: on the one hand with traditional structures (tribal/feudal) that were re-enforced by colonialism, and on the other, with art institutions that were supposedly modern but were in fact extremely conservative. There were widespread revolts against the status quo, made manifest by the formation of various radical and progressive groups. [ . . . ]

In India the debate about what is progress and what is progressive, which began over a century ago, is still not resolved. It was never a question of rejection of traditions, but of how to re-vitalize them in terms of “modern progress.” This is what Rabindranath Tagore said: “Fearfully trying to conform to a conventional type is a sign of immaturity. . . . I strongly urge our artists vehemently to deny their obligation to produce something that can be labeled as Indian art, according to some old world mannerism.”<sup>4</sup>

Throughout history artists have traveled from one country to another in search of patronage, quite often ending up in a dominant center. The arrival of Picasso, Brancusi, and Mondrian, for example, in Paris in the early years of this century, was very much part of this tradition. So when artists from the ex-colonies began to arrive in the metropolis after the War it was not an unusual phenomenon. The independence of their countries removed the constraints, both physical and psychological, from travelling to those places where they could find institutions to support their work. The paradox here is not that of chasing the old colonial masters, but that the lack of modern institutions in their own countries made it impossible for these modern artists to receive all the support they needed. Of course, it would be foolish to ignore other reasons that were to do with the artists’ own individual ambitions. It would also be difficult to separate these ambitions from the repressed aspirations, desires, and fantasies of the colonial times. [ . . . ]

It should be understood that England has been marginal in terms of twentieth-century modern movements, since all the important movements before the War took place on the Continent. London had never been an international art center like Paris. It was this consciousness of marginality and the hope that London would develop into an international cultural center within the independent Commonwealth that created a euphoric spirit among a section of British society that welcomed the arrival in England of artists from abroad.

These artists faced many difficulties in the beginning, no different from those faced by any artist in a new place or country. These problems may have been compounded by the fact that we are here dealing with a society with an imperial past and within which racism has been rampant and overt. [ . . . ] However, it would be a mistake simply to evoke this kind of racist bigotry in order to understand the position of Afro-Asian artists in Britain. [ . . . ] The point here is that this position depends not only on individuals’ responses to these artists but also on the attitude of the institutional structures of this society.

However, one is amazed by the kind of support and response which Afro-Asian artists received during their successful period. They began to exhibit their work in the mid-50s, and success followed in many cases. The success of F. N. Souza and Avinash Chandra had become so phenomenal by the early 60s that there must have been many English artists envious of their success. There was hardly a critic who did not write about them. [ . . . ]

However, despite all their success they remained the Other, in the sense that their Otherness was constantly evoked as part of the discussion of their work. Headlines such as “Oriental Week,” “Indian Vision,” or “An Indian Painter” were not uncommon, but there were also critics who tried to deal with the problematics of the Otherness, critically and sympathetically, not in order to exclude those artists from the discourse of modern art but to raise

the issue of other cultural traditions in relation to modernism. [. . .]

The success of these artists was short-lived—so much so that by the end of the 60s nobody knew or even wanted to talk about them. On the other hand, many of the younger artists of the early 60s, English and White, took over the art scene and became part of the history of the period. What happened to Afro-Asian artists? Why did none of them manage to enter history?<sup>5</sup>

The rise and fall of an artist is not an uncommon phenomenon. Few artists can sustain their position for long. Success is an extremely complex issue, but it can be observed that success in the art market alone is not enough to sustain an artist's career for any length of time, and institutional support is necessary in the consolidation of the artist's position and his/her place in history. Can we conclude from this that Afro-Asian artists did not receive support from the institutions? If so, why not?

Of course, Souza, Chandra, Geoffrey, Bowling and Parvez did leave London in the second half of the 60s to live in New York, but they left only because they were no longer doing well in England. And they were also lured by the success and glamour of New York. In any case, living abroad should not make any difference to the status of an artist. David Hockney has lived most of his life in California, but is still a favorite of the British establishment. An expatriate, Malcolm Morley, who spent little time in Britain during his career as an artist, was given the first Turner Prize a few years ago. The explanation must be that they are *English*.

Why were things so different for Afro-Asian artists? The situation can be better understood in the context of the changes that took place after the War, not only in Britain but worldwide. Since the details are so complicated I have to generalize and simplify the whole thing in order just to explain its relationship with the emergence of a new situation in Britain. If the Commonwealth euphoria of the 50s welcomed Afro-Asian artists as what Dennis Bowen called “a breath of fresh air,” the shift of Britain towards America in the 60s became detrimental to the status of these artists.

Given the fact that Britain had lost the Empire and its economic power, its new alliance with an emerging imperial power is understandable. London was not just the focal point of the Commonwealth in the post-war period, it also became an important art center, which by the early 60s had direct and close connections with New York, the new Mecca of the art world. The opening-up of the New York art market to British artists was a crucial boost to the confidence of the new generation leaving art schools in the early 60s, who soon became part of the international art scene. [. . .] At the same time there emerged a new class of art critics, historians and art administrators, whose confidence was formed and enhanced by this change. The Tate Gallery in particular played an important role in the promotion of American interests, in some cases at the expense of British developments.

It is difficult to suggest any direct connection between the situation in Britain and America's use of art (particularly Greenbergian formalism) in Cold War politics, or any collusion between the two in relation to what happened to Afro-Asian artists. But it must be remembered that the objective of post-war American cultural imperialism was not just anti-communism but also the assertion of its own cultural hegemony over the world. Freedom of expression in newly independent countries was inevitably affected. It seems that the eventual disappearance of Afro-Asian art from the British art scene was not fortuitous, nor can it be explained simply as a result of the emergence of new racism, epitomized by the famous speech of Enoch Powell in 1968 in which he demanded the return of the new Commonwealth peoples to the countries of their origin. It is no coincidence that the British art world became completely white by the end of the 60s—so much so that no major art gallery showed work other than English, American, and to a lesser extent, European. Subsequently no national or international survey of post-war art in Britain had mentioned or included any non-European artist.

But things are changing again, mainly as a result of the anti-racist struggle in Britain, and it is now officially recognized that Britain is a multiracial and multicultural society. Can true pluralism be achieved without recovering what we have lost in the past, for whatever reasons? Can we afford to be complacent any more?

5. It is interesting to note that Afro-Asian artists were ignored during Norbert Lynton's tenure as the Arts Council's Exhibitions Director in the 70s, and when his book *The Story of Modern Art* came out in 1982 it comprised only white/European artists.

ATTITUDE



**CURATING AS SPATIAL  
RESISTANCE**

João Ribas

i.

1. See Steve Rosenbaum, [curationnation.org](http://curationnation.org).

2. "The exponential growth of online content is a given. Every month there are more people online, more tweets being tweeted, more blog posts being written, more Web sites being launched, and more videos being uploaded. On a daily basis, all of us are inundated with news articles, emails, tweets, and news feeds. Some have tried the zero inbox methodology, while others have declared content bankruptcy and just started over." Pashan Deshpande, "The Rise of the Curator in Marketing: Marketers find value in getting customers exactly what they need," CRM.com, June 7, 2013.

3. Ibid.

4. I was struck after writing this by the first line of one of Rosenbaum's recent columns: "Greetings fellow victims of the information apocalypse." Steve Rosenbaum, "Can You Text/E-mail/Tweet/FB/DM Me? (Plz!)," Huffington Post, December 10, 2014.

It reads like an imperative or an insult: *Curate This!* The exclamatory title of the new "Hands-On, How-To Guide to Content Curation," by Steve Rosenbaum forcibly announces the semantic drift of the term "curating" from the argot of contemporary art to the even murkier lexical realm of marketing. Rosenbaum—a self-styled "Curator. Creator. Collector." in all that orthographic assurance—argues that the growth of user-generated content online amounts to a surfeit of information, a cultural TMI, constituted by overwhelming "content abundance."<sup>1</sup> There are too many emails, tweets, blogs, and uploaded videos, and not enough time, or even people, to share or like them.<sup>2</sup> Curating, Rosenbaum claims, is the solution to this exhausting condition:

Face it—you're drowning in data.  
Your in-box is flooded with spam  
Your Facebook has too many "friends"  
Your Twitter is a flock of unrelated birds [. . .]

Lucky for us, there is a new magic that makes the web work. It's called curation, and it allows us to sort through the digital excess and focus on what's relevant.<sup>3</sup>

With its mixed metaphors, the declarative prose speaks of the near-apocalyptic urgency of the problem: *Drowning, floods, birds.*<sup>4</sup> Our glut of content is a plague of seemingly biblical proportions. Without the reparative power of "content curation . . . the process of finding, organizing, and sharing the

best and most relevant content”—something “that art galleries and museums have done for centuries”—there is only the banal terror of consumptive excess.<sup>5</sup> Curation is the “magic” that remediates our informational sublime by transforming, through sleight of hand, quantity into quality. Such lexical appropriation reduces the sense of “to curate” to equivalence with selection, its practice made virtually synonymous with sorting and circulation, reducing the curatoriat to “packagers of content.”<sup>6</sup>

What goes missing in the term’s new currency (of which Rosenbaum is just one emblematic example) are notions central to curating as it has been commonly understood within the realm of art production and exhibition. These range from the foundational idea of *care*, to practical and historical concerns around exhibition practices, which ground the purview of publications such as this one. This is not merely a question of semantics. Rather, it is a question of the assumed “role of language in the constitution of institutions,” as the philosopher John Searle writes, and of how a word is taken for granted within the “collectively accepted system of rules (procedures, practices)” that define specific practices.<sup>7</sup>

Read differently, Rosenbaum’s exclamatory title invites an assessment of our own attitudes toward curating and exhibition making, attending to those aspects that his definition obviates—specifically, the dramaturgical, scenographic, and discursive aspects of exhibitions. In contrast, then, I would like to assert the practice of curating as a catalyzing of spatial forms—particularly, of spatial forms of resistance.

To limn this proposal means addressing the politics and ethics of the museum as a space, and the exhibition as occasional structure, and in doing so, to approach it as a means of producing “desire lines” through various processes, institutions, formats, and contexts. In the discourse of urban planning, a desire line is an informal path that cuts through established or planned routes and trajectories, such as the footpaths that pedestrians often carve out through grass fields rather than using designated sidewalks.<sup>8</sup> This seems to me an apt metaphor for the spatial politics of exhibitions—not only in how they are put together (too often as a form of exiting through the gift shop) but also within the space of the institution itself, in which the promise of the museum as public space becomes increasingly encroached upon by hollowed-out forms of the “public,” interactivity, or spectacle.

The populism that underlies the reframing of the curatoriat reflects these conditions of the contemporary art institution under neoliberalism, in the form of the contraction of public space and the increasingly fading potential of the museum as a commons. By advocating curating as an inherently spatial, behavioral, and embodied practice, therefore, we must concern ourselves with how it can challenge the spatial forms through which capital, and its enclosure of space, operates. The function of the exhibition would then be to gather, propose, or expand spatial and behavioral modes of resistance that

5. Pashan Deshpande, “The Rise of the Curator in Marketing.”

6. Julia McCoy, “How Content Curation Can Help You Come Up with Awesome Content Ideas,” *Business2Community.com*, December 23, 2014.

7. “Instead of presupposing language and analyzing institutions, we have to analyze the role of language in the constitution of institutions.” John R. Searle, “What Is an Institution?” *Journal of Institutional Economics* 1, no. 1 (2005): 2.

8. See Noëleen Murray, Nick Shepherd, and Martin Hall, eds., *Desire Lines: Space, Memory and Identity in the Post-Apartheid City* (London: Routledge, 2007), 1.

9. Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 268.

10. Walter Benjamin quoted in *ibid.*, 269–70.

11. Jan Verwoert writes of Buster Keaton “that the characters he plays are positively incapable of doing anything right.” Jan Verwoert, “O Lucky Man!” *Frieze* 110 (October 2007).

12. Buck-Morss, parsing Benjamin, writes, “It is in this way that technological reproduction gives back to humanity that capacity for experience which technological production threatens to take away. If industrialization has caused a crisis in perception due to the speeding up of time and the fragmentation of space, film shows a healing potential by slowing down time and, through montage, constructing ‘synthetic realities,’ as new spatio-temporal orders, wherein the ‘fragmented’ images are brought together ‘according to a new law.’” Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 268.

13. Jan Verwoert, “The Life Aquatic: SpongeBob SquarePants, Buster Keaton and the Anti-Oedipal,” *Frieze* Blog, October 9, 2007.

14. *Ibid.* Karl Marx writes that the machine “is animated by the longing to reduce to a minimum the resistance offered by that repellent yet elastic natural barrier, man.” Karl Marx, *Capital* vol. 1.

15. Franco Berardi asks, “Today, what does it mean to work? As a general tendency, work is performed according to the same physical patterns: we all sit in front of a screen and move our fingers across a keyboard.” Franco “Bifo” Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy* (New York: Semiotexte, 2009), 74.

16. Jan Verwoert, “The Life Aquatic.”

are artistic and curatorial as well as spectatorial, allowing the emergence of new paths and trajectories that are physical, affective, and ideational—trajectories that might resist the “magic” that makes things work.

ii.

Consider Charlie Chaplin’s Little Tramp role in his landmark film *Modern Times* (1936). Over the course of the film, as he works on an assembly line, wanders through the city, or struggles to drink a cup of coffee, his anarchic movements resist both the new modes of production within the Taylorized factory as well as new forms of being in the metropolis, by converting each into a ludic space.<sup>9</sup> As Walter Benjamin wrote of Chaplin’s performance, “[He] breaks apart human motions of expression into a series of the smallest innervations.”<sup>10</sup>

This embodied resistance, and this failure to work properly,<sup>11</sup> rearranges and reterritorializes both factory and city—as it does cinema itself, through montage.<sup>12</sup> The Little Tramp is a paradigmatic figure of resistance to the spatial logic of capital. As Jan Verwoert has written of Chaplin (and of Buster Keaton): “The subversive quality of their performances always lies in the way in which they set their protagonist[s] up against the hostile reality of capitalist America—shaped by poverty, exploitation and random police brutality—and make them triumph over these realities through the resilience of a simple mind and flexible body.”<sup>13</sup>

The factory is, of course, no longer the paradigmatic form of labor it once was; the urban situation has itself been transformed. The immiseration of service workers, the extension of labor time, and new organizations of the city (including suburbanization and the repopulation of a new “boutique” city gentrified by financiers and knowledge workers) have shifted the conditions in which Chaplin’s resistance once operated. Formerly a mode of resistance to capitalist spatial control, the Little Tramp’s “flexible” slapstick now pervades capitalism’s modes of production, and consumption itself.<sup>14</sup> New forms of capital have worked themselves into the level of gesture, inscribing on our bodies an order and relation of production. We sit and stare at screens. We swipe; we share.<sup>15</sup> The occlusion of other forms of labor aside—the older forms of materially exploitative labor, such as mining or factory work, which sustain digitization—such modes of production now incorporate the flexibility that defined Chaplin’s spatial genius. And as the flexibility of spatial performance becomes the dominant model of labor, blurring the lines between life and work, what was once resistant has become compliant.<sup>16</sup>

As if to perversely emphasize this transition, “former factories,” as Hito Steyerl writes, “are today more often than not museums,” which are “simultaneously a supermarket, a casino, and a place of worship whose reproductive work is performed by cleaning ladies and cellphone-video bloggers alike.

In this economy, even spectators are transformed into workers.”<sup>17</sup> On these terms, “curation” (in Rosenbaum’s sense) promises to put *everyone* to work, though in ways that are largely under- or unpaid. What are the prospects for resistance in such conditions? Part of the answer might lie in the negotiated and reterritorialized condition of daily social space—as a place where we might contest the drags, pinches, and swipes that characterize our regime of digitized labor.

## iii.

Among the various types of formalized social interaction, from the exhibition opening to the funeral, “the coffee” is one of the most banal and seemingly conventional. A ritual in the behavioral repertoire of everyday life, “the coffee” condenses a variety of economic, social, and political dimensions into a simple exchange and act of consumption. It also readily intertwines forms of personal, professional, and geopolitical space. Informal and casual, the coffee is nevertheless, on another level, directed and purposeful. As pretense or occasion to get together, it acts as a way to redraw and delineate the map of urban, capitalist, and personal spaces that are part of the cartography and proxemics of contemporary life—the spaces we move, feel, and produce in and through.

Having a coffee may be the cheapest and easiest way for people to easily and efficiently lease space for their own personal use. Doing so means leasing time—the technical term is “rental in perpetuity”—through a purchase that allows us to stay, share, connect, produce, and relax.<sup>18</sup> As expressed in a story about the sociology of coffee shops in *The Atlantic*: “Make your purchase and the seat is yours—if you can find one. What you do with it and how long you sit there is pretty much your own business.”<sup>19</sup> A cup of coffee is a reason to meet or catch up, get to know someone, make deals, or chip away at that flood of emails. In this way, the leasing of space in coffee shops emblemizes the conditions of precarious labor—as the informal office of the “creative class”—and the contemporary nature of social and public space, which must increasingly be leased. If Jürgen Habermas has shown that the coffeehouses of the 18th century were a primary place where “*private* people came together to form a *public*” through debate and interaction,<sup>20</sup> today cafés are perhaps best described as a “collision between abstract capitalist space and concrete human place,” to borrow Marshall Berman’s phrase.<sup>21</sup>

The leasing of such spaces has become a way of claiming *space* in order to gain *time*—precisely that space and time where capital now operates most readily. As explained on the Starbucks corporate website, for example, the coffee shop is “a place for conversation and a sense of community. A third place between work and home.” The choice of words is deliberate: the “third place” reference is drawn directly from a concept coined by the urban soci-

17. Hito Steyerl, “Is a Museum a Factory?” *e-flux journal* 7 (June 2009).

18. Neil Wagner, “The Social Dynamics of Coffee Shops,” June 13, 2012, *TheAtlantic.com*. Wagner writes, “Try as coffee shops might to encourage more profitable behavior, customers still control these third places.”

19. *Ibid.*

20. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 125–27. It is worth qualifying Habermas’s idealized description by noting that European addiction to caffeinated conversation was of course a colonial enterprise, giving rise to the Atlantic slave economy and with it the beginnings of the modern credit system. Coffee set biocapitalism to work.

21. Berman quoted in Martha Rosler, “Culture Class: Art, Creativity, Urbanism, Part III,” *e-flux journal* 25 (May 2011).

22. "The Third Place Concept: The Business of Community," *WallStreetFlaneur.com*, October 15, 2002.

23. See Daniel Marcus, "Proposal for a Museum: Daniel Marcus, A Public Museum," *SFMOMA Open Space Blog*, December 6, 2012.

24. Julian Myers-Szupinska, email correspondence with the author, February 7, 2015.

25. Byron Peters and Matthew Post, "Proposal for a Museum: Questions on Expansion," *SFMOMA Open Space Blog*, May 28, 2013.

26. Daniel Marcus, "Proposal for a Museum."

ologist Ray Oldenburg to describe "a location where people gather outside the familiar confines of the first and second places, home and workplace."<sup>22</sup> Through the appropriation of this "third place" urbanism, public space is achieved not through a "right to the city" but by renting space through minimal (though in aggregate quite lucrative) acts of consumption. This enclosure of the commons has the added bonus of getting us, through caffeination, to work more, to enjoy our work, and to *spend our time* in capital's environs (the idiom is telling). It is from these "third places" that we increasingly *siphon off the commons*. The museum's public role, then, fills in for the neoliberal contraction of the public sphere and the collapsing distinctions of public and private, while the leasing of the coffee shop offers to redraw the collapsed spaces of work and life. Public space is thus re-created through a refracted image in the hybrid form of the museum café, to which museum architecture increasingly leads.<sup>23</sup> The purchase of admission itself functions as a chance to "rent" access to culture, history, or experience—as well as time and space for social interaction.<sup>24</sup> The museum becomes the "rentier of collective cultural riches."<sup>25</sup>

iv.

How might affirming the spatial aspects of "curation" help us resist these inscriptions of behavior and such enclosure of space? Whether the museum should, or can, function as a "third place" given its current conditions is unclear. In contrast, however, the spatial practices of exhibition making should collect together forces, masses, and actors in the face of the larger structures that impede them, and in doing so, enact a leasing of space equivalent to that through which we negotiate the constrictions of public space in everyday life. An exhibition is such a leasing of space and time, and as such, it must be made to redraw the boundaries of private, urban, capitalist, and affective spaces. In response to rhetoric of the "public" employed by contemporary institutions, exhibitions might instead be thought of as "rental in perpetuity" in their bond between artwork, institution, and audience.

An exhibition aggregates various agents and structures for a period of time, in a particular space. It is an occasional structure, like the coffee or the celebration, whose ethics extend beyond the functions of selection or circulation. It is a gathering, a constellation, a means to unite people, objects, ideas, movements, or gestures, all connected together by a shared purpose and a shared space. Call it an excuse, or an obligation; in either case, it calls for curating to use the very concept of "rental in perpetuity" against itself. As the art historian Daniel Marcus writes, "To resist the encroachment of capital in the present climate means harnessing the museum's resources against the logic of productivity, elevating time-insensitive activities above the 'proper' (i.e., productive) use of space."<sup>26</sup>

As a space of confrontation, then, the exhibition should function to pro-

pose, engage, and enact the contemporary versions of the Tramp's spatial resistance, now in the converted factories he once playfully inhabited. The exhibition should be engaged for all this productive—and indeed non-productive—potential, affirmed especially in the face of curating's appropriation into the abstracted space of capital.

What might this resistance look like in practice? There is no one answer. It may call for what the artist and e-flux founder Anton Vidokle refers to as artists “doing something else in the space of art,” and so attending to practices that “temporarily construct a rather peculiar set of social relations between those in attendance.”<sup>27</sup> Or perhaps the answer might be to redistribute the museum's resources altogether, and elsewhere.<sup>28</sup> In still other cases, it may mean preserving the possibility of direct spatial confrontation, confronting the somatic and temporal dimensions of capital by holding tight to the idea of the exhibition as a zone of agonistic encounter. Curation should see its task as enabling, directing, diverting, or sustaining the lines of desire that need to emerge on such occasions. Most estimates report that the average museum visitor spends 15 to 30 seconds in front of an artwork. What is the time it takes to drink a cup of coffee?<sup>29</sup>

27. Anton Vidokle, “Art Without Work?” *e-flux journal* 29 (November 2011).

28. Byron Peters and Matthew Post, “Proposal for a Museum.”

29. “There have been a number of surveys of how visitors interact with paintings in museums. One found that an average viewer goes up to a painting, looks at it for less than two seconds, reads the wall text for another 10 seconds, glances at the painting to verify something in the text, and moves on. Another survey concluded people looked for a median time of 17 seconds. The Louvre found that people looked at the Mona Lisa an average of 15 seconds, which makes you wonder how long they spend on the other 35,000 works in the collection. A survey at the Metropolitan Museum of Art supposedly found that people look at artworks for an average of 32.5 seconds each, but they must not have counted the ones people glance at.” James Elkins, “How Long Does It Take to Look at a Painting?” *Huffington Post*, November 8, 2010.

ASSESSMENTS



**HISTÓRIAS  
MESTIÇAS**

## DIS-ENCOUNTERS

Claire Bishop

It's almost unheard of for a contemporary art institution to mount a show that tackles a nation's history, and even rarer for one to address that history through the lens of race. *Histórias Mestiças* (Mestizo Histories) did exactly that, taking Brazil's founding myth of *mestiçaje* (the mixing of races and cultures) as the premise for a *mestiçaje* of three histories and epistemologies formative for this country: the indigenous Amerindian, the colonial Portugese, and the African slave. Curators Adriano Pedrosa and Lilia Moritz Schwarcz hung the seven galleries of São Paulo's Instituto Tomie Ohtake with some 400 works that juxtaposed contemporary and modern art with 19th-century photography and prints, indigenous artifacts, and other material culture.

The risks of such assemblages are of course well known: the ghosts of "Primitivism" in *20th Century Art* (1984) and *Magiciens de la terre* (1989) haunt cross-cultural exhibitions, and critics love to invoke both as a way to denigrate attempts at forging dialogue between different epistemologies, forgetting how hugely generative both of these supposed failures have in fact been. *Mestizo Histories*, however, played a much more intelligent game by focusing specifically on Brazil and its mythic self-presentation as a nation of harmonious miscegenation and racial democracy. The result was a polemical exhibition whose political ambitions, while not perfect, offered a suggestive approach that could be applied to dozens of other contexts that triangulate the indigenous, the colonial, and the Atlantic slave trade—not least the United States.

The show was organized as a constellation of transcultural categories

around themes such as "Trails and Maps," "Encounters and Dis-encounters," "Masks and Portraits," "Cosmologies and National Emblems," "Rites," "Labor," and "Weaves and Graphic Inscriptions." It began discreetly (but forcefully) with Adriana Varejão's *Tintas Polvo* (Octopus Paints, 2013), a modest wooden box containing 33 pristine tubes of oil paint in various shades of flesh—from "chocolate" and "half-caste" to "buffed," "sun-kissed," and "Galician fair." Placed at the entrance to the show, it indicated that the art and artifacts in the exhibition would reveal the violence of slavery and colonialism in the most subtle and aestheticized ways.

The rotunda gallery, dedicated to "Masks and Portraits," demonstrated this through a haphazard, *Wunderkammer*-style hang. Modern and contemporary images that consciously integrated indigenous forms—from Tarsila do Amaral's sketch for *A Negra II* (The Black Woman II, 1923) to Anna Bella Geiger's *Brasil Nativo / Brasil Alienígena* (Native Brazil / Alien Brazil, 1977)—appeared alongside African masks from France's Musée du Quai Branly and 19th-century *cartes de visite* showing (anonymous) black nannies holding the (named) children of white families.

"Weaves and Graphic Inscriptions" ("graphic inscriptions" being a conscious rewording of the more loaded art-historical term "abstraction") made a more specific argument, namely that the origins of Brazilian geometric abstraction might be found as much in indigenous artifacts and practices as in European Constructivism. The case was made via tribal body painting—complex codes used to denote hierarchy and status within the community—and woven fabrics. The former strategy was the strongest, represented via lithographs of "savage dances" made by the French artist Jean-Baptiste Debret in the 1830s, and in the more recent, striking photographs of bodily decora-

tion by the anthropologist Lux Vidal (ca. 1992). These were positioned next to some stunning, earth-toned modernist paintings by Vicente do Rego Monteiro (early 1920s) and a display case of genital coverings (a smoothed-out triangle of decorated ceramic) showing the same patterning in brown and white, and similar inversions of negative and positive space.

The kernel of the whole exhibition, and summation of its key themes, was a small gallery presenting three rows of images—drawings, watercolors, and photographs—on top of each other ("Encounters and Dis-encounters"). The longest row, on the bottom, was a series of 45 black-and-white photographs by Claudia Andujar, taken in 1983–84 during a mission to the Amazon to vaccinate indigenous tribes. Each one is a portrait of a nameless Amerindian with a numerical identification tag around his or her neck. The result is akin to a police lineup, as the subjects stare at the camera with a sullen resistance verging on derision. Andujar's photographs, while eliciting empathy and indignation, also have a troubling beauty, anticipating certain strands of subsequent fashion photography.

Hung above Andujar's photo series was another from the Western tradition, nearly identical in size: 38 watercolors by Joaquim José de Miranda (1771–73) depicting the Portugese "discovery" of Brazil as a peaceful encounter with happy natives. This encounter was, of course, not a discovery but a military invasion, during which anywhere from one to eight million indigenous peoples were murdered. Fiddly, fussy, and self-satisfied, these painted images show the lumbering imposition of upper-class European values onto a population depicted as tame and expendable. The top row of images was made in 1976 by Taniki Manippi-theri, a Yanomami shaman, who deployed colored felt pens on small sheets of white paper provided by Andujar. Made using a

representational system that could not be more different from Miranda's, these images are graphic equivalents of a spoken story relating the death of a woman in the village, her grieving relatives, and the importance of cremation as a way to free the soul. Clusters of dots and stick-like figures are arranged in circular configurations, with arrows pointing in and out. The juxtaposition of these drawings with the colonial prints and photography—legible as horizontal narratives but also in contrast on the vertical axis—was one of the most punchy, eloquent, and moving curatorial statements I have seen in years.

The only weakness of *Mestizo Histories* was some of the contemporary work. Aside from Varejão and Jonathas de Andrade (the latter represented by a vast wall installation about laborers on a banana plantation, *40 negro bom é 1 real* [40 Good Blacks for R\$1.00, 2013], in the gallery devoted to "Labor"), the newly commissioned pieces were significantly less striking than the historical ones. This contrast was particularly acute in "Cosmologies and National Emblems," where Sidney Amaral, Thiago Martins de Melo, and Luiz Zerbini were invited to produce alternative versions of 19th-century history paintings celebrating national events such as the first Catholic mass, the abolition of slavery, and the proclamation of the republic. These flamboyant paintings didn't stand a chance against the modest set of crayon drawings by Marubo elders and shamans collected by the anthropologist Pedro Cesarino, which show the layers of the Marubo cosmos and the path of the dead, or (in the previous room) religious statuary of black saints unique to the Brazilian Catholic church.

It will never be easy to place the indigenous—a category discursively locked into the world of anthropology—alongside the art historical, but a critical distance toward colonial and religious

art certainly helps to mediate this gap. *Mestizo Histories* did not attempt to shoehorn these indigenous traditions into Euro-American art history, but rather aimed to demonstrate the irreconcilable frictions that give lie to the fantasy of harmonious *mestizaje*. (At several points in the show, the curators made the polemical decision not to translate indigenous captions—a decision that respected singularity but increased alterity.) At its best, such an anthropological gaze can diminish the present-ism of contemporary art and allow it to become a method or system of thinking, as best seen in the gallery "Encounters and Dis-encounters." Would that more curators, in more countries, had the nerve to investigate so unflinchingly cherished national myths, particularly via racial identity. In the midst of protests against race-based policing across the United States right now, this task seems particularly pressing.

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## COLONIAL UNCONSCIOUS ON DISPLAY

Cristina Freire

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A "colonial unconscious" dominates discourse and practices in Brazil today. Curated by Adriano Pedrosa and Lília Moritz Schwarcz, *Histórias Mestiças* (Mestizo Histories) at the Instituto Tomie Ohtake, São Paulo, consistently elaborated the many layers of this collective imaginary.

Breaking at the outset with hierarchical interdictions, the exhibition presented an expressive set of 400 objects from different origins, times, and territories: paintings, drawings, sculptures, installations, maps, indigenous and African artifacts, historical documents, texts, and videos, organized into seven thematic nuclei: "Trails and Maps,"

"Encounters and Dis-encounters," "Masks and Portraits," "Cosmologies and National Emblems," "Rites," "Labor," and "Weaves and Graphic Inscriptions." Within these nuclei, the representations and values associated with racial *mestizaje* were juxtaposed over different axes and given many historical, anthropological, and cultural associations.

The question of *mestizaje* has been present for some time in the research of the curators. As an adjunct curator of the 24th Bienal de São Paulo (1998), Pedrosa, along with Paulo Herkenhoff, took anthropophagy—in the form of Oswald de Andrade's "Manifesto Antropófago" (1928)—as a starting point. Andrade's manifesto is about the local swallowing up of European references, the acceptance of which could be more complete, he argues, if it included African and Amerindian cultures. This concept was emphasized again in the banquet of *Mestizo Histories*. Pedrosa explains: "As an instrument for swallowing up the European tradition, it (antropofagia) was an early post-colonial strategy. But its indigenous and African roots have not yet been totally eaten up."<sup>1</sup>

Schwarcz, a historian and anthropologist, also assigns different values to the notion of *mestizaje*. It is in her analysis a social and historical construction, and should be considered through antagonistic ideas, ranging from racial democracy to the violence that it mobilizes; inclusion and exclusion are two sides of the same coin. The different layers of *mestizaje* in Brazilian culture and the violence emerging from it (besides the myth of racial democracy) refer back to the notion of trauma: trauma of colonization, trauma of slavery, trauma of genocide of the natives, trauma of invasion (covered over by the image of discovery).

In the nucleus "Weaves and Graphic Inscriptions," photographs from the 19th century, for example images of black nursemaids with white children

on their laps, contrasted with more recent images showing socially admired black women. The iconic painting of Brazilian modernism, *A Negra II* (The Black Woman II, 1923) by Tarsila do Amaral, shared this space with masks from the Congo, Angola, and Benin, places from which most of the slaves being sent to Brazil came. Blacks and Indians, participants in an oral culture, were condemned to silence. As a result, against the background of hegemonic cultural standards, they were despised or put in subaltern positions, which was reinforced in art-critical categories.

Categorization is undoubtedly an exercise of power. The word “category” comes from the Greek *katēgoria*, which means “to publicly accuse.” In *Mestizo Histories* the curators opted to abandon categories such as native art, primitive art, religious art, naïf art, and popular art, among others, and proposed instead a horizontal relationship as a principle for perception. Graphics and indigenous designs, masks, paintings, and African drawings were paired off with photographs and works by artists such as Jean-Baptiste Debret, Johann Rugendas, Albert Eckhout, Pierre Vergier, Rubem Valentim, Tarsila do Amaral, Adriana Varejão, Ernesto Neto, Cláudia Andujar, and Jonathas de Andrade, among many other non-hierarchical and/or chronological connections. As a critical and political operation, therefore, *Mestizo Histories* stood out from the canons established by history and art criticism—and this is no mean achievement in Brazil, where abstraction from the historical and social context, a remnant from Modernist ideology, still often regulates relationships with art.

In the nucleus “Trails and Maps,” documents and works referring back to the time of slavery in Brazil were gathered, exposing the traumatic foundations on which modern capitalism is based. Among many other objects and historical documents, such as maps of the Quilombo de São Gonçalo neigh-

borhood in 1769, and drawings and maps for the piling of bodies on the ships that brought slaves to Brazil, there were contemporary works such as *Navio Negreiro* (Slave Ship, 2007) by the artist Emanuel Araújo, who founded and directs the Museu Afro-Brasil, the country’s first museum dedicated to Afro-Brazilian culture.

In the 19th century, the ideological conceptions of history (as development) and civilization (as hierarchy) gave support for an anthropology based on the superiority and hegemony of European culture in relation to other societies and peoples. As a matter of fact, the association of space and time—that is, the more distant in space, the more remote in time—are related to this linear and developing conception, which was fundamental for these narratives. With colonial rhetoric under suspicion and the rejection of the hegemony of Western societies’ claim to stand as a model for humanity, room is granted for the possibility of a border epistemology (to call up the idea formulated by the Argentine semiotician Walter Mignolo) that operates between the metropolitan legacies of colonialism and the legacies of the colonized areas.

*Mestizo Histories* stood in this battlefield as it brought together cultural objects set apart by the colonization of thought, and at the same time revealed many stories of violence and of silence. In the nucleus “Encounters and Disencounters,” for example, 38 watercolors from the 18th century described a conflict between the frontiersmen and the Kaingang Indians in the south of Brazil, and the drawings of the Yanomami artist Taniki Manippi-theri were juxtaposed with photographs of the Yanomami Indians by the Swiss photographer Cláudia Andujar. In Andujar’s *Marcados* (1983–84) they are identified through numbers, just like the survivors of Auschwitz. In the nucleus “Weaves and Graphic Inscriptions,” ritual objects and paintings by Rubem Valentim

and Mestre Didi, as well as indigenous graphics, were set alongside paintings by representatives of Brazilian Concrete art. Such pairings served as an overall strategy for the exhibition and provoked a reconsideration of our usual associations with such work.

*Mestizo Histories* gathered objects from the most diverse Brazilian and international holdings, such as those from the Musée du Quai Branly in France, the National Museum of Denmark, the National Library Foundation of Brazil, the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology of the University of São Paulo, the Rio de Janeiro National Museum of Fine Arts, and the Museum of Contemporary Art of the University of São Paulo, among many other public and private collections. It presented them with new commissions by contemporary artists made specifically for this exhibition. Finally, the show was complemented by the publication of a carefully chosen selection of texts, bringing together authors and fundamental research and ideas to illustrate the roots of a culture over the centuries. *Mestizo Histories* exhibited, in the end, historical and political struggles within Brazilian mestizo culture against (always-updated) mechanisms of power.

#### Notes

1. Teté Martinho, “Histórias mestiças,” *Brasileiros*, August 29, 2014, <http://brasileiros.com.br/2014/08/historias-mesticas/>.

*Translated from the Portuguese by David Alan Prescott*

## A MURKY HISTORY

Tobi Maier

When *Histórias Mestiças* (Mestizo Histories) opened at Instituto Tomie Ohtake in São Paulo, many were reminded of

Jean-Hubert Martin's 1989 exhibition *Magiciens de la terre* in Paris. That show, as it is described in the recently published Afterall reader on the exhibition, "argued for the universality of the creative impulse and endeavored to offer a direct aesthetic experience of contemporary works of art made globally and presented on equal terms."<sup>1</sup> At Instituto Tomie Ohtake, by contrast, crossbreeding (*mestiçagem*) was the central idea. The show aimed to challenge the Eurocentric focus of the dominant understanding of Brazil's art history, and to foster the inclusion of indigenous and African visual production.

At the entrance, a wall text laid out the ambitious claims of curators Adriano Pedrosa and Lilia Moritz Schwarcz. Among other things, they acknowledged the genocide committed on indigenous populations in the colonization process, which resulted in some seven million dead (some skeptics believe that this number is still an underestimation). It was a laudable attempt to deconstruct from the outset notions such as "popular art" or "naive art" and tell the hybrid histories of this country, which, as Schwarcz (an anthropologist as well as a curator) affirmed, are "constructed and based on violent processes, sexism, and political and social exclusion, and not their negation."<sup>2</sup>

With approximately 400 works on view, the exhibition was organized into seven core groups: "Trails and Maps," "Encounters and Dis-encounters," "Masks and Portraits," "Cosmologies and National Emblems," "Rites," "Labor," and "Weaves and Graphic Inscriptions." The lobby leading toward these different galleries featured an environment reminiscent of spaces used for spiritual Ayahuasca ceremonies. Created in his signature style by Ernesto Neto in collaboration with indigenous inhabitants of the northeastern state of Acre, a service was held during the opening (that space remained somewhat lackluster afterward).

*Mestizo Histories* was strongest where clear analogies were established and different voices converged in the display of artworks. The Swiss-born Brazilian artist Claudia Andujar, who has dedicated much of her life to the preservation of the Yanomami people, exhibited 45 images from her *Marcados* series (1983–84). These black-and-white photographs stem from a moment when the Brazilian government decided to construct the Interoceanic highway from the Pacific to the Atlantic. On the way they encountered the Yanomami, who, because of their relative isolation, were vulnerable to diseases the construction workers carried. Many became infected and died. Andujar was given the task of documenting them photographically. Above her images, the curators hung 38 watercolors attributed to Joaquim José de Miranda, produced between 1771 and 1773. His work describes the violent encounter between an expedition commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Afonso Botelho e Souza and the Kaingang in the Tibagi region of the southeastern state of Paraná. Above Miranda's watercolors was a series of drawings by the Yanomami shaman Taniki Manippi-theri. Produced in 1976 and recovered by Andujar, they narrate the death of a Yanomami woman, the suffering of her relatives, the importance of cremation in the liberation of the soul, and finally the act of preserving the ashes of the dead.

Other galleries were dedicated to rites: for example, images of black saints, which allude to Afro-Brazilian religions, or sculptures of Shango, the demigod of thunder and lightning in the Yoruba religion, which were displayed next to paintings by the Bahian painter Carybé, whose work embodied the same spirit.

As with these precious constellations, created from analogies between popular beliefs and their representation in visual art, the exhibition was most successful where different visual tradi-

tions were brought into contact. Another example was the felt pen drawings of Antonio Brasil Marubo titled *Patamares Celestes* (Celestial Levels, 2005) and *Patamares Terrestres* (Terrestrial Levels, 2005), which reflect the language and cosmology in the shamanic knowledge of the Marubo—the people who inhabit the upper Rio Ituí region in the Amazon—whose beliefs are anchored in a plurality of bodies, both visible and invisible.

Some fascinating examples of indigenous abstract painting on the human body were brought into the exhibition through black-and-white photographs, documenting, for example, the back of a shoulder covered graciously with wing-shaped traces. These bodily depictions turned rather awkward, however, with the 16 *tangas* (loincloths, essentially) alluding to exposed indigenous vaginas. Also problematic was the fact that much of the classical history painting produced by Euro-Brazilian artists in the exhibition, such as Benedito Calixto de Jesus's *Fundação de São Vicente* (Founding of Saint Vincente, 1900), rendered the arrival of the European colonizers in Brazil as a peaceful negotiation. Thiago Martins de Melo was commissioned to make the painting *O liberal Mammon invade Pindorama sob o signo do corte azimutal do Mundo* (The Liberal Mammon Invades Pindorama Under the Court Sign of the Azimuthal World, 2014), which introduced the brutal chaos of genocide, invasion, and massacre—an iconography otherwise largely absent from the show.

The exhibition was accompanied by an invaluable reader, in Portuguese, that tracked this history. It featured an anthology of texts, including Michel Montaigne's "On Cannibals" (1580), Oswald de Andrade's "Manifesto Antropófago" (1928), Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's "The Marble and the Myrtle: On the Inconstancy of the Savage Soul" (1992), Darcy Ribeiro's "The Brazilian People: The Formation and



Christiano Junior  
*Untitled*, ca. 1870  
Cartes de visite  
Collection of Ruy  
Souza e Silva



Claudia Andujar  
*Vertical 9-Série  
Marcados*, 1983-84  
Digital print with  
mineral pigment  
Courtesy the artist



Histórias Mestiças

Claudia Andujar  
*Horizontal 2-Série*  
*Marcados*, 1983-84  
Digital print with  
mineral pigment  
Courtesy the artist





Histórias Mestiças



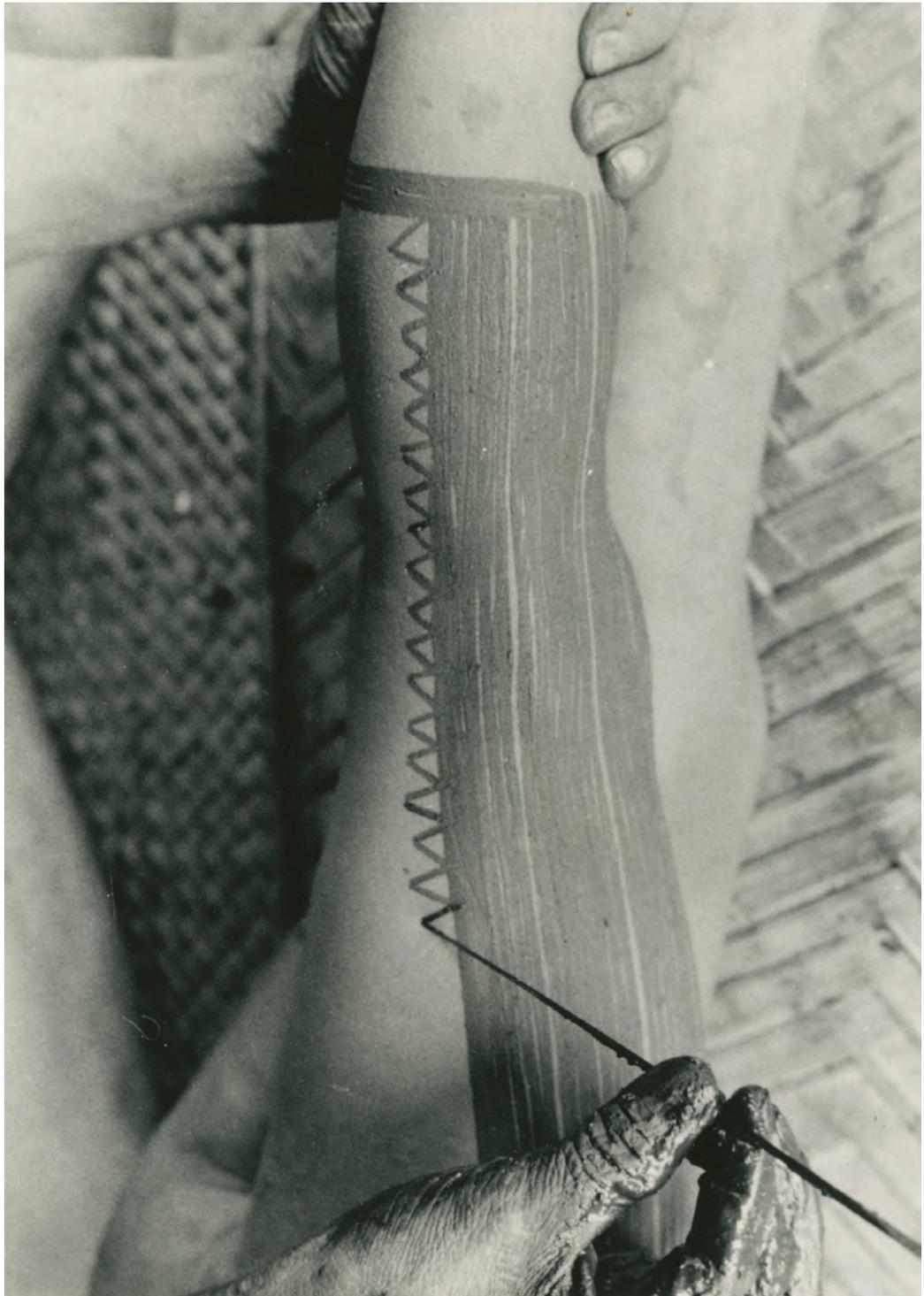
Group in Morro da Mangueira, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, wearing Hélio Oiticica's *Parangoles* (1964–79) during the filming of Ivan Cardoso's film *H.O.*, 1979

Lux Vidal  
Indigenous graphic body  
decoration, ca. 1992  
Photograph





Lux Vidal  
Indigenous graphic  
body decoration,  
ca. 1992  
Photograph



Meaning of Brazil" (1995), and Jerry Davila's "Hotel Trópico: Brazil and the Challenge of African Decolonization 1950–1980" (2010). This reader includes writings by many current scholars of cultural and postcolonial theory, but the lack of discursive and performative public programs left the exhibition itself feeling rather static; visitors were forced to decipher its main narratives through wall texts rather than direct engagement. Now that Africa is coming again to Brazil, with new waves of refugees from Senegal and Ghana, the conversation initiated by this exhibition cannot be considered strictly an academic or historical one. Active debates regarding contemporary migratory streams into Brazil, and how they relate to the murky history of racial relations in this country, might have brought these discussions more disruptively (and productively) into the present.

#### Notes

1. Back cover text, *Making Art Global (Part 2): "Magiciens de la Terre," 1989* (London: Afterall, 2013).

2. Lilia Moritz Schwarcz, *Historias Mestiças* (Rio de Janeiro / São Paulo: Cabogo Editora, 2014), 13.

## THREE COUNTS FOR A BRAZILIAN PUZZLE

Octavio Zaya

It is difficult to approach complex historical, anthropological, social, cultural, or linguistic subjects such as those addressed by *Histórias Mestiças* (Mestizo Histories) from the distance of another cultural background and understanding. As Gayatri Spivak would put it, in order to carry out distant reading, one must be an excellent close reader. And

yet I will dare to take to heart the astute observation of the great Brazilian Emanoel Araújo: "To understand Brazil, you need to be a foreigner."<sup>1</sup> And since my task is not to enter into comparative cultural disquisitions, but to review an exhibition, I hope that my assessment does not get lost in "the texts"—that I can steer clear of the globalizing traps and generalities that so often attend the "intertextuality" that the curators Adriano Pedrosa and Lilia Moritz Schwarcz staged among old, modern, and contemporary discourses and works.

In the wake of the impressive, encyclopedic research, writings, creations, and exhibitions that Araújo has pioneered since the late 1970s, Pedrosa and Schwarcz's undertaking is more than ambitious. Just a quick look at the list of sections around which this expansive and demanding exhibition was organized and classified—"Trails and Maps," "Encounters and Dis-encounters," "Masks and Portraits," "Cosmologies and National Emblems," "Rites," "Labor," and "Weaves and Graphic Inscriptions"—their task seems gargantuan, perhaps even extraordinary. Their purpose and intentions, based on two years of research and (very evidently) focused and clear, demanded that they assemble, under the same roof, 400 works, including paintings, sculptures, installations, photographs, videos, texts, documents, maps, African and indigenous artifacts, and stories. They did so in order to contrast and reframe different discourses and sources from a vast mosaic of indigenous, European, and African cultures in Brazil, without giving special treatment or prominence to any particular instance. They mixed together centuries and generations, disciplines and languages, artists, writers, and stories with no specific chronology in mind, but rather the themes and concepts that relate them.

In addition to gathering existing works from several Brazilian collections and institutions, and from international

museums such as the Musée du Quai Branly in France and the National Museum of Denmark, the curators commissioned several works to be premiered with the exhibition. Among them were new works by Beatriz Milhazes, Thiago Martins de Melo, Luiz Zerbini, Adriana Varejão, and Sidney Amaral, which drew relationships that subverted the usual patterns—the rational approaches we might have expected—and enriched the visual and intellectual experience of the exhibition.

One grouping of historical and contemporary works made a particularly strong impression on those, like me, who have felt disappointed and lost in the comparative, associative arrangements and arbitrary linkages found in many other exhibitions of this kind. In this case, three different types of works and narratives were presented one on top of the other, as if representing three different lines of meaning and worldviews that overlap, creating a challenging space of coincidences and dissonances, continuities and interstices, distortions, condensations, and displacements, rather than a false, harmonious closure. On the lowest level of the three parallel lines was the photographic series *Marcados* (1983–84) by Claudia Andujar, which were commissioned by the Brazilian government. The construction of a road through the Amazon had led to an outbreak of diseases among the Yanomami people, and Andujar was sent to photograph every single person in the area. She produced a series of portraits of each individual carrying an identifying number around his or her neck (apparently their names were difficult to transcribe). The similarity to the identification of concentration camp prisoners during the Holocaust seems obvious, although in this case, the purpose of the classification procedure was about saving a population at risk.

Above Andujar's work was a series

of 38 prints by Joaquim José de Miranda titled *A expedição do Tenente-Coronel Afonso Botelho e Souza aos Sertões do Tibagi* (The Expedition of Lieutenant-Colonel Afonso Botelho to the Hinterlands of Tibagi, 1771–73). This sort of explorer’s logbook is a vivid and detailed example of the cultural encounters, confrontations, and colonization that ensued after the Portuguese invasion. Then, at the top of this arrangement, the curators displayed *Yanomami Funeral* (1976), a set of 29 drawings by Taniki Manippi-theri, a Yanomami aborigine. These exposed a rather different understanding of reality from the layers below, emphasizing the relationship between humans and nature, and between humans and the spiritual, within the ongoing flux of life and death.

This far-reaching visual “intertextuality,” in what could be construed as material for an education in comparative cultures, extended throughout the exhibition. It was moreover supported by an anthology of texts, beginning with travel documents from the 16th century, passing through 18th-century naturalist essays, 19th-century racial determinism, and culturalist essays from the 1930s, incorporating engaged studies about social movements in the 20th century, and ending up with present-day authors such as Manuela Carneiro da Cunha and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro.

Through these texts, as much as through the powerful images and narratives of the exhibition, the curators not only traced personal histories and the history of Brazilian colonization, but also placed Africa, African cultures, and the slave trade at the heart of what makes Brazil what it is today. This clearly went beyond the limits of what the curators understand as the “incomplete project” of the much-revered and legendary “Manifesto Antropófago” (1928) of Oswald de Andrade.

And this, perhaps, was the most revealing and challenging aspect of

the two traumas that were brought to life in *Mestizo Histories*. Adriano Pedrosa made clear in his wall text that if, on the one hand, from 25 to 95 percent of the native population in the Americas in 1492 (estimated at between one and eight million) was annihilated in the infamous invasion, it is also true that “Brazil received 40 percent of the Africans who came to the Americas during the slave trade, for a total of about 3.8 million Africans (according to [slavevoyages.org](http://slavevoyages.org))—which is more than the number of Portuguese who arrived here (approximately 2.3 million according to the IBGE, Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística). Today, with 60 percent of its population composed of blacks or *pardos* with some African ancestry, Brazil is the second most populous African country, after Nigeria.”

Brazil, that is, might be thought of as an African nation—even if a quiet racism is pervasive, and even as racialist ideologies of “whitening” are alive and well in the big cities. Alberto da Costa was, of course, more eloquent about it: “The slave has remained within us, whatever our background may be. After all, without slavery Brazil would not exist as it does today, it would never have occupied the immense spaces that the Portuguese designed for it. With or without regrets, slavery is the longest and most important process in our history.”<sup>22</sup>

#### Notes

1. Adriano Pedrosa and Emanuel Araujo, “A Conversation Around Afro Brazil,” *Manifesta Journal* 17, <http://www.manifestajournal.org/issues/futures-cohabitation/conversation-around-afro-brazil>.

2. Alberto da Costa, *Histórias Mestiças, Antologia de textos*, eds. Adriano Pedrosa and Lilia Moritz Schwarcz (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Cobogó, 2014), 220.

RIGOROUS RESEARCH



**1970: A BIENNALE  
IN SEARCH OF ITSELF**

Vittoria Martini

To account for the unique and inventive structure of the 1970 Venice Biennale, which aimed to completely reimagine the venerable exhibition, we must first describe the crises in which the institution found itself over the course of the preceding years. First was the appearance of Documenta, born in Kassel, Germany, in 1955. The two exhibitions took place in the same year for the first time in 1964, and unflattering comparisons ensued. In Kassel, a collective of art historians and critics were trying to give a holistic and international picture of contemporary art production; in Venice, each participating country had its own pavilion, which gave the impression of a chance conglomeration that could make no claim to completeness.<sup>1</sup>

A second crisis came from the transforming nature of the Biennale's audience. In the immediate aftermath of World War II, the Biennale launched a series of historical exhibitions, a novelty in both Italian and international exhibiting that was intended to inform the public about new forms of practice in an expanded international field. But by the late 1950s, this informational function was already ceasing to be necessary. The world had changed: international travel was no longer a privilege reserved for the elite, and with the rise of specialized art magazines, the public had other ways of receiving the latest art news. It was demanding more from exhibitions: critical readings, and shows that could determine, rather than simply report on, new directions in art.



Entrance to the Central Pavilion, Venice Biennale, 1970; the facade, designed by Carlo Scarpa in 1968, remained on the building until the late 1970s



Banner advertising the 35th Venice Biennale and *Proposal for an Experimental Exhibition* on the Rialto Bridge, Venice, 1970

The Biennale survived the 1960s by investing in ever more gigantic presentations, yet these remained more or less irrelevant to international debates; also, any artist with certain political connections could participate. Lawrence Alloway wrote in 1968 that the Venice Biennale was “like a party,” no more than an elegant and pleasurable place in which to do business and meet the art world.<sup>2</sup> It was a lovely society event, but as a cultural power player, it was dead.

The changes realized in the 1970 edition, which aimed at revitalization, had their roots in these and other protests and criticisms. In the run-

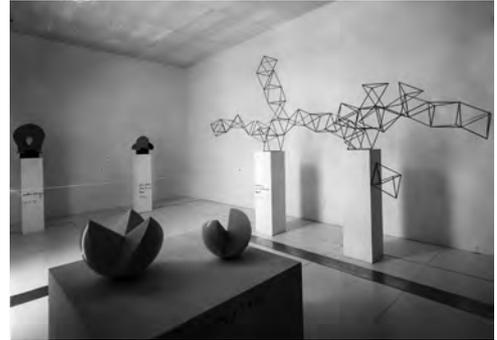
up to 1968, the art critic Giorgio De Marchis described in *Metro* magazine a crisis “of the criterion and function of art exhibitions.”<sup>3</sup> He referred in particular to Rome’s Quadriennale and to Venice, stressing that both conformed to an outdated distinction between sculpture and painting in both invitations and in prizes, besides being organized by a confusing profusion of commissions “torn between invitations and acceptance.” These commissions invariably viewed contemporary reality as “a panorama, or an anthology, in which different trends, survivals, evasions, anachronisms, turns, and generations happily coexist, leading to exhibitions that lack a critical approach.”<sup>4</sup>

The main target of De Marchis’s polemic was the Venice Biennale, which he argued did not focus on history as it was being made, or express a value judgment on the relevance of art today, or identify a coherent set of issues and validate them on the basis of evidence. It was necessary, he continued, to identify a research topic and divide it into “operating problems” as opposed to taking for granted received categories and trends. These “operating problems” should be proposed and developed by someone in charge of the cultural aspects of the show—in other words, a curator—and not by the overcrowded commissions, which simply generated dissonance. Only this approach would enable “choices that are unilateral and critically founded.”<sup>5</sup>

In those days, Italy was going through an incredible season of avant-garde exhibitions, which took place mostly in private galleries and occasionally in public spaces. According to De Marchis, the only public institution in Italy truly reflecting the new standards was the Galleria d’Arte Moderna in Turin, opened in 1959. The Turin museum could be described as modern because “it was built around functions that mirrored the latest ideas on the preservation and exhibition of artworks, and on the relationship with the public.”<sup>6</sup> Gradually taking shape around it was a system unique to Italy and “founded on the joint involvement of institutions, galleries, and cultural centers, an active synergy between the public and private spheres.”<sup>7</sup>

A central component of the Galleria d'Arte Moderna was the Museo sperimentale d'arte contemporanea (Experimental Museum of Contemporary Art), a progressive museum founded in 1963 by Eugenio Battisti at Genoa University (where Battisti taught) and donated to the Turin museum in 1965. Battisti's Experimental Museum was conceived as an open museum, problematic and non-systematic, whose primary function was educational. It was a "center for the promotion of culture" that "functioned as a gateway to knowledge,"<sup>8</sup> presenting works with accurate, straightforward captions and providing the public with a wealth of supplementary documents, among them films of the artists at work.

In the catalogue for the first exhibition of the Experimental Museum after it came to the Galleria d'Arte Moderna, we find a definition of "experimental research," a concept that would be central to the 1970 Venice Biennale. The author is Germano Celant, Battisti's young pupil and one of the protagonists in the birth and development of the Experimental Museum:



*Proposal for an Experimental Exhibition* installation view, Venice Biennale, 1970, showing an installation by Max Bill

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The term "experimental research" ... designates a process aimed at deactivating the traditional interpretive scheme ... [and] acting against an institutionalized situation. ... Experimental research operates in the "situation," ... trying to open up a new vision of the world, and works at discovering new expressive ways of working, pointing to new possibilities of the visual "discourse."<sup>9</sup>

The other key idea for the 1970 Biennale would come from Umbro Apollonio, a member of the managing board of the Experimental Museum and custodian of the archive of the Venice Biennale since its inception in 1950.<sup>10</sup> In 1964, Apollonio published an article in the magazine *Marcatre* titled "La continua sperimentazione" (Constant Experimentation), which pointed out that history cannot be measured in decades, but must be imagined in longer cycles because reality is neither fixed nor immutable, and neither are art forms. Given the instability of reality and the absence of fixed points of historical reference, Apollonio believed that the only experience humans could have was one of permanent transition:

Hence vitality lies in constant experimentation, in the awareness of future (albeit as yet undefinable) events, just as history cannot be anything but an endless itinerary. The question, therefore, should not be posed in terms of an interpretive act, but in terms of perception of the case history inherent in all things.<sup>11</sup>

Having worked for 20 years inside the Biennale, where history was “produced,”<sup>12</sup> Apollonio took a confrontational stance, which would come to center stage in 1970. This opportunity came as a result of the protests in 1968, which had turned the Biennale into a political liability. Abandoned by politicians, who failed to reach an agreement about a new institutional reform law, it was in a state of bureaucratic limbo. But the staff, including Apollonio, saw this gap in the power structure as an opportunity. They decided to gather in an assembly and, remarkably, took over the institution. They immediately issued an “experimental program” for the 1970 events.<sup>13</sup>

The staff assembly believed that the Biennale could and should become the leading model for Italian cultural institutions in a time of crisis, showing the way to renewal. Rather than endure silence and immobility while waiting for new institutional reform, they believed that continuing to organize activities was the best way to put pressure on governmental bodies. The assembly agreed, in turn, on a unique “operating problem” for the 1970 edition—*Biennale/Research*—and invited the national pavilions to reflect on it, which could be seen in retrospect as the first attempt at a thematic exhibition in the history of the Biennale.<sup>14</sup>

Experimentation became an operative code, under which everything could be modified; corrections became a dynamic factor in the process of arriving at a proposal, which could not be formulated on the basis of any existing theory. In this experimentation process, the only certainty was a rigorous point of view. Battisti described the proposition as follows:

The choice of the theme is determined by an interpretive hypothesis: (the emergence of) a general tendency to blur the boundaries of individual languages, as a consequence of the polarization of everyday life and political practice.<sup>15</sup>

The assembly understood that the only way to avoid the risks inherent in the “museum dimension”<sup>16</sup> was to turn the Biennale into an open, active research center. This radical change, the result of a “set of reflections and projects developed inside the institution,”<sup>17</sup> aimed to meet cultural needs that had become unavoidable for an international exhibition in that moment. The assembly’s proposal contained the idea of a *forum*-Biennale that would be open, non-defined, and in progress—that is, constantly integrating elements that might enrich and add to the complexity of its informational structure. Activities would start in May with an “open preparation,” with the actual launch of the special exhibition embodying the “cultural memory” of the Biennale’s theme taking place in June. The 1970 edition would include a permanent section that was formed by the central exhibition and the pavilions, and a changing part that was related to the idea of a forum and open to the outer world.

These ambitions came up against certain dysfunctions within the Bien-

nale's operations. For example, since the postwar period, everything had to be organized from scratch with each new edition. Given that the only way to begin was to wait for the Ministry's decrees, it was chronically late. Inasmuch as *Biennale/Research* would not have been complete unless its different sections and activities were structured and integrated, these delays to some extent caused the implementation of the 1970 edition to be something of a failure.

In the design of the experimental programming, for example, all sectors of the Biennale should have converged on a single place in the Giardini, the Auditorium. This newly built, multidisciplinary space inside the central Pavilion was to feature experimental music concerts, happenings, underground and art films, debates, and nonstop lectures. Although the city had approved the project, it did not manage to complete it on schedule. The Auditorium should have been the heart of the experimental Biennale, and the fact that it was not finished dealt a mortal blow to the overall scheme.

Another delay compromised the content and production of the central exhibition, which should have been the theoretical focus of the show. The exhibition that was meant to embody "the new awareness of trends and issues that had emerged in all art genres in the past 50 years . . . starting from the Russian avant-garde of the 1920s to Constructivism, De Stijl, and the Bauhaus"<sup>18</sup> was forced to scale down. In the words of Luciano Caramel, whom Apollonio had hired as an assistant curator for the central exhibition, nothing reached the implementation stage until February, when all positions were made official and funds made available. According to Caramel, the logical thing to do would have been to postpone everything by at least a year, but the Biennale's invitation mechanism had already started, and the only solution was to resize the project, turning it into an "exhibition proposal."

If the central exhibition, titled *Ricerca e progettazione: Proposte per un'esposizione sperimentale* (Research and Programming: Proposals for an Experimental Exhibition), was a product of the random interplay of factors that had always characterized the institution, it was nevertheless in line with the Biennale's theme. The title reflected the structural crisis it was going through. In other words, given the present conditions, no real statements were possible, only a conditional project—an exhibition proposal, indeed.

For the first time, the central exhibition was not planned by a commission, but curated. Two people, Umbro Apollonio and Dietrich Mahlow, were in charge of it, and consciously assumed the risks associated with their critical point of view.<sup>19</sup> The curators wanted the exhibition to



*Proposal for an Experimental Exhibition* installation view, Venice Biennale, 1970, showing the production atelier organized in Carlo Scarpa's loft in the heart of the Central Pavilion

express the urgent need to change the exhibiting patterns of the Biennale along the lines of what De Marchis had suggested in his criticism. This was tantamount to the curators admitting to not knowing how to exhibit contemporary art in a setting like the Biennale.<sup>20</sup> These circumstances give us an idea of how far *Proposals for an Experimental Exhibition* had moved away from tradition, which until then had espoused a historical-informative function. The “proposal” was to introduce not art personalities but ideas, realized through documents and reconstructions that “highlighted the current aspects of artistic production in relation to historical foundations,” conveyed “with the help of new technical means.”<sup>21</sup>

For this reason the exhibition was designed as a series of “starting points” with subsections called “examples.” More than objects, it showed “models” and lined up “samples” in a space where everything could (and should) be debated, thought through, and communicated to the public in an active, conscious way. The “statements” gathered in the exhibition were connected by a common thread, which was the development process of the show itself as a “matter to reflect upon.”<sup>22</sup> This was achieved by selecting some aspects of contemporary art making that had a relationship with the past. The rescue of history as part of the debate on the current situation was essential in the search for a new exhibiting concept. As the introduction to the exhibition suggested, in a poetic tone: “The memory of things past contains the hope of things to come. The exhibition is an attempt at renewing hope without reaffirming memory.”<sup>23</sup>

In order for true change to take place, so the curators believed, the Biennale would have to go down the path carved out by its tradition, and modernize it without rejecting it. Tradition was seen as the legacy upon which to build something new. *Proposals for an Experimental Exhibition* therefore called into question the concept of the institution it was born from, as a sort of exercise in institutional self-criticism. The 1970 edition claimed it was searching for itself and, by questioning “the way in which an art exhibition is built,” mirroring the current crisis in artistic practice.<sup>24</sup>

*Proposals for an Experimental Exhibition* was mounted in the central Pavilion, and began with an analysis of the relationship between art and society through examples from the early-20th-century avant-garde. The Russian avant-garde, which had a real influence on politics, exemplified the theme of the section. On entering, spectators were met by a model for Vladimir Tatlin’s *Monument to the Third International* (1921, as reconstructed by the Moderna Museet,



*Proposal for an Experimental Exhibition* installation view, Venice Biennale, 1970, showing an installation of works by Vladimir Tatlin

Stockholm, in 1968). The room also contained historical photographs that portrayed the construction of the monument and documents showing Tatlin's constructive technique. The rest of the section consisted of slides, explanatory texts, photographs, documentaries, and artworks by El Lissitzky, Kazimir Malevich, László Moholy-Nagy, and Alexander Rodchenko.

The following section was "The New Material: Manual, Mechanical, Electronic, and Conceptual Production." It addressed the creative power of the individual in its most physical form. That is, the materials used by artists: no longer paper and pencil or canvas and brush, but plastic or natural materials, neon tubes, foam rubber, and technological appliances to produce sound and color. This section presented three types of artistic production: manual and mechanical, technical-electronic, and conceptual. The idea was to contribute to the general debate under way at the time on the problem of the "expansion of art," not only in an instrumental sense, but conceptually as well.<sup>25</sup> This section, too, was historical-documentary, presenting works such as



*Proposal for an Experimental Exhibition* installation view, Venice Biennale, 1970, showing an installation by Michael Heizer

Victor Vasarely's *Permutations* (1969), or examples of conceptual production such as the room dedicated to Michael Heizer, where a photograph of his earthwork *Displaced/Replaced Mass* (1969) was projected onto a curved wall. The curators' intent was to involve spectators in an experience, trying to give an idea of the size, concept, and construction behind this new work.

The central part of the exhibition contained a workshop for manual and mechanical production, where Italian and foreign artists took turns working for the entire duration. In the various spaces of the workshop, artists could use a screenprinting system, a lithographic press, a vacuum-printing machine, an engraving press, a photo lab, a workshop for plastic materials, and a Rank Xerox photocopy machine—a mix of very old and very new technologies. They created works in real time. Visitors were seen as active protagonists and encouraged to participate. With this direct experience, the curators hoped they would reflect on the loss of uniqueness of the artwork, and on changes in the form of its production.

Next was a room for closed-circuit TV, where visitors had access to four monitors, 14 television sets, four video cameras, and four control decks. They could sit down and control the cameras, placed at different spots inside and outside the Giardini. This experience, too, had a clear educational purpose, as the public was encouraged to reflect on the new opportunities offered by technology. The next section, "Relax/Play," was aimed at "unleashing the sensory faculties" of spectators by inviting them to enter a free space within the exhibition

space. Here, the architects Livio Castiglioni and Davide Boriani had designed an *Environment of Polyurethane Foam and Sodium Lamps* (1970) in which visitors could relax in a strange landscape made of soft, comfortable protrusions. The following space, also designed by Boriani and Castiglioni, was the *Space for Perceptual Stimulation* (1970). It was delimited by trapezoidal surfaces on orthogonal planes, and changed according to visitors' behavior.



*Proposal for an Experimental Exhibition*, installation view, Venice Biennale, 1970, showing Davide Boriani and Livio Castiglioni's *Environment of Polyurethane Foam and Sodium Lamps*, 1970

Titled "Analysis of Seeing," the next section was divided into "light, color, form, and thought" following an "artistic trend" that focused on examples such as "the representation and self-representation of light."<sup>25</sup> The section opened with a *Penetrable* (1970) by Jesús Rafael Soto, followed by the replica of a *Rotorelief* (1920) by Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray's *Rayographs* (1920/21), László Moholy-Nagy's *Light-Space Modulator* (1920/21), a series of works by Josef Albers, and finally Bruno Giaquinto's *Laser environment* (1963).

The exhibition ended with the "Forum," a space for discussion, evaluation, critique, and collecting proposals for alternative versions of the exhibition.



*Proposal for an Experimental Exhibition* installation view, Venice Biennale, 1970, showing Davide Boriani and Livio Castiglioni's *Space for Perceptual Stimulation*, 1970

The "Forum" was designed with the aim of "providing a direct verification of the stimuli and ideas that the special structure of the 1970 Biennale had given visitors, who could test their reactions and enhance their critical abilities."<sup>26</sup> In this space, visitors were encouraged to leave comments on blackboards and in notebooks. The exhibition also included an "Active Space for Educational Action" addressed to younger visitors, which suggests that the curators were aware of the theories of Eugenio Battisti, in particular his belief that "any change will bring with it an improvement of conditions only if the

theoretical and formal premises are communicated to people from a very young age."<sup>27</sup>

*Proposals for an Experimental Exhibition* literally changed the face of the "ancient plan of the great salon," which had witnessed the passage of "kilometers of paintings."<sup>28</sup> The central exhibition of the 1970 Venice Biennale, designed by Boriani and Castiglioni, was the first in which both the set design and the study of space emerged out of a discussion between curators and architects, and thus became an integral part of the exhibition concept. The spaces of the central Pavilion were adapted to the exhibition, as opposed to the exhibi-

tion adapting to them, as they always had before. The central idea for the design was to “give shape to ideas rather than to show an array of works and personalities.”<sup>29</sup> The problem, then, was the variety of media and spaces, so the architects had to produce visual coherence in order not to “establish hierarchies of values . . . to better highlight ideas rather than the means through which they are, occasionally, communicated.”<sup>30</sup>

Boriani and Castiglioni structured the exhibition in such a way as to achieve the greatest possible coherence in the “active and conscious comprehension” demanded by the curators “in order to guide and stimulate” the observer.<sup>31</sup> The main obstacle was the structure of the central Pavilion itself, which, besides being arranged as a labyrinth of mostly small rooms, was not equipped to support a technological exhibit.<sup>32</sup> Boriani and Castiglioni clarified the visitor’s path by adding ramps, opening and closing passages, covering floors and ceilings, blocking daylight, and installing an electrical system, which the Pavilion still lacked.

A second aspect was the exhibition design, which had to emphasize the different sections while simultaneously retaining unity and coherence. The problem was solved by using materials and colors on a gray scale. Titles, captions, and explanatory texts appeared on metal plates throughout the exhibition, functioning as its “measurement and marking.”<sup>33</sup> In several spots,



*Proposals for an Experimental Exhibition* installation view, Venice Biennale, 1970, showing Jesús Rafael Soto’s *Penetrable*, 1970

the plates incorporated audio sources of information, which were activated by the passage of spectators. The audio, in four different languages, contained commentary that would have been too long to read on the wall. Boriani and Castiglioni created a structure that was functional to the works, and at the same time helped spectators concentrate and immerse themselves in the journey of the exhibition.

*Proposals for an Experimental Exhibition* breached the fortified walls of the Biennale, which had been erected by a fin-de-siècle, aristocratic, decadent society that by 1970 seemed very far away. The primarily informative function that it had previously performed gave way to the “history of yesterday and today” that was part of everybody’s experience.<sup>34</sup> In his “Considerations” on the 1970 Biennale, Umbro Apollonio wrote, “It would be a very serious mistake to return to a kind of exhibition that envisions an ideal museum, or celebrates artists as irreplaceable geniuses. Idealization cannot but appear outdated in view of the expectations of the coming civilization.”<sup>35</sup> With this, he debunked the myth of art history as it had been produced by the Biennale until that moment. *Proposals for an Experimental Exhibition* deactivated tra-

ditional interpretive schemes, giving the public an experience, a journey, in which they for the first time were the protagonists and the addressees. It eradicated functional pathologies, completely reset the Biennale's history, and suggested new paths forward.

**Notes**

1. Franz Hartmann, "Qual è la differenza fra Venezia e Kassel?" (What's the Difference Between Venice and Kassel?), *Frankfurter Neue Presse*, September 16, 1964, trans. version, in *Fondo storico, Serie arti visive, Unità 200, Varie 1965-1966-1967* (Venice: Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee [hereafter FS, AV, ASAC]). References to the ASAC documents may have changed due to the recent reorganization of the archive.

2. Lawrence Alloway, "It Is the Four Days of the Official Opening That Give the Biennale a Special Value," in *The Venice Biennale 1895-1968: From Salon to Goldfish Bowl* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1968), 23.

3. Giorgio De Marchis, "Mostre e attività critica," *Metro. International Magazine of Contemporary Art* 13 (1968): 22-23.

4. *Ibid.*, 22.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Giorgina Bertolino, "Mostre autree e musei-manifesto," in Luca Massimo Barbero, ed., *Torino sperimentale 1959-1969* (Turin: Allemandi, 2010), 98.

7. Francesca Pola, "Dialoghi tra spazio e tempo. Il sistema dell'avanguardia," in *Torino sperimentale 1959-1969*, 131.

8. Eugenio Battisti, "Un'utopia realizzabile," in *Museo sperimentale d'arte contemporanea*, exh. cat. (Turin: Torino Galleria civica d'arte moderna, 1967), 9.

9. Germano Celant, "Situazione '67," in *Museo sperimentale d'arte contemporanea*, 16.

10. In 1962 Apollonio was described as "the only contemporary art expert" involved in the Biennale. See Bruno Alfieri, "La Biennale!," *Metro. International Magazine of Contemporary Art* 6 (1962): 12. Another member of the Experimental Museum board was Gian Alberto Dell'Acqua, the secretary general of the Venice Biennale from 1957 to 1970. Between 1969 and 1970 he took on the position of emergency manager in absence of a new law that redefined roles.

11. Umbro Apollonio, "La continua sperimentazione," *Marcatre* 4-5 (March-April 1964): 89.

12. See for instance Walter Grasskamp, "For Example, Documenta, or, How Is Art History Produced?," in Reesa Greenberg, Bruce Ferguson, and Sandy Nairne, eds., *Thinking About Exhibitions* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 48.

## Rigorous Research

13. *Attività per Biennale 70*, B.69.3, busta 228, FS, AV, ASAC. For the history of the institutional reform of the Biennale and its consequences on its policies, see for instance Vittoria Martini, "The Venice Biennale 1968–1978. The unattainable revolution" (PhD diss., History and Theories of Art, School for Advanced Studies, Venice, 2011). Forthcoming as a book.
14. The theme could not have been binding for the pavilions, which by law enjoyed total freedom of choice. See Umbro Apollonio, *Considerazioni sulla 35a Esposizione biennale internazionale d'arte*, document archive, Convegno studi Biennale 1970, ASAC. The first thematic Venice Biennale was the 1976 edition. See Vittoria Martini, "The Venice Biennale 1968–1978."
15. Eugenio Battisti, "Editoriale," *Marcatre* 61–62 (July 1970): 6.
16. For more on the first discussion of the risk inherent in the "museum dimension" that the Biennale had been taking, see Comune di Venezia e Provincia di Venezia, *Proceedings of the Conference on Biennale Studies* (Venice: Cà Loredan, 1957).
17. Umbro Apollonio, *Considerazioni sulla 35a Esposizione biennale internazionale d'arte*.
18. *Progetto per le attività della Biennale di Venezia nel 1970–N. 2* (riservato), December 27, 1969, busta 226, "Una nuova Biennale," FS, AV, ASAC.
19. Dietrich Mahlow was director of the *Kunst-sammlungen der Stadt* of Nuremberg. For an in-depth analysis of the issue of "curated" exhibitions at the Venice Biennale, see Federica Martini and Vittoria Martini, "Questions of Authorship in Biennial Curating," in Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal, and Solveig Øvstebø, eds., *The Biennial Reader: An Anthology on Large-Scale Perennial Exhibitions of Contemporary Art* (Bergen-Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010), 260–67.
20. Apollonio had great experience in contemporary art exhibiting. For example in 1967, he was one of the curators of the show *Lo Spazio dell'Immagine* (The Space of the Image), an exhibition of environmental installations held at Palazzo Trinci in Foligno, Italy.
21. Umbro Apollonio and Dietrich Mahlow, *Proposte per un'esposizione sperimentale. Alea e programma*, busta 220, Mostre, FS, AV, ASAC.
22. Umbro Apollonio and Dietrich Mahlow, "Introduzione," in Umbro Apollonio, Luciano Caramel, and Dietrich Mahlow, eds., *Ricerca e progettazione: proposte per una esposizione sperimentale* (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 1970), 9.
23. Umbro Apollonio and Dietrich Mahlow, "Proposte per un'esposizione sperimentale," in *35a Biennale internazionale d'arte di Venezia*, general catalogue (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 1970), xxv.
24. Ernesto L. Francalanci, "Proposta per una Biennale sperimentale," *Art International* 14, no. 7 (September 1970): 86.
25. Luciano Caramel, "L'Espansione dell'arte," in Umbro Apollonio, Luciano Caramel, and Dietrich Mahlow, eds., *Ricerca e Sperimentazione* (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 1970), 56.
26. Brunella Brunello and Paolo Ticozzi, "Note sul Forum," in *Ricerca e progettazione*, 256.
27. Umbro Apollonio and Dietrich Mahlow, *Proposta per un'esposizione sperimentale. Alea e programma*, busta 220, Mostre, FS, AV, ASAC.
28. Giuseppe Marchiori, "Le molte polemiche confermano la vitalità della Biennale," *La Stampa*, July 15, 1970.
29. Davide Boriani and Livio Castiglioni, "Note sulla realizzazione espositiva," in *Ricerca e progettazione*, 14.
30. *Ibid.*, 15.
31. *Ibid.*, 16.
32. For an in-depth analysis of the situation in the central Pavilion of the Venice Biennale, see Vittoria Martini, "The Space of the Exhibition: The Multi-Cellular Structure of the Venice Biennale," in *Pavilions / Art in Architecture* (Brussels and Sierre: La Murette and Le Bord de l'Eau, coedited with ECAV, 2013); and Vittoria Martini, "A Brief History of the Structure of the Venice Biennale," in *Starting from Venice: Studies of the Biennale*, ed. Clarissa Ricci (Milan: et.al/edizioni, 2010).
33. Davide Boriani and Livio Castiglioni, "Note sulla realizzazione espositiva," 17.
34. Giuseppe Marchiori, "Le molte polemiche confermano la vitalità della Biennale d'arte."
35. Umbro Apollonio, *Considerazioni sulla 35a Esposizione biennale internazionale d'arte*.

*Translated from the Italian by Elisabetta Zoni*

The Exhibitionist

# **SIX x SIX**

★

**IONIT BEHAR**  
**ASTRIA SUPARAK**  
**INTI GUERRERO**  
**GIANNI JETZER**  
**SARAH DEMEUSE**  
**NIKOLA DIETRICH**

## IONIT BEHAR

*Imán: Nueva York. Arte argentino de los años 60* (Magnet: New York. Argentine Art in the 1960s)

2010

Curated by Rodrigo Alonso  
Fundación Proa, Buenos Aires

During one of my stays in the Southern Cone, I was fortunate enough to visit this show at the Proa Foundation, which explored the intense institutional and artistic dialogue between Argentina and New York during the 1960s. It was especially concerned with the increased migration of non-American artists to New York in that moment, together with an accelerated centralization of the New York art market and the fall of Paris as the hegemonic global art hub. Through meticulous research, including 60 works of art, numerous re-creations, documents, publications, and photographs, it reconstructed a universe of artistic exchange. It included as well a remake of the exhibition *Beyond Geometry: An Extension of Visual-Artistic Language in Our Time* (Center for Inter-American Relations, New York, 1968) with works by David Lamelas, César Patermosto, Alejandro Puente, Eduardo Mac Entyre, and many more. The 300-page catalogue is of particular interest, as it rescues important documents, including interviews with the artists and written criticism of the time. Why might an exhibition in 2010 be so concerned with arguing over who did what in the 1960s? Perhaps we are still struggling with similar ideas and conflicts half a century later.

*Estructuras Primarias II*  
(Primary Structures II)

1967

Organized by Jorge Glusberg  
Sociedad Hebraica Argentina,  
Buenos Aires

In September 1967, the influential Argentine art critic Jorge Romero Brest organized the “Week of Advanced Art” (also known as

## ASTRIA SUPARAK

*Actions: What You Can Do with the City*

2008

Curated by Mirko Zardini  
and Giovanna Borasi with  
Lev Bratishenko, Meredith  
Carruthers, Daria Der  
Kaloustian, and Peter Sealy  
Centre Canadien  
d'Architecture (CCA),  
Montreal

This exuberant exhibition gathered a range of unorthodox interactions with the urban environment, from foraging for free food on public lands (Fallen Fruit), to resting comfortably on no-loitering barriers in foam-enhanced suits (Sarah Ross), to dancing in “sustainable dance clubs,” thus providing electrical power for the party (Enviu and Döllab). Categorized into the everyday activities of walking, gardening, recycling, or playing, 99 actions were presented, all focusing on tools and tactics (some of them illicit) for urban intervention. *Actions* championed the transformative and positive effects that individuals can have on a city, providing a welcome contrast to the solutions prescribed by top-down civic planning. Consistent with Borasi and Zardini’s long and impressive record of prescient, brilliant exhibitions, *Actions* seamlessly combined the work of an international roster of architects, designers, artists, and activists; it offered visionary ideas grounded in research and framed by gorgeous exhibition- and graphic design (provided by Andrea Sala and Project Projects, respectively). Their interdisciplinary, thematic approach to curating is curious about the world, relevant, conceptual-ly and aesthetically rigorous, and inspiring.

*James Lee Byars: I Cancel All My Works at Death*

2014

Curated by Triple Candie  
Museum of Contemporary  
Art, Detroit

## INTI GUERRERO

*24th Bienal de São Paulo: Anthropophagy and Histories of Cannibalism*

1998

Curated by Paulo Herkenhoff  
Fundação Bienal de São  
Paulo, Brazil

This landmark biennial sought to shift the dominant narratives in art history. Paulo Herkenhoff took Oswald de Andrade’s famous “Manifesto Antropófago” (1928) as a curatorial digestive system that would gobble up the canon of Western art in order to excrete and rewrite it. Herkenhoff involved a platoon of young curators—now important voices in today’s art world—to create solo presentations of Francis Bacon, Armando Reverón, and Vincent Van Gogh; group shows from areas then considered marginal, such as Scandinavia, Oceania, and Central America; and film programs, like the one organized by Catherine David, devoted to Cinema Novo legend Glauber Rocha. The biennial’s three-volume catalogue, edited by Herkenhoff and a young Adriano Pedrosa, was comprehensive and erudite. The thickest volume investigated the history of art, showing how international movements such as Dada or monochrome painting were inscribed into this “cannibalistic” epistemology. Another volume compiled national “pavilions”; typically a hodgepodge, in this instance they responded to the biennial’s thematic concern. The third book—named after a line in Andrade’s manifesto, *Roteiros Roteiros Roteiros...* (Pathways Pathways Pathways...)—featured the regional group shows and artists’ projects. Following Herkenhoff’s interest in the density of meaning, a concept drawn from the theorist Jean-François Lyotard, this show was a Babylonian abundance of knowledge.

*Ante América*

1992

Curated by Gerardo  
Mosquera, Carolina Ponce de

## GIANNI JETZER

*Rirkrit Tiravanija: Das soziale Kapital (The Social Capital)*  
1998

Curated by Rein Wolfs  
Migros Museum für  
Gegenwartskunst, Zurich

I have had the privilege of experiencing personally some of the exhibitions that Nicolas Bourriaud later labeled Relational Aesthetics. These shows were mind-blowing. They actually opened doors that previously had been shut. Seeing them felt like liberation from the expectations of what art should look like. Suddenly everything seemed to be an option: eating, sleeping, living, working in the museum—possibilities that are taken for granted now, but were back then a gasp of fresh air. Times were about to change. The acceleration through new electronic media, and its sheer unlimited promises, triggered the imagination and pushed a button. Even the most quotidian acts such as basic, direct communication turned into something to be examined in the context of art. Those early days contained a somehow euphoric energy. The museum opened up directly to the everyday. Rirkrit Tiravanija was one of the key figures in making this happen. Curated by Rein Wolfs, this particular exhibition was directly concerned with the function, history, and image of the Swiss wholesale distributor Migros (the owner of the museum where the show took place). The exhibition included mementos of Migros's past, such as its historic "shop-on-wheels" or the poster of the legendary stone that Migros's founder, Gottlieb Duttweiler, hurled through a window of the parliament building. Then, a variety of items from the

## SARAH DEMEUSE

*Once Is Nothing: Individual Systems*  
2008

Curated by Charles Esche  
and Maria Hlavajova  
1st Brussels Biennial

As a fan of repetition, and especially of resisting the imperative of innovation, *Once Is Nothing* is for me a key exhibition. It remade *Individual Systems*, a group show curated by Igor Zabel at the 2003 Venice Biennale. It did so as homage, but also arrogantly, as a replacement, presenting new work by Patrick Corillon in the place of the works in Zabel's original. The exhibition took place in a former postal sorting center, which multiplied its odd restaging, and indeed the curators described themselves as "displacers," imagining the audience as accomplices: "We know that things do not loop back to where they started," they wrote, "and [that] the surviving memories and chance documents of the exhibition may tell us much more than the physical presence of the artworks about the conditions of viewing and thinking about art at that moment in 2003."<sup>1</sup> The latter-day publication features installation shots, descriptions of the earlier version, and Zabel's essay. Only after providing neat documentation of the original do the curators present their own argument, setting the stage for a single black-and-white image of Carrillon's *On the Verge of the Void* (2008) alongside his artist's statement. Organized as part of a new biennial in Brussels, this recursivity was striking. Biennials tend to confuse, to hype the new and singular, to mess with one's perceptive aptitude. *Once Is Nothing*, by contrast, represented the efficacy of return.

*Haim Steinbach: once again the world is flat*  
2013

Curated by Tom Eccles and  
Johanna Burton  
Hessel Museum of Art,

## NIKOLA DIETRICH

*Ray Johnson: The Name of the Game*  
2003

Curated by Ina Blom  
Fridericianum, Kassel,  
Germany

The American artist Ray Johnson is often regarded as a legendary cult figure and misfit among his contemporaries, and is probably best known as the inventor of mail art. Despite an artistic career spanning more than 50 years—often working in close proximity to an influential circle, including John Cage, Jasper Johns, Ad Reinhardt, and Lynda Benglis—his work was little known upon his death. Regarded as a seminal Pop art figure in the 1950s and an early conceptualist, Johnson began developing the basic principles of his mail art practice in the mid-1950s. All of his work after that point—letters, collages, texts, and performances—seems to have been filtered through the postal system. The exhibition in the rotunda of the Kunsthalle Fridericianum (as well as the very carefully compiled book, which includes previously unpublished letters) illuminated this particular aspect of his work. Browsing through the multiple letters, artfully designed postcards, envelopes, and small collages, I gained a sense of a practice aimed at creating an alternative space for art. Interactivity, communication, and correspondence were the keywords for an ever-growing network of artists using the postal system as an artistic medium—a medium that turns artworks into dispatches or gifts, and that replaces the traditional format of artistic presentation (in galleries and museums) with a continuous system of correspondence and exchange. Considered in a time of hypercirculation (Instagram, Tumblr, et cetera), the impact of Johnson's work seems ever more significant.

*Martin Ramirez*  
2007

Curated by Brooke Davis

## IONIT BEHAR

the “Americans Week”) on the occasion of the visit of a large delegation of representatives of various U.S. art institutions attending the opening of the 5th International Di Tella Prize. The organizer of this prize, the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, wanted to encourage communication among contemporary artists from around the world (in 1967, Robert Morris would be the last international artist to receive the award). In Brest’s words, “the purpose for these exhibitions is to show our friends from abroad the advanced forms of art in Argentina.”<sup>1</sup> Institutions such as the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, the Di Tella, and the Museo de Arte Moderno, as well as some private galleries, took part. *Primary Structures II*, organized by Jorge Glusberg at the Sociedad Hebraica, took up Brest’s challenge by directly quoting the international avant-garde of the moment. The title, for instance, was a reference to *Primary Structures* (1966) at the Jewish Museum in New York. The show included works by 22 artists (some of whom appeared in the 2014 show *Other Primary Structures*, curated by Jens Hoffmann at the Jewish Museum, New York). The sculptures created by Oscar Bony, Juan Pablo Renzi, Norberto Puzzolo, and Noemi Escandell, among others, followed an international minimalist look by producing a “new” space using abstract forms. In some cases, though, these evolved into conceptual provocations. Bony, for example, presented a yellow polychrome wood sculpture called *Sinusoid* (Sinusoid, 1967) consisting of four separate curved forms, three of which rested only upon the floor while a fourth rested on both floor and wall. Together these forms created a perceptual paradox, questioning the limits of an artwork and its relationship with space. Although related in some ways to American minimalist sculpture, *Primary Structures II* represented something more complex: it reminded us of the historical and contemporary relationship between the South and the North, between one “country” and the “other,” with implications beyond the conventional binary of global and local.

## ASTRIA SUPARAK

We arrived at MOCAD on a day when it was closed to the public, but a kind employee opened the door upon seeing us peeking wistfully through the windows. Even without the videos or gallery lights turned on, the exhibition’s conceptual prowess was evident. Billed as the “first comprehensive survey” devoted to the late artist James Lee Byars, it did not include a single performance or object by Byars, nor did it feature vintage ephemera, documentation, or re-creations. Its fabulously outlandish and playful conceit was of an amateur theater company preparing a production about Byars’s plays. On view were sophomorically designed posters for his shows; cheap, garish versions of his immaculately tailored costumes; his minimal performance scripts rewritten as florid theater-style scripts; thrift-store-sourced approximations of what documentation and remnants of his actions *might* look like; and a sculpture representing the artist’s ghost rising as a length of glittery tulle strung on fishing wire. This was not only an ingenious way to stage an exhibition without borrowed objects, permissions, or much of a budget (a feat that Triple Candie is known for, as with their controversial retrospective of David Hammons), but also an ingenious *idea*, full of heady treats. The exhibition materialized an artist’s dematerialized work, fabricated a story about an unreliable storyteller, questioned how history is passed on, and made the poetic into something horribly awkward. And it was perfectly executed as “amateur,” in part by MOCAD senior curator at large Jens Hoffmann, who was credited with the exhibition’s “dramaturgy.” Triple Candie, a critical and performative curatorial duo of art historians, continues to push the field and muddy the waters of creative authorship, exhibition making, critique, and historicization.

***Kill Joy’s Kastle: A Lesbian Feminist Haunted House***  
2013  
Art Gallery of York

## INTI GUERRERO

**Léon, and Rachel Weiss**  
**Biblioteca Luis Ángel Arango,**  
**Bogotá, Colombia**

(traveled to the Museo Alejandro Otero, Caracas; the Queens Museum, New York; Centro Cultural de la Raza, San Diego; Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco; the Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, Lawrence; and the Museo de Arte y Diseño Contemporáneo, San José, Costa Rica)

*Ante América* was the first traveling survey of Latin American contemporary art curated by Latin Americans (previous surveys were assembled by the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, among other institutions in the West). It was staged against the backdrop of a wide cultural debate around the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus’s “discovery” of the Americas, and thereby resonated with contemporaneous interrogations of national identity and traumatic history worldwide: the post-socialist transition in Eastern Europe, the end of Latin American dictatorships (the Chilean autocrat Augusto Pinochet had just stepped down in 1990), or China in the wake of the massacre at Tiananmen Square. As colonial and totalitarian power shifted and the free market began to extend its tentacles, asking what it meant to be Latin American was a big question. Curators Mosquera, Weiss, and Ponce de León rejected outright the prospect of celebrating Columbus’s “discovery” and instead proposed a critical exhibition, the title of which already connoted a confrontation with the idea of “America.” The exhibition represented how the discourse of multiculturalism of that moment (of which Néstor García Canclini’s 1991 book *Hybrid Cultures* is an important artifact) could manifest in artistic production—for instance in works by Alfredo Jaar, Doris Salcedo, José Bedia, or José Antonio Suárez Londoño. The his-

**GIANNI JETZER**

company's product range stood side by side with works from its art collection. Thomas Schütte's puppets were on display in the clothing department. This was a shopping trip and a museum visit as a single experience (you could pay for your merchandise at the cash register). The museum was set to become a unique emporium for goods and ideas. This was the most generous and eccentric retrospective I have ever seen, interweaving under one roof a supermarket, an art collection, and iconic pieces by Tiravanija himself.

***Liebet Euch*  
1854–ongoing  
Altstätten, Switzerland**

The so-called *Liebet Euch* (after *Liebet euch untereinander*, or “Love one another”) takes place in a forest in the northeastern part of Switzerland every five years. It is a large family gathering that brings together hundreds of people from all over the world. The party commemorates Johann Mathias Naeff (1773–1853) and his progeny. His mantra (and nickname), *Liebet Euch*, and its celebration, is, so to speak, a forerunner of the peace and love movement. Besides the radical social component, there is an accompanying exhibition that is remarkable. Paintings and photographs of dozens of ancestors are hung, each on a single tree, under the open sky. This exhibition concept merges trees and human bodies and creates an eerie presence in the middle of a forest. The effect is similar to the fantastic collection presentation that the Brazilian architect Lina Bo Bardi created for the inauguration of the Museum of Art of São Paulo in 1968. Paintings are made into hovering icons, weightless, but nevertheless notionally connected to the human body.

**SARAH DEMEUSE**

**Annandale-on-Hudson,  
New York**

This was a unique sort of retrospective. The entire exhibition was a cabinet of curiosities arranged by the artist Haim Steinbach, including his own works (some of which, like his phenomenal grid paintings, have rarely been shown), everyday objects, and artworks from the museum's collection. In this array, my line of sight intuitively zeroed in on the scenography. The exhibition truly engaged perception (the I as an eye). A strip of incoming light created a precise choreography between the frame and what is framed, while metal wall structures produced a compelling optical effect, as with a jalousie window. Steinbach's individual works, of course, make us aware of how we view, sort, adore, and display objects, but for me, this exhibition was most compelling as an experience. In a museum that often underscores the self-reflexive aspect of curating, the architecture and scenography were, as if by organic extension, transferred to the artwork. Exhibitions at the Hessel require the inclusion of significant numbers of works from the museum's collection. Past curators have found ingenious ways of dealing with this, for instance Maria Lind's effective salon-style hang of collection photographs in *The Green Room* (2008–9). Following the logic of Steinbach's work, *once again the world is flat* leveled distinctions between collected item, everyday object, and borrowed artwork. The construction of art storage shelves in the center gallery made the included works linger between value and latency, display and withdrawal, and turned them into something like unready-mades.

***1979, a Monument to Radical Moments*  
2011  
Curated by Carles Guerra  
La Virreina Centre de la Imatge, Barcelona**

**NIKOLA DIETRICH**

**Anderson  
American Folk Art Museum,  
New York**

(traveled to the San Jose Museum of Art and Mexican Heritage Plaza, California, and the Milwaukee Art Museum)

This major, carefully designed exhibition was my first encounter with the remarkable work of Martín Ramírez, who is considered one of the most outstanding self-taught artists of the 20th century. My attraction to the show was twofold: I was enraptured equally by his powerful drawings and collages, and by the stories surrounding his biography and the diverse debates over his status as an “outsider artist.” I was drawn to the work for its independence, its failure to inscribe itself into the traditional art canon—or, as Daniel Bauman put it in his catalogue essay, its “singular vision rooted in specific and complex contexts.” Ramírez's path began in Los Altos de Jalisco, Mexico, and brought him to the United States in 1925; he was put in a mental asylum in California in 1931 and lived there until his death. His path is mapped in his drawings and collages, which combine traditional Mexican motifs and American symbols from advertising and films. The exhibition examined Ramírez's astonishingly rich and multi-layered art, presenting a nuanced portrait of this tremendous artist and inviting five scholars from different fields of expertise to complement the undertaking with their enlightening writing. Ramírez's archetypal images of tunnels, horseback riders, Madonnas, and trains circling in and out of tunnels affected me deeply and took me on an unforgettable journey.

***Robert Gober: Sculptures and Installations, 1979–2007*  
2007  
Curated by Theodora Vischer  
Schaulager, Basel**

## IONIT BEHAR

*Lygia Clark: The Abandonment of Art, 1948–1988*

2014

Curated by Luis Pérez-Oramas and Connie Butler  
Museum of Modern Art,  
New York

Not every exhibition is inviting; some require work. This exhausting retrospective of the Brazilian artist Lygia Clark was one such show. While it has been almost a year since I saw it, its impact on me remains profound. Clark's works raise essential questions about art. How might an artist create a new, concrete space-time, not only for herself, but also for others? How might art involve the spectator in a more active way? At first, when entering the museum rooms, there was a sense of detachment or coldness in the installations. Upon closer examination, I understood that that is what Clark's practice was all about: a sensation of both intimacy and strangeness at once, where mind and body are incorporated into the process of making. As she put it, "Geometry is born from the reflex of the body projected on my mind."<sup>2</sup> In her abstractions (as in the later, more performative works) Clark searched for the "internal form," or, as she called it, "interior development," which is the form that is born within the artist herself.<sup>3</sup> This internal form was difficult to define, even for Clark. But that is what made this exhibition so compelling. It put on display the laborious process of the artist, always posing new questions while attempting to discover the complexity of being. Clark's strong belief in the fusion of art and life is an antecedent of contemporary artists' involvement in community-based projects, participatory installations, and socially engaged undertakings. How can art be more relevant to our daily lives?

*Losing the Human Form: A Seismic Image of the 1980s in Latin America*

2012

Curated by Red  
Conceptualismos del Sur

## ASTRIA SUPARAK

University offsite project,  
Toronto

Timed for Halloween and animated by live performers, this warehouse installation became a feminist and lesbian art mecca; eager visitors lined up around the block, for as long as three hours, to get in. Artist Allyson Mitchell masterminded the spectacle, drawing on years of collaborative practice, community consulting, crowdsourcing, and workshoping. Dozens of (fairly compensated and demographically diverse) performers staged scenes throughout the fun-house in the style of American evangelical "hell houses," playing off stereotypes and fears to uproarious, kitschy effect. The mazelike tour passed through sets of Ball-Busting Butches literally and symbolically smashing patriarchy (in the form of plaster cast "truck nuts"), Consciousness-Raising Ghosts gazing into their vaginas with handheld mirrors, and Zombie Lesbian Folk Singers wailing about rape revenge and alternative economies. And that wasn't all: a Carpet Muncher monster with a dripping moist face, a coat-hanger-encrusted Pro-Choicer, a too-cool Riot Ghouls dance party, a Hall of Straw Feminists, including portraits of Sarah Palin and Liz Lemon, and a graveyard of dead lesbian and feminist ideas such as "gender binary" and "the universal female." In the final room, each visitor was invited to process their feelings with actual feminist scholars. From the "demented women's studies professors" tour guides to the food truck offering fish tacos outside, from the crocheted cobwebs to the hand-painted signs warning visitors not to slip on the pussy juice, this lavish *Gesamtkunstwerk* was layered with hilarious and cutting institutional, academic, and self-critiques. And, perhaps appropriately, there were heated online debates about whether the satirical project was inclusive or sensitive enough (which received a friendly, thoughtful reply from Mitchell, the funniest feminist kill-joy ever).

*Readykeulous by  
Ridykeulous: This Is What*

## INTI GUERRERO

torical traumas of their places of origin were translated materially, aesthetically, and symbolically to represent the "Americas" as a site of conflict.

*Mesótica II: Centroamérica re-generación*

1996

Curated by Virginia Pérez-Ratton and Rolando Castellón  
Museo de Arte y Diseño Contemporáneo, San José,  
Costa Rica

This exhibition is an important part of the history of curating in Central America. It was a direct reaction to *Ante América*, which had traveled to this venue and which, while purporting to speak about Latin America in general, did not include any artists from Central America. Curator Pérez-Ratton began her catalogue essay by dedicating the exhibition to Gerardo Mosquera, a tautological gesture that exposed how making an exhibition is also an intervention, with complete self-awareness, within a history of exhibitions. The exhibition was more than institutional critique. Like *Ante América*, it was interested in the form and aesthetics of cultural hybridity, now relating to the Central American artists that the earlier exhibition excluded. This geographical specificity came with historical burdens: many of the artists were from war-torn countries, and so the representation of trauma became even more vital. The Guatemalan photographer Luis González Palma, perhaps the most prominent figure in the exhibition, presented uncanny sepia portraits of indigenous people with overlapping texts (his work would later appear in Harald Szeemann's 2001 Venice Biennale, as would several other Central American artists). This call-and-response among exhibitions would continue in the curatorial biography of Pérez-Ratton. In 1997 Paulo Herkenhoff, while in Paris doing research for the Bienal de São Paulo, saw *Mesótica* in its international itinerary and invited Pérez-Ratton to curate a

## GIANNI JETZER

***Daniel Silver: Dig***  
2013**Commissioned and produced  
by Artangel  
Odeon site, London**

I have admired Artangel's singular exhibition program for many years. Codirectors James Lingwood and Michael Morris employ a unique and unmatched precision in their choice of sites and artists. Their projects—such as a mind-expanding tour of the East End by Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller (*The Missing Voice: Case Study B* [1999]), the complete disposal and recycling of all the belongings of Michael Landy in a former shopping mall (*Break Down* [2001]), seven walks by Francis Alÿs presented in a derelict mansion (*Seven Walks* [2005]), or, more recently, Daniel Silver's excavation of a pseudo-archeological site next to the debris of the razed Odeon cinema—will always stick in my memory. One starting point for *Dig* was Silver's fascination with Sigmund Freud's collection of sculptures. Freud kept on his desk in his consulting room an "audience" of some of his favorite figurines—Egyptian, Greek, Indian, Asian, and African icons—that watched over him and his patients as they dug deep within themselves. Freud often referred to archaeology as a metaphor for his own practice of uncovering desires and phobias. Interestingly, the site of Silver's personal archeology was located in between a former cinema and an operating hospital. The vanished dreams of the silver screen whirled around the sculpted bodies, and aligned as in the fraught community of a hospital chamber.

***Elevation 1049, Between  
Heaven and Hell***

## SARAH DEMEUSE

Inspired by Peter Weiss's three-volume novel *The Aesthetics of Resistance* (published in German between 1975 and 1981 as *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands*), this exhibition mirrored the near-impossible aims of its source. Weiss's books tested narration in order to grasp a heterogeneous present and to discuss the transformative potential of art. *1979, a Monument to Radical Moments* stayed true to that epic sweep. Including material from personal archives, documentary photography, historical artworks, and new works, it wove together themes of labor, education, city life, and political resistance. Guerra's familiarity with Weiss's books allowed him to draw parallels between artistic proposals and propositions made in the novel. Weiss's unnamed narrator wandered through a slideshow on education and labor (Allan Sekula's *School Is a Factory* [1979]), or past Susan Meiselas's *Pictures from a Revolution* (1991). Even though its title may suggest a revisionist lesson, 1979 was part fiction, too, about the project of realism under global conditions, and a reflection on the nature of history. Artworks from 1979 were connected diachronically, for example to a realist painting from 1886 (Robert Kochler's *The Strike*) or synchronically, across medium and social context, as with the presence of Gilles Lundgren's design for IKEA's notorious Billy bookcase (1979) in Bestué-Vivés's *Encargo Difícil 2* (2009). Walking through this exhibition, I was absorbed by Weiss's fragments, and by the intensity of the artworks; I took special delight in the leitmotif of hanging monochrome glass works by Philippe Van Snick, which were a refrain throughout. I felt as if I had entered an aesthetic imagined in fiction, and realized in exhibition.

***La Era de la Discrepancia:  
Arte y Cultura Visual en  
México, 1968–1997 (The Age  
of Discrepancies: Art and  
Visual Culture in Mexico,  
1968–1997)***  
2007

## NIKOLA DIETRICH

Robert Gober's sculptures and environments have played a significant and recurring role throughout my involvement with art. His signature works—replicas of domestic objects such as washbasins, fireplaces, and drains, effigies of body parts, and reproductions of specific spaces with institutional or religious connotations—have become intertwined with my understanding of art and its history. Gober's daring approach to the representation of sexuality, violence, childhood, power, and exclusion, expressed against the backdrop of American cultural experience, has the power to unlock repressed emotions. This exhibition of his works helped me to understand the power of art. Gober's individual sculptures and now-iconic installations were allowed enough space to truly unfold on their own, while simultaneously building a complex narrative about how his practice evolved over the years. When I worked with Gober on an exhibition at the Museum für Gegenwartskunst in Basel some years later, I was able to witness firsthand his careful and precise consideration of each element of an exhibition. Looking back on this 2007 show with that experience in mind, I see it as embodying a personal choreography in which domestic objects carry their own secret stories.

***Anicka Yi***  
2013–15***Denial: Lars Friedrich,  
Berlin; Divorce: 47 Canal  
Street, New York; Death:  
Cleveland Museum of Art***

This trilogy of exhibitions took viewers on an emotional journey involving all the senses. Anicka Yi's unique installations and sculptures engender an unsettling feeling that slowly expands and envelops you. Evoked by unconventional arrangements of daily objects, decaying elements within these tableaux, and unusual odors, they engage visitors on several levels, both enthralling and implicating them. This trilogy began in 2013 in Berlin, taking the concept of denial as its point of departure,

## IONIT BEHAR

**Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid**

While the 1980s were not so long ago, it seems hard, from the perspective of the present, to imagine how it must have felt to live under a military dictatorship. *Losing the Human Form* offered a narrative of a decade (the 1980s) in which much South American art circulated as rumors, occurring at the edges of public life and in forbidden spaces. The collective Red Conceptualismos del Sur (Southern Conceptualisms Network) is an international group of researchers concerned with providing access to documents and information about art from Latin America. For this exhibition, the collective partnered with the Museo Reina Sofia in proposing an exhibition that would “lose the human form”—that is, a show about art forms or art practices centered on shared authorship, rejecting artistic autonomy. Red Conceptualismos del Sur also challenged the European museum to rewrite the politics of center and periphery that have structured the debates around the so-called third world for decades. Their aim was to display the art of the 1980s in South America in a way that acknowledged both differences and affinities among multiple countries. The 600 objects—artworks, documentation, and videos of ephemeral actions—were displayed as thoughts or networks, interconnected and yet independent. The exhibition traced the many possibilities of looking at Latin America, telling stories of the diverse worlds that existed before and after its conquest by European powers, and moving beyond the art world. The result was a courageous project that showed Europe a different Latin America than it usually sees.

*No es sólo lo que ves:  
Pervirtiendo el minimalismo  
(It Is Not Only What You See:  
Perverting Minimalism)*

2000

Curated by Gerardo

Mosquera

Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid

## ASTRIA SUPARAK

***Liberation Feels Like™*  
2014**

**Organized by Ridykeulous  
Institute of Contemporary  
Art, Philadelphia**

Ridykeulous is the curatorial project of the artists Nicole Eisenman and A.L. Steiner. Their exhibition showcased anger as a medium through correspondences, screeds, diatribes, and artworks. These included pun-filled doodles (from the duo’s PATRIArchives™), sincere “letters to the editor” (Adrian Piper, David Wojnarowicz), a patient reply to an audience member abnormally concerned about the well-being of a volunteer in a performance (Nao Bustamante), a celebratory “fuck you” to years of gallery rejection letters (Kathe Burkhart), cringe-worthy revelations of art-world dealings (Adrian Piper, William Powhida, K8 Hardy, and others), and an all-caps cultural critique disguised as a reactionary defense of crystals (Allyson Mitchell and Deirdre Logue). And there was more: seething texts from the depths of Kara Walker’s sarcasm, a brutally honest assessment of one-night stands by Zackary Drucker, and a powerfully moving print of the My Lai Massacre by the Artists’ Poster Committee of Art Workers’ Coalition (*Q. And Babies? A. And Babies* [1970]). This unassuming-looking exhibition was located in a modest hallway at the ICA, next to a drinking fountain and restroom entrance (previously it was installed on a multipurpose mezzanine at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, where it originated). Despite its location, it packed a ferocious punch. Bitterness, off-the-handle outrage, hysteria, exasperation, and more were transformed into things poetic, raw, inspirational, revelatory, mournful, fearless, and definitely a great time. This is one of several outstanding exhibitions organized by or with artists in recent years, for instance *Macho Man, Tell It to My Heart: Collected by Julie Ault* at Artists Space, New York (2013) and *Imitation of Christ*, curated by William E. Jones at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2013),

## INTI GUERRERO

*Roteiros* regional exhibition on Central America and the Caribbean. This experience would lead her to establish TEOR/cTica art space in Costa Rica, with Herkenhoff as a founding member.

***La Era de la Discrepancia:  
Arte y Cultura Visual en  
México, 1968–1997 (The Age  
of Discrepancies: Art and  
Visual Culture in Mexico,  
1968–1997)***

2007

**Curated by Olivier Debroise,  
Cuauhtémoc Medina, Álvaro  
Vázquez, and Pilar García  
Museo Universitario de  
Ciencia y Arte, Mexico City**

This exhibition traced the genealogies of Mexican art and visual culture from the late 1960s to the turn of the century. It was the result of years of research by scholars and curators, led by Cuauhtémoc Medina and the great Olivier Debroise (who died the year after—too soon). It began from the student movement of 1968, a moment of civil disobedience that erupted in the massacre of students by the military 10 days before the Olympics opened in Mexico City (in this event, Mexico lived May 1968 and Tiananmen Square simultaneously). The exhibition’s most impressive elements were the reenactments, reconstructions, and archival displays of ephemeral production—works that had been created in clandestine settings or in the context of one-day events throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Most of this work came from collective processes and represented the counter-cultural yet dispersed generation that had emerged after the student movement. The show therefore gathered art forms that, in most cases, had not been previously historicized—before this they might not have been considered “art” at all. This included the remaking of sculptural props by artists such as Pedro Friedeberg for movies by the Chilean filmmaker Alejandro Jodorowsky, who was then based in Mexico. In the exhibition, such objects were shown next

## GIANNI JETZER

2014

Curated by Neville Wakefield  
and Olympia Scarry  
Gstaad, Switzerland

It has always seemed wrong to me that attendance is considered by some a criterion for a successful show. I see an exhibition differently—as an entity that is highly self-sufficient. Even in sheer isolation, it develops an identity and, more often than not, an intrinsic presence of its own. *Elevation 1049* was an alpine extravaganza curated by Neville Wakefield and Olympia Scarry, who in turn invited me to contribute a show within their show. Naming it *A Layer of Snow and a Layer of Silence*, I decided to realize my long-standing dream of an inaccessible exhibition. It was dedicated to the seclusion of alpine winter: subfreezing temperatures, an ancient alpine hut high above, in the middle of nowhere, a small dot in infinite whiteness. Being an art show in splendid isolation, it triggered myths. You actually had to walk three hours uphill through deep snow to reach the hut (helicopters were banned). Almost all of the artists (who included Eric Andersen, Hans Bellmer, Bruno Jakob, Ylva Oglund, Daniel de Roulet, Olympia Scarry, and Andro Wekua) were part of the expedition and installation team. Some of them even performed up there, despite the arctic cold and the lack of oxygen. Thematically, the group show circled around the cliché of pure altitude, close to heaven and out of reach of the obliquity of human nature. That impression was immediately annihilated by the relative proximity of Gstaad's ski resort and its mundane clientele. The show echoed layers of the past, amplified lost voices, and investigated secrets. The ethereal landscape bleached out distinct perception. In splendid isolation, the show

## SARAH DEMEUSE

Curated by Olivier Debroise,  
Cauahuéemoc Medina, Álvaro  
Vázquez, and Pilar García  
El Museo Universitario de  
Ciencia y Arte, Mexico City

Though I missed its original iteration at MUCA (I saw a version in São Paulo afterward), I've compensated by returning constantly to this show's catalogue. Being conscious of matters of interpretation, information, and access, the curators, at least in part, imagined their exhibition as a book. And a rather large book, at that, featuring 350 works of art and close to 1,000 documents. As one of the last exhibitions held at MUCA on Mexico City's Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México campus, this project's intervention was pointed. As the university was getting ready to inaugurate its contemporary art museum, the gigantic Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo, with its focus on contemporary Mexican art, *La Era de la Discrepancia* set a rigorous standard for how to tell the story of art in Mexico after 1968—and, as a consequence, for how an institution would need to collect that art. As an academic research project that meticulously documented ephemeral, urban, quasi-underground artistic expressions, *La Era de la Discrepancia* provided a grounded response to surface-level narratives circulating in the burgeoning global market for contemporary art made in Mexico. Attempts to internationalize the scope of 20th-century art at a global scale have simultaneously increased the desire for in-depth analysis of local phenomena, works, venues, and visual culture. This show did this for the art scene in Mexico City. And this is how I, as a remote visitor, have learned from this exhibition. The wealth of documentary reproductions, the accounts of past art initiatives, and academic essays have proven to be helpful stepping-stones to further explorations. *La Era's* work on Helen Escobedo's *Corredor blanco* (White Corridor, 1969), for example, compelled me to study her curatorial work. To be continued.

## NIKOLA DIETRICH

and exploring the process of intentional forgetting, or complete erasure. Presented in window displays and embedded in a gray-painted wall, each work was an assemblage of the most awkward elements, for instance *The Easy Way to Quilt New York* (2013), which includes a shower handle, vinyl tubing, glycerin soap, resin, a petri dish, paper, wax, and a fish oil capsule. While her approach here was tangibly cool—even bordering on distant and objective—the next exhibition, *Divorce*, catapulted the viewer into an extremely emotional zone. It consisted of a transparent box containing snails and oxytocin (the so-called love hormone). Pairing these materials, Yi examined the very human conditions of relationships, with all their clichés and evolutions. In the inevitable conclusion, *Death*, the floor and walls of the space were entirely covered in red. On large Perspex tableaux, dried and resin-coated flowers were carefully arranged and preserved. It included two different scents: one suggesting decay and chaos, the other evoking bacteria and infection. Yi's trilogy of exhibitions represented a certain life cycle, ending with the closing of a chapter, but leaving room for transcendence into another state of being.

*Abandon the Parents*

2014

Curated by Henrik Olesen  
(with Daniel Buchholz and  
Christopher Müller)  
Statens Museum for Kunst,  
Copenhagen

Working with colleagues and friends, Henrik Olesen curated *Abandon the Parents* for x-rummet—the Statens Museum for Kunst's experimental venue for contemporary art. Bringing together diverse artists, voices, and materials, it included works by Olesen's circle of friends and influences, including Judith Hopf, Gerry Bibby, Richard Hawkins, Jeanne Mammen, Lutz Bacher, and Arthur Köpcke, all intended to examine the decisive, emancipative moments that occur in an adolescent's life as

**IONIT BEHAR**

In 1966, the American minimalist Frank Stella said, “What you see is what you see.” Many years later, the Cuban curator Gerardo Mosquera negated this tautological statement by gathering a group of artists who utilized minimalist strategies while expanding on the genre’s formal guidelines. This presentation was one of a series of five simultaneous exhibitions comprising *Versiones del Sur* (Versions of the South), located in various locations throughout Madrid, each dedicated to Latin American art. Whereas the other exhibitions were geographically focused, this one included artists from multiple regions, including some that were not Latin American at all. They included Willem Bosshoff, María Fernanda Cardoso, Wim Delvoye, Iran do Espírito Santo, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Mona Hatoum, Byron Kim, Kaisu Koivisto, Fátima Martini, Cildo Meireles, Priscilla Monge, Rivane Neuenschwander, and Santiago Sierra. Mosquera’s curatorial proposal actively critiqued and undermined the assumption that the cultural production of a given region, in this case Latin America, has any essential or natural character. Although group and solo exhibitions featuring artists from Latin America are increasing in number around the globe, according to Mosquera, “Latin American art” is ceasing to exist. In his words, this category has now become a “postmodern cliché.”<sup>4</sup>

***Do Corpo à Terra* (From Body to Earth)  
1970  
Curated by Frederico Morais  
Parque Municipal de Belo Horizonte, Brazil**

This was a series of events and happenings organized in the city park of Belo Horizonte, Brazil. The early 1970s was the harshest time of Brazil’s military dictatorship, with violent repression, censorship, and torture being commonplace (and only abating over the course of the 1980s, with the relatively liberal regime of President João Figueiredo and a pro-democracy protest movement). It was therefore an admirable, courageous gesture for these artists (Artur Barrio, Cildo

**ASTRIA SUPARAK**

inspired by a Pedro Meyer photograph of a wounded guerrilla fighter in Nicaragua.

***Zee*  
2008  
Curated by Murray Horne  
Wood Street Galleries,  
Pittsburgh**

On my first New Year’s Eve in Pittsburgh, I wandered through an empty downtown with artist friends to visit this installation by Kurt Hentschläger in a former porno shop. After a long health-risk warning, orated energetically by a gallery attendant, and absent one friend whose claustrophobia made it impossible to venture inside, we fumbled into a room so dense with artificial fog we couldn’t see more than a foot ahead. Despite everything—worrying that I might slip on the scummy floor, not knowing how far away my compatriots were, and with winter raging outside—it was an otherworldly experience. Eventually, my eyes started to pick up color pulsations and patterns, and I felt like I was inside a flickering cathode ray tube. Unsure of what I was seeing versus what my mind was filling in—what were swirls of fog and what were intentional patterns of light—this was one of the most perception-skewing works I’ve encountered, right up there with projects by Olafur Eliasson, James Turrell, and Anthony McCall. Wood Street Galleries restaged *Zee* five years later as part of an exhibition of Hentschläger’s earlier artist duo, Granular Synthesis. I wanted to visit again, to see if it was as magical as I remembered, but it was shut down within three days after multiple visitors had seizures from the strobe effects. Maybe it was the combination of elements that made this work so memorable: the context, the backstory of the space, the specific people I was with, and our openness to new adventures.

**Center for PostNatural History  
2012–ongoing  
Pittsburgh**

**INTI GUERRERO**

to excerpts from films, or photographs of wild theatrical plays and happenings. The endpoint of the age of discrepancies was 1997. Within the framework of the show, the mid-1990s saw the last ramifications of this collective counterculture, manifested in the sarcasm embodied by artists linked to independent spaces such as La Panadería. Next would come the burgeoning international market for Mexican art and what one might call the “Jumex phenomenon”; the juice corporation began its influential collection of contemporary art in 1998. This was a new period, in which rampant globalization and endemic state corruption, along with the collapse of the country’s official political party, marked the failure of a “modern Mexico.”

***Mimétisme*  
2008  
Curated by Anselm Franke  
Extra City, Antwerp, Belgium**

This exhibition was the mental laboratory in which Anselm Franke first explored ideas that would appear in the edition of *Manifesta* he co-curated with Hila Peleg in 2008, in the touring show *Animism* (2010), and in the Taipei and Shanghai Biennials (2012 and 2014, respectively; the latter with co-curators Freya Chou, Cosmin Costinas, and Liu Xiao). Though a smaller endeavor, *Mimétisme* had already begun to deconstruct conceptions of aesthetics. The exhibition somehow rescued post-colonial thought in curatorial practice by amplifying concepts of otherness rather than moralizing about colonial guilt; it brought in psychoanalysis, and it reestablished discourses of the body to address the complexities of subjective and social behavior. The exhibition included a theatrical, absurdist film by Javier Téllez, a video installation by Paweł Althamer & Artur Żmijewski describing their experiences under the influence of narcotics, obscure short films by Samuel Beckett, and unique animal documentaries. Each room had furniture designed specifically for it. The show made a statement on how an

**GIANNI JETZER**

was self-sufficient and radiated like a berg crystal.

*John M Armleder*  
2014

**Curated by John M Armleder**  
**Burning Bridges, Brooklyn**

Burning Bridges is a private storage facility. From time to time, its owner, the artist Wade Guyton, turns it into an exhibition space, inviting artist friends to come over and produce work in situ. One dark fall evening, yellow cabs brought hundreds of guests to the quiet Dobbins Street in Brooklyn to celebrate one of the most thrilling exhibitions of the season. Behind a gray metal door, a grand painting show contained all the exciting flavors for which John Armleder has made himself a name these past decades. Armleder has no studio, preferring to set up his production line wherever it is needed. In this case it resulted in some of the most thrilling paintings I've ever seen. His *Furniture Sculptures* (hybrids of canvas and furniture, simple objects) were hung near more than two dozen large-scale glitter paintings. The energy radiating from the walls was palpable. The vibrant colors recalled the slideshows that the New York underground poet Ira Cohen used as backdrops for his readings in the late 1960s. Armleder's attitude—"too much is not enough"—drove him to push size, color, and glitter to their limits, and gave this show the energy of a flare gun.

*Animal Mineral Vegetable*  
2014

**Curated by Alice Conconi,**  
**Andrew Kreps, and Liz**  
**Mulholland**  
**Andrew Kreps Gallery,**  
**New York**

**SARAH DEMEUSE**

*The Object Lessons: Nina*  
*Beier & Marie Lund*  
2013

**Written by Francesco**  
**Pedraglio**  
**Published by Mousse**

I'm intrigued by how, after gallery lights are dimmed and works are de-installed, exhibitions continue their lives in the minds of the people who spent time with them. *The Object Lessons* is about a fascination with these very questions. Written by Francesco Pedraglio and departing from an exhibition featuring Nina Beier and Marie Lund at De Vleeshal in Middelburg, the Netherlands, in 2009, *The Object Lessons* adapts and translates that exhibition over time and from several perspectives. This book, in turn, provided the ground for an exhibition the following year at Mudam, Luxembourg, and turned the two artists into translators of Pedraglio's book. If *1979* took a work of fiction as its material, I'm drawn to *The Object Lessons* because it tries out the opposite, using an exhibition as ground for introspective fiction (which subsequently reverberated into another exhibition). While each component stands alone, or is semi-autonomous, the publication is a way to imagine both exhibitions retrospectively, offering subjective reflections in contrast to the rule of silent installation photography or noisy critical write-ups. Its opening lines contain a lesson in how to engage with exhibitions over time: "Forget, then remember and interpret. Let's start from that. Then forget and remember somehow differently . . . somehow interpret. OK? Let's continue."<sup>2</sup>

*MATRIX/Berkeley: A*  
*Changing Exhibition of*  
*Contemporary Art*  
2009

**Co-curated by Project**  
**Projects and Elizabeth**  
**Thomas**  
**Berkeley Art Museum and**  
**Pacific Film Archive**

**NIKOLA DIETRICH**

they begin to identify themselves as distinct individuals, separate from their families. The show took on the realities of life as an adolescent, examining the information—bits and pieces, names and figures—that teenagers cling to as they try to assemble the puzzle pieces of their identity and solidify their place in society. The exploration of these forms of searching made for an enthralling experience. Masses of materials—books, texts, music, and films, in the form of originals, copies, and forgeries from private and public collections—were presented. It was a salon-style archive-as-exhibition that occupied every inch of available space. This concretion of material transmitted the simultaneous feeling of order and disorder, the personal significance of each individual artifact slowly expanding to merge with that of others into a constellation of meanings. The curators' emphasis was on "the process of departure—from family, institutions, and prison to cabin fever, landscape, adventure, trompe l'oeil, sexuality, and portraiture."<sup>1</sup>

*Florine Stettheimer*  
2014

**Curated by Karin Althaus,**  
**Susanne Böller, and Matthias**  
**Mühling**  
**Lenbachhaus, Kunstbau,**  
**Munich**

It was unbelievable that there had never yet been an exhibition of the works of Florine Stettheimer in Europe, and when the Lenbachhaus announced this show, it became a highly anticipated event among artists and enthusiasts. Stettheimer was what you could call an artist's artist. Although she was a shimmering figure in the New York art world—where, together with three of her younger sisters and her mother, she organized an art salon between 1915 and 1935—she never established a successful commercial career during her lifetime. Prominent exhibitions were undertaken after her death, including a 1946 retrospective organized by Marcel Duchamp for the Museum of Modern Art and

## IONIT BEHAR

Meireles, Antonio Manuel, and Luiz Alphonso) to carry out such oppositional events in public. This was the first exhibition in Brazil in which artists were invited to create work directly on site, in a way that we would now call site-specific. For example, the “situation” created by Barrio caused great alarm, requiring the intervention of the fire department and military police: the work was an allusion to the release of bodies of political prisoners who had been tortured and killed by the military government. Meireles’s controversial installation *Tiradentes: Totem-Monumento ao Preso Político* (Tiradentes: Totem-Monument to the Political Prisoner, 1970), in which chickens were burned alive, associated the violence of the Portuguese colonizers with that of the military government. This piece immediately drew the attention of the police and was soon halted.

## Notes

1. Jorge Romero Brest, *Semana del Arte Avanzado en la Argentina*, exh. cat. (Buenos Aires: 1967), n.p. Also see Andrea Giunta, *Vanguardia, internacionalismo y política. Arte argentino en los años sesenta* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2001), 298.

2. Briony Fer, “Lygia Clark and the Problem of Art,” in *Lygia Clark: The Abandonment of Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2014), 226.

3. See “Writings by Lygia Clark: 1956–1959,” in *Lygia Clark: The Abandonment of Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2014), 59.

4. Gerardo Mosquera, “From Latin American Art to Art from Latin America,” *Art Nexus* (Bogotá) 2, no. 48 (April–June 2003): 71.

## ASTRIA SUPARAK

An independent museum, “research center,” and artist project, the Center for PostNatural History focuses on living organisms that have been intentionally manipulated by humans via methods such as genetic engineering and selective breeding. Housed in a small storefront, with the proprietors, Rich Pell and Lauren Allen, living in the apartment above, the museum contains dark-stained wood displays, formaldehyde-filled jars, stuffed specimens, miniature models, and audio guides that play on rotary telephone handsets. Samples include GloFish®, the only transgenic organism (zebrafish with genes from bioluminescent jellyfish) available for consumer purchase; a taxidermied BioSteel™ goat that produces milk containing spider silk (many were sold to the U.S. Defense Department for use in bulletproof armor manufacturing); and impotent mosquitos used to eradicate malaria. This clever and sincere effort aims to pick up where natural history museums and evolutionary tree diagrams end. The museum is careful to not take a stance for or against these technologies and products; it avoids the paranoid position that Frankenfoods will destroy the world, and the utopian rhetoric that imagines science as a cure-all. This neutral curiosity places the CPNH among other notable endeavors that appropriate the look and language of encyclopedic museums and educational displays, such as the Museum of Jurassic Technology, or c-flux’s *The Unmaking of Art* (2010–ongoing), which claims to be based on a 2011 lecture by Walter Benjamin (who died in 1940). Such projects leave one questioning the veracity of museums and history in general.

## INTI GUERRERO

exhibition of video (normally a difficult prospect) can be meaningful, powerful, and discursive.

*The Potosí Principle: How Shall We Sing the Lord’s Song in a Strange Land?*

2010

Curated by Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, Max Hinderer, Alice Creischer, and Andreas Siekmann

Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid

(traveled to Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, and the Museo Nacional de Arte and the Museo de Etnografía y Folklore, La Paz, Bolivia)

Loved and hated, this exhibition and research project was remarkable for its idiosyncratic installation and extreme juxtapositions of historical artifacts with contemporary art. It was based on the exploitive world economy of the 17th century. Then part of the Spanish Empire, the Bolivian city of Potosí was the center of an ur-version of global capitalism. Potosí was one of the biggest cities in the world, surpassing Paris and London, and its wealth was drawn from the vast extraction and exportation of silver, which circulated globally and funded European wars. The Andean city was also important for art history: due to patronage linked to its wealth and power, the city housed an important school of Baroque painting in the Americas. The exhibition gathered up a number of these paintings from churches in Bolivia and showed them next to works by contemporary artists that addressed how the primitive accumulation of capital manifests in our current ferocious global market and its resulting class divisions. A new film by Harun Farocki dealt directly with the Potosí paintings. Farocki’s camera described microscopic details of their canvases, while his narration revealed the racist hierarchies of their iconography.

**GIANNI JETZER**

I immediately liked the wide-open spatial concept of this gallery show. The unbent coexistence of sculptural works by various artists (Leonor Antunes, Nina Canell, Giuseppe Gabellone, Dianna Molzan, Navid Nuur, and Erika Verzutti) in one large room seemed rare and masterfully non-arranged. The first time I eyed photographs of *When Attitudes Become Form*, Harald Szeemann's milestone exhibition at Kunsthalle Bern in 1969, I was surprised at how messy it looked. The works almost touched one another—no mutual reservations, it seemed. *Animal Mineral Vegetable* had a similar touch, a curatorial laissez-faire. It trusted the artworks to deal with issues of vicinity amongst themselves. A second parallel to Szeemann's seminal show lay in the total lack of direct reference to the human body and its vertical presence. The exhibited sculptures formed instead a course for the viewer's body to take measurement of itself, without the presence of any sculptural proxies. The Italian artist Giuseppe Gabellone produced the horizontal piece per se—an expansive floor sculpture that took the form of a huge quilt, and which cut an undulating path through the gallery like an expanding stream. The choice of artists and artworks was precise. The irritating beauty of the Brazilian artist Erika Verzotti's hand-painted bronze wall reliefs, which oscillated between the sacred and the utilitarian, Navid Nuur's light sculptures (each entitled *Tentacle Thought*), or Leonor Antunes's filigree sculptures, based on woven wall hangings by Anni Albers, were all equally strong in their congeniality.

**SARAH DEMEUSE**

The 229th exhibition in the pioneering MATRIX series is a book. Like other MATRIX projects, it was a newly commissioned work, but it is also a compendium of the 228 exhibitions that preceded it. To make the book, the curator and designers delved into the Berkeley Art Museum's archive of ephemera, culling installation views, press, and "artist sheets," and reproducing most at a one-to-one scale. Leafing through, we visit these ephemeral events not only as gallery interventions, but also as ideas, opinions, and institutional mediations. The book proposes that an exhibition, in the end, is the sum total of all these voices and views. It says something about time, too: that in the succession of exhibitionary units over time, there is a cumulative identity, and that readers and viewers might engage with material from the past as participants in their own present. Distinct from exhibitions whose goal is to tell a specific history, this compilation eludes singular interpretation. Nevertheless, by assembling the history of a small yet crucial institutional program that stimulated art production in its context, it also fills a lack. It offers a counter-history of exhibitions of modest scale, and of that precise curatorial skill we call "commissioning." And, thanks to a concise index, it provides insight into the shifting meaning of "contemporariness" from the late 1970s to the first decade of the 21st century.

**Notes**

1. Charles Esche and Maria Hlavajova, *Once Is Nothing* (Utrecht, the Netherlands: BAK, 2008), 64.

2. Francesco Pedraglio, *The Object Lessons: Nina Beier and Marie Lund* (Milan: Mousse Publishing, 2013), 13.

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a 1995 exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, and Stettheimer seems to be rediscovered anew every 10 or 20 years, warranting an ever-larger retrospective. She refused to cater to the art market, presenting just one solo exhibition in her lifetime, at Knoedler Gallery in New York in 1916. She also had a peculiar painting style, and insisted on constructing whole environments for her works' presentation. Upon entering the exhibition in Munich, Stettheimer's fabricated world enveloped you: the red carpet and white curtains were the essential component of the dramaturgy and echoed the details of the paintings on display. In addition to all of this, large photographs of the artist's home, reproductions of furniture, and baldachins mimicked Stettheimer's own orchestrations, creating a personal and almost homey atmosphere. The young artist Nick Mauss contributed a space where one could listen to an LP he had produced using Stettheimer's lyrics. All these framing elements added to her exuberant painted scenes of elegant, sophisticated, subversive figures, which mirrored the celebrity- and consumer-obsessed culture of the 1920s. The exhibition will do much to cement Stettheimer's significance in the canon of Modern art.

**Notes**

1. "Abandon the Parents at Statens Museum for Kunst," *Contemporary Art Daily*, <http://www.contemporaryartdaily.com/2014/09/abandon-the-parents-at-statens-museum-for-kunst/>.

The Exhibitionist

# REAR MIRROR



## FALLING INTO THE PUDDLE

**Ruba Katrib**

I took a turn somewhere and arrived at Disney. Despite being something of a taboo reference in contemporary art, Disney unexpectedly became central to my research for the 2014 group exhibition *Puddle, pothole, portal* at SculptureCenter, New York. The gross tourism, spectacle, and stereotyping associated with the company's recent enterprises often obscures the mad genius of its founder. In the lead-up to the exhibition, I talked to many people about the history of the studio and its transformation in the 1930s into the Disney we know now. Anecdotally, it seemed that many weren't familiar with the details of this history. And I am not entirely sure anyone knows more, after the exhibition, about the early cartoons that were so important to me in its planning—or if that was even the point.

This may underscore a certain disarticulation that often occurs among the various limbs under the umbrella of an exhibition. My experience with this show, as with others I have organized, is that there can be a surge of fascinating connections made through research that aren't fully visible in the physical presentation, or even in the public programs and catalogue that result from this research. At its best, I do believe that an exhibition enacts something, even in a latent way. Can the work of preparatory research direct an experience rather than illustrate a concept? Might an argument imagined through research be made palpable in the physical exhibition, rather than just explained in its framing?

## RETROSPECTIVE

**Scott Rothkopf**

I could tell you how I curated the Whitney Museum's Jeff Koons retrospective, but then I'd have to kill you. Well, maybe not kill you, but at least swear you to secrecy, since the roughly four years I spent making the show were filled with so many plot twists, political hijinks, and financial cliffhangers that to reveal them fully might mean I'd never work in this town again. And besides, to dwell on them here wouldn't be in keeping with the spirit of the editors' invitation to write this text, nor with the one in which the show was conceived.

My aim was to push beyond the market hoopla, the ceaseless press frenzy, the production intrigue, and the unsparing psychological analysis in order to take scholarly measure of Koons's 35-year career. Love him or hate him, Jeff Koons is one of the signal artists of our era. Yet until last year he had escaped retrospective treatment in his hometown, New York, while his contemporaries Cindy Sherman and Richard Prince had already enjoyed not one survey here, but two. The time had finally come for audiences to have the opportunity to look closely at the actual work and to see it assembled into a comprehensive narrative arc. Even the show's deadpan title—so common yet somehow so improbable for Koons—was meant to signal a seriousness of purpose. Not *Jeff Koons: An Extravaganza* but *Jeff Koons: A Retrospective*.

That said, the Whitney's choice to make the show its grand finale (at least for now) in its uptown building, and for the first time to give a single artist nearly the entire museum,

**FALLING  
INTO  
THE PUDDLE**

Ruba Katrib

The central ideas informing the show came from conversations with my co-curator, the artist Camille Henrot. We wanted to consider relationships between two-dimensional and three-dimensional space in light of new technologies, primarily handheld ones, as well as an expanding notion of screens. Camille thought of Saul Steinberg and his near-hallucinatory drawings. We agreed immediately that he was an important starting point and should be reexamined in the context of contemporary art. Then *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (1988), a Disney movie that had left an indelible impact on me as a child, struck me in a daydream as relevant and also worth a reexamination. Camille and I are both interested in notions of childhood and mischief, particularly from political and psychoanalytical perspectives, and we aimed to touch on these ideas in the show.

Early on, while researching something else, I came across the art historian Mignon Nixon writing, in a text on Louise Bourgeois, about humor. Referencing Freud, she connected slapstick to an infantile experience of helplessness.<sup>1</sup> This interpretation of the comic resonated with me, because those of us who are of a certain minimum age are also (at least symbolically) like children in today’s world of new technologies. Slapstick seemed an appropriate way to think about technological naïveté, a useful metaphor for stumbling through a screen-occupied reality.

Of the recent exhibitions that have approached thematically the broad notion of contemporary art and new technologies, few gave much consideration to humor and ineptitude—not even the ones I’d organized myself.<sup>2</sup> The predominant tone had been more dystopian, or at least (and perhaps rightly so) couched in criticality, rather than anything verging on slapstick. There is a term for people who grew up with the Internet, the so-called “digital natives.”<sup>3</sup> For *Puddle, pothole, portal*, I was more interested in a *lack* of mastery, in using analog means



*Puddle, pothole, portal* installation view, SculptureCenter, New York, 2014



*Puddle, pothole, portal* installation view, SculptureCenter, New York, 2014

to talk about digital space, and in considering humor as a way to address an ever-changing technoculture. I wanted to acknowledge that we actually have little idea what we are doing and a limited understanding of the implications of our actions. In these conditions, we might as well laugh at ourselves a bit. I hoped to remember that humans aren’t the masterminds of our reality; we are fallible and subject to many forces. We are always trying things, and iPhones don’t necessarily equal progress. As our devices become ever more sophisticated, how do we keep our fallibility in mind? How do we remain wary of the seductions of technological mastery and order?

In my curatorial work, I tend to think about contemporary problems through the lens of social and art history. The ways in which the Machine Age of the early 20th century influenced art and popular entertainment are for me a recurrent source of fascination and inquiry. *Roger Rabbit* became a window into a history of film that deeply impacted the attitude of the exhibition, and that was further articulated in a film program at Anthology Film Archives toward the end of the show. Over three days, we screened several shorts from the 1920s and 1930s, as well as *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* I figured, while I could *tell* people about the early Disney or Fleischer Studio animations, I couldn’t fully convey how radical they indeed were—and how they connect to our present moment and to the work in the exhibition—unless people actually watched them. I approached Anthology because they have a proper the-

**RETRO-  
SPECTIVE**

Scott Rothkopf

meant that the whiff of spectacle was inevitable. But then again, it always is with Koons. As the opening neared, many people, Koons admirers among them, questioned whether the exhibition might be too much of a good thing—whether it would feel big for its own sake. I knew I couldn't necessarily convince Koons's detractors of the merits of his work, but I felt compelled to organize the exhibition in such a way that the scale seemed earned and appropriate rather than gratuitous. It couldn't feel like eating too much cotton candy. As difficult or unlikely as it may sound, I hoped people would leave wanting more—or at the very least, leave curious about what Koons might do next.

Perhaps the most vexing problem when curating a chronological retrospective spanning several decades is pacing: how to prevent the audience from getting bored, and keep aloft the sense of the artist's achievement and discovery. This challenge was made all the greater by the sheer scale of the exhibition, which covered nearly 30,000 square feet and was likely the largest monographic show held in Manhattan since the Museum of Modern Art's full-dress Picasso retrospective in 1980. Not only did Koons's oeuvre need assiduous editing (as any artist's does) but I felt that the exhibition needed to be presented as a sequence of shifting experiences. In each gallery, the works on view would change, of course, but so too would the logic of their display.

The architecture of the Breuer building was the starting point. Seeing Koons's work today in large, refined museum or commercial spaces, we can easily forget the intimate and rough-hewn character of the downtown galleries such as International With Monument and Sonnabend where he first showed his work. In these settings, the pristine clarity and oracular presence of the sculptures shined even more dramatically, and I hoped that by carefully building out and detailing the muscular Breuer space, I might be able to restore to the work some of this lost tension. The architecture also helped suggest a narrative structure, since the size of the three main floors grows as one ascends, and the ceiling height rises from just under 13 feet on the second and third floors to more than 17 feet on the fourth.

As it happens, Koons's work has also increased in scale over the years, so it became clear that the chronology would have to progress largely from bottom to top, and that the show would break into three main chapters, each opening with a dramatically different physical situation relating to both the architecture of the floor and the tone of the art it housed. The second floor would contain more intimately scaled spaces and tell the story of Koons's early years and exhibitions in the East Village; the third would open with the famous 1989 *Made in Heaven* billboard, announcing his ascendance as a veritable art star; and the fourth would center on the long-running *Celebration* series as a joyful climax and contrast to the supposed cynicism of the earlier years.

Working closely with Koons and models in his studio, we created a completely bespoke floor plan that changed constantly in relation to the checklist, just as the checklist changed constantly in relation to the spaces we designed. The point of this give and take was not simply to find the right number of objects to represent each series, but to vary subtly the mode of presentation from room to room in order to bring out different qualities latent in each body of work. The opening gambit was restrained and sober. Peering into the sculpture court off Madison Avenue, one didn't glimpse the shiny, colorful objects for which Koons has become known, but instead two new black



*Jeff Koons: A Retrospective* installation view, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2014



*Jeff Koons: A Retrospective* installation view, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2014



*Puddle, pothole, portal* installation view, SculptureCenter, New York, 2014

ing Alice runs an egg factory in an animated world, together with her cartoon sidekick cat, Julius. They push the chickens to produce more eggs; the chickens go on strike. Alice and Julius bribe the chickens with lowbrow entertainment: a cockfight. But the chickens have the last laugh when Alice and Julius drive off, their truck brimming with eggs, only to have the cargo fall off and break as they speed away.

The laughter such cartoons evoked would have been ambivalent. As social satire, *Alice's Egg Plant* touched on contemporary frustrations with industry and economic plight, but it also offered momentary relief for its public, many of whom themselves worked in factories. They were the chickens, and Alice and Julius the exploitative capitalists. People enjoyed seeing everything go berserk. Committed leftists such as Walter Benjamin and Sergei Eisenstein witnessed a liberating power in these cartoons, which were consumed by the masses, even as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, curmudgeons by comparison, were more skeptical.

A key element of the films I chose was that they brought live actors and animated characters together in an early exploration of virtual reality. Humans could exist in animated space. *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*, the first feature-length film that brought animated characters and live actors into equal screen time, critiques, through humor and hijinks, a changing film and transportation industry as well as issues of urban gentrification and discrimination. Appearing in a transitional moment between analog and digital technologies, it depicts alternate spaces opening through holes or tunnels into Toontown, a hysterical animated city just below the surface of the real. This became an important image: a frenzied and mischievous space just behind our veil of reality, one that defies physics and where everything is animated.

In a way, *Puddle, pothole, portal* aimed to take a trip to Toontown. Many of the artists (who included Judith Hopf, Antoine Catala, Chadwick Rantanen, Allison Katz, Win McCarthy, and Abigail DeVille) aimed in their works to confuse expectations of space and architecture and to “animate” the building. This physical renegotiation of museum space posed questions about how we organize our reality, and provoked us not to take ourselves so seriously. Many visitors were stunned by one of Hopf's works: a glass pane with a cartoon-style door handle drawn on it, which functioned as an impenetrable doorway. Visitors could pass around the door, through an area framed with two-by-fours to resemble the support structures for a wall. People would test the limits of the space, wondering if the whole thing was glass, apprehension turning to humor as they easily passed through the openings. Hopf's



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ater and could help facilitate loans from major studios such as Disney. It was important that the films would be shown in their native habitat, even though this meant they could not be included in the exhibition at SculptureCenter. This was a hard decision; to separate the films from the fabric of the show meant that those who only visited the galleries had many blanks to fill in.

Viewing the films with a projector in a cinema also emphasized their status as inventive works of art, and made clear their social function at a time when machine technologies and the body were first colliding. Disney and Fleischer Studio films regularly commented on the absurdity of new early-20th-century technologies, comically demonstrating the mishaps that can occur when we are too caught up—or literally caught—in the machine. The films were symptomatic of a new type of humor that was generated using new tools. In Disney's *Alice's Egg Plant* (1925), for example, a live actor play-

**RETRO-  
SPECTIVE**

Scott Rothkopf



Jeff Koons: *A Retrospective* installation view, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2014

modular grid of the Breuer ceiling and how it might heighten the rigorous geometry of these sculptures and their almost military address—the conundrum of the retail showroom and capitalism's false choices, the aggression and seduction of its false gods. At the end of this allée, a single basketball magically hovering in its tank served as a vanishing point for the strong linear perspective of the opening gallery; behind it one of Breuer's signature windows released this compression and revealed the world beyond. If the opening gallery was strictly ordered and emphasized a serial logic, the following one featuring the *Equilibrium* (1985) series depended on isolated juxtapositions within a more poetic and airy atmosphere befitting works that play with physical states such as floating and sinking, as well as themes such as salvation and its inverse. Other galleries introduced further display logics still. The iconic *Rabbit* (1986) dominated the center of the room devoted to the *Statuary* series, while additional figures from the body of work orbited *Rabbit* like planets imagined by its blank but knowing visage.

In what was probably the most dramatic of all the galleries (and a sticking point for me and the artist at first), I lined up 10 of the *Banality* (1988) sculptures on a long, low plinth that spanned the floor's full north-south axis of around 80 feet. Yet even here, this admittedly stagy gesture grew directly from the sculptures, all of which have faces, are rigorously frontal, and are both based on photographic images and now known widely from them. How could these iconic objects seem strange and alive again? Did anyone really need to see *Michael Jackson and Bubbles* (1988) once more? Could the works somehow own up to or acknowledge their own iconicity in the space of the exhibition? Could a tight presentation heighten their inherent clash of scales, surfaces, and imagery, as well as their mash-up of images from a pre-Google age? These were the questions that led to an array variously suggesting a runway, curio display shelf, and perp lineup.

I would be lying if I didn't say that the long, low plinth also acted as a consolidated protective barrier for some of the most valuable and fragile works. Too often, Koons's exhibitions seem to take these devices as an afterthought, and the artist himself has very particular ideas about pedestals and supports. For example, he specifies pedestals that feel precisely scaled to individual objects within a series, which can then seem idiosyncratic when gathered together because they might have six different heights, all within a few inches of one another. Koons always thinks about the scale relationships among objects in a series and the relationship between an object and you

Rear Mirror

granite figures that mirrored the dark cladding of the museum's edifice. The stainless-steel folk peddler *Kiepenkerl* (1987) commanded the lobby, and through the transom adjacent to the elevator bank, one saw *Gazing Ball (Belvedere Torso)* (2013), a white plaster cast of the titular sculpture crowned by a reflective blue ball. Taken together, these four nearly monochromatic works suggested different approaches to the figure as well as a restrained, even classical, tone befitting an institutional context. This wasn't Koons as usual.

The exhibition's chronological narrative commenced on the second floor. I knew from the start that I wanted to present a grid of the 1980s encased vacuum cleaner pieces, all facing forward, even though they had never been shown like that before. This idea grew partly out of the strong



Jeff Koons: *A Retrospective* installation view, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2014

**FALLING  
INTO  
THE PUDDLE**

Ruba Katrib

work became a setting for pranks: people would mime a solid surface on the open spaces, or repeatedly cross through the threshold, or pretend to open the door. Similarly, visitors squealed when they noticed McCarthy's glass water spouts hidden in various spots, or looked up and saw Katz's paintings on the high windows.

*Puddle, pothole, portal* was legible on multiple levels, depending on how deeply one looked. For me, it was beginning of a bigger line of inquiry rather than a finished statement. The early cartoons I researched ultimately weren't very present for the audience; I'd run out of intellectual space in the exhibition framework. In my research, I was increasingly drawn to think about the political implications of the early work of the Disney and Fleischer Studios. It seemed important that Disney significantly shifted his work with *Snow White* (1937)—the first feature-length animated film—and increasingly aimed to do away with slapstick, nonlinear narratives, and rough drawing styles. His revised mission was to make cartoons that the audience forgot were cartoons.

This change in tack had broader implications, representing a desire for mainstream animation to replicate reality rather than to invent another world. This is a history that has informed visual culture ever since, and now it seems that improved technologies have almost finished what *Snow White* started, by attempting to mimic reality ever more accurately, seamlessly merging virtual and actual space. I, however, remain more interested in the rough edges of the quickening stream of new technologies we incorporate into daily life, and the humor they can elicit. The awkwardness of new technologies reminds us of our fundamental lack of control over life, despite the deluge of devices that declare otherwise.



*Puddle, pothole, portal* installation view, SculptureCenter, New York, 2014

**Notes**

1. Mignon Nixon, *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and a Story of Modern Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 67.

2. This would include the exhibition I organized at SculptureCenter in 2012, *A Disagreeable Object*, which touched on the subject of the body and technology, as well as exhibitions that more directly examined the impact of new technologies and society, for instance *Free* at the New Museum, New York (2010); *Speculations on Anonymous Materials* at the Fridericianum in Kassel, Germany (2013); *ProBio* at MoMA PS1, New York (2013); and *Art Post-Internet* at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing (2014). Ranging in thematics and topics, these shows were more critical of the incorporation of technologies into daily life. The predominant tone, in the press materials and the exhibitions themselves, was of incorporation, fluency, and seriousness.

3. The term "digital native" refers to people born after 1980, when digital technologies took hold: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Digital\\_native](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Digital_native). An example of a generational focus in relation to technology can be seen in curatorial initiatives such as Simon Castets and Hans Ulrich Obrist's *89 Plus*: [89plus.com](http://89plus.com).

**RETRO-  
SPECTIVE**

Scott Rothkopf

in space, but not always of how a group of objects might populate a space together. I made it a general point to focus on this last concern, right down to a protracted review of every last pedestal, plinth, and piece of sandpaper tape in the show. It could sound like dwelling on minutiae, but many of the curatorial ideas in the exhibition percolated up from the smallest practical and aesthetic issues. I couldn't pretend that they didn't matter, or the show would have been retrofitted with stanchions and barriers when the security team and insurers stepped in. We might have ended up with a petting zoo of penned sculptures, or worse.

There isn't space here to reflect on the curatorial logic behind every gallery, but each was conceived with a similar sense of specificity. When sequestering the more graphic *Made in Heaven* works off the main room devoted to this series, I emphasized a shift in scale—a sense of zooming in—so that the increasingly explicit character of the imagery was attended by a startling amplification of proximity to the subject, be it a human orifice or a carved wooden flower evoking one. For years, I was flummoxed by what should follow the psychological intensity and narcissism of this series, and eventually decided to present a selection of the blank-faced *Easyfun* (1999) mirrors as a kind of narrative palate cleanser, but also as a way to force viewers to confront themselves after seeing so much of Koons. The slightly asymmetrical animal outlines of each mirror played off the fractured *Split Rocker* (1999) at the center of the space, which stood for the cleaving apart of the self that Koons experienced after *Made in Heaven* and the abduction of his son. For the final gallery I borrowed the axial logic of a classical sculpture gallery to present two Venuses flanking visitors as they entered with a startling image of coupling dead ahead.

Visitors found almost none of this thinking explained, but I hope it was somehow *felt*. When curating monographic exhibitions, my goal has always been for people to leave thinking an artist is better or more interesting than when they arrived. Perhaps this sounds absurdly obvious, but I think with retrospectives it's all too often not the



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case. Despite the prevalence of solo surveys on museum calendars, the craft of assembling them doesn't garner enough attention in critical forums or curatorial studies degree programs. The focus is on "big idea" group shows where the curator is assumed to have greater authorial agency. And the assumption, in turn, is that a chronological retrospective leaves the curator far less conceptual work to do, since the exhibition somehow curates itself. Nothing could be further from the case.

## The Exhibitionist

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