

Art, Globalism, and New Modes of Curatorial Practice

How Do Latitudes Become Forms?

Asian Art >
General

Since Edward Said published his seminal book *Orientalism* in 1978, many scholars of art history have been challenging time-honoured maxims, examining foundations, and re-framing their gaze. While particular strides have been made in the study of non-Western art, parallels in the museum world are less readily apparent. Strictures from acquisition policies to museum collections, decades in the making, have limited the speed of institutional change. How does, for example, a contemporary art museum in Europe or the United States begin to collect and display work that falls outside its conventional purview? Where does a curator begin to look for new talent in countries (s)he has never visited? And, once talent is found, will there be an audience for the museum's venture? These are just some of the questions that confronted Walker Art Center director, Kathy Halbreich, curator, Philippe Vergne, and a team of advisors as they sought to challenge paradigms and transform curatorial practice through an exhibition of global proportions.

By Alisa Eimen

Following three years of planning, the exhibition *How latitudes become forms: Art in a global age* began its international tour this past February at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Featuring artists from seven different countries, Brazil, China, India, Japan, South Africa, Turkey, and the Walker's home, the United States, the curators of this exhibition were cautious to avoid the well-trodden paths of their forebears. Exhibition models established by nineteenth-century international expositions have engendered, in part, the more recent regional exhibitions that bring 'African,' 'Asian,' or 'Chinese' art to the Euro-American world. Although many curators of these exhibitions intend to challenge the dominant paradigm rooted in the colonial order, the effect is often that they

reify the very constructs they hope to obliterate. Rather than challenge categories based on difference, ethnicity, religion, or location, an exhibition of 'Chinese' art, for example, maintains its distinction, yet only nominally subverts the larger hegemonic structures informing categorization, collecting, display, and interpretation. The work in these regionally organized exhibitions remains on the periphery of contemporary art and only slowly makes its way into European and American galleries, auction houses, and museum collections. *How latitudes become forms* confronts these structures through a series of case studies that focus on transforming contemporary curatorial practice through a very intentional blurring of boundaries.

From the beginning, this exhibition was conceived to challenge curatorial conventions. Not only did the curators

intend to broaden their notions of the contemporary arts. They also were interested in restructuring curatorial practices within their home institution. Indeed, diversity and multidisciplinary have been important buzzwords for over a decade, often being tacked on to grant proposals, mission statements, and acquisition policies. The curatorial team, comprised of curators from all programming departments at the Walker, was interested in pursuing these goals in more substantial ways. Wary of becoming global art predators, they developed a multidisciplinary 'global advisory committee' comprised of seven international scholars and curators who could guide them through the art scenes in various countries. Working with local specialists proved a useful strategy not only to engage the community of artists directly, but also to have access to histories and cultural specificities that otherwise would have been lost in translation. Thus, the curators of this exhibition offer a working method that dispels these obstacles of access and interpretation. By making their curatorial practice transparent, this exhibition demystifies the process of selection, opens up a discursive space within museums, and perhaps, most importantly, admits incomplete knowledge, thereby creating room for less familiar stories and imagery. Crossing boundaries is synonymous with the operations of the contempo-



Installation view with Yin Xiuzhen's *Suitcase Series* (centre).

rary world, as this exhibition reveals.

How latitudes become forms features more than forty artists, many of whom – like the curators – transgress a range of boundaries. Through her *Suitcase Series* (2002), Chinese sculptor Yin Xiuzhen examines constructs from the socio-political to the environmental, to those we put on ourselves. Using unconventional materials, Yin creates models of various cities in old suitcases from second-hand clothing of residents of those cities. For the artist, these transportable cities evoke the human body that is often overlooked in rapid urban development and a growing global economy, or, in her own words, 'people in our contemporary setting have moved from residing in a static environment to becoming souls in a constantly shifting transience ... the suitcase becomes the life support container of modern living.' Her work, like the work of many other artists in the exhibition, invites active participation from the viewer. Japanese artist Tsuyoshi Ozawa invites the exhibition-

goer to enter a museum within the museum. His *Museum of Soy Sauce Art* (1998-2000) recreates masterworks from Japanese art history in soy sauce and, with accompanying texts, traces a fictitious history of soy sauce art. As the visitor wanders through Ozawa's museum, (s)he participates in a light-hearted yet poignant transgression of the authority of both the canon of art history and the museum. Numerous other artists in the exhibition, variously working with film, animation, performance, tinfoil, and chalk, challenge conventions, boundaries, and even object-hood in a myriad of ways. Interested in disrupting hegemonic authority and its counterpart, the global economy, artists and curators alike transform display into activation, objects into events, and contemplation into direct experience. <

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Installation view with Hüseyin Bahri Alptekin, *Heimat/Toprak* (2001), on the wall.

Agenda >

How latitudes become forms

Opens 5 June 2003 at Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin, Italy
Travels to Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Internacional Rufino Tamayo, Mexico City, Mexico, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Monterrey, Mexico, Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, and other venues to be announced.
www.cnca.gob.mx/cnca/buena/inba/subbellas/museos/mtamayo

Lessons from Looting: The Place of Museums in Iraq

Early trepidation at the potential destruction of Iraqi archaeological sites has long given way to anger and profound sadness about the looting and sacking of Iraqi museums and libraries. The unexpected scale and intensity of the looting has produced various reactions, initially dominated by blame and recrimination of the United States' mishandling of the post-war situation but now focused on ameliorating the damage by tracking down stolen antiquities and controlling their traffic across international borders.

Asian Art >
Central Asia

By Yasser Tabbaa

The International Council of Museums (ICOM) has just finalized a Red List of Iraqi Antiquities at Risk to be distributed to all relevant border crossings. While almost everyone agrees that the US – the authority legally responsible for maintaining law and order in Iraq – was woefully negligent in protecting Iraqi national treasures, very few have attempted to understand why some Iraqis looted their own cultural institutions. This is a difficult and still quite unpopular line of questioning. Over three days of meetings in Lyon, France with INTERPOL and ICOM officers, the question was hardly discussed, only muttered in passing with total incomprehension and a measure of disdain.

As an Arab-American, a frequent visitor to Iraq and an art historian, I am especially troubled by this question: why did some Iraqis take advantage of the breakdown of order to loot and even sack their own museums, libraries, and universities? Rather than fixing blame, in this essay I would like to use my knowledge of Iraqi history, museums, and institu-

tions of culture to address a question that may haunt us for a long time, in Iraq and in other countries that may face similar upheavals in the future. Silence on this matter, I think, is dangerous.

While some might attribute Iraq's current state of lawlessness and disregard for historical patrimony to underdevelopment, my long-term association with the country tells me otherwise. Until quite recently, when wars and sanctions took their inevitable toll, Iraq was ahead of most of the Arab world in cultural matters, including archaeology, museology, art, architecture, and music.

So what may have led to this tragic situation? First, we now know that the recent looting of Iraqi museums was in some respects the sad culmination of a process that had already gained considerable momentum in the aftermath of the first Gulf War. There are confirmed reports, in the most recent issue of Smithsonian, for example, of extensive illegal excavations in such Sumerian and Babylonian sites as Uruk, Ur, Isin, and Larsa, digs often conducted by underworld groups under the protection of armed men. The current efforts of

Warrior from Hatra, 200 BC, Iraq
Museum Baghdad



Yasser Tabbaa

ICOM, the British Museum, and the College Art Association to control the trade in Iraqi antiquities are equally directed at the looting of Iraqi museums and the more intractable problems of illicit excavations and the illegal art trade.

Second, whereas cultural heritage has often been co-opted for nationalist purposes, Baathist Iraq turned it into an instrument for the aggrandizement of the party and especially of Saddam himself. By appropriating the antiquity of the land,

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