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Museum ad nauseam? Museums in the post-modern labyrinth

Serge Guilbaut

- 1 In 1956, as France was just beginning to savor the benefits of a consumer society, Charles Estienne, an influential and popular French art critic who was championing the most advanced forms of modern art, finally decided to give up his career in the art world and devote himself to writing popular songs, in particular for his anarchist friend Léo Ferré, and quickly became the household name of French intellectual songwriting.
- 2 In order to justify such a radical change, Estienne, who had previously believed that art criticism was essential to the development of a public consciousness, argued that, faced with the growing meaninglessness of art criticism due to its collusion with the art market and politics, it was ethically preferable to walk away from it, humming one of his own street ballads. The high hopes and aspirations Estienne had held since the war had crashed against the traditional wall of the art world: money and fame. He had found (again) that the meaning of art was indeed volatile and realized not only that he, as an art critic, had very little control over his profession, but also that the image he had always believed in – that of the critic as the annunciating angel of the modern era – had in reality been transformed into that of a small shopkeeper with nothing worthwhile to sell. He realized that he could not escape the unenviable fate that transformed the art critic into a publicist. Switching, as he did, from the criticism of art for the elite to producing of popular art was surely problematic, but at least, Estienne thought, his new position would not carry with it the illusions still attached to the term “fine art.” He could now participate plainly in everyday French life without shame.
- 3 Charles Estienne, still connected in 1955 with André Breton and looking for a subversive space in French culture, was one of the few who decided to drop out of the “rat race,” as it used to be called. Other critics and museums, despite growing criticism by Lettristes and Situationists, managed to continue their economic and political promotional activities. Unlike art critics, who had rapidly been transformed into reviewers without much independent-mindedness (several critics in the late 1950s

were, in fact, on the payroll of art galleries: Michel Tapié, Clement Greenberg), modern art museums were thriving, multiplying around the Western world, becoming part of the everyday circus, as Guy Debord would say, becoming celebrities among celebrities.

- 4 I am not against museums, far from it: I sometimes collaborate with certain institution in order to articulate visual demonstrations and arguments about historical and cultural moments. I am not against the concept per se and certainly not against the idea of the museum as a democratic space where cultural histories are presented and debated, where memory and history dialogue in order to avoid falling into the myth of a single transcendental culture. What I currently oppose the utilization of the museum concept for profit, for prestige, and of the museum space as entertainment. I am against the museum as a logo or brand, against the museum as an architectural wonder easily recognizable on the cityscape but often devoid of ideas: against, in other words, the museum as an empty sign. We now know that it has always been the game of every ambitious City Hall to gather sufficient cash to be able to afford a fashionable architect charged with creating an instantly recognizable structure, even if its content is weak and its collections almost nonexistent, as Jean Clair has noticed and criticized in his book *Malaise dans les musées*: “Malraux invented the imaginary museum, the museum without walls. Now we are ushering in the museum without collections.”¹ And indeed the walls of the new empty museum are gorgeous and so successful that, following Hollywood’s habits of producing sequels, copycat museums are cropping up in numerous cities in search of recognition as tourist appellation. (Remember the performance artist Andrea Fraser sensuously hugging the walls of the Bilbao Guggenheim.)
- 5 If I sound like an old disgruntled professor, I do not think however that I am the nostalgic kind, like Jean Clair. Despite the fact that I agree with Clair’s description of the problem facing the modern museum world, I am far from accepting his solution, which is to go back to some form of elitist space where only high art, chosen by cognoscenti, should be displayed. But his observation about the problem is, I think, accurate. The mushrooming of publics in modern museums, which could have been a strength, has not been followed by an increase in artistic education in schools and universities, and certainly not much in museums themselves, despite their education departments, which often offer anything beyond the kindergarten level. What we have now is a new public: a crowd entering old museographic structures still geared towards connoisseurs. The result is abysmal in its disjuncture, as Jean Clair points out: “The less we understand images, the more we rush to stare at them.”² The public museum will then model its operations on those of private enterprise, anxious about the management of its assets or, as Jean-Pierre Jouyet and Maurice Lévy, authors of a report on the “Intangible,” have said, “a dynamic management of their intangible capital.”³ In a global economy, it is clear that the role of the museum is no longer to enter into a dialogue with the public, to trigger national or individual memory or historical consciousness, but rather to serve a brand (MoMA, Guggenheim, Louvre, Beaubourg, France, USA, etc.).
- 6 For many years, museums functioned as intimate, almost private spaces for connoisseurs who wanted to spend time contemplating objects that they already knew. Museums were like churches, and works of art, almost like icons, were worshiped in silence. The entire structure reinforced the canonical discourse established by formalist curators trained to endlessly repeat their gospel with only few exceptions.⁴

The structure was protected by a complex and robust system of regulations enforced by guards and curators. Guards kept people from talking or laughing in the sanctorum, curators regulated shows by replicating the values they received through their conservative training. To give an idea of the state of affairs, let's recall that in France, for example, curators are called "conservateurs" which means exactly what it says; they are conservative; or, alternatively, they are called "commissaires" (commissars), a term that does not particularly evoke openness and experimentation. When one remembers that "curators" in old England cared for those suffering from dementia... one has the feeling that the profession has to carry a very heavy burden indeed!

- 7 It is now difficult to defend with the strong vision of Alfred Barr, the man who convinced the entire western world of the importance of protecting and developing the notion of modernist progression in the arts. For years museums accepted Barr's graphic idea that good modern art was progressing fast, constantly innovating and perfecting itself and moving forcefully through time with the swiftness of a torpedo. While his 1933 torpedo/program presented the development of the movement from Francisco Goya, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, and John Constable through the School of Paris, hitting its prime, as he liked to predict, in 1950, thanks to American and Mexican artists, his reworked scheme of 1941 tells a different story. Starting with Paul Cézanne, the movement now thrusts forward toward 1950, with only the United States and Mexico appearing as the detonators of a new era. This was quite a prophetic and programmatic concept, but from today's point of view one has the impression that those torpedoes, with their heavy frontal ammunition launched by the Museum of Modern Art, after a certain amount of early success, have finally crashed and destroyed the entire seemingly coherent and irrefutable organization. Today all the parts of the well-designed modernist project lie scattered across the cultural landscape, while the Western world is not only rethinking the way to present collections of art but, more importantly, pondering the entire *raison d'être* of modern art museums. The world has indeed changed since the end of the Berlin wall, as the economists and politicians have been telling us. It has become open and global. The old authoritative institutions that had run the show since the end of the Second World War have now been called seriously into question in this "postmodern" age. The new global economy has indeed transformed international relations while modern museums seem to have been asleep at the wheel, unable to react to interests so alien to their own historical constructions. Many previously ignored voices have begun to be heard, advocating for their own full representation in cultural institutions and opening wide a field traditionally controlled by a few powerful symbolic centers and groups.⁵
- 8 Confronted with this new situation, museums seem to have taken the easy way out. Following the tradition of television, as remarked earlier, museums now think that the public (whatever this means) wants to see easy shows of famous personalities (the Impressionists, Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dalí or Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec). Often these shows are created by a large museum from a dominant center and rented out for a fee to other smaller museums. We are back in the time of the Barnum & Bailey Circus which would drive around the country, stopping here and there, dazzling a crowd of pleasure-seekers with weird animals and clowns, before moving on to the next city. What is funny about all of this is that, as Jean Clair has noted, the museum and the circus were created approximately around the same time, between 1850 and 1870.⁶ These touring shows, now the norm, are too often easily organized without much

thought, but with much fanfare, and sent around as neat packages. We see more and more of this type of disdain for the public.

- 9 The museum should be a democratic place where debates and real interactions with exhibitions can take place in order to provide better knowledge and understanding of our own history. Collections should be displayed to show how successful the museum has been – through good politics and cash – not only in affording (or not) important names, but especially explaining why those pictures we hold dear were important, and in the context which they were produced, and the kind of ideas they were articulating in their environment. Today, collections are still presented as if paintings were part of a stamp collection: all pinned against the wall looking at people with glazed eyes. The public, conditioned by the technique of museum display, only becomes excited when they read tags mentioning famous names. As Jean Clair says, “one rejoices without knowing why, without knowing what it is we are rejoicing about. To take pleasure in a work without understanding its meaning, is like glancing at a text written in a foreign language: a series of printed signs that we know nothing about.”⁷
- 10 If twentieth-century museums were considered elitist and somewhat boring, today they have become a must for the visibility and marketing of any ambitious city or province. The words “Modern Art Museum” bring to any gathering of material a glossy cultural varnish attractive to a new, large, and transient tourist population eager to mimic the educational aristocratic grand tour, but in shorter time. Indeed, speed is of the essence for the new tourist, but so is – during the tour – the visiting of museums of whatever kind. Museums as a sign of culture are everywhere: they have even crept into old factories and abandoned mines. Disused factories and deconsecrated churches are being recycled as contemporary art spaces. It seems that every single bankrupt industrial site has been refitted and transformed into a museum of sorts, with even barren sites being sanctified as “lieux de mémoire.” Villages have exchanged their traditional everyday life for seasonal tourist slots announcing the museification of the world. Lately, in the south of France for example, one can visit an incredible number of diverse types of museums. They are everywhere. Some are about art, some about history or artifacts – horseshoes, bees, wine, honey, flowers, scent/perfume (no need to show anything really), the post office, pots and pans, clothes, corkscrews, and even crocodiles. In Vancouver, one can now go underwater to see a museum of endangered fish, since the number of fish species has decreased in inverse proportion to the number of tourists.
- 11 Competition between urban cultural programs and traditional museums for the public is fierce. The public – as a number of visitors – is important and sought after, and museums have to track them down in that competitive environment. The Guggenheim Museum in its different expansions has understood something that others have not yet grasped: you go abroad, multiply your franchises, and go where the public (tourists) is, rather than wait for them to come to you, as the MoMA has done in New York by relying on its famous collection and a new hotel built next to the revamped museum structure. Today brashness is not only accepted, it is actually demanded. They have understood that it pays auratic dividends to build a franchise in other lands to show not only that your own country is universal and hegemonic, but also that your foreign implantation helps the economy of other, weaker countries through cultural tourism. This is the contemporary way of using culture as a complement to international policy.

The “big stick” policy of past years is now replaced by artists’ signatures, by Jeff Koons’ gigantic, but ecologically savvy and ironic, large sculptural guard dog in Bilbao.

- 12 The tourist, then, is the main target for the twenty-first-century museum. But it is a moving target. Indeed the modern tourist is a fast-traveling person who, while having only a limited amount of time, but still wants to have “meaningful” experiences in a foreign land. Local cultures are a way to break the routine of an everyday life that is becoming more and more alienating and ritualized. As the French philosopher Yves Michaud points out, “Tourists seek freedom, although this is a negative freedom that allows them to rid themselves of everydayness, routine, obligations, so as to make room for pleasure and curiosity. Yet this is always against a safe backdrop, which makes the tourist seek exoticism in repetition and cliché. The tourist wishes to live the experience with safety.”⁸ That is what managers of commercial enterprises assume. As Nestór Canclini has remarked, “all tourists are in a rush and come to get to know an eye-catching landscape – not the history of local drama.”⁹ The drama is that all these assumptions are false. Tourists are also active seekers of challenging discourses about others, about different places and cultures. The problem is that tourist institutions, now including museums, do not provide what the public could enjoy – an engaging and transforming experience, but rather prefer a bland, safe, and superficial material. We are close to the notion of kitsch, attacked years ago by the American art critic Clement Greenberg: an old problem that is again becoming central to the functioning of our global world.
- 13 The weight of the tourist industry (four hundred million euros in France from the latest numbers in 1995) is growing fast in economically advanced societies. This increased fourfold between 1960 and 1980. For example, the tourist surplus in France is comparable to the income from the food or automobile industries. In fact, tourism, with its 102 million euros of turnover and two millions direct and indirect jobs, has become the number one French economic activity¹⁰. It is in this context – present in all rich countries – that museums of modern art are trying to retool themselves for the new environment. Their first reaction is generally always the same: rather than change their intellectual structure, they tend to reshape their architecture, to upgrade their space, to build new wings in order to be visibly present in every corner of large cities, like a cat marking its territory. The phenomenon is not new, but has now reached extreme proportions. Already by 1939, the MoMA of New York, to differentiate itself from old models, stressed the modern qualities of transparency, clarity, and experimentation in the architecture of the new museum itself to symbolize what it stood for: a modern world. Modern art, rejected by the majority of Americans, was protected and symbolized by a simple and transparent architecture exalting free-wheeling individuals committed to the future. The acceleration of the construction of modern art museums at the end of the twentieth century shows that the ideology of institutions is more and more clearly announced in the structure of the architecture.¹¹
- 14 The Centre Pompidou, built in 1977 and retrofitted in 1985 and again in 2000, shows in its oil refinery-like design how the museum reacted and responded to post-1968 demands for democratization and openness of contemporary visual culture in a postmodern world. The Tate Gallery was transformed through the Tate Modern, built in an old power plant in 2000. The Guggenheim Museum, built in 1959 like a fortress/church in New York, transformed itself into a stunning international franchise in Bilbao in 2005. All these museums, understanding that their traditional, well-informed

public was being replaced by a fast-traveling one, reacted to the change rather superficially, through architecture, without really attempting to refit or to rethink their programming, despite some efforts (Pompidou and Tate). In the case of Bilbao, the excess of art objects kept in the reserves of the New York museum is now being transferred and exhibited in the Basque city in a shrewd move, that renders otherwise sleeping resources profitable. In Bilbao, US corporate power is on display in a very sophisticated way, reminding us of the potlatch tradition. All is powerfully united here in the *dépense* (waste) incurred by the construction of a sumptuously spectacular monument: large amounts of money are spent (together with local authorities) – that is, seemingly wasted – on the distribution of aesthetic beauty. But this traditional waste, the “*part maudite*” described by Georges Bataille, should in this instance be called the “*pars benedicta*,” as this apparent waste generates a powerful set of new economies (symbolic and tangible), as well as dependence.

- 15 The situation is complicated by the fact that there is a certain popular pride in being the repository of sexy international culture, and a certain pleasure in witnessing a new energetic tourist trade reviving a declining industrial port located on an ancient pilgrimage road leading to the very important site of Santiago de Compostela. One site does not threaten the other; rather, they complement each other. They are tied together in a line of pleasurable sites where relics of different kinds, and representing different periods, are offered to the impressed and reverent public. These two sites of devotion to historical are both, interestingly enough, housed in fancy architectural complexes whose main purpose is to dazzle the visitor. The only major difference is that the imported museum seems to forbid the activation of local memory, since the art and culture gathered within it are imports from a foreign land. In fact, that particular export triggered one of the first examples of conflict, or at least discrepancy, between the global and the local. Nevertheless, with modern art, the modern museum was rescuing, or rather replacing, old and collapsing industrial areas with cultural apparatuses. This process, these imbrications of global capital and the local, were then seen as *the* new post-Cold War strategy of global mass culture in Stuart Hall’s definition: “now a form of capital which recognizes that it can only, to use a metaphor, rule through other local capitals, rule alongside and in partnership with other economic and political elites.”¹² But this seemingly optimistic project rarely brings complete satisfaction because, as John Frow mentions in *Time and Commodity Culture*, “Promising an explosion of modernity, it brings about structural underdevelopment, both because of its control by international capital and ‘because it is precisely the lack of development which makes an area attractive as a tourist goal’.”¹³ This is what happened in Bilbao: a large influx of tourists, but also cultural deflation outside the center.
- 16 New museums, like the Tate and the Guggenheim, by their size and their global expansionist efforts – the Tate in several cities in England and the Guggenheim almost everywhere in the world (Saint Petersburg, Berlin, Las Vegas, Venice, and Rio de Janeiro) – symbolize the free-enterprise culture that became preeminent during the 1990s. The artist Andrea Fraser, commenting shrewdly on this transformation, remarked, “They need large exhibitions and large oeuvres in order to attract a large public in order to recuperate a large amount of money which will serve to build large spaces so as to organize large exhibitions with large art works in order to attract an enormous public.”¹⁴

- 17 If you think that I am too cynical about the future of large city museums, let me quote on invitation I received from the Vancouver Art Gallery. The purpose of the invitation is (as is frequent in the museum world) to entice people to go to an art auction called “Flash Forward,” to give money for the construction of a new and, of course, improved structure for... well, we do not really know: a new flashy museum must be created to make Vancouver a world-class city and a magnet for tourists and locals alike. In any case, what we get from the invitation is a description of the type of activity that will attract those who have the needed and desired money: “The Gallery stands on the edge of the most electrifying phase yet. Come celebrate with a live and silent auction featuring works by many of Canada’s finest artists. Party with champagne reception, decadent dinner, dance and performance by one of today’s most fêted entertainers.” Flashy, fêted entertainers, bubbles, decadence, you name it, the invitation is like a naïve litmus test for the new age of museums. I drink to this and hope you do too.
- 18 If, after the Second World War, the United States used Hollywood films to impress starving European populations with representation of the American way of life, the post-Cold War experience is an extreme deterritorialization of business as well as cultural institutions. While salvation in the 1950s was promised by mass consumerism, in the twenty-first century, it seems that salvation will come from cultural business and through mass tourism. As noted in an interesting, but rather cold, internet site of the now *à la mode* international art critic and museum curator Germano Celant, also – characteristically – both director and designer of the Fondazione Prada, fashion and art have become now totally intermingled: “But in the end it all fits together: art, fashion, architecture, design – even shopping. It’s all theatre, really. A modern spectacle for a modern world.”¹⁵ This attitude – a mixture of cynicism and fatalism – seems quite dangerous because it annihilates what had supposedly been the modern museum’s role since its creation: as a space for education and discussion around problems posed by history, by memory; a democratic space for argument and debate (though perhaps this goal has not always been fulfilled). With the Guggenheim in Bilbao, for example, everything is reducible to the glittering surface of the consumerist object. The architecture is fun, hi-tech, often described with humor as a “Tower of Babel,” as “a fixed explosion,” or even better as “a Lourdes for a henceforth handicapped culture.” Indeed, a miracle is maybe needed to transform our relationship to museums, but the battle will be tough and long.
- 19 I was already confronted by this problem in the late 1980s when discussing museum strategies with Marcia Tucker, the wonderfully creative director of the New Museum in New York. Our positions diverged after a few minutes of discussion. My argument was that such a new museum should be fighting the passivity of traditional structures by creating debates in the middle of shows. But the position of the director was one of addition to the canon rather than of critique. The museum, according to the director, could not do what I was proposing in order to test its openness: to present, for example, a show of art that I did not like while explaining the reasons why by comparing it with other options. This impossibility showed clearly that museums, even the most far-out ones, are only positive spaces where negativity and critique are banned, at least when it comes to their adherents. Even the New Museum, despite its entire projected progressive image, was unable to avoid being a positive voice, stuck as it was as between artists’ egos, market forces, and historical traditions.¹⁶ The New Museum was acting in fact like the old ones, attracted to celebration, homogeneity, and a positive

outlook, the opposite in fact of real life. No surprise then that museums have become one of the main actors in the entertainment industry of the twenty-first century. As we know, during these last few years, international exhibitions, following the example given among others by Thomas Hoving at the Metropolitan Museum of New York in the 1970s, have become huge media spectacles needing to capture bigger and bigger crowds. These exhibitions were geared towards the presentation of universal treasures, in particular if they were made of gold. Remember “Treasures of Sacred Maya Kings,” “The Golden Deer of Eurasia: Scythian and Sarmatian Treasures from the Steppes,” “Treasures of Tutankhamun,” “Princely Splendor: The Dresden Court, 1580-1620”? Paintings were also admitted after having been transmuted into gold, thanks to their passage through international auction houses (Van Gogh, Cézanne, the Impressionists, Pollock, etc.) At times, running out of geniuses, but still pressured to compete and produce attractive shows, museums exploited artists’ productions as if they were wine, offering different vintages: Cezanne’s or Picasso’s early period, their middle age, and their twilight. At times the site of creation is mined, as in Van Gogh in Auvers-sur-Oise or in Arles. These often gorgeous, gigantic presentations full of marvelous productions, piled up like in Ali Baba’s cave for connoisseurs, do not incite reflection from the viewer as he/she is rapidly dragged away from any understanding by a flow of moving passers-by eager to get to the gift shop to buy postcards of what they really did not have much time to look at. Paradoxically, these popular exhibitions, produced like TV shows to massage the viewer into a stupor, are in fact only really talking to specialists who have the background and the know-how to understand some of the untold connections. The rest of the audience often reacts as if under a cobra’s gaze: fascinated, lulled, and spellbound into passive abandonment.

- 20 If museums are not cautious, if they want to become logo games, just playing with appearances while looking for more and more visitors, they risk – and it might be already too late – replacing the little intellectual space still left in cultural institutions by a space which will look more and more like American TV: all soft and wrinkle-free (*57 Channels (And Nothin’ On)* as Bruce Springsteen used to sing in 1992). While modern art museums were seen as educational spaces earlier in the century, even if this education was geared to the few, it seems now that they have become entertainment centers where debates are banned again: not by the intimidating, churchy silence of earlier days, but by an intense, cacophonous, merry, empty, and whirling activity forbidding any kind of deep reflective attitude. With these new structures, museums might produce a generation incapable of debating or understanding cultural and political stakes, on that, in the end, is incapable of participating in a democratic debate, while the internet alone is unable to propose a critical working alternative.
- 21 To be serious about art is to try to show how difficult it is to make artistic statements, to react to important issues about representation or about personal understanding of historical issues at a specific time. Artists as intellectuals do not produce images or text without a reason or simply for fun. Isolating of art from questioning, from engaging in debate – despite what those aesthetes who just want to look at images say – is to denigrate the art and diminish its importance. So let’s urge museums to have a grown-up relation with their publics. Let’s ask them to reflect on this new public and those important needs. What museums have lost is what used to differentiate them from entertainment: serious engagement with history and memory. Yes, I know, history is also a form of construction, but whereas a historical way of looking might not be the truth, it is at least less false than entertainment because it promotes thinking,

reflection, and some engagement, some form of self-consciousness. Isn't it time to forget about the old *Kunstkammer* syndrome, where rare things were all bunched up, undifferentiated, and used as powerful trophies? Isn't it time to create a space where the public can enter into a dialogue with an explicit interpretation of history on the walls of the museum – a thesis, in other words? Isn't it time to give, in constructing an exhibition (exhibitionism, showing off), enough material so that the viewer can grasp what was at stake in the past and how some solutions, some choices were made? Isn't it time for museums to become research centers rather than product-display halls?

- 22 It is indeed interesting to note that in the last thirty years we have seen quite a transformation of the cultural researcher from someone who wants to avoid “creating an empire” (securing meaning for him/herself) as Michel De Certeau described it, into somebody who wants to critically analyze the laws that organize encountered facts. Museums need to re-connect with research, to be part of the cultural and political dialogue. Research should be integrated with more force in museum exhibitions and should be a way to destabilize certainties by understanding the way others, at different times, talked, strategized, were read, and understood. What is needed is a constant re-reading of past constructions through present understanding or needs. Research is part of a war for signification, part of the struggle to articulate another type of history, in opposition to the status quo, presenting different, complex, and contradictory views of the world. Research channeled through museum exhibitions is, in fact, made for today, it is actively participating in our understanding of cultural discourses. This is why Paul Virilio, in one of his latest interviews, explains that the role of the intellectual/researcher is to develop antagonistic discourses toward everything, in opposition to the actual tendency to pacify everything, to process it through demagoguery.
- 23 It is time to re-read canonical descriptions from perspectives informed by the juxtaposition of different documents or by using another type of gaze, looking askew, in order to see different possibilities and readings. This approach would free release from under the thumb of institutions nervously trying to use their possessions – their collections – in order to write, like the prince used to do, their own history the proper way, their way, the only way, as the MoMA lately did recently by securing and hiring a seemingly subservient pen to re-write their post-World War II history in a somewhat embellished and rosy way.¹⁷

Dealing with the New History

- 24 In the last few years historians have been struggling with many turns (the semiotic turn, the cultural turn, the linguistic turn) so many that the profession is showing some signs of dizziness.¹⁸ And so is, by ricochet, art history. This is the perfect moment for historians to get the point that, since the beginning, art works, cultural products, and images were not given, but constructed with uncertainty and contradictions. These complex constructions have become for the art historian the privileged site where social forces, through the subjectivity of the artist, clash or exchange words. It is also there that, from now on, the historian will extract multiple explanations produced by the artwork confronted with different readings proposed by varied publics, often defending contradictory interests. What gives force to contemporary research in art history is the fact that finally, after so many years of isolation, the field is open to

transversal inquiries; out-of-field experiences which have managed to destabilize old certainties and aesthetic and political traditions.

- 25 This is what I tried to do in 2007 with the help of Manuel Borja-Villel: the translation of research into a public dialogue in a show called *Be-Bomb: The Transatlantic War of Images and all that Jazz, 1946-1956* for the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona.¹⁹ This exhibition documented and argued issues surrounding the at times quite turbulent cultural and political relations between Paris and New York from 1944 to 1956. From the start of the project my idea was to try to understand and present the many different attempts to reconstruct a western hegemonic cultural power out of the ruins of World War II. After researching the literature and looking into miles of archives on two continents, it seemed obvious to me that this story of reconstruction had to deal with subtleties and had to be told in many tongues (so to speak), from many different angles, using the arsenal of new tools at the researcher's disposal. It was clear that visual art was then extremely important for national identity, but so was jazz music as well. Jazz, through its elevation to classical status, became, in fact, a way to criticize American society. Similarly, the construction and signification of the alternative type of social behavior and lifestyles developed in the old Latin Quarter in Paris were crucial to the definition of new French culture, as were as the upheaval in 1947 around Christian Dior's New Look fashions and the wild 1948 debate surrounding the word "Modern" in the United States. Nor should one forget the crucial importance of the Bikini Atoll nuclear explosion when the Cold War was on the political horizon. To engage with all this, the research was multifaceted, multidirectional, and fun to carry out, with often surprising discoveries, but in end, it was quite difficult to stage on the walls and spaces of the museum. It was a challenge for all kinds of reasons that had nothing to do with the wide range of research done or with the museum's own desires, but rather with problems of cost, location, loans of works, and other administrative issues.
- 26 Nevertheless, to decolonize the Western eye was one of the major goals of the research I embarked on for the exhibition. The research, that is, the gathering of diverse and new art-historical materials, was prepared in order to be able to publicly unfurl differently constructed debates that, in both countries, for different reasons, framed the way we understand post-war modern culture. The research insisted on comparative models, as it was important to confront synchronically internal cultural and political constructions in both countries as well as to compare two different approaches to international affairs. The idea behind the show was finally to let us, the interested viewers, wander around the immediate post-war culture without those formalist blinders designed in downtown New York (or Paris, for that matter), blinders that have for decades corralled the amateur gaze within a very limiting intellectual framework. Through the articles out during research, the specific and short period covered by the show allowed for the presentation of active, diverse, and opinionated debates about national identity, history, and power at a time of dangerous but still democratic exchanges. It also offered an opportunity to dig deep within each specific art scene in order to unearth a dense and sometimes unconventional history. On the walls the show presented a discussion of a specific and synchronic moment through an array of different types of expression: painting, fashion, music, and film, along with current events, in order to show how these elements, at a specific time, through their

specialized debates, took part in a larger and competitive reorganization of the Western World.

- 27 Indeed, the project of the exhibition was not simply to present on the walls of the museum not only a succession of works by well-known and victorious artists, as it is sadly still too often the case in exhibitions, but instead to immerse them in the vital debates in which those art works were actually directly or indirectly involved. Art works are put “in situation” so to speak, breaking simultaneously the sanctity of the white cube and the straitjacket constructed by powerful and by now recognized formalist or connoisseurial traditions. By bringing into the discussion discourses other than painting and sculpture in the museum space, it was hoped that the art works would be seen and understood as a vigorous part of a large and exciting dialogue about national identity and individual and social positioning, during an important moment of general reorganization under the pressure of the Cold War. In this context, avant-garde activities and pronouncements were purposely juxtaposed with official and traditional propositions in order to show just how crucial and controversial aesthetic choices became during this moment of the Cold War, when symbolism and propaganda were at the center of attention.
- 28 In many ways, this type of multidirectional research allowed us, on the one hand, to breathe life back into many of the famous pictures frozen in a meaningless space produced by their celebrity status that had emptied works of their vital earlier meanings, replaced by a commodity signature. On the other hand, it was also important to show the historically meaningful place of other propositions that had been forgotten and erased from canonical and linear art-historical narrative without creating another revisionist reversal.
- 29 The rhythmic reappearance of traditionally neutral museum spaces in the exhibition was supposed to let these works speak, as we usually say, but this time not by themselves: they would speak through the understanding of their discourse, gathered, accumulated by the visitor in preceding rooms – *en connaissance de cause*. These “reflection rooms” as we called them allowed the viewer of today to read and evaluate the messages – the issues put into images by individual artists dialoguing with their own time and the history of their trade in all their complexities and contradictions. All this because an exhibition experience should not be only one of contemplation, but rather one of wondering and wandering, navigating through a dense past so as to allow positions to be re-evaluated and the eye of the beholder to be hopefully surprised and enchanted by new possibilities of reading and discovery. This is what I call a democratic environment, where the past is laid out for our questioning: for questioning the way it has been translated, constructed, and framed by many ideological forces. The point of the exercise, the point of an exhibition, should be a challenge to past readings, and not the affirmation of clichés. It is for this simple reason that Alfred Barr’s famous torpedo should be decommissioned, if not detonated, in order to be able to reconfigure the puzzle of the past without fear and with some elation. Museums have the power to do this, but do they have the will? I am not so sure, knowing and seeing what is in store for the future, a future that seems to be already with us today. Considering the trend of tourism in our culture, are we going to have to look at famous art works the way pilgrims in Mexico have to see the revered image of the Virgin of Guadalupe? Imagine this in the Louvre in front of the *Mona Lisa* or in Madrid in front of *Guernica*. In Mexico City, confronted with the vexing problem of numbers, a deadly mix of pilgrims and

tourists, the authorities decided to install a fast-moving sidewalk to facilitate the flux of people passing in front of the saint's image. The contemporary cult of speed creates havoc among a population of pilgrims used not only to a more contemplative mood, but also hoping to be able to catch a glimpse of the famous and miraculous gaze of the Virgin. Welcome then to this new world where logos, speed, vacuity, and advertisement not only direct and control our gaze, but now, as in this saintly example, literally run the show.

NOTES

1. "Malraux a inventé le musée imaginaire, le musée sans murs. Maintenant nous entrons dans l'ère des musées sans collections" (Jean Clair, *Malaise dans les musées*, Paris, 2007, p. 134).
2. "Moins nous comprenons les images plus nous nous précipitons pour les dévorer des yeux" (Clair, 2007, cited n. 1, p. 37).
3. "d'un management dynamique de leur capital immatériel" (Clair, 2007, cited n. 1, p. 56; from the report by Jean-Pierre Jouyet and Maurice Lévy, *L'Économie de l'immatériel*, Paris, 2006, p. 123).
4. See the excellent study by Jesús Pedro Lorente, *Les Musées d'art moderne et contemporain: une exploration conceptuelle et historique*, Paris, 2009. Lately, I was happy to see that the Beaubourg museum was changing the presentation of the collection through important addenda. The journey through the chronological presentation is rhythmized by research rooms where documents unveil the force of art criticism (called "Passeurs") to define- with the help of artists- new issues and directions: A tremendous shift in the presentation of modern art in museums which will help to understand its complexity and multi layered history.
5. There is an avalanche of books trying now to sort out not only the role of today's museums, but also new curatorial practices. See Ivan Karp, Stephen D. Lavine eds., *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Displays*, Washington, D.C., 1990; Antoni Muntadas, *Between the Frames: Interview Transcript*, Columbus/Cambridge, 1994; *The end(s) of the Museum=Elis límites del museum*, Thomas Keenan, Alexander García Düttmann ed., (exh. cat., Barcelona, Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 1994), Barcelone, 1996; Laurent Gervereau ed., *Musées et politique*, (conference, Quebec city, 1998), Quebec City, 1999; Melanie Townsend ed., *Beyond the Box: Diverging Curatorial Practices*, Banff, 2003; Maurice Berger ed., *Museums of Tomorrow: a Virtual Discussion*, (conference, Santa Fe, 2003), Baltimore/Santa Fe/New York, 2004; Serge Chaumier ed., *Du Musée au parc d'attractions: ambivalence des formes de l'exposition*, theme issue of *Culture et Musées*, 5, 2005; Lorente, 2009, cited n. 4.
6. Clair, 2007, cited n. 1, p. 69.
7. "On se réjouit sans savoir pourquoi, sans savoir ce qu'est la chose pour laquelle nous nous réjouissons. Éprouver du plaisir devant une œuvre sans comprendre sa signification, c'est comme jeter un œil à un texte écrit dans une langue étrangère: une série de caractères imprimés, auxquels nous ne comprenons rien" (Clair, 2007, cited n. 1, p. 95).
8. Yves Michaud, "Looking Beyond the Challenges of Cultural Tourism," in *Nexus*, theme issue *New Policies for cultural tourism: Challenges, ruptures, responses*, 35, Winter 2005-2006, p. 4).
9. Nestór García Canclini, "Paranoiacs vs. a utilitarian vision," in *Nexus*, 2005-2006, cited n. 8, p. 6.
10. See Michaud, 2005-2006, cited n. 8, p. 3-5.
11. See Anna Maria Guasch, Joseba Zulaika eds., *Learning from the Bilbao Guggenheim*, Reno, 2005.

12. Stuart Hall, "The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity," in Anthony D. King ed., *Culture, Globalization and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, Minneapolis, 1997, p. 28.
 13. John Frow, *Time and Commodity Culture: Essays in Cultural Theory and Postmodernity*, Oxford/New York, 1997, p. 101.
 14. Andrea Fraser, lecture at the University of British Columbia for the "Andrea Fraser: Exhibition" show at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, Vancouver, February 2004.
 15. Michael Specter, "The Designer," in *The New Yorker*, March 15, 2004, p. 111.
 16. For an excellent analysis of the difficulties of being a museum director, see Marcia Tucker's memoirs: *A Short Life of Trouble: Forty Years in the New York Art World*, Berkeley, 2008.
 17. See in particular Michael Kimmelman, "Revisiting the Revisionists: The Modern, Its Critics and the Cold War," in John Szarkowski et al. eds., *The Museum of Modern Art at Mid-Century: At Home and Abroad*, New York, 1994, p. 38-55.
 18. See the sharp book edited by Gabrielle M. Spiegel, *Practicing History: New Directions in Historical Writing After the Linguistic Turn*, New York, 2005.
 19. *Be-bomb: The Transatlantic War of Images and All That Jazz, 1946-1956*, Serge Guilbaut, Manuel Borja-Villel eds., (exh. cat., Barcelona, Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2007-2008), Barcelona, 2007.
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