

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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Saddam linked himself with Assyrian, Babylonian, and Abbasid rulers, substituting his humble origins with false genealogies. Bricks used in his megalomaniacal restoration of Babylon are stamped with his name, and a large inscription states that the city was begun by Nebuchanezzar and completed by Saddam. Close identification with a single ruler can easily backfire once the ruler is removed.

The third factor that seems to have contributed to the looting of museums has to do with their origins under colonial rule and their persisting state of alienation in Iraq and other Arab countries. Most Arab museums still operate within an outmoded orientalist framework, displaying artifacts with little regard for local general audience or even specialists. My Danish colleague, Ingolf Thuesen, who conducted a survey of visitors to a regional museum in Hama, Syria, noted that the museum was primarily visited by foreign tourists and government officials and rarely by the adult Syrian population. Interestingly, precisely this museum suffered severe damage from looting in the aftermath of the 1982 bombardment of the city. By and large seen as symbols of the government, signs of privilege, and as 'foreign' institutions, one can understand why some Iraqis were willing to loot their museums and cultural institutions.



View of the Ziggurat at Ur, ca. 2100 BCE

The Laws of Antiquities governing the excavation, possession, and transaction of antiquities in Iraq and other Arab countries seem to foster this rupture between society and artistic culture, in two main ways. First, the overly stringent policies in these laws virtually ignore the existence of an art market or the age-old desire of some people, Iraqis included, to collect ancient objects. Whereas such policies prescribe an ideal situation, in reality they have contributed to the proliferation of an illegal art market. Second, by defining a protected cultural artifact as 200 years or older, these laws valorize the ancient over the more recent and cheapen the still palpable memory of the population.

Finally, I agree that a few well-placed tanks in front of Iraqi museums and libraries would have prevented or at least minimized their looting. But in the end such security measures, whether by US or Iraqi forces, only serve to deepen the rupture and further disengage culture from the population. Rather, I would like us to look a little more proactively towards a future when cultural institutions are not only better protected but also better integrated within their own societies. It is time, I think, to turn alienation into outreach, to develop the public and educational components of these museums, following the example of European and especially American museums. Once Iraqis feel included in their own cultural patrimony, I suspect they will have second thoughts before looting it. <

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Editor's note >

As a follow-up to this issue, the newsletter would like to publish your comments and experiences regarding the recent looting of cultural institutions in Iraq. Please send your comments of 100 words or less to the art & cultures editor, Kristy Phillips phil8632@um.edu

Kazari

Asian Art >
Japan

Tsuji Nobuo introduced *kazari* as a central concept in the study of Japanese art about fifteen years ago and has been developing the idea ever since. The basic meaning of the verb *kazaru* is 'to decorate, to adorn'. It can also be used in the sense of 'to exhibit', 'to put on show'. Finally, *kazari* involves the idea of 'being affected', as in *kazarike*, 'affectation or showiness'. Thus, *kazari* stands for decor, decoration, the decorated and the decorative, and for the proper way of handling and appreciating it all. In pre-modern Japan, *kazari* has led to objects and ensembles of objects being used for purposes of play and display.

By Anna Beerens

Kazari is also the title of the catalogue accompanying an exhibition of the same name organized by the British Museum and the Japan Society of New York in association with the Suntory Museum of Art in Tokyo. Some two hundred exquisitely beautiful objects were on display at the Japan Society in New York (autumn 2002) and at the British Museum (spring 2003). Nicole Coolidge Rousmaniere, director of the Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Cultures, and Tsuji Nobuo, Professor Emeritus of Tokyo University and currently president of Tama Art University, were co-curators. Both contributed introductory articles to the catalogue: Tsuji's article centres on the role of *kazari* within the history of Japanese art, whilst Rousmaniere's concentrates on conceptual aspects.

In stressing the conceptual complexity of *kazari*, both exhibition and catalogue make an attempt to challenge the conventions of current art-historical discourse which, as Rousmaniere says, 'has tended to categorise the arts arbitrarily', as is evident from terms like 'visual arts' or 'applied arts'. This exhibition seeks to break down such conventional boundaries between artistic forms, even between arts as apparently different as painting and music, with the aim of presenting the 'social life' of artefacts, and to show them in the context of what Rousmaniere calls 'a larger artistic programme' (p. 21). For example, the exhibition not only included high-quality hanging scrolls and painted screens, which would traditionally be classified as high art, but also spectacularly shaped parade helmets and skilfully decorated musical instruments, objects that would usually be considered applied art.

The exhibition is arranged in six thematic sections, each centring on what are considered to be the six highpoints of *kazari*. The first section deals with display in the reception rooms of the fif-

teenth- and sixteenth-century elite; the second with the exuberant style of the early seventeenth-century samurai; the third introduces the taste for finery and splendour of late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century merchants; the fourth presents the fashions of high-ranking women of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; the fifth takes us to the pleasure quarters of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; and the last section explores festivals of the pre-modern period, with their colourful floats and costumes.

The question to be answered is whether the exhibition is successful in changing the way we look at Japanese art, as its organizers claim it will be. It goes without saying that the exhibits are immensely engaging, but are they shown in such a way that we do indeed see the objects as part of 'a larger artistic programme', and get a notion of their usage in every sense – what Rousmaniere claims the exhibition is all about?

In fact, it is only in the first section that the visitor can experience something of 'kazari in action'. In large showcases, reconstructions are made of the decorative arrangements in Muromachi period reception rooms. Hanging scrolls, screens, and small decorative objects are put together as they might have been in a sixteenth-century interior. The result is striking. However, hardly any other attempts are made to present an ensemble in this manner. Contemporary etiquette manuals, pattern books, and illustrations are called upon to provide a context, but kimonos, sashes, accessories, screens, small articles of furniture, and ceramics are still mostly displayed in separate cases, and are treated individually in the catalogue. There are no clashes of textures and materials, no three-dimensional confrontations. There may well have been practical reasons (such as conflicting conservation requirements) for not putting objects together, but after the promise of the first section one does expect more of an attempt to show items in ensembles.

The catalogue follows the layout of the exhibition. Articles accompanying the first five sections were written by Kawai Masatomo, John Carpenter, Yasumura Toshinobu, Nagasaki Iwao, and Timothy Clark respectively. The section on festivals has no accompanying essay: there is instead an article on the vocabulary of 'decoration' in early modern Japan by Tamamushi Satoko. Each contribution shows fine scholarship, and the descriptions of the individual exhibits, provided by a range of contributors, are highly informative. Much information is brought together here that cannot be found in any other English-language publication. It is the catalogue, more than the exhibition itself, which draws our attention not only to the beauty of the design and the quality of the workmanship, but also to an object's use, its place within the discourse of ornament and good taste, and



Helmet in the shape of a peach with attached bison horns. Early seventeenth century.

the many allusions to the canon of art and literature, which brings in the element of play and parody. Despite the careful labelling of exhibits, the uninitiated visitor who does not read the catalogue will have little appreciation of the supposedly revolutionary nature ('entirely fresh interpretation' or 'new thinking') of the exhibition, and will only be aware of having seen a series of showcases displaying very appealing objects. This is an exhibition that needs the catalogue to make its point.

In spite of these misgivings this exhibition is of innovative value: both exhibition and catalogue are representative of a perceptible trend in the study of art history (and also in other areas) that encourages scholars to move away from exclusive thinking, break down boundaries, and be more aware of interrelatedness, multifariousness, ambiguity, and ambivalence. Objects really are presented in context, even if one has to read the catalogue to fully appreciate this point, and traditional boundaries are negated. Even a few 'ephemeral objects', as Rousmaniere calls them, such as a wrapping cloth, a decorated lantern, or an incense wrapper are included. This integrative impulse comes from application of the concept of *kazari*. When ideas are represented on such an impressive scale and at such a high level of scholarship, as is the case with the *Kazari* exhibition, they are sure to have an impact, even if it takes time for partition walls to fall and long-standing art-historical considerations to be challenged. Perhaps in a few years' time we will be able to see all the finery of fashionable eighteenth-century ladies presented in one showcase, together with elements of the interiors in which they lived their lives. <

Rousmaniere, Nicole Coolidge (ed.), *Kazari, decoration and display in Japan, 15th–19th centuries*, London: The British Museum Press/The Japan Society (2002), pp. 304, ill., ISBN 0-7141-2636-5

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Campaign coat (*jinbaori*) with saw-tooth pattern at hem and nine-circle crest. Early seventeenth century. Private Collection, Japan. Yasukuni Jinja, Yushukan Museum, Tokyo.