

# CIMAM 2008 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

NEW YORK | 17 – 18 NOVEMBER 2008 | ASIA SOCIETY MUSEUM | MoMA

The roles of the museum and culture in the 21st century have become central to the discourse in an increasingly 'globalized' world. To discuss the issue within the museum community, this year's conference focuses on 'collections and collecting' and the new types of dialogue that museums must generate.

17 – 18 NOVEMBER, 2008

Asia Society Museum and the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), NEW YORK

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## WELCOMING REMARKS AND INTRODUCTION

**Manuel J. Borja-Villel**

**Manuel J. Borja-Villel (MBV).** Good morning.

You know it's a pleasure to have you here. I think we're heading for a very successful meeting. I am always very optimistic. I see Benjamin coming down, and he knows I'm very optimistic – which doesn't mean he's pessimistic!

If I worked in a management company and I had to choose a letter for this meeting, I would certainly choose the third letter of the alphabet, 'C'. 'C' for CIMAM. CIMAM, as the members of the group know, but not everybody else does, is a professional organization. We meet once every year and our aim is to create a platform to discuss issues, professional issues, but especially to create a platform where we can confront each other's ideas. We should not forget that we grow not only by seeing the world, but also by the way the world sees us. So it's important that we work together, and that once a year we can sit together, discuss issues and hopefully create some kind of framework, some kind of best-practice ideas.

We should not forget that we live in a period when museums, like everybody else in society, have a tendency to abuse each other. And I think it's very important in this sort of period to have the kind of organization that somehow establishes limits to this kind of abuse, or at least a framework for good practice.

Secondly, 'C' would be for centrality and for culture. As many historians and economists say, culture today is central. We live in an age, as Toni Negri or Paolo Virno would say, where the general intellect, where information, communication, art and culture as the true paradoxical form of this communication, are central. And they are central not only in the traditional way we know, in terms of the benefits or economic elements that any museum carries with it, like transport, like insurance, tourism, etc. We are central because today information and communication are central.

And thirdly, 'C' would be for crisis. Yesterday we were at a dinner and the word 'crisis' was coming up all the time. It looks as if we are at the beginning of a recession, of a big crisis, and, needless to say, we are all scared. We don't know what will happen in the next years, but since we are here and one of our two hosts is MoMA, I would not like to forget that MoMA, *the*

Museum of Modern Art, the museum that used to embody the promises of modernity, was founded in 1929, the year of the Great Crash, the moment of a major crisis. So maybe it's time also to remember the words of Pier Paolo Pasolini, who used to say that in times of crisis, in a moment like probably today, when an age is ending and a new period is coming – maybe better or maybe worse than the one we live in – it is good to grow not outwards but within, to go back to the basics. And I think that somehow this is what we need to do today. And somehow, those are the issues that we are dealing with today: How we collect, why we create, how we write our memories – that is the key element, one of the issues that will be addressed today. Secondly, if we collect, are we custodians or are we proprietors? Is private property really applicable to something that belongs to everybody or not? How do we treat countries like those in Latin America and Africa, where we take their works and write their histories in their name? How do we behave in relation to them? Thirdly, how do we display, how do we structure, these new forms of knowledge? And then, fourthly, education. May its transmission be another of the fallacies of modernism? How do we give access to the public? I think those are the key issues today, and those are the issues we are going to address in these two days' discussions.

Because we are talking about access, about being open, this time the format of the conference will be different from other years. Other years maybe we had too many talking heads and too few discussions, so the idea is that you will not ask the speakers any questions – sorry, it's a matter of timing – but we will have workshops for discussion in the afternoon. There are six workshops, with a moderator in each one, and the idea is to discuss the issues brought up by the speaker and respondent in the morning.

Hopefully, at the end of the two days there will be a general discussion, and hopefully we will have reached some conclusions that will be publicized, placed on the web, that will help us create some kind of code of ethics.

This is all I have to say, except when we finish the speeches, look at the number on your badge, which is the number that you have been assigned for the discussion workshops. This is very important, if we really want to proceed properly.

Finally, I would like to thank the hosts of this meeting, MoMA and Asia Society, with their two directors, Glenn Lowry and Melissa Chiu, who will introduce the conference after me, and P.S.1

with Alana Heiss. And of course all the collectors, patrons and contributors who have made the conference possible. The list is a long one and we were supposed to list all the names, because I was afraid that Benjamin wouldn't make it, but since I see he's here, I will just let you read it. It's in your bag.

Finally, special thanks to Sabine Breitwieser and Hendrik Driessen, the Secretary and the Treasurer of CIMAM; they are the ones who do the work. And especially Jay Levinson from MoMA, who has taken lots of responsibilities for this meeting. And, of course, our newly named executive director, Pilar Cortada, who must be outside or somewhere, putting everything in order for us.

Thank you very much. Thank you for coming. And I hope that everything is as good as we expect. Thank you.

## CONFERENCE OVERVIEW

**Melissa Chiu and Glenn D. Lowry**

**Melissa Chiu (MC).** Manuel, thank you for introducing the program. It's an absolute honor to have all of you here at Asia Society today. I'm joined of course by Glenn Lowry. Instead of a formal address on the part of both of us, we thought that we would have a conversation about the current state of play, and perhaps even future trends, from the perspective of both our institutions – what we see happening right now, and some predictions.

I think the real importance of CIMAM is that we can all discuss things as individuals, and the role that we might play within our museums and institutions. But also, most importantly for CIMAM, it's how we might work collectively to have an impact on ideas of education, collecting practices, and perhaps most importantly, forming attitudes to material culture.

For modern and contemporary art museums there are a number of issues that have come into play in recent years. From the perspective of my institution – one that focuses on Asia, covering anywhere from the Pacific Islands through to Iran, with nearly thirty countries and two-thirds of the world's population – we see a new kind of canon formation, the emergence of a field that is contemporary Asian art. I am pleased that we have a number of colleagues in the audience today who have played a significant role in working hard to establish it. This is one of the main issues we're grappling with today.

If we had had this conversation just a couple of months ago, we might have also been talking about the encroachment on or intertwining with museums by the market, but the financial crisis has changed this dynamic – for better or worse. This has had an enormous impact on Asian art, with the establishment of a market which distorted the understanding of some art, but we also saw a surge of interest in art that museums clearly benefitted from. All this, of course, had an impact on the work that we all do. With much of the market speculation gone we might treat this as an opportunity; after all, innovation has often come about through necessity. So I hope that in the conversations we have in our discussion workshops, we will be able to see how we can actually use this time to look at innovative ways to present modern and contemporary art and build our collections.

We saw the establishment of the Museum of Modern Art and many private collections during the Great Depression. So now I'm going to turn over to Glenn, perhaps to say a few words on the current state of play – where we think we are today – and then we'll move on to a discussion of what we think the future holds for us.

**Glenn D. Lowry (GL).** Thank you so much, Melissa. It's a great pleasure not only to be sharing the podium with you, but also to be a co-host with Asia Society. I want to acknowledge Jay Levinson, who runs the Museum of Modern Art's International Program, for all of his efforts to make this a successful meeting.

I think this is a fascinating moment – and not because there is crisis in the larger economy, in forces far greater than anything we understand or know about, but because there are forces that create opportunities-for moments of pause. And what I have seen, from our perspective, is it that we have just gone through roughly a decade when everybody was in fifth gear, moving at almost warp speed trying to catch up with events around the world, and the result of that has been a kind of ragged approach to a broad systemic thinking about what constitutes the field of modern and contemporary art at large, and what sort of strategies are available to think about this intelligently.

For any of our institutions, the answer clearly has to lie in the fact that the world is so interconnected, and the amount of art being produced so vast, that no matter how large our curatorial staff may be, no matter how much access we may have to the most advanced research, it is virtually impossible to stay on top of what is taking place. And that compels rethinking both what we do, and how and why we do it.

To my mind, the issue is that we need to find ways of generating knowledge and engaging in fine-grained research so that we can move from broad generalities to carefully resolved observations. We need to be able, for instance, to recognize that when we are talking about Asia, it is not a homogeneous territory. The distinctions between Chinese and Japanese, Japanese and Indian, Indian and South Korean, South Korean and Vietnamese cultures, for example, are so significant that if we want to look intelligently at what's taking place in these parts of the world, and then find modes of engagement, we will only be able to do this by creating lasting partnerships with institutions in those regions, especially universities.

This moment affords us the opportunity to step back and not rush into all sorts of areas that are not particularly well understood, and where the impact of collecting, exhibiting and displaying works of art that we don't necessarily fully appreciate yet can be modified by building the knowledge base. This is true whether one is in China or in New York, Paris or Istanbul, Tokyo or Bombay – it doesn't matter where one is. The moment one commits to a broad international perspective and recognizes that that commitment inevitably inflects and alters both what one collects and how one displays a collection, then the seriousness of that endeavor implies long-term, and I think ultimately fundamental, changes in the way our institutions construct themselves and operate.

So, what I think is so central to this conference, and the reason we are so delighted to be associated with Asia Society and CIMAM, is that there is such an opportunity right now to turn the dials differently, to come up with ideas to experiment with, to look at what is valid and enduring, and what we currently do, collectively, and also to ask how we can grow that, alter that, enhance that, at a time of diminished resources. I think that diminished resources become the key element. This is not about the art market imploding – that is probably a good thing for all of us in a very particular kind of way, at least those of us who are still able to collect. But I mean diminished resources that will affect our ability just to keep the doors open and the lights on in many of our institutions, because we are now going to be faced with really hard choices, and therefore if we are committed to enlarging our perspective, enhancing the texture of our collections, altering what we display, it is coming at a price; it is no longer simply an environment where you can do almost anything you want.

And I think that's good, because it forces us to look at what we are currently doing that we shouldn't be doing or don't need to be doing, in order to embrace and accommodate new directions, so that would be my opening gambit.

**MC.** I thought I would spend a few moments talking about the development of modern and contemporary Asian art as one of the newest fields in our understanding of a more international art history. If you look at the history of my own organization—we were founded in 1956 by John D. Rockefeller the Third to promote a better understanding of Asia here in the States. Over a decade ago, we were one of the first to turn our attention to Asian contemporary art, and we started with a series of discussions that evolved into a series of exhibitions. Some of those exhibitions were the very first presentations to U.S. audiences [of

Asian art], to some extent defining the field, such as 'Inside Out: New Chinese Art' (1998) and 'Edge of Desire: Recent Art in India' (2005). I think we're at a point now when the large-scale introductory survey exhibitions have reached a critical mass and there is a tendency to dismiss this kind of survey exhibition, but I do think that they have an important role to play in introducing audiences to broad trends and an understanding of a certain body of knowledge, and even the context from which artists come.

So we are now seeing a kind of second or third wave of those kinds of shows here in the United States, but also the presentation of individual artists' work. This is the next step in terms of understanding the finer points of how an artist's work evolves over the years—his or her responses to certain changes in the world. Our exhibition last year of Zhang Huan's work, which looked at his evolution over the last fifteen years as one of the younger representatives of the avant-garde or experimental art generation, was an important moment. In a way it was recognition of historical depth in the field of Asian contemporary art: that there is now the potential to develop exhibitions of artists who have a body of work that affords a certain degree of critical evaluation. There are of course many earlier precursors who are well-respected in the region but awaiting wider international appreciation.

Apart from looking at specific exhibition genres, if you want to call them that, we also need to be mindful of the issue of curatorial knowledge or expertise. Here in the United States, when I was first appointed to Asia Society seven years ago, in 2001, I was the first ever curator of Asian and Asian-American contemporary art in an American museum. So, it gives you a sense of, in terms of the museum field, the consideration of Asia in the contemporary art world as being fairly a new phenomenon. In academia it is an even more recent interest. It is the museums who have really taken a leading role in producing the scholarship on Asian contemporary art. For a long time, much of the discussion of Asian contemporary art happened outside Asia (with the exception of Japan and Australia) but now we are also seeing more of it occur in the region. Museums in Japan and China, and even Hong Kong, have begun to take responsibility for developing scholarship through exhibitions and collections and the establishment of art archives. In the 1980s we saw a huge museum-building boom in Japan. Now we are seeing the same happen in China. The Chinese government just recently announced that they have plans to build over a thousand new museums in the next decade. That's not counting the private museums, many of them run by corporations, as was once quite common in Korea. Many new collections are being formed by individuals; in fact some of

the most important collections of Asian contemporary art are held in private hands. This is one of the other challenges for museums dealing with this field of enquiry: How do we begin to collect in a new area, and who takes responsibility for it? I know a number of major encyclopedic institutions who are looking at this very issue.

This gives you a kind of overview of where we're coming from, and where we are heading if we use the example of a new field that may be described as only coming into being in the past 20 years. We are also seeing a greater interconnectedness within the region of the Asia-Pacific region. Biennales have played an important role in that, promoting a sense of intraregional connections in a way that we did not see before. Just in September, Glenn, you attended a number of these. There were seven biennales in Asia, not counting the art fairs, forming a parallel to the European Grand Tour. That was the first time that this had really ever happened.

**GL.** I think the interesting thing that comes out of that is the reality that if there is no centre – and it's certainly true today that you can't point to a centre in the art world – it also means there is no periphery. The moment that periphery dissolves as a condition, it creates all sorts of interesting connections and opportunities, but also it compels us to react differently to both looking at our collecting art and thinking about how to engage. And it's not as if all of our institutions can suddenly morph into being perfect reflections of the current condition: that isn't going to happen. Nor would it be interesting if it happened, but I do think that this dissolution of the periphery creates really important opportunities for a deeper intellectual engagement with what's taking place all over the world.

And I think that when I look at what is broadly happening in Asia, trying to think of analogies, one of the analogies that comes to mind – and again, it's a very Eurocentric point of departure, although I don't think you have to end up with a very Eurocentric conclusion – is how a number of museums, at least in this country, have started to think about, or have been thinking about, Latin America. Latin America is a much easier region to deal with. You are only dealing with two basic languages, you are dealing with a common religion; even if it's not a completely shared colonial and postcolonial attitude, it is a far more homogeneous region than Asia. So maybe it's not a perfect analogy, but what I do think is clear is that it is impossible today, if you're interested in modern art and contemporary art and you are in an institution in North America, not to be fully and deeply aware of what's taking place all over Latin America,

and to be thinking about how to generate either exhibitions or collections or programs that respond to the richness and intensity of what's happening there. You can look at longstanding programs, like those of the Museum of Modern Art, that are connected literally to the founding of the museum. The second one-man-exhibition that the museum gave in 1931 was to Diego Rivera, right after Henri Matisse, so from its inception the museum made a commitment to Latin America, and over the years has built its collections and sought trustees who would support that, and eventually we were able to create a curatorial position whose focus was Latin America. Or in more recent and very significant developments, such as the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, where Mari Carmen Ramirez, whom we will be hearing from shortly, has played such an important role. In between those two poles are dozens of other lesser or greater initiatives. The point I want to make is that in the end the only way to build that knowledge and learn from cultures that are so rich and so interesting, and I think now, so central to our own thinking, is to shape curatorial initiatives – and without a curatorial initiative, without a commitment to allocate resources, even at the expense of pre-existing resources, it will always be superficial. And what interests me are two twinned ideas.

The first is to go deep – it's not worth it if you're only going to scratch the surface – and then to be irrevocable. It only makes sense, if you're prepared to make commitments that are sustainable and irrevocable; that is, a fundamental altering of the DNA structure of at least the intellectual mindset of an institution. That is why for me this moment of pause is so important. I think you don't do that lightly, you actually do it after extensive conversation, research and investigation, and I think what you've done at Asia Society, just to shine a spotlight, is not unlike what Julián has done at El Museo del Barrio, and many others of you in this room have done in your own institutions, which is to get very fine-grained, to show that even in an environment as competitive as New York, there are artists from Asia or from Latin America who can stand on their own and sustain the same kind of intense scrutiny and still be very clearly significant to any understanding of what is taking place in terms of contemporary art. I think these programs get built piece by piece. It seems to me that our challenge collectively is to ask ourselves what are the appropriate relationships for our own institutions.

But it is unlikely that any institution can be truly global in its connections across every front, so the question is; what are the appropriate linkages for our own institutions that allow us to be, and in fact ensure that we are, engaged with the world in an interesting way?

**MC.** Your point about curatorial expertise is one of the most important for museums today. One of the common questions, especially of larger encyclopedic museums, is how do we begin to curate in a new field, especially when the curatorial specialization or museum internal organization is at odds with the reality of a more globalized world? In some larger institutions we have, on the one hand, traditional Asian art curators, and on the other, curators of Western contemporary art. How do they actually come together to curate shows or make acquisitions when their training and approach to art is often very different? This has been one of the key questions for a lot of larger institutions.

Curatorial collaboration has been one of the ways that a lot of institutions have gotten around this, either internally or externally (by bringing in experts in the field). In some ways we feel a little bit more comfortable with this in the traditional disciplines because there is a sense of specialization. This is a move away from curators parachuting into certain countries and curating a show in six months or a year.

The idea that has gotten more traction has been to collaborate with a curator within that country, or beyond, who has a greater sensitivity to the local issues. It is important for us to understand the specificities of art from different places. In fact, I was at the International Art Critics' Association conference delivering a paper just last weekend in Barcelona, and the overall title was 'Global Memory and Economic Power'. They had asked me to talk about India and China, yet those two countries have very different histories and visual cultures. I think the tendency, because of the economies of these two places, is always to pair them together because they are seen as part of the emerging BRIC economies (Brazil, Russia, India and China). But the idea of really looking carefully at curatorial collaboration can bring about more useful, more sensitive, essentially more lasting, presentations of art from these places.

**GL.** What's interesting is that there is clearly no formula, no way through the range of issues that all of us have to contend with, but I'd be really interested if Melissa would talk a little bit about how you go about developing an exhibition program. I mean, your field, your perspective here is almost three hundred and sixty degrees, if not quite. What are you looking for when you do your programming?

**MC.** Our exhibition program is designed around looking at Asia from its traditions to its most experimental and current art practices. Sometimes they intersect, and at other times

contemporary art is a complete departure from tradition. In addition we have the issue of trying to balance representation of different countries. For us we are at a point where we have presented a lot of major contemporary art surveys already, so we are looking now to develop a more diverse program, between smaller individual studies, where we commission anything from artists for single projects through to larger historical studies. For the larger-scale scholarly shows, we're actually in the process of looking back at important historical junctures that have informed the work of artists today. The exhibition upstairs, *Art and China's Revolution*, is an example of that. In fact it is looking at the prelude, or the period just prior to, the experimental movement that began in 1979 when China opened up.

The idea for this exhibition, which I co-curated with Zheng Shengtian, came to me when I was talking to a number of the Chinese contemporary artists over the years. Many said to me, time and time again, that if you wanted to understand their work you had to go back to the Cultural Revolution. So I began research about five years ago on this exhibition, which was the first ever show on the subject. Most of the works had not been shown since the Cultural Revolution and had never been seen before in the United States.

In some ways this is a good summation for the approach we're taking to develop this new field of enquiry, asking the question; how do we better understand contemporary art practices today? This is also an acknowledgment that when we began to show Asian artists few museums would have considered them, yet now it is rather common to include artists from the region in international shows. We're looking at where the gaps are in people's knowledge or understanding of Asian art, especially here in the United States.

**GL.** I think that leads to two related but interesting points. The first is, there is a tendency to look at this contemporary efflorescence around the world as if it were *de novo* and without precedent, especially in the long, rich, complicated tradition of modern art, which exists in almost every one of these countries that we have suddenly decided to think about.

I'm struck by the fact that at the Museum of Modern Art we did a couple of years ago an exhibition that looked at a number of artists from what can be loosely described as the Islamic world, who have become, if not well known, certainly interesting to a larger audience today. And one of our curators looked back into our own collection to see whether or not we had in fact earlier ever collected or exhibited artists from Iran, Egypt, or any of the other countries in

this region, and of course we had been collecting previously, but we'd never found a way of connecting that work into the overall framework of the museum. I think that becomes a very important challenge, but at the same time I think there is an even greater challenge, which is for those institutions that are encyclopedic, or that at least endeavor to be universal in their approach, to realize that the idea that somehow the Asian or Latin American or African collections stop dead at some point between colonialism and post-colonialism is an utter fiction.

Every one of these countries has living traditions, and those living traditions are more or less connected, but never in a clean and simple way, to what was there before. And I think there are real opportunities to enrich the way in which art collections generally – it doesn't matter whether one is in Europe or North America or Latin America or anywhere else – are seen, by not necessarily creating these arbitrary breaks that somehow move the contemporary world to another zone, as if what was taking place within a culture ceased to be local and suddenly became universal or global. I think there's an awful lot of work that needs to be done in this area, to revisit the way in which we think about the kind of formation and sustaining of cultures.

**MC.** So, Glenn, I have a question for you, because many of my colleagues are asking what the Museum of Modern Art's next step will be, especially after the '17 Ways of Looking' show addressing art from the Islamic world that you just mentioned. How would you describe your approach?

**GL.** I would say that we are deeply committed – and that is why I say these things sometimes take time – deeply committed to developing the knowledge base that's resonant within the institution; to look carefully, in a sustained way, at – initially at least – a limited set of regions where we think there is a lot of resonance within the museum, where there are antecedents or deep-seated reasons, to engage. I'll give you two simple examples, because they reflect the poles. The most obvious, of course, is Latin America, where we now have, through the efforts of Patty Cisneros, a Latin American and Caribbean fund, which is a dedicated fund to ensure that we have the resources to collect; even if we are collecting Latin American art elsewhere within the museum, we have a dedicated stream that shines a spotlight on our ability to continue collecting. We have an endowed curatorial position, and we are in the process of developing a series of relationships with universities that have a shared interest in Latin

America, in Latin American art. If you think of this as a kind of reasonably developed strand, a less developed strand might be Japan, where we have over the years sporadically collected across all media. It is very clear, when you step back and ask among the various countries in Asia which one seems to have the most connection with what we are doing and have done, Japan tends to emerge strongly in this respect; whether it's in architecture, film, painting, it doesn't matter, there are so many tentacles that reach out. And where, through our international program, we've been able to direct enough resources, curators from the museum have been traveling together, as well as individually, to Japan, not simply with the goal of going and meeting an artist or seeing an exhibition, but with the goal of beginning what I hope will be the basis of a very long-term set of relationships with curators and universities in Japan that will allow us to create the kind of network of relationships that we've developed in our Latin American program, so that ultimately Japan and Japanese art will be deeply and fully thought of as integral to our program, not peripheral. Do I see that manifesting itself in twelve months? No. Do I see it manifesting itself in maybe thirty-six months, seventy-two months? Yes I do.

And we are still very much – and maybe that is a peculiar problem of the Museum of Modern Art – first and foremost a collecting institution, and our responsibility lies in the collection. How the collection gets displayed becomes a generational question, so that as long as critical works of art are resident within the frame of the institution, it means there will always be the possibility for another generation to change, in small or very large ways, the understanding of what we have done.

You can go from Japan to other regions, but I pick those two, because Latin America and Japan are kind of poles in terms of where we are. I think that eventually, if we are successful in our efforts it will show up in exhibitions, and it shows up ultimately in the way that the permanent collection – what we call the permanent collection – is displayed and in the plurality of approaches we can generate. I don't think there is any one approach that any of us should adopt. I think we should all adopt very different approaches, and each of those approaches, ultimately, inflects and enriches the larger picture.

**MC.** It's obvious that each institution has their own strengths, and for us here at Asia Society, we have been showing Asian contemporary art now for over a decade, but it was only last year that we embarked on a new collecting initiative, and the rationale behind that was that we had

a depth of curatorial expertise here in terms of knowledge of the art scenes in Asia and relationships with Asian artists, so it made complete sense for us to start to collect. There are also still great bodies of work out there that have not been collected. We devised a strategy with an initial focus on new media, video and photography, identifying it as one of the strengths of Asian artists today. In fact, if you look closely, it is Asian artists who are truly innovators in this area. It also lends itself well to being able to integrate these collection works into our exhibition program, which in 2010 will expand to Hong Kong and Houston with new museum facilities. So for us, with our centers in the US and Asia, we've begun a museum program that enables us to share our collections, and also our touring exhibition program.

So that's just one example of how our institutions are working towards integrating a greater sense of internationalism and responding to the changing environment. Glenn, did you have anything else to add before we close?

**GL.** No, other than it's always a pleasure to share the stage with you.

**MC.** Thank you. Before we leave the stage, I want to thank a number of people who all have worked very hard to make this conference happen. Of course Manuel, for bringing us all here to New York. Pilar, thank you very much for your efforts. It's been a pleasure to work with you and your team. And also from Asia Society, I wanted to acknowledge Hannah Pritchard and Marion Kocot and her colleagues; thank you very much for allowing today to happen. So, please join me in thanking Glenn and Manuel for today, and we look forward to further discussions with all of you over the next two days. Thank you.

## SESSION 1

### COLLECTING: GENERATING KNOWLEDGE AND RESEARCH INTRODUCTION

#### INTRODUCTION

**Sabine Breitwieser**

**Sabine Breitwieser (SB).** Thank you very much, Glenn and Melissa, for that interesting conversation.

The first keynote 'Collecting: generating knowledge and research' brings us to the very heart of the museum, to its *raison d'être* and its function as a reservoir for memory and education. Somehow this session deepens what we already started to discuss in our conference last year in Vienna, with the session 'The museum as part of the public sphere', and then the last session, covering the whole ground of research, education, production and dissemination of knowledge. And today, again, we would like to envision the current challenges – the world has changed, as we all know – to the institution of the museum, and also the radical changes it has undergone in the past years and will undergo now or in the near future. So what is the role of the contemporary art museum, and indeed what roles and functions can it fulfill?

It's a great pleasure to welcome and introduce Benjamin Buchloh, our keynote speaker today. His title is 'According to what? On the questions of criteria in contemporary art'. Professor Buchloh has been Andrew W. Mellon Professor of Modern Art at Harvard University's Faculty of Art and Science since 2005. Before, from 1994, he was Professor of 20th-Century and Contemporary Art at Barnard College, Columbia University, and he also held the department chair from 1997 to 2000.

He is also a co-editor of the very influential journal *October*, and earlier, he was the editor of *Interfunktion*, a very important German journal. He had of course previously taught at a number of institutions, including the Staatliche Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf, the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, the California Institute of Art and Design, the New York State University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology. And what was also, I think, extremely influential was his work from 1991 to 1993, as director of critical and curatorial studies in the Whitney Independent Studies Program at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

Professor Buchloh is recognized internationally as one of today's most important contributors to the study of post-1945 art. He holds a Master's in German literature awarded by the Freie Universität in Berlin, and a PhD in Art History from the City University here in New York. He has written extensively on contemporary art for journals and exhibition catalogues, and he is also the publisher of a number of very, very important books on artists, in the Nova Scotia Series of publications, such as Michael Asher, Daniel Buren, Simone Forti, Dan Graham and Martha Rosler, among others.

He is also the author of books and essays on artists such as Gerhard Richter, James Coleman, David Lamelas, Lawrence Weiner, Joseph Beuys, Yves Klein, Ellsworth Kelly and Andy Warhol, just to name a few, and some of his essays – just a selection, unfortunately – were published in his monograph *Neo Avant-garde and Culture Industry* in 2000 by MIT. We are hoping the next volume will come out in the near future.

Last year, Benjamin Buchloh was also awarded the first Golden Lion for Art Criticism and History of the Biennale di Venezia, which I think was really great.

And now I introduce his respondent. I am very happy to welcome here also Mari Carmen Ramirez, the Wortham curator of Latin American Art and director of the International Center for Arts of the Americas at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, Texas. Mari Carmen has a really – I think this is well known – explicit geographical focus, so this will be an important element in her response. Before her current appointment, for about twelve years until 2001, Dr. Ramirez was a curator of Latin American Art at the Blanton Museum at the University of Texas in Austin, and the International Center for Arts of the Americas. I think it's kind of interesting; founded when Ramirez joined the MFAH, and built on the existing commitment to Latin American art, this museum has existed since 1927, and the center is the only one of its kind in the world, as both a curatorial department and a resource center within the museum. It's emphasized the formation of a new collection and research culminating in major exhibitions, lectures and symposia. The focus of these collections is modern and contemporary art, in all media, by artists from Mexico, Central and South America, but also the Caribbean, as well as by US-based Latino artists, and the center provides specialized resources and professional experience for students studying or working in this field. Mari Carmen is also a renowned curator and scholar, and has published extensively. In 2005 she received the Award for Curatorial Excellence from the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College.

Many of you may have seen her exhibition 'Heterotopias' at the Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid in 2000, and a version of this show 'Inverted Utopias, Avant-garde Art in Latin America' was later shown in Houston. She co-authored with Teresa Papanikolas and Gabriela Rangel the book *Collecting Latin American Art for the 21st Century*, published by the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, which explores in particular the shifting profile in Latin American collections, and I think it's a very interesting book.

So please welcome our speaker Benjamin Buchloh.

#### **SPEAKER**

##### **Benjamin Buchloh**

**Benjamin Buchloh (BB).** Thank you, Sabine, for the more than generous introduction. Just let me correct one thing: the Simone Forti book was done by Kasper König, not by myself.

I really would like to thank both Manuel Borja-Villel and Sabine for inviting me to give an introduction or a talk to this rather illustrious audience of the museum world, with which I am not really deeply connected, other than being a regular visitor. One of my bright graduate students said, 'Why on earth would they invite you to give a speech? Are you the resident complainer?', and I said, 'I guess that must be one definition of my function.'

I would also like to thank Pilar Cortada for her fantastic help with all of this. And of course Mari Carmen Ramirez, for taking the time to read and respond to the paper. She and I don't know each other, which is possibly a good position for a respondent to be in, so there will be a surprise for me as well. I know of her – [to Mari Carmen] 'And I've met you once' – but it's not as if we are mentally connected.

But I do want to say one thing, in more than a public acknowledgement of friendship. I consider the work of both Manuel Borja-Villel as the director of the Museum in Barcelona – that has now changed, he is at the Reina Sofia – and of Sabine Breitwieser as the director of the Generali Foundation are exemplary counter-models to what I am complaining about. I really have to say this, because both the collections and the installation of the collections, as

often as I've seen them, to me were absolutely astonishing examples of what collecting and displaying could mean in the present.

I remember last being in Barcelona in March of this year, and it was the most amazing installation that I've seen in a very long time. And I think it was probably Manuel's last installation of a group of relatively small, possibly minor works – since clearly it's very difficult to find a major Miró, or a major Calder at this moment in time – that he must have found or acquired over the last ten years – I don't know the history of the collection. And they were installed and combined with a number of unknown, or relatively unknown, works in the most exciting and engaging textual construction that I've seen in any museum for a very long time. And I really do want to emphasize that I believe deeply in the possibility of collecting and displaying art, even though my paper seems to say otherwise, and the same is true for the collection that Sabine has formed at the Generali Foundation since she has been there.

[Slide] So this is my first image of an artist whom I will briefly discuss. Here he is, Marcel Broodthaers, in 1972 with the director of the museum with whom he was showing his first major exhibition, *The Eagle from the Oligocene to the Present*. Now Jürgen Harten makes him hold up a placard and a bottle of beer, a rather casual performance by the artist and the museum director in tandem, in 1972 in Düsseldorf.

The title of my talk is: 'The Museum of Modern Art – formerly of the Public Sphere, now that of Spectacle?'

Each generation of critics and historians at some point inevitably will have to make comparisons between the historical features of a presumed cultural ascendance – that of their generation – and of a presumed decline – that of the following generation – of the times that they have experienced and observed. I guess it is in that role that I report today on my perception of how the social roles and functions of the museum have changed in the past thirty years or so. I am fully aware that this report is tinged with a seemingly inevitable tone of mourning, if not complaint. That would have to be almost inevitably the case, since rare are the historical processes – and their historians – that would inspire such optimism and enthusiasm that the developments just passed in recent history could be reported on with triumph and satisfaction. It is much more common to witness decline and deterioration from these retrospective positions of a generational chasm. And so it will be with my report, and I

would therefore ask you to take the acidity of the account with a certain modicum of amusement, rather than taking offense at its acerbity, should it appear unjustified to you and your considerably more optimistic reading of the current situation of the culture of the contemporary art museum.

In my by now rather lengthy attempt to clarify some of the arguments advanced by the work of the late Marcel Broodthaers from the late 1960s to the mid 1970s, I have always sensed, and increasingly so over the past five years in particular, that his work had a profoundly prognostic, if not oracular, quality that made it so deeply enigmatic, not to say illegible, to audiences on both sides of the Atlantic at the time of its initial presentation.

[Slide] This is a museum installation in 1968 in Brussels, the foundation of his own private museum.

What was oracular about it was first of all the fact that one could never identify clearly what type of relationship Broodthaers had ultimately articulated with regard to the museum: was it a radical critique of the power of museum institutions to transfigure artistic and discursive practices into assimilated cultural objects – and we can say most certainly that that had indeed been one of Broodthaers' primary concerns in the wake of 1968?

Or was it exactly the opposite: the slowly growing insight, and melancholic realization, that the culture of the bourgeois art museum, as the Western world had formed it and sustained it over barely two hundred years, was coming to a threshold at which it would be reconfigured to an extent that would make all previous functions practically untenable? This was most clearly articulated in Broodthaers' continued critique of the museum of contemporary art as a 'site of production'.

It was hard, of course, to imagine that an artist could be formulating simultaneously a critical and a conservative project with regard to the museum, but with hindsight it appears that that might have been precisely the motivational structure behind Broodthaers' perpetual meditation on the state of the museum.

[Slide] I'm showing you one of the museum plaques that he did in 1968 or 1969.

What are the changes, then, that the institution of the museum has undergone since the late 1960s, the moment when Broodthaers first formulated his critical interventions with his string of works called Museum Fictions, projects that were soon thereafter expanded by artists such as Daniel Buren in Europe and by Michael Asher in the United States and that have since then been generally identified as practices of institutional critique?

My first hypothesis would be that the museum of the late sixties was still widely perceived as an institution of 'the bourgeois public sphere', and that Broodthaers was in fact the first artist to recognize that that condition was rapidly vanishing.

[Slide] This is the last of the Museum Fictions that he installed in Paris under the title *L'Angelus de Daumier*. The work itself is called *La Salle Blanche*, which is a recapitulation or repetition of the original 1968 foundation of his museum.

Broodthaers was the first to recognize that that condition was rapidly vanishing. He recognized earlier than anybody that the bourgeois museum as an institution of the public sphere would soon be replaced by heretofore unheard-of assignments of various roles that the museum would have to play in the future.

Based somewhat loosely on the fundamental definitions of the theoretician of the public sphere Jürgen Habermas, I would suggest the following features as basic to a definition of the museum as an institution of the bourgeois public sphere in analogy to the university, for example, or other public educational institutions:

First, the museum was defined as an institutional space where the competences of visual cultural production and reception were established in an ongoing cumulative system of artistic objects gathered in collections for comparative purposes. After all, once artistic practice had acquired the status and a claim to autonomy from feudal or religious dependence, it was precisely in the museum where artists found the laws and the levels of achievement that were meant to be maintained and transferred from one generation to the next. The art of the museums, as it has been called, was primarily a pedagogical system in which the highest and seemingly most valid definitions of what aesthetic experience had meant and could achieve at any particular moment in time were visibly upheld and maintained. It is for these reasons that artists at the centre of the formation of Modernism, such as Edouard Manet, continually

referred to the museum as the site of their education, more so than the academy itself. They also considered it increasingly as the locus of their ambitions and aspirations, both to match the standards of aesthetic achievement in other historical moments evident in the museum, and to aspire to be at some point themselves admitted into the seemingly timeless hall of artistic fame.

So we are arguing in fact that the museum served pedagogical purposes first of all for each artistic generation, to internalize standards and levels of native competence and artistic, if not epistemic, complexity. And the museum's function was also to provide the social, discursive and architectural spaces in which the mnemonic functions of artistic production itself could unfold in the most adequate manner to generate collective cultural meaning.

It offered spaces of contemplative experience, disturbed neither by roaming crowds, endlessly searching for entertainment, nor by architectural ambition, meddling in the aesthetic process itself in order to position the architect at every turn before, or above, the work of art itself. Which are, of course, some of the conditions that the spectacularization of the museum has brought about, and I will address that soon enough.

The second and ultimately more important pedagogical function that the bourgeois arts museum had performed for two hundred years was the aesthetic education of its audiences. That education was meant to look simultaneously backward to the past and forward to the future, since the aesthetic object was known to give lessons in historical memory and in utopian thought simultaneously. And in order to achieve this immensely important and complex pedagogical task, the museum had to become an institution that operated, like other institutions of education, in relative autonomy, not to say in total independence of all forms of ideological interest, and political and economic instrumentalization. In fact, precisely the disinterestedness of the aesthetic object itself could only be adequately protected by a type of museum that guarded that very same condition as a primary point of departure for its own practices and politics.

Paradoxically, however – and here yet another fundamental difference from the museum of the present opens up – the definition of disinterestedness and autonomy was intricately linked to rather intensive and extensive forms of differentiation, skills, and linguistic and visual competence. And here lies one of the many fundamental contradictions that the museum has

encountered over the past hundred years, at rapidly accelerating intensity: since the project of de-skilling in artistic practices, begun with Duchamp and expanded by Dadaism, brought about a total devaluation of the desire for preservation and collection. What should the museum collect when the work of art acquires the features of the mass-cultural object, no longer just imitating them, but actually acquiring all of their features, eventually becoming congruent with the mass cultural object itself? One example: the failure to collect and display Fluxus artists, and their fundamentally uncollectible work in the museum, would be a more recent proof of this argument, even though the relevance of their practices is less contested than ever. Of course I should add in a very grateful footnote that I've just heard that the greatest existing Fluxus collection, by Gil Silverman, may enter the museum space in New York, which would be a fantastic moment to prove my point wrong and to see how it will be displayed.

But the project of de-skilling was only part of the problem, and in fact a minor one by comparison to things yet to come. If artists had initiated a process of radical deskilling as a project of democratic demystification of the aesthetic object, precisely culminating in our post-Duchampian moment in the work of Fluxus and Andy Warhol, they still had at the core of their project a cultural agenda that assumed the necessity of enlightenment and communication as integral to artistic practices themselves.

But at the same time, a rather different project of de-skilling emerged, one that was not at all initiated by an artistic desire for radical egalitarian forms of experience, but by a massive technological and economical onslaught formed in the early 1980's. It would change the conditions of experience in ways whose consequences are only slowly becoming transparent in the full degree of their devastation of all previously held assumptions about what culture could achieve and what its communicative forms might have to become.

I am speaking, of course, of the technological revolution of the digital and electronic age that has suddenly relegated all artistic practices that had at some point presented themselves to be in the forefront of cognitive, perceptual or theoretical representations of temporal and spatial conditions of experience as quaint, not to say outright irrelevant.

This is of course the crux of the pedagogical questions that all museums now face: the fundamental structures of aesthetic experience, its institutional and discursive spaces just as much as its morphologies and materials have been changed by that technology in the past ten

years in a heretofore unthinkable intensity and totality. While most of the causes are very well known to us, very rarely, at least to my knowledge, has the interplay between them been studied or even articulated. Allow me to sketch out a few of those intersections in the following. The simplest of all observations is the recognition that the work of art's communicative powers have totally lost out in terms of its spatial and temporal capacities to an electronic and digital technology that seemingly relegates all artistic activities, including those that until recently perceived themselves to be in the forefront of efforts to fuse art and technology, such as the video and filmmakers, to a position of quaint obsolescence.

What appears on the horizon now is a particular dialectic whose intensity is only just becoming visible: imbued with heretofore unimaginable technologically and commercially mediated communicative powers, the social collectivity simply feels that artistic visual culture has run its historical course. Artistic production, or so it seems, at least, is no longer in the position to offer us enlightenment, information or entertainment, if we assume that these are the fundamental quests with which visual culture has been approached in the post-war period.

Or, and at present this is almost the more plausible scenario, whose profiles have already emerged, visual culture, precisely under the enormous impact and pressure exerted on it by advanced technological forms of media culture, acquires the status of an intensely rarefied experience. In response to the universal domination of the technological image, artistic production acquires highly assimilating and compensatory functions, and works of art – most of all, their creators – now acquire the status of an absolute singularity and exceptional being.

In a complementary economic formation, they have of course also acquired singular powers within the cultural context in which, until very recently at least, vast amounts of surplus value could be and had to be invested. This powerful attraction to the aesthetic object does not originate in economic speculation alone, even though that was of course the driving force in the ever-accelerating art markets, but in the intensifying desire to attain a residual and symbolic connectivity to the very forces of subjectivity that the realm of the aesthetic now provides. Artistic production has thus become the sole dimension of subjective experience that the expansion of visual technologies has not yet systematically erased. As such, detached from all social and subjective relations of formation, it has become the quintessentially fetish production of the decade.

In the late sixties and seventies, critical and political art was largely sustained by liberal guilt and self-consciousness. It was fostered by a sense that a democratic society simply had to keep open as many dimensions of dissent, deviance, transgression and contradictions as possible. Thus, at that time, critical artistic practices, works such as those of Hans Haacke or Martha Rosler, for example, could acquire and sustain a fairly central position in the perception of the public.

By contrast, I would argue that in the present a totally different set of motivations brings audiences and publics back into the museum institution. The horror of a totally rationalized and technologically controlled world, against which the museum and exhibition culture can seemingly provide the last refuge and buttress, is undoubtedly one of these motivations, regardless of whether its innate laws and standards have been obliterated under the impact of these demands. And of course there is clearly another dimension that has emerged in the past few years that has contributed immensely to a new form of viewing by museum audiences: given the extraordinary developments of accelerated investment and speculation in the exchange value of the work of art, the museum is the sole site where an audience can contemplate these magnetic and miraculous forces and transformative economic powers of art. It is here that we can contemplate them without being subjected to the social controls that normally restrict access to these objects of speculation and investment: the pure fetish object appears here in the museum in a state of contemplative preservation, so to speak, not in its manifest subjections to the wild agitation of the market in the auction house or gallery, where it is surrounded by various forces of control and power that prevent access or even visibility and guarantee the object's operational intensity *as active fetish*.

And here we can already explore another of the major transformations that have occurred in the change of the museum as an institution of the public sphere into an institution of spectacle: the architectural display system itself. Let me address just a few examples to clarify my argument: one could construct a first, admittedly simplified, lineage of museum architecture in the postwar period, and it would become fairly compelling to recognize the transformations that have taken place within the display systems and their institutional frameworks during that time.

My lineage jumps through three intervals of twenty years. It would begin with Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum, in 1957, and it would pass through Piano / Rogers' Beaubourg

Museum in Paris, in 1977, and end with Frank Gehry's Bilbao Museum in 1997. What could we learn from just glancing at this comparative lineage, even in its crudest and fastest form as I will present it? We could learn first of all that the battle between architect and artist, begun by Frank Lloyd Wright, had different motivations in each of the decades under consideration. Frank Lloyd Wright's open hostility to the pictorial arts, for which the museum was supposedly built, had a foundation in his own radical utopian thinking. It paralleled the legacies of the artistic avant-gardes of the 1920's, from the Soviet Union to the Dutch De Stijl. Frank Lloyd Wright wanted to create architectural spaces in which the interaction between the subject and the object, the subject and the social group, would be intensified for the sake of a new type of simultaneous collective reception, spatial and perceptual cognitive experiences – a core concern of almost all painterly and architectural projects of the 1920's. In other words, Wright's hostility to pictorial production wanted to expand abstraction's own radical project, exceeded on its own terms. His defiance of abstract painting was ultimately engaged in a dialogic relationship with the utopian avant-garde claims that in fact they themselves were part of it, and extended them into the museum institution itself (very similar, in this regard to the degree to which El Lissitzky's and Alexander Dorner's conception of the Abstract Cabinet in Hannover in 1928 enacted the project of avant-garde painting and sculpture within the display conventions of museum architecture itself).

The Beaubourg, designed by Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers exactly twenty years later, and critically analyzed by Jean Baudrillard in his essay 'The Beaubourg Effect', was widely and rightly perceived as a new breaking point in museum architecture in the age of an emerging politics of cultural mass-consumption. Clearly in many ways a consequence of the proto-revolutionary moment of 1968, Beaubourg deserves as much of our attention as does the Guggenheim New York. After all, Piano/Roger's architecture redefined audience behavior and the relationship between avant-garde culture and architecture in an equally fundamental, but also a fundamentally different way, from Wright's epochal building. On the one hand, Beaubourg was clearly conceived with an underlying desire for a new type of mass education: its architecture, the centrality and extraordinary success of its library and public information services, clearly attest to that even today. Its architecture was what used to be called *une architecture parlante*: it spoke of the desire to open up the museum's doors to a new generation of spectators, and its primary signal system – through the forms of technologies and transparencies, through the morphologies of the engine and the ocean liner – signaled a new access to culture through amusement and consumption. Yet at the same time it

maintained a sense of the subject's share in and responsibility for participation in the communicative acts of cultural experience.

Again, twenty years later, the third, and most recent, almost contemporary example, would be of course Frank Gehry's notorious Bilbao Museum in 1997. All the changes that one could identify as the essential structural transformations of the museum in its transition from an institution of the bourgeois public sphere to an institution of spectacle culture are profiled here in a manner that delivers almost a textbook rehearsal of my arguments.

First of all the choice of 'site'. Few people, if any, in the international art world had heard of, certainly cared for, the Capital of the Basques before 1997. A more or less dilapidated port city, it was discovered and designated by Thomas Krens, the global manager of culture, or rather, the first corporate executive of the museum as a site of Global Corporate Culture, to become the location of an experiment in the first steps of that project of cultural globalization. Undoubtedly, for the city managers themselves, this was a hazardous deal that might just as well have imploded, but miraculously, it performed and delivered exactly what Krens had promised, and much more.

What it delivered was first of all, architecture. Architecture of a new kind, however, fundamentally different from both Wright and Piano/Roger's, in as much as Gehry's architecture was no longer even ambivalent – as Piano/Roger's still had been – about the question of the functions of the museum architecture. We could say without too much polemical hyperbole that Gehry's architecture was conceived from the start as an architecture of spectacle, whose primary function was not the accommodation, preservation and display of works of art, but to position his architecture in the very place that in Gehry's mind art had occupied until his arrival: the ostentatious architectural gestures of the 'great creator', the histrionics and the seduction of it all, attest to that more than we would even like to admit.

Gehry's signal system – after all, it is not an architecture of tectonics, of spatial functions, but an architecture of signs – succeeded as planned: the shining path to contemporaneity could no longer bypass that building. As a result, the international art milieu, the self-styled art world, would have to follow the path to Bilbao at least once, bringing with it all the media and magazine attention that the city of Bilbao had been longing for so desperately and which it would now amply receive in the form of an ever-expanding industry of art tourism.

That it was Thomas Krens who engineered this first venture of the museum as a pure spectacle site integral to an international and increasingly globalized art world circuit is certainly no accident. After all, Krens had been the major domo of the Guggenheim New York for a number of years before he ventured into his global expansion program, and certainly the Guggenheim had told him what miracles architecture could perform, if properly employed. After all, Wright's Guggenheim had turned out to be more important for most visitors than any object or exhibition that they could study inside the building itself. The Guggenheim had become the first landmark of museum architecture which functioned as an apparatus that could generate international art tourism. In analogue to the increasingly intensified competition within the art world at large, that type of architecture could create situations and events around works of art that would mobilize larger audiences than ever before. By contrast, the 'mere' existence of works of art, slumbering in the great collections of museums, could hardly find any viewers at all any more – who would go to Montpellier, for example, to see the miraculous collection of Alfred Bruyas in its then sleepy and dusty castle of a dilapidated museum from the nineteenth century, if they could go to Bilbao to see Gehry's building? But of course, ironically, in the meantime Montpellier has followed suit.

What we have witnessed as a consequence of the transformation of the museum's public functions is, of course, an equally dramatic transformation of curatorial principles. I would argue that, starting in the late 1970's and accelerating most dramatically since the late 1980's, curatorial criteria for the politics of both exhibitions and acquisitions have been subjected to precisely the same principles and pressures of spectacle that have engendered the fundamental changes in the architectural and spatial organization of the museum institution itself.

In ever-intensifying competition with the proto-totalitarian powers of media culture and the ideological state apparatuses of total consumption, museum exhibitions and collections have increasingly assimilated their exhibition and acquisition parameters to those prescribed in the world of product propaganda, tourism and the mass media.

In acquisitions, the German museums of the early 20th century housed some of the best international art of the continent until the arrival of Nazi fascism, and the subsequent destruction of international Modernism at the hands of the ideologues who wanted to enforce

a return to local, regional and national cultural idiom. But this type of internationalism of the early Modern Art museum in the hands of German critics and curators such as Julius Meier Graefe, of Paul Westheim, or Wilhelm von Uhde, was one of scholarship, critical and scholarly discernment and competence. It was not one of cultural tourism primarily concerned with the increase and intensification of spectatorial quantities. Now, by contrast, the internationalism of the art world has become this peculiar two-tier system that I have mentioned already (in fact, there may be many more differentiated tiers than I recognize right now). First of all, there is the social group of those who are actually shareholders in the art world as an international, now global, investment system. And to the same degree that this segment of the art world is actually economically engaged with the production and distribution of high-level investment in art objects of all kinds, so has the art world become professionalized and specialized. That is, competence and forms of highly specialized knowledge are still operative within the systems of representation we call culture, but they serve purposes that are rather different from the concept of the disinterested aesthetic experience that was been at the core of modernist thought and its insistence on aesthetic autonomy.

Let me, by contrast, be specific and argue the following: as a result of the perpetual overproduction of the market, and the endless supply for speculation and investment that it has provided over the past twenty years, and as a result of the enormous pressure on the museum to fulfill its last remaining role, to provide the imaginary gold standard of historical authenticity and longevity, enormous arrays of objects have become available for curators under pressure to supplicate their respective trustees and the forces of dealers knocking at the institution's doors. And hence, in the absence of criteria for selection, since only a commitment to a certain historical principle allows for the formation of criteria, all objects become more or less equivalent.

The pressures of the globalization of the art market and the need to comply with these pressures in fact make it impossible for curators, so it seems, to wait and see, to distinguish and discriminate, to discern more carefully what the object of their discursive constructions could be. But more importantly even, in the absence of any cultural agenda based on a socio-political perspective or elementary pedagogical message, what would be the discursive construction of the present-day collection?

Doesn't the very impulse to collect presume a certain desire to reconstruct a lost complexity or a hopeful completeness? Isn't this part of the utopian dimension inherent in every collection deserving of its name, that it attempts to reconstruct a moment whose differentiation and difficulty appears to the present as a lost facet of a different type of experience, a different moment in humanity, dramatically different from our present one, to be recaptured in the redemptive or even fictitious cohesion of the collection?

So from the scholarly perspective one would imagine that it should be among a museum's first ambitions to collect precisely those objects of an initial artist's discursive departure, i.e. the early and difficult works within any artistic trajectory where the rupture of the established conventions is first formulated, when the artistic breakthrough is induced with all the palpable aggression and anxiety these departures come to signal in epochal artistic endeavors.

By contrast, what we get to see more often than not in collections today is precisely the opposite: the standardization of practices, when the work has acquired recognition and the solidity of international recognizability, when it has acquired a certain size, dimension, scale, that it could not afford in its initial stages, and become an almost branded artistic identity.

With this yet another important pedagogical dimension of the museum as an institution of the public sphere has, under the impact of the museum's spectacularization – and here I am looking at an aesthetic function – diminished even more than the first, if not disappeared altogether, from contemporary museum culture.

Aesthetic experience taught the subject modes of historical self-critique at the most radical level. The bourgeois definition of the aesthetic understood that it was not the primary task of artistic production to affirm established ethical, moral, political and aesthetic codes and conventions. Rather, avant-garde practices were defined as, and expected to be, challenging and critical: in other words, artistic production found its place in the public institution of the museum precisely to challenge the conventions of bourgeois identity on all levels and as radically as possible.

It is, of course, attributable to that radicality that museums often failed altogether to acquire the most important works at an appropriate moment – think of the French reception of Mondrian, for example. Unless directed by courageous and committed curators and directors,

they perceived quite clearly – the museums, that is – or quite unconsciously that contemporary artistic practices performed a public negation of the very identity and power structure they represented. Artistic avant-garde practices negated the credibility of the very bourgeois identity represented in the institution of the museum, as integral to bourgeois public experience, in the same way as artistic practices had previously performed, albeit in clandestine and allegorical fashions, a critique of the feudal representations or religious functions of art.

One example from recent museum pedagogy that should make us pause – and since a curator of the Museum of Modern Art told me about it, I guess it is an authentic statement – apparently in a recent exhibition called ‘What is painting?’, the museum installed devices or personnel to observe the attention span that spectators maintained or failed to sustain in front of each painting in the exhibition.

This advanced process of quantification, while certainly in line with the laws of quantification in every aspect of everyday life, has the tantalizing qualities of the *novum*, if not the scandal of it. First of all, what is measured here, and for what purpose? Is the fact that a spectator might spend more time in front of the elaborately represented and histrionic narrative of a junk current painting an index of that artist’s real contribution to contemporary aesthetic experience and education? And what are the consequences of the testing system? Will artists whose work received only short viewing attention, like Robert Rauschenberg, be relegated to the storage rooms, excluded from future exhibitions altogether? And lastly and most importantly, is it not the function of the modern art museum to analyze the oddities of perceptual habits and conventions rather than affirm the ruling conventions? So if spectators with attention deficit disorders, which will be most likely the case for most of them, enter the museum, is the museum now going to corroborate that behavioral pattern, or counteract it?

Let me sum up my arguments: we have come to understand that all artistic production is innately mythical, inevitably and necessarily so. This is the primary reason for an ever-intensifying anti-aesthetic impulse in the 20th century, since myth and subject formation in the 20th century have become increasingly and mutually exclusive. Duchamp’s famous quip that photography was only valid as long as it could dismantle and displace painting is pertinent here. He continued that once photography had achieved its goal, photography itself would hopefully be displaced and dismantled by something else. This is a wonderful articulation of

that dialectical process of artistic myth formation and anti-aesthetic counterformation that I am trying to hint at.

Under the impact of an enormous expansion of the desire to counteract the proto-totalitarian technological order, criteria of artistic production have been eroded at a breathtaking pace. We are now facing an artistic overproduction probably unknown to any previous culture. This overproduction, as we have tried to argue, originates in a variety of constellations: one of them being the false promise that everybody is or could be an artist, another in despair of counteracting the technological order, a third the desperation with which the market, the museums, and the collectors have engaged in this *va banque* game of history, trying to redeem and rescue whatever might be redeemable of these old obsolete forms of cultural production and transform them into an enormous investment and speculation gamble.

I will not develop a moral argument against an economical reality, but I will sketch out an aesthetic critique against certain forms of self-deception. And it runs as follows:

If all acts of artistic production are mythical, false promises so to speak, and therefore in need of the counter-mythical impulse of the anti-aesthetic, that condition points to the necessity of judgment. But judgment, is of course, the one force that has been eliminated from the process of accumulating culture altogether in the past twenty years. And that is the last aspect where we can study the dismantling of the museum as an institution of the public sphere: in its initial definition, it depended on a tripartite division of knowledge and competences: the artist, the curator/collector and the critical competence of the historian and critic.

As an inevitable result of the abolition of skills and criteria, and of the transformation of culture into a compensatory production of fetishes that protect us from advanced forms of media technology, the criteria of judgment and the professional articulation of them have lost their entire grip.

This is clearly not only affecting the critic and historian, but to a much more destructive degree, the curator. Therefore it appears increasingly as though it had been decided that the curator of the museum institution will no longer need any other criteria than those provided by the rapid consensus formed around economic investment in, and the reception of, works of art.

And this is perhaps where real critique could be formulated. One function of the work of art within the bourgeois public sphere was precisely to contest and challenge the validity of that model of bourgeois subject formation. The subject confronted with a work of art is confronted with its own demise, its own undoing, its systematic deconstruction, and the bourgeois public sphere and the museum, its curators and independent historians and critics, provided the discursive and mnemonic order to allow this continuous act of challenging the subject, as was the case with the social constructions of artists as symbolic subjects themselves. It was particularly symbolic independent of the system of the total instrumentalization and economic productivity that guaranteed the success of the works as communicative acts in public space to envisage different subject formations and social relations.

Once these conditions are abolished, artistic practice can no longer claim to construct this dialectical challenge to existing forms of subject formation or social relations. It becomes merely affirmative, as it is now integral and subservient to an ever-expanding apparatus of compensatory consumption. In other words, it contributes to, rather than contradicts and counteracts, the most violent forms of destruction that we are facing in the cultural field: the annihilation of the criteria that define a subject as subject.

Why then, I would ask, does the museum not set its proper historical agenda and criteria anymore? Why does it not confront contemporary audiences with precisely the opposite of those audiences' expectations, frustrating their demands for a monolithic culture of universally accessible objects, of rapid acquisition and consumption? Why does the museum not have the courage any more to enforce and enhance the spectators' experience of the intrinsic difficulties that protect the complexity and slowness of perception that constitute a work of art and define its history? And why does the museum not demand and encourage linguistic competence from its audiences, rather than comply with their tyrannical tantrums, insisting on instant and perpetual gratification? Were those not previously some of the fundamental pedagogical functions of the museum? Did it not precisely thus provide forms of counter-memory and of knowledge that are totally neglected, obscured, phased out, in the present, because they had to be censored in favor of an increasing assimilation of the museum to the monolithic apparatus of the cultural industrial complex?

Rather than yielding to an ever-intensifying assimilation in order to garner the colonizing support of the core of the fashion and consumption industries as its sole substance – because artistic production is the most glamorous provider of mythical subjectivity – isn't one of the productive forces that the museum should have held onto precisely the definition of itself as a space of resistance and opposition to the ever-expanding violence of collective de-sublimation? Thank you.

## RESPONDENT

### Mari Carmen Ramirez

**Mari Carmen Ramirez (MCR).** Those of us who are deeply involved with museums of modern and contemporary art or who value the utopian legacy of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century avant-garde would find it hard to disagree with Buchloh's dark assessment of what can be described as the *sell-out* of these presumably iconoclastic institutions to a somber axiology of values: those of vested interests and sheer spectacle. Without doubt, such a *sell-out* has brought about a surrendering of these museums' intellectual mission in favor of massive audience- or market-driven programs. Indeed, in this regard, the mourning tone of Buchloh's text touches upon very timely concerns that I am sure are shared by many in this room, including those inclined to reject the apodictic tone of his arguments. This is, to be sure, a positive assurance that certainly collides with the negativity of his reading of our times.

In the short time allotted for this response, I would like to critically engage only a few of the many enticing points raised by Buchloh's trenchant analysis of the current state of museums of modern and contemporary art. In doing so, I will be speaking from an overtly different position: one that shies away from abstract generalizations in favor of what I will refer to as a *theoretically informed pragmatism*. That is, a point of view shaped by an ongoing straddling of often two realities: the detached milieu of academia and the hands-on arena of museum practice. This type of pragmatism – which I credit for having informed my curatorial practice from the very beginning – is also grounded in a multicultural perspective nurtured by the constant back and forth between individuals and institutions in the so-called First and Third worlds. It is from this malleable vantage point that I am hoping to either contest or expand upon some of Buchloh's intellectual scrutiny and sweeping assumptions through which the

encompassing idea of the museum of modern and contemporary art emerges as both homogeneous and ungraspable.

Let me begin by addressing a couple of theoretical points. The first involves the very model of the museum of modern and contemporary art that serves as the starting point for Buchloh's argument. As I understand it from his presentation, this is a model that Western societies inherited from the Enlightenment tradition which was duly contested and redefined by the historic avant-garde movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Such a model not only privileges the museum's pedagogical function but charges it with preserving and transmitting standards of quality for artists. As we all know, museums of modern and contemporary art are quite complex institutions. For this reason, to privilege pedagogy above the myriad functions that they are called to play in our societies implies upholding a rather restrictive parameter that raises elitist specters of the not so distant past. I refer specifically to the *canonic* museum, a paradigm that served as both the focus and locus of resistance for artists since the 1960s. Indeed, Buchloh's characterization of the enlightened museum of modern and contemporary art as a vehicle for establishing and projecting *quality* the latter presumed to be an absolute value — invokes notions of supremacy as well as the passive reception of audiences and viewers. It stresses, ultimately, a hard-core elitism that contradicts the self-critical impulse at the heart of avant-garde practices, on the one hand, and on the other hand, its desire to connect with everyday people and reality. It is precisely this sacralizing function that resulted from the unwilling distortion or nostalgic imposition of the Modernist ethos that has been the target of attack by artists, critics, and minorities over the last thirty years. Such a contradiction at the heart of Buchloh's argument leads me to raise the following questions: shouldn't the function of museums of modern and contemporary art be to question, directly or indirectly — if not desacralize — inherited social or artistic platitudes? Have we not learned anything from at least two generations of artists whose work has revolved around the institutional critique of this kind of museum? Is the urgency to stop the *sell-out* so desperate that we have no choice but to restore the very ruins of the museum that was already deemed obsolete some three decades ago? I sincerely hope that this will not be the case and that I may be misreading or (perhaps worse) *over-reading* Buchloh's hypothetical position.

Instead of places for the *passive* transmission of legitimized knowledge, wouldn't it be more useful theoretically to posit the notion of the museum of modern and contemporary art as a

fulcrum? One where collections and collection-based programs and practices serve as the starting points for enabling a serious dialogue not only about art but, more importantly, about the social context in which these institutions and practices are inscribed? In my view, the museum of modern and contemporary art thus emerges as an autonomous experimental site for the *dynamic production* of new relationships between art, artists and their audiences. In this notion of the museum, experimentation with the limits of human creativity and perception would reveal that the true nature of the museum's didactic mission lies not only in the transmission of prestigious knowledge but in an open, broad engagement with the socio-political reality that surrounds it. (By the way, a perspective usually empowered by Marxist thinking.) This implies a true dialectic between the museum and the social body that sustains it; one that is extremely necessary for these institutions to engage themselves with democratic societies. Overlooking the need for this lifelike exchange can only lead museums of modern and contemporary art to lose contact with reality.

Even more problematic for me is the universalizing bias of Buchloh's characterization of the modern art museum. This prejudice leads him to presume that all museums of modern and contemporary art follow the same enlightened paradigm grounded in the critical legacy of the Central European avant-garde. Those of us who work both inside and outside the hegemonic centers know (all too well) that this is not a common field we share. Indeed, I suspect that outside Central Europe and mainstream United States, one would be hard-pressed to identify the type of museum invoked in Buchloh's lecture. So how can we speak in such over-arching terms, when the examples are not only infinite but vastly different from each other? To cite but one case, the one closest to my practice: in developing societies like those represented by Latin America – where modernity, even today, is still an incomplete project – the enlightened avant-garde museum has neither achieved autonomous status nor fully consolidated itself. In many of our countries it is even non-existent. Does this imply that our societies have not produced models of their own to compensate for this deficiency and should therefore stay out of the key issues of Buchloh's statement? Are we to assume that their practices have been exclusively restricted to the blind adoption of the Eurocentric model here addressed? Of course not! I even dare to predict that it is in these emergent regions – the Far Western countries – where alternative versions to the current crisis affecting central museums of modern and contemporary art are being brought to the fore. The unconventional contexts in which the non-centrality of these institutions operate have indeed produced examples to interact with specific milieus and arenas. I will thus argue for the need to focus the current

state of museums of modern and contemporary art with concrete and differentiated analysis of their specificity vis-à-vis their various contexts. My professional straddling tells me that this type of investigation should not be undertaken as a mere academic exercise, but as a rather urgent task. Particularly if we take into account the swift pace at which museums of modern and contemporary art in central countries are being challenged to respond to drastic demographic changes; transformations that are indelibly altering their societies, making the model under consideration – where it still exists – even more obsolete if not completely dysfunctional.

Furthermore, Buchloh argues that, in order to fulfill its mission, the modern and contemporary art museum must remain completely free of all forms of political or economic instrumentalization. The way his argument goes is that in recent years the failure to maintain such autonomy has led to the museum's relinquishing of its pedagogical role in favor of void, senseless, mass-oriented spectacle. There is an undeniable pitfall in this line of thinking. It is a well-known fact that, as institutions inextricably linked to the rise of the capitalism system, museums of modern and contemporary art – perhaps even more than history or natural history museums – operated from their inception as vehicles of either the vested interests of national states or the longing for distinction and privileges of private elites. The incisive work of Pierre Bourdieu – among many others – has demonstrated how these bourgeois institutions serve to preserve and project elite interests, while in the process replicating class divisions and status. And they do so precisely by invoking abstract standards of quality and old-fashioned taste as well as a hermeneutical notion of education. This is particularly true in dominant societies like the United States where, to the best of my knowledge, modern and contemporary art by no means imply shared social values, but activities closer to private cults or ancillaries to elite privileges. Therefore, if the link between museums and elite interests has been an intrinsic factor of these institutions from the very beginning, why should it be different today as suggested by Buchloh's assessment? Moreover, we must not overlook the fact that in the United States, in particular, the marriage between capitalism and art has not only been a deep-seated factor of the development of museums, but also an undeniable key to their success. In a society where the responsibility for culture has been delegated to private initiative and not to the state, this so-called 'outrageous partnership' not only allowed museums to survive; it has also given their constituencies a stake in both the well-being and feasible future of these institutions while facilitating – in the best cases – their democratization. Despite the distortions that this model may have undergone in recent years,

there is ample proof that it has somehow worked. Therefore, the problem is not whether or not museums should relate to economic interests, but the degree to which they are able to maintain a fine balance that allows their social responsibility and intellectual integrity to continue to evolve unrestricted by these bold conditions. To do so, however, implies embracing rather than rejecting the creative potential that can arise from the enlightened partnership between economic investment and art. Whether we like it or not, in the present context – i.e. late capitalism – any other attitude will only prove to be delusional or preposterous.

Undoubtedly, it may prove more fruitful to look elsewhere for the reasons behind the fundamental transformations that have occurred in museums of modern and contemporary art in the last three decades. Inextricably related to the issue of instrumentalization, for instance, are the transformations suffered by the public sphere over that period of time, as well as the relationship of the present-day modern art museum to this metamorphosed, *evolving context*. Jürgen Habermas used this term in the sixties to refer to the transition from feudal to bourgeois society. However, after more than three decades of free-reigning neo-liberalism, today's public sphere is a complex web of corporate and private economic interests (duly filtered by media dominance) that far exceeds the parameters of the Habermasian model. Hence, rather than invoking this concept as a valid framework of action, it may be more adequate to point out the resulting paradox of the *privatization of the public sphere*. I mean the ongoing increase in economic and marketing functions of this presumably disinterested space that not only brought about its obsolescence, but at the same time compromised the social role of the institutions that had morally benefited from it. The signs of this redefined space of action are everywhere. They include the ubiquity of art markets as the primary legitimizing agents for art in contemporary society; the proliferation of art fairs not only as the operative but even as the pseudo-intellectual centers of the art world; and, more importantly, the rise and consolidation of the *institution* of the private collector. I use this term to refer not only to the individuals who collect art on a selective or a massive scale but to the dedicated spaces, retinues of professionals and services that have accompanied this trend. The ascendancy of this parallel institution has forced museums of modern and contemporary art to compete with this sector for art works as well as funding in a way that thirty years ago would have been unthinkable. All of these factors, in turn, have contributed to the substantial erosion and displacement of the once uncontested authority of the museum of modern and contemporary art.

Rather than stay true to their original mission and adamantly resist these trends, museums of modern and contemporary art have responded by recasting themselves to compete on equal footing with the new forces at play. Therefore, complementing the privatization of the museum's public sphere of action is the biggest trend towards expansion in the history of these institutions. Expansion here does not refer exclusively to growth in square footage or in collections, but to major increases in both human and financial resources and the infrastructure needed to operate in the newly privatized environment. Ironically, the super-sized museum of central countries has come to resemble Uroboros: a serpent biting its own tail. That is, the institution constantly needs to nurture itself in a vicious circle before its primary goals are duly met. The impact of these combined factors has not only significantly compromised the public role of museums of modern and contemporary art but (more importantly, and once again, to challenge Buchloh's vision), it has led to the de-characterization of their collecting purpose and educational mission as well as the museological practices that they enable. At the level of collections, for instance, the concept of the *trophy* artist and/or work has replaced the incisive search for relevant artistic values and experimental practices which defined the gist of the museum of modern and contemporary art. In this scenario the notion that a museum can venture into previously unexplored artistic territory or engage with artists who lack legitimization is dubious if not outlandish. The implications of the *trophy mentality*, however, go beyond issues of market or competitive edge. The shining trophy is the updated embodiment of the 'auratic' work; it reintroduces the academic notion of the masterpiece, thereby reinforcing it. As we know, nothing can be more opposed to the nature of contemporary artistic practices which are characterized, on the one hand, by their inherent reproducibility in the form of photography, video, and other technological means, and on the other hand, by artists' rejection of the art object in favor of relational processes.

The role of the curator – both in terms of his/her authority and the ability to anticipate changes and stay ahead of his/her practice – has also been deeply affected by these developments. Buchloh is indeed right when he observes that, in this scenario, the museum curator [and I quote] 'no longer needs any other criteria than those provided by the rapid consensus formed around economic investment and reception in works of art.' In fact, many curators working for these institutions have adapted by living in what Bourdieu would call 'a

state of dual consciousness.’ This split condition implies, on the one hand, ‘a practical view that leads them to get as much as they can – sometimes cynically – of the possibilities at hand; on the other hand, a theoretical perception which is both gullibly moralizing and self-indulgent, tending, ultimately, towards denial.’

Buchloh blames the shift brought about by the digital revolution for many of the key transformations affecting museums in the last few decades. I also beg to differ from him on this point of his argument. The ghost of technology has not only haunted modern art since the onset of the Industrial Revolution, but it has been a powerful incentive to artists seeking to expand the scope and range of visual perception. Yet some of the best works of twentieth-century art resulted from artists’ self-preservation instincts and their critical resistance to this potentially dehumanizing phenomenon, an issue raised by the influential Spanish critic José Ortega y Gasset as early as 1925. If this attitude held true in the past, why should it be different today? Have we not seen enough examples in our practice so far to prove that technology will always be a tool and not an end for contemporary artists?

To summarize my argument so far: if there is a critical issue affecting the institution of the museum of modern and contemporary art in central countries today, it is not the threat of technology or the abdication of the museum space to the architect’s ego, as Buchloh forcefully argues, but the *intellectual bankruptcy* of these institutions. Stuck in twentieth-century models, these museums have not been able to stand outside the white cube in order to take stock of broad shifts in current artistic and cultural practices around them. As a result, they have not been able to recast themselves to address the looming issues affecting artists and constituencies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Crises, however, offer opportunities for new beginnings, and the present crisis is no exception.

Without doubt, in addition to the impact of the external conditions described earlier, a great many of the problems affecting museums of modern and contemporary art today are internal. That is, they arise from a complacent implementation of received museological standards and practices that never questions their relevance to present-day realities. Therefore, one asset that can assist these museums in lifting themselves out of the present conundrum is the adoption of a broadly-based notion of *research*. By this term, I do not mean the search for materials that precedes the organization of any exhibition or that serves as the basis for

collection-building. I refer instead to an openly self-critical and inquisitive attitude towards the objects and practices that constitute the museum of modern and contemporary art's field of action. That is, a self-reflective attitude that would allow these museums to showcase collections not as capital assets or *trophies* but as active platforms for the production of new knowledge about art and its relationship to the outside world. This attitude implies not only identifying artists and movements that lie beyond official history, but also focusing on issues of curatorial and museological practice – such as the display of the collections and their interpretation – that could lead to a more transparent understanding of what a museum of modern and contemporary art is and how it works. This involves using collections not as illustrations of previously elaborated art-historical frameworks but as material tools to produce new frameworks of interpretation. A museum capable of reflecting upon itself may be the only vehicle for understanding the paradoxes that engulf our present epoch.

Finally, to conclude this response: At the beginning of his text, Buchloh invokes Broodthaer's oracular capacity to foresee the end of the avant-garde model of the museum of modern and contemporary art. Undoubtedly, we agree with him. From today's perspective, such a museum irretrievably died. Its demise occurred not only by reason of the attacks leveled against it by artists, critics, and cultural activists in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but by virtue of its own complicity with a self-indulgent system that suffocated it.

As socially responsive institutions, museums of modern and contemporary art necessarily reflect the contradictions of their societies and their time. Contradiction, I repeat, should be a point of departure for any dialectical approach. The very survival of these institutions calls for them to adapt to the changing exigencies – sometimes paradoxical moves – of the redefined public sphere. Since the 1960s, art museums have indeed proven that they can nimbly adapt to the changes demanded by the new socio-political conditions. Hence, despite the host of negative factors that have accompanied their transformation, we must recognize that the modern art institutions of today are not those of the past. There is evidence that museums have opened up and democratized in a more inclusive and responsive manner to the needs of artists as well as those of diversified audiences, including minorities. This point, I should note, is ostensibly overlooked by Buchloh's hegemonic, unyielding perspective. Even their newly adopted corporate structure is a far cry from the culture of patrician privilege that dominated the majority of these institutions until very recently. Buchloh's perception of the modern art

museum is thus laced with either nostalgic longing or existential angst. What is at stake implies, instead, an encompassing if not visionary re-imagining of the potential of these institutions in order to – believe it or not – transform themselves into *active agents* of the twenty-first century's panorama of challenge and paradox.

## OPEN DISCUSSION

**Benjamin Buchloh and Mari Carmen Ramirez**

**Sabine Breitwieser (SB).** Thank you both. Thank you very much, Benjamin and Mari Carmen. We are running late, but of course we have to give Benjamin the chance to respond as well, since we have here a situation of rather different positions, one reflecting the museum within the social, economic and political conditions, to make it brief, of a system of spectacularization in our society, and the other about the museum lacking self-reflection, of internal practices, which applies directly to us. I would say that is something we really can change, and demand that the museum become more of a social agent. We'll give it ten minutes.

**Benjamin Buchloh (BB).** Thanks, Mari Carmen, for the vital and, in many ways, pertinent response. It has made me think about what I said very productively, and there are many aspects on which we probably agree more than you may realize. I do think that I described the transformation of the museum institution in terms very similar to yours, but with different evaluations, I suppose. But we both seem to agree that we are looking at a dramatically different public sphere, if public it is. I think that's where the difference may occur between us. Would we be equally willing to advocate those changes being introduced in other public institutions of education, such as the universities or the courts, which are also part of the public sphere? Would we equally advocate giving control over the university, or over the court system, to the corporate world, as you seem to be advocating for the museum institution as an absolutely necessary and inevitable historical development? What you fail to address, to my mind – which is not an accusation, but a very necessary and complicated task – is the question: what type of culture are we actually identifying with, if that culture, by your definition, with which I agree, is corporate culture, when the state, that is the government, has by definition abdicated its commitment to constructing institutions within which culture is produced and received?

That is the fundamental question, I think, where we differ: that you take it for granted that the

corporatization of public life is a historical given that cannot be challenged, and that the fact that institutions have been increasingly or completely given over to this corporatization is an absolutely uncontested necessity, where I would say it is historically an extremely problematic condition – as we see in Europe, where the museum institutions, until very recently at least, were publicly funded institutions that increasingly also received corporate support, but the fundamental structure of the European museum was, importantly, an institution for which the state had financial responsibility.

So, as I say, if we make that comparison, I totally agree with your analysis on all points, and it was brilliant and very helpful for me to hear it so clearly stated, but the fundamental difference in our arguments is that you seem to think that the transformation of the museum in those terms is an inevitable historical necessity we have to live and work with, whereas I would say I still take a moment to question its inevitability and justifiability, especially in comparison with what would happen if we gave all institutions in the public sphere over to a similar historical transformation. I hope that makes some sense.

**Mari Carmen Ramirez (MCR).** I think, in the end, we are not so distant from one another. First of all, I don't think this change is inevitable. I'm not endorsing corporate culture; I am dealing with it from a pragmatic point of view, and I think that's the difference. And also you have to bear in mind that my field of action has been the United States, not Europe, and perhaps we're coming at this from two very different points of view. Obviously, where the state actually had dominion of the public sphere, then it makes more sense to say that mustn't happen.

However, in the United States, the tradition has always been... I mean, there is actually no state involvement in culture, there isn't even a Ministry of Culture in this country, so culture has been traditionally relegated to the private initiative, and now perhaps to the corporate initiative. Although I think that the corporate world is not so involved in the kinds of museums I was referring to as private individuals are. And my point is that there is something productive that can come out of that. I think, at its best, the American model of having the private sector vested in the interest of these institutions has produced, and has the potential to produce, very democratic institutions. It has that potential because the constituents of society ultimately have a stake in those institutions, and that stake is given to them by this participation. I am not saying that that has not led to distortions, I am not saying that perhaps that is the ideal model, but I think it is one that can yield many interesting possibilities in the future, as long as museums do not abdicate their responsibility. And I think it is the museums,

the professionals, the curators, who have to fight to maintain that fine line, that fine balance that will ensure that they can proceed with their intellectual missions and preserve their integrity. I think what has happened, to a large extent, is that the professional sphere has abdicated from that.

One last point is that I really don't agree with you that universities have been exempt from this. At least in the United States, and I have been in the university world for many years, universities function the same as corporations. I think it's exactly the same phenomenon at the level of universities. And that would be a completely separate discussion, but it is there, already. And that's why in my particular case an institution like the International Center for the Arts of the Americas could never exist in a university. It is just not feasible for a university to host that kind of specialized research centre, in the present conditions of corporatized university and academic life.

**BB.** That seems to me rather a shocking statement. I think I will have to contradict that, at least on the level of my experience. Certainly on the level of curriculum design, if that is in any way comparable to curatorial activities, which it probably is, I don't think there is anybody in any university who would voluntarily agree, or have to admit, that there is any interference of manifest interests: certainly not in the field of the humanities, that I am aware of. I don't know how it would work in the hard sciences, where one would yield to corporate control or demands in terms of defining one's curricular planning, so I think your statement there once again seems to anticipate conditions that I can hardly imagine happening, even though they are clearly on the horizon.

But there is another fundamental question I wanted to ask you, out of real interest: how would you envisage... since where we also differ is on the missionary power of artistic production. I don't share that belief you have. How would you envisage a museum, for example, in a Latin American country to be different in its functions and purposes and public operations from a museum in the so-called Western world, in the egocentric model? How do you think a museum in a country like Mexico could possibly transform its structural organization in order to address the audiences that you claim are primarily the target of such a progressive museum policy, outside elitism, outside the bourgeois criteria you cited?

**MCR.** I think Mexico is a very special case, because Mexico, as a result of the Mexican

Revolution, has a very different museum tradition. If there is a country in this hemisphere where you find massive audiences in all these institutions, it is Mexico, because art is taught at school level, and pupils are taught to value museums. The problem with these museums is that they all enforce the old focus on national patrimony; they are all focused on Mexican art and Mexican culture. The negative part of it is the way the state builds up the identities of these groups and keeps them contained within a particular national discourse. But at the same time, it offers very interesting ways in which the museum engages audiences at the very mass level that do not involve consumerism, because, obviously, the museums are state-run, so that's not an issue. Of course there are all sorts of other issues, like the precarious state of these institutions, the lack of funding, etc. But on any given day, even if the exhibitions in a particular museum are not very interesting, you will find masses of people there, visiting the museum. So I think that those museums, and I know of many specific examples in Mexico, are in the process of working with that relationship with the audience really to question aspects of the social model in which they are inscribed, so that the exhibitions bring out topics that don't necessarily have to do with art, but have to do with the relationship of that art to certain social structures or models, and in that way they are reaching out to audiences to change their perceptions about some of these inherited models. In another case, at the Carrillo Gil Museum they have done exhibitions where they have taken the collection, which is a very well-known one, and exposed the history of that collection and the reasons why all these works came to be there – because of the taste of the patron, because of political changes – and so they gave the audience all this information for them to understand the process behind the museum. So the museum is not presenting itself as the authority in this, but it's exposing its inner workings to the public. That is just one example.

**SB.** Thanks again. There's a lot to discuss in the workshop. What is rather interesting also, you've probably heard about it, in Austria, the federal museums that were privatized are now demanding more public funding too, like the banks are receiving right now in Austria. So we are turning backwards, whatever happens; it is a sort of new-new-new liberalism. Thanks a lot for the discussion. Thanks.

## SESSION 2

### ARE WE PROPRIETORS OR CUSTODIANS?

#### INTRODUCTION

**Zdenka Badovinac**

**Sabine Breitwieser (SB).** We are really late starting session two, 'Are we proprietors or custodians?', something we continually ask ourselves. This will be Ned Rifkin, introduced by Zdenka Badovinac, and Andrea Fraser will be the respondent, so please, Zdenka, go on.

**Zdenka Badovinac (ZB).** Thank you, Sabine. I hope that after the very intense and interesting morning session, we will continue with the same energy and spirit. I hope you all really enjoyed the morning, not just me. So, as Sabine announced the second session has the title 'Are we proprietors or custodians?', and the speaker is Ned Rifkin. My task is to introduce him, to introduce his CV.

Rifkin lives outside New York City and writes. Over a career in the visual arts, he has been Assistant Professor of Art, University of Texas (Arlington), Curator and Assistant Director, the New Museum of Contemporary Art (New York), Curator of Contemporary Art, Corcoran Gallery of Art (Washington, DC), Chief Curator, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden (Washington, DC), Director, High Museum of Art (Atlanta, Georgia), Director, the Menil Foundation and Collection (Houston, Texas), Director, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden (Washington, DC), Under Secretary for Art, Smithsonian Institution (Washington, DC). A lot, huh?

In addition, Rifkin has served on numerous committees, juries, advisory boards, and has lectured internationally. He authored several exhibition catalogues and books on subjects ranging from contemporary art to post-war cinema. He is currently working on a book that involves a personal family saga. Rifkin is the father of three sons and has a five-year-old grandson. It's a complex CV.

The respondent, Andrea Fraser... Fraser's work has been identified with performance, video, context art and institutional critique. Major projects include installations for the Berkeley Art Museum (1992); the Kunstverein Munich (1993); the Venice Biennale (Austrian Pavilion, 1993);

the Whitney Biennial (1993); the Generali Foundation, Vienna (1995); the Kunsthalle Bern (1998); the Sprengel Museum Hannover (1998); and the Bienal de São Paulo (1998).

She has created performances for the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York (1986); the Philadelphia Museum of Art (1989); the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford (1991); inSITE, San Diego/Tijuana (1997); and the MICA Foundation, New York (2001). She has also performed solo work at the Whitechapel, London; the Dia Art Foundation, New York; the Museum of Modern Art, Vienna; and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, among other venues.

Her essays and performance scripts have appeared in *Art in America*, *Afterimage*, *October*, *Texte zur Kunst*, *Social Text*, *Critical Quarterly*, *Documents*, *Artforum* and *Grey Room*. *Museum Highlights: The Writings of Andrea Fraser*, was released by MIT Press in 2005.

Fraser was a founding member of the feminist performance group The V-Girls (1986-1996); the project-based artist initiative Parasite (1997-1998); and the cooperative art gallery Orchard (2005-2008). She was also co-organizer of Services, a 'working-group exhibition' that toured to seven venues in Europe and the United States between 1994 and 2001.

She is Associate Professor in the Department of Art of the University of California, Los Angeles. She is also on a faculty of the Whitney Independent Study Program in New York. So we have really very important people with us. So please, Ned Rifkin, take the floor.

## **SPEAKER**

**Ned Rifkin**

**Ned Rifkin (NR).** Let me first... Can you hear me all right? That's a shame, really, because...

I want to thank, as everyone before me has, the organizers of this conference – and particularly for taking somebody on the bench into the game here. As you just learned, after twenty, almost thirty, years I have taken a sabbatical from directing and working in art museums, and have been reflecting quite a bit on what's happening in the world of art museums and of art.

I also want to mention that I think it's a terrific idea to have an artist, not only as a respondent

but also as a participant in this, because all too often we in the field of modern and contemporary art argue the abstract and theoretical brilliantly, as we saw this morning, but to anchor back the discussion with the perspective of an art-making person is, I think, critically important, and I am honored and delighted to share the stage later with Andrea Fraser.

To begin, I really want to compliment both Benjamin and Mari Carmen on their presentations this morning. I haven't been to a conference like this in a number of years, and I was thrilled by both the level of erudition and the insight that was delivered to us all. And also reminded why I left academe – and I don't mean that derisively, I promise you, I have the utmost respect for each of them. But I find that ever since I was a little boy, and I think that was when I went to college, probably, having someone read to me was really soporific, and I gather there was an audio demonstration of that here – I didn't hear the person snoring. If nothing else, I'll try to keep you awake!

It is, I think, more importantly... I did want to say, since most of you, or at least many of you, are visiting the United States at this moment from elsewhere, I wanted to welcome you to the United States of America, which many of you have been to before, but this is a really amazing time in this country. Thankfully, because of the change that has just been voted into place, it reminds me of... I think I'm probably vulgarizing Dickens when I say that 'it's the worst of times and the best of times' – or the other way around, the best of times and the worst of times – because we now have at least some hope in the leadership of our country, both symbolically and otherwise. But at the same time I've never experienced, as I'm sure that many older people have, such a moment for this country, and it's probably coloring more of what I have to say than it might have a year ago – certainly when I was still employed.

I want to tell you what I heard on the radio in the taxi coming over here this morning. Citigroup, one of the largest international banking interests headquartered here in New York City, is laying off fifty-four thousand workers, which is additional to the twenty-three thousand people they had already laid off, and comprises twenty percent of their workforce. I think this and the other things many of us know that are going on in our headlines, at least in this country... and I should apologize, because all my experience as a leader in the arts has been in this country; I've been visitor to many others, and I know many of the colleagues and peers here today from the past, but my frame of reference is going to be the situation as it exists here, and hopefully it will have some bearing and relevance to everyone, but I can't promise

that.

I think what I'm going to try to do... I did write a fairly loquacious paper, but I don't think I'll read it, I'll try to refer to it, which means I need my glasses... And likewise, Andrea doesn't have the opportunity Mari Carmen had, since she didn't have this paper, so she won't be able to respond directly to what I have written, but rather to the abstract. And in all candor, the abstract was written before the paper, which is usually the way I work, it is a form of crystallizing and outlining, and if you read the abstract, you basically get what I'm saying, and so I will try not to drone on more than is reasonable. On the other hand, maybe in the presentation more things will come out, or simply be reduced to paper themselves.

The title that was assigned, and I was told just a moment ago that it was decided upon by the board of CIMAM over a year ago, or about that, was, 'Are we proprietors or custodians?', and I was going to subtitle it, basically, 'Now what?', because 'Now what?' to me has much more relevance than this kind of abstract question. But as I started to think about the pairing of proprietary interest or roles versus the custodial role, I finally realized – and this is the advantage of stepping away for a period of time – that the world is not as binary as we make out; it's not 'either/or', it is 'both/and'. So we are proprietors in some sense, and we are custodians in other senses; it's really not one or the other. It's the kind of question that I think enables us or provokes us to create a kind of diagnostic perspective on what's happening. To that degree, I really think it's a useful consideration. I use the word 'diagnostic' very specifically, because I think we're dealing with a patient in the way that we look at this, as was really intelligently revealed by our two previous discussants and presenters. I think the patient is ill and has been ill for quite some time, and I think that is one of the things I took away from their conversation, and the precise reasons or theories about why that is can be discussed and debated usefully amongst all of us as we embark on a conversation either in this session or later this afternoon.

But ultimately, I wanted to share my own experiences – not that I'm typical, but perhaps in walking you through my point of entry into the field of art museums, there may be some relevance and understanding of why I hold the perspective I do. And it's nearly three decades that I have been a museum professional, however you would describe that, I think because of my point of entry, which was – and one of my colleagues from those days, Lynn Gumpert, is here – we were curators at something called the New Museum, which was mentioned in the

introduction. But the New Museum was started in 1977, I guess that's the same year the Beaubourg was created, but as many of you know, the founder was the late Marcia Tucker, who was dismissed from the Whitney Museum as a curator, largely owing to her fairly radical, programmatic interest in artists and the art they make. Because she was repelled, or rejected, by what was then a strong and upcoming organization of American Art, the Whitney, she founded the New Museum as a kind of tonic to the institutional frameworks that many of us work with, whether they be corporate or governmental or both. It was very important to those of us who joined her staff to understand the space in which Marcia was operating, which was alternative; it was saying essentially that there are artists everywhere who don't get recognition, or even an opportunity to show their work, let alone enter into the larger dialogues, and so my experience coming from an academic position into the world of art-museum practice was that we should – I think Lynn would concur with this – spend more time in the studios than we do in the office, essentially arrange in the office for us to be out of the office, and to get into the field – and that meant both in New York and everywhere else, as far as our modest means could take us.

That ethos, and you could define it in many, many ways, for me began in late 1980 or early 1981, and it was a moment – I didn't know it at the time – when things were changing more globally... let me say that differently: within the ecology of the art world, and I use that term advisedly after listening to Benjamin's intervention. But things were changing in that many new and younger artists were quickly emerging, and the term 'the emerging artist' was used probably ad nauseam at the time, but artists were being shown in cooperative galleries that they created for themselves, many alternative spaces that proliferated throughout the world, at least in the western world, at that time, and some of you were instrumental in those, in Amsterdam, in Germany and other places. But they were sort of anti-museums; the New Museum was almost a misnomer. And, as I say, the ethos was set against, in effect, what was latent but becoming more apparent year to year, almost month to month, and that is: as these new artists emerged, they were being embraced in a way that was fundamentally different. I didn't know this at the time, and probably very few of us did, but they were being embraced not only by the art-viewing *congerie* that we in a sense represent here today, and the concentric circles beyond that, but also by the enterprise of the art galleries with an intensity that I don't believe existed in quite the same way before, which one can talk about as capitalist, but rather than go into the ideological, it was business, and we were seeing the emergence of very young art stars. You know who they are: they existed, not just in New York,

although gradually New York became a centre for commerce, certainly superseded Paris from earlier decades. And it was, in my view, a very exciting time to be a young curator. I actually saw myself almost as a talent scout. We were out looking at artists who weren't considered, we were trying to bring into a process and in effect, a system, artists who were outside the orbit of the accepted canonical museums, and even the established galleries.

The experience of that was both intoxicating, in both senses of the word, and ultimately sobering, because as the eighties unfolded, at least in this city and in the United States, there arose a class of collectors, who I don't think... My understanding from studying the recent past, in the seventies and so on, was that there was a kind of scene, but it was a very kind of closed and fairly *entre-nous* type of experience. Suddenly with publications and the collectors moving out of their apartments and buying lofts, sometimes, in Soho, where a lot of the action was, my experience at least was that it became a sort of juggernaut, something that in many ways had its own power, and it was a power... I've experienced it from very important galleries, dealers, owners, certainly. The collectors became more and more significant, they began to serve more generously on the boards of museums or organizations, and without realizing what was happening, it seemed to me that something was going on which was almost an exaggeration, and perhaps a distortion, of what had gone on before.

Most of my talk will not focus on the past, but I feel it's important to lay out at least my own perspective. Auction houses suddenly were featuring contemporary artists at levels never before realized, sale prices going from five figures to six, and ultimately to seven, figures for living artists. So we knew artists who were sitting down in their studios – or maybe they were standing up – but they were working on million-dollar paintings as they prepared their palates or whatever they made their work of.

This created a headiness and, as Benjamin, I think very rightly, pointed out, a disorientation, I would call it, rather than a corruption – although I don't think he used the word corruption – a disorientation about what the curator was really doing, where the artist and the curator met, and as the role of the curator got extrapolated into the organization or the institution, it had ramifications up the power hierarchy as well. Suddenly you had... if you take for a moment my assessment of my role, at least as a curator, a talent scout, and that sounds cynical, but it really wasn't, I had that feeling, 'How exciting to bring new art into view'. It wasn't so much a power thing as an enabling, I really felt I was doing something beneficial. It opened wider, as Mari

Carmen said, ways of thinking, not just about the pedagogy of museum work, but also the scope of what it could present and consider. That was what we were committed to at that time, fairly ferociously – and yet, looking back on it, perhaps not ferociously enough. But Marcia was one of those people who, having gone through the experience of institutional limitations, really committed herself and the organization she founded to an alternative and very deliberately... Whatever you think, question it, and consider with us what else is possible. And also to put the artist very much in first place. And I think that was a very significant thing.

But when you think about it, if you examine the 1980's, and you look at the kind of publications museums were doing for artists, and then you walk across the street to the galleries and look at the publications they were doing, their aim is a concrete manifestation of what was happening. They had resources, they had investors and backers, and however else this phenomenon was fueled, it was clear, and it was becoming more and more clear, that museums were not what they had once been.

They were on the one hand earnestly, and I think legitimately, philosophically, trying to make the relationship between art history, and even the recent past too, the current phenomenon of art, more clear and manifest. On the other hand, there was something going on in the commercial zone that was becoming more and more muscular. And that strength, that building of strength is, I think, very much what has brought us into these conversations that we heard earlier today.

One could say that I am skeptical, and I think the responsibility of people in art fields is to maintain a healthy skepticism. But I think what I'm hearing, and what I feel and sense, is an eclipsing cynicism about the very practice and our position within the larger scope of things. I may be projecting too much since, as I say, I've taken myself out of the game for a period of time. And I'm really wondering, very seriously, whether I want to re-enter, having taken myself out now, and having realized some things, but that is a very personal perspective.

But the kind of sumptuousness of presentation, the understanding of the mechanisms of how artists become important, was really quite evident at the time when galleries were taking up the idea of placing in museums art from collectors, using the benefits that accrued, at least in this country, to the donors of art. And the market kept going up, and the museums had less opportunity to purchase and participate in selection, and were more likely to receive gifts from

collectors. I'll come back to that shortly.

In a way I'm trying to be fundamental, because perhaps I'm just not that complicated.

So as artists became successful and powerful, what was then called art stars, they started to become more like their own patrons – and this is nothing new, if you think of Peter Paul Rubens being a court ambassador, there's a kind of analogy. These artists became powerful in ways that I think very few artists had been powerful before, and from my perspective, being someone who sees himself as a collaborator with artists, I thought that this was a good empowerment, but with the successes, I'm afraid, came excesses. Of course there are always excesses, but it seems to me that, certainly into the late eighties, those excesses were becoming somewhat problematic for many artists, and of course for us, who were working in the world of contemporary art.

I remember the first time, when I went to a gallery to get some background information on an artist I was working with, the first time a gallery director told me what to put in a show, and I thought, 'Well, that's not what I think,' and I thought, 'Well, don't be so pure and orthodox, work with that person, a perfectly intelligent, knowledgeable...' But it occurred to me after I left that gallery with the material he provided me with, which was important, just how this was a slippery slope for those of us who were coming out of the discipline of art history and contemporary culture, thinking about writing maybe the first entries on some artists for the history of art, that galleries were starting to tell us: 'No, don't choose that, that lender, what you really want is to borrow this one, from this lender.' And I may be slow, but am not totally stupid, and I started to realize what was going on. Maybe we have all had those experiences somewhere along the line, in order to get a gallery to support that catalogue or whatever it might have been. We were starting to find ourselves, and please excuse the expression, in bed with a not disinterested party.

Is that a sin? No it's not a sin. Simply those lines have been raised and redrawn many times now, to the point where galleries are borrowing from the museums to do exhibitions. That is not an uncommon thing any longer. But I think that those of us who came from the idealist view of a student and professorships, where we taught and were detached from reality, go back to the theoretical and the pragmatic access. And again, these are not 'either/or', these are 'both/and'. One needs to be pragmatic, one needs to be mindful of the politics of a

situation, but I never lamented, nor, I think, would anybody have, the selling of art. That's something that I think is intrinsic to the history of art, the patronage and support of artists in various ways. It was important, as this class, this group, this *congerie* of collectors – and I don't mean just the New York collectors, but collectors all over – did want support and help from the museums by the way of curators, from the critics they would come to know, and simply the galleries, to help filter. It's a natural thing; they didn't have as much time to devote. Many of them wanted to be curators in some way or other – and actually, to refer to something else, the trend toward private museum collections is not something that is new by any means. If you just look down the street, Pierpont Morgan Library and the Frick are examples of private collections becoming public institutions eventually, or at least quasi-public, and certainly the museum that I worked in for many years, the Hirshhorn, was named for the man whose collection was given to the United States of America.

It is interesting though, as we think about the evolution of what I'm describing, to recognize that only a few weeks ago, or a month ago now, Damien Hirst did something that seems... Certainly he is a powerful, extraordinarily well-known artist, and he for the first time, in recent times at least, that I'm aware of, did something novel, which is eliminate the gallery, take what was essentially his studio work and go directly to the auction houses.

Just exactly how that scheme was hatched I don't know, maybe some of you do, but I suspect it was not his idea entirely. It's certainly consistent with what I know of his character to want to do something slightly different, perhaps ingenious in a way. By the same token, who benefits? Well, certainly the auction house can eliminate the galleries, and I think the truth of the matter is – many of you from London would know this – the rumors are that the artist and his dealer bought many of the [...], so it's not showmanship, as I'm starting to think of it, or that show business presenting art is anything new to our time. But I think what we're talking about is the texture, the intent and, ultimately, the result. I will definitely come to the idea of proprietorship and custodianship, but it strikes me that the issues that converge and intersect with that polar framing are actually significant when you have a context. We're not just custodians and proprietary stewards; we exist within a world that's changed. The change of the world is significant for how we see ourselves, and that's why I describe this, at least from my own perspective. I know that everything I've said is subject to other experiences, but the relationship between art and patronage, money and institutional dynamics is what we are really talking about.

Again, the philosophical stewardship ethos that I think is a given to those of us who work in this field, certainly as leaders, as directors and the like, is to be an advocate for some of the things that we discussed earlier, and advocate not just for education – I even think that education is a misnomer. Quite honestly, I think it's really about engagement. You want to enable an audience, sometimes specific and targeted, and sometimes more broadly defined. You want them to have an experience that maybe nostalgically harkens back to what we experienced when we first went to museums. I don't see how that's avoidable entirely, but with the knowledge and the investigations we've gone through in the past couple of decades about audience access, about the limitations of our own perspectives and tastes, I don't think we can, for a moment, accept that it should be like it was. In any case, it *isn't* like it was, so what's the point of discussing that?

I think where I want to go here, in order to set up the issue that I must focus on now, is the role of trustees, and their role beyond their role as trustees, because I think their aim is where we find it, let's call it sticky. And again, this may not apply to the European model, government-supported. What I've noticed is one trend: certainly it is true for our colleagues sitting here that the American model has been examined and applied; whether it has been replicated I can't say. But we now have not-for-profit organizations in this country, set up to support organizations in other countries, because the laws are such that Americans can do that beneficially whereas perhaps the English can't, or so on.

I remember being asked to come over – I think Julián was involved in this – to discuss fund-raising for a group of European museum leaders, because they never had this experience of structuring and strategizing to raise money from people. On the other hand, for us in America it's part of our culture and it's been a necessary – I wouldn't call it evil, it's just a necessary part of fortifying these institutions.

So, I love the word 'trustee' because it involves trust, but the technical idea of what this trust is is critical. What trustees do, for any of you who don't really understand this, perhaps because it isn't part of your practice, is serve as ultimately responsible financial stewards. They have other functions as well, but ultimately it's a financial trust that they have taken it on themselves to oversee and, in effect, create policy so that the resources of these organizations are applied in order to fulfill the mission of the organizations. There are differences in missions

here and there, but primarily, especially with collecting versus non-collecting institutions, which differ, much of it has to do with preserving, interpreting, collecting and... What's the other one? You know, there are sort of four truths to a mission-based work.

I think what's really critical, though, is those trustees have the fiduciary responsibility, that's the term that gets used a lot, and it's a fancy way of saying they're on the hook for the financial management of that institution. They are also, but as a corollary, responsible for either bringing money of their own to the table or finding ways of bringing money to fortify and nourish the institution programmatically and operationally.

Again, this may be the ABC, but where it gets tricky is going back to what I was suggesting a short while ago, and certainly implicit in what Benjamin and, to a certain degree, Mari Carmen's presentations did: okay, you have passionate collectors, let's give them the benefit of the doubt; they may be affluent enough actually to be so passionate that they not only support the museum, they also support galleries. Somebody is the investor in galleries. And I know some who are paid their returns on the investment through art, you know – this isn't a secret, but it is not discussed a lot. Some of those same people, guess what, serve on the boards of museums. Some of those same people serve on acquisition and exhibition committees. Now this isn't a dirty secret; it's an unspoken reality.

This might not be true in Europe. I have no idea how it works specifically in Europe, but where you become no longer disinterested as a trustee, but possibly conflicted as a trustee in voting on things that... We never did this in Washington, never, but there were times when it was awkward to ask people to leave the room, because we were revolting against the gifts they were offering, and they might not have voted, which technically means that they were not conflicted, but you see where I'm going.

Why is this relevant? Because a hundred years ago we had a very young president of the United States named Theodore Roosevelt, and one of his initiatives was – actually, he was called 'the trust buster' – it involved the idea of what is now called interlocking directorates. I remember that from eighth-grade social studies, but the fact is that the focus on the, at that time I think overt, collusion between people who had interests and were controlling markets and were controlling the direction of major businesses, and therefore the economy at that time, whether it be US steel or automakers or whatever, became a real issue, a political and

ideological issue about whether the millionaire industrialists, some of whom have museums named for them, were really the right people to control things.

Now again, pragmatically, nobody got elected President of the United States without substantial support, and it's even more that way in this country today. Many of you can't help but see what goes on, internationally, and when you watch the kind of money that was raised, the kind of expenses that were applied, you can't imagine that wealth isn't still controlling the power: of course it is. But whereas museums – let's take the Museum of Modern Art, for example. It was founded essentially by a Rockefeller, and yet the visionary was Alfred Barr. There were others of course, and as someone pointed out, it was on the threshold of a financial cataclysm, and yet it was Barr's role to guide and educate his trustees. And through that leadership, and I'll call it enlightened leadership, I think we had a model. That model has really yielded – not whether you are enlightened or not, but it is no longer easy, it probably never was, to think that that's what you are doing, if you really believe that you are merely leading and educating people who are so powerful and so uptight.

**SB.** Five minutes.

**NR.** Five minutes, really? Maybe we'll get to custodians.

I guess what I want to say goes to proprietary interest in terms of ownership. Who really owns these places? Certainly not us. In some formal sense it's the trustees, or perhaps the municipality. So, are we custodians or proprietors? To the degree that we buy art, yes, we are working in a proprietary way, but then again, usually purchases are adjudicated and ultimately decided upon by boards of trustees, committees. So I think we should just give up the notion that we are proprietors.

The custodial function is irrefutable: we take care of the collections, we are even called keepers in some jurisdictions. So my thinking, and I guess my concern, is that as we look at the future, and we are in the role of custodial leadership, we must recognize that our leadership has shifted from the art side – not that it should be set aside entirely, by any means, it's still the reason we exist and the reason we are all in this world, to begin with, is our love and value of art and aesthetics, even with all the refined arguments about fetishism. I agree with most of what was said and it's fascinating, but when we get down to short strokes here, we are really

talking about what are we looking at and going to learn immediately, and what have we learnt from the last number of years.

And simply said, we have, if you use a business model, overbuilt; we have over-expanded, we have overstaffed, we have over-purchased. I know just from my own experience that this is absolutely true. I don't know if it's true in all cases, but certainly we have not heeded anything to do with the modest and disciplined kind of management that is warranted. When you build a new space you have to provide some sort of endowment or security or get a guarantee from your government sponsors that they will continue to support it.

Look at what we see: the possible bankruptcy of General Motors, the closing of major banks and financial interests. These things are much more frightening in a way, not just because we may have money in the stock market, but because the entire tsunami effect is going to hit us, and it's started already. We saw the signs and we ignored them, and we ignored them because the people who advised and counseled us very often were entrepreneurial, business-oriented people who were serving the interests of the institution through their lens.

What I'm really getting at here is that there have to be new strategies, not only about audiences, not only about rethinking ourselves in the way that was discussed previously, but from a business standpoint. We just can't afford to be what we thought we were becoming. Most of us have really to retrench. Yes, you can shrink, you can do everything smaller, and just put it on a Xerox machine and reduce it by thirty percent, and then you will have an operation which is thirty percent smaller, but that's not the way to lead, that's not vision. Vision has to do with some of the things that were discussed this morning, and understanding not only technologically or pedagogically, but really from the standpoint of... I really do believe that in particular small museums, and even many middle-sized museums, are really endangered species. I hope I'm wrong, but I say that to provoke thought. How can museums without major collections resort to collection display when they don't have anything that is really going to engage people? It may work to a certain degree on a local level, but it's not going to work on a regional or national level at all. The model we have had and we all practice is circulating exhibitions. Those exhibitions have become, first of all, very, very large. Do you really need all the Morandis at the MET to really see Morandi? It's a good question, and I don't know the answer. And somebody said – I think it was Benjamin, no, it was Glenn actually – the key question is not what to do, it's what not to do. It really is. What to do can involve strategic

alliances, where not only exhibitions are shared, or collections are shared, but staff are actually shared. Now that's terrible. That means you won't have control in the same way, you won't have your own program so singularly engendered.

But I think that if you really think about what we can do in this field, it has to do with efficiencies, it has to do with, on the one side – and Glenn said this too – going deep, not going wide. The scope of what we do, which has been in the interest of audience development, has to be really rethought. If you don't go deep, what are you offering? My view is that our country is going to Russia for ballet. I don't really know what happened, but if you think that a museum is important and then you think about the other kinds of institutions that are failing, don't kick yourself. Museums are going to fail at some level, unless we rethink not just the mission but the actual vision of these organizations.

I think the only way to continue the good work is to pull ourselves... That's why this conference is so important. We need to create alliances, not just geographical ones, that have to do with shared vision; that have to do with a belief that we complement and supplement each other in ways that have to be forged, that heretofore really have never been done. Sure, there are little models of that... I'm going to stop.

I guess what I wanted to end with – I did write a quick conclusion, which is that here is willful optimism against a backdrop of dark pessimism, and that the privilege of working in this world of creative work is that we can come up with solutions that are to an extent incumbent on us, but it's just because we work with creativity that I believe that we can come up with better ideas and better solutions than many other worlds. I think we all understand that it has to do, ultimately, with maintaining the quest for inspiration, and the privilege of supervising and overseeing and ultimately sharing what we have to offer. So I'm going to yield the stage. Thank you for your patience.

## **RESPONDENT**

**Andrea Fraser**

**Andrea Fraser (AF).** I would very much like to thank Manuel Borja and Sabine Breitwieser for giving me an opportunity to participate in this conference and to speak here to such an incredibly distinguished group of museum professionals and others, and many, many thanks to

Pilar Cortada for all the organizing and for facilitating my travel through a number of last-minute changes. And thank you, Ned, for your thoughtful presentation.

As Ned mentioned, I didn't receive a copy of the paper, which in any case he didn't read, but what I received about a month ago was an abstract and I prepared a kind of response, or a kind of counterpoint on the basis of that abstract, and Ned's presentation doesn't actually entirely reflect the tone of the abstract, or at least my interpretation of that tone. So when I mention Ned's name in my paper, in my little response, you might sort of replace it with some other name. Just remember, in your own minds, that it may not refer to Ned, but to some other hypothetical former museum director, or current museum director.

But I do sort of summarize some elements from his abstract.

Ned – maybe I should use another name, Bill – sees museums and museum professionals as custodians more than proprietors. However, key to either role, as he put it in his abstract, is responsibility, and this implies the more important roles of leadership and advocacy. Sadly – he argued in his abstract – these questions have become much less relevant today, because of the immense challenges posed to museums by the current economic crisis.

Reading Ned's abstract, I was struck by the language of his account of these challenges, as well as the solutions he offered, which... This language came in a little bit toward the end of your talk in a way that perhaps contradicts some of what went before – he began by defining a proprietor as an owner of property. However, in the English language at least, a proprietor most often implies an owner not simply of property but of a business establishment. It was striking, therefore, that despite his assertion that museums and museum professionals are more custodians than proprietors, the language of leadership he evoked was quite explicitly, to quote from his abstract, taken from the world of business. He spoke of dynamism and efficiency, strategic paradigms, mergers and strategic alliances, exporting and importing works of art, and suggests that successful art-museum leaders will have to engineer new solutions simply to avoid going out of business.

All of this would seem to contradict his assertion that museums and museum professionals are more custodians than proprietors. In fact, such language and the framework in which, in the abstract, he formulated the challenges faced by museums and proposed solutions, itself seems

to demonstrate how central the alternatives of proprietor and custodian are to the question of what kind of leadership and what kind of advocacy museums might offer today.

I would argue that the economic crisis has not displaced, but revealed, their centrality. Of course, Ned and I assume all of you who are museum professionals, which I'm not, know better than I that museums and museum professionals are technically more custodians than proprietors. The charters of most museums, and the codes of ethics of most museum organizations, make this very clear. ICOM's code of ethics states: 'Museums that maintain collections hold them in trust for the benefit of society and its development.' Of course, this principle broadly applies to publicly governed and subsidized museums whose collections are often owned by the state, and not by the institution. It also holds true for most private non-profit museums, whose tax-exempt status – an indirect public subsidy to the tune of at least a percentage of a top tax rate – is grounded in 'the tradition of public service', as the American Association of Museums' Code of Ethics puts it. They are organized as public trusts holding their collections and information as a benefit for those they were established to serve. And this is the official language of trusteeship, which Ned mentioned in his talk.

The past two decades, however, have seen the rise of entrepreneurial models of museum management, influencing the organizational priorities of many museums as well as their approach to financing. Many museums and museum professionals have indeed come to see themselves as proprietors as well as custodians. And the line between business establishments and public and non-profit organizations has become increasingly fuzzy.

The rise of economic criteria in both museum management and programs, which we heard about a little bit this morning, with efficiency and box-office buying, scholarship and artistic criteria, has of course been much debated, as has the rise of program-related investments in retailing, and public amenities such as high-end restaurants where the average price of admission has skyrocketed. This entrepreneurialism can also be seen in the architectural programs of many museum buildings, not only in the kind of spectacular museum architecture that Benjamin Buchloh was talking about, which is oriented toward destination marketing, but also in the vast amounts of new space devoted to large income-generating amenities, again like restaurants and gift shops, as well as the grand atriums that can be rented out for corporate functions.

And of course many museums also turn to their collections as sources of revenue: relicensing, high loan fees charged to other institutions, and even deaccessioning.

In the US context, these phenomena have led to challenges to the tax-exempt status of some museums, or some museum activities I should say, but most museum professionals, in papers or at conferences that I have attended, insist that such income-generating activities are a matter of survival, given the cuts in public financing and the furious competition for donations and audiences, circumstances that will only get worse as the economic crisis deepens.

However, in the US at least – and again, like Ned, I'm reflecting primarily on a very specific model, the US model, which perhaps, as Benjamin Buchloh said this morning, could open me up to charges of provincialism and a narrow perspective, given the diversity of museums around the world – but in the US, at least, the relationship between museums and the economic policies that produced both the dearth of public financing and the economic crisis we face is not new, nor incidental to the economic and organizational structure of museums. In fact, the structure of museums in the US as privately governed non-profit corporations, going back to the late nineteenth century, was a direct product of the activism of economically liberal and politically conservative individuals against the expansion of government into any areas of social provision.

Andrew Carnegie spread the Gospel of Wealth, in his famous tract of that name, arguing that private philanthropy, not government, is best suited to provide for public welfare. Andrew Mellon, who was not only the father of our National Gallery of Art, but is also a very convenient figurehead at the moment, as treasury secretary in the 1920's, of many of the theories that have guided the economic policies of the United States since the 1980's: slashing top tax rates from seventy-three to twenty-four percent, arguing that lower taxes would not only increase tax revenues and spur economic growth, through increased consumption and investment, but would also allow wealthy individuals to engage in cultural and other forms of philanthropy, as he himself did, with more effect and efficiency than the public-sector provision.

Of course that frenzy of financial speculation resulting from Mellon's economic policies came to an abrupt end with the stock market crash in 1929, and the Great Depression.

The past twenty-five years of art market and museum expansion can relate quite directly to the return of these economic philosophies in the 1980's, and their spread around the world as free-market fundamentalism, most often known as new liberalism and monetarism, imposed on developing and transitional economies by financial institutions, and even embraced to varying degrees by European social democracies and Asian command economies.

The well-documented result has been a continuous overall decline in global productivity since the 1970's, coupled with a massive upward transfer of wealth. The last two and a half decades have seen the wholesale dispossession of publics and public sectors through debt traps set for governments as well as individuals, through privatization and other forms of enclosure of common resources, through high-risk lending and investment schemes that have forced periodic public bail-outs.

The wealth extracted through this impoverishment of publics and public spheres was transferred to a very small number of individuals, and these individuals poured billions of dollars into art, the art market and the art institutions. And there is absolutely no question at this point that the exponential growth of museums in the last two decades, like the art market, has been a direct consequence of these economic policies, the economic policies that have led to the current economic crisis. There is no question that museums, artists and the art world as a whole have been prime beneficiaries of the economic inequalities those policies have produced, of unprecedented concentrations of wealth, and the impoverishment of publics and public sectors that have made those concentrations of wealth possible. I would even go so far as to suggest at this point that for museums, who consider themselves as proprietors of collections held by them in public trust, to raise admission fees beyond the reach of any members of the public, to spend large sums of public or tax-deductible money on exclusive events and amenities for high-income audiences, has itself represented a kind of enclosure of common wealth and resources.

We are not today innocent victims of this crisis, any more than we were unwilling beneficiaries of the policies that produced it. Our participation may not, like those of some of our patrons, have involved fraud. At this point, however, for us to rationalize our proximity to and benefit from the wholesale dispossession of the public sphere by way of some nebulous notions of art as a public good, or to aver that it contributes to critical self-reflection in society, as I myself have done as an artist, is intellectual fraud.

My remarks, of course, are primarily directed to museums in the United States, and to museums that have embraced the US model of private cultural support that spread around the world, along with the free-market fundamentalism of the so-called Washington consensus.

The magnitude – and again, I say if it doesn't apply to or to your institutions, I can really only congratulate you – the magnitude of the disaster created by these economic policies is only beginning to reveal itself, as Ned started to remind us. If indeed what we need today is leadership in this crisis, to quote President-elect Obama, it is not to be found in the failed policies of the last decade, which produced it. The global revulsion against these policies, made evident in the US election a few weeks ago, has made it clear that if that is where leaders are leading, followers are no longer following.

I would suggest that in the museum world, such leadership is not to be found in the US model of private non-profit museums, or business models of efficiency, mergers and strategic alliances; rather that leadership must lie in a new or renewed commitment to art as a public good, in its economic and not just symbolic conditions. A commitment rooted in a broad advocacy of the enrichment of the public sphere, and not only our little cultural corner of it. Advocacy that must include not just cultural policy, but the social and economic policy with which it is invariably tied.

Well, I think the last two paragraphs are probably unnecessary.

The museum world must develop a basis for leadership and a conception of public service that rises above the politics of power, prestige, positional status, and organizational self-interest – now perhaps self-preservation – that it seems to me has driven leadership in the field of museums for most of the last two decades. Now is the time for that leadership. To quote President-elect Obama's new Chief of Staff: 'A crisis should never go to waste.' Thank you.

## **OPEN DISCUSSION**

### **Ned Rifkin and Andrea Fraser**

**Ned Rifkin (NR).** First of all I want to tell you how much I appreciate what you said, what you wrote. I'd love to see it again. I think there was a little misunderstanding about the abstract. What I was referring to wasn't – I forget how you put it, but...

**Andrea Fraser (AF).** I already absolved you of responsibility.

**NR.** On behalf of Bill, then. What I was objecting to was the question of custodial versus proprietary, which I agree with you is not black and white, it is very grey, and perhaps that's the fun of the conversation. On the other hand, it wasn't that I was backing away from either the advocacy or the leadership issues. But I think what you're saying is not so far from what I'm saying, which is the leadership models – I was taking them from the business standpoint, very pragmatically, because whether we err on the side of the extremes of the principles or the other extreme, which is survival and reduction, however you want to describe your strategy, they are both important. And I think the question that we all face and probably can only solve collectively as well as individually is how to go about this, because what you're proposing is a radical overhaul, it seems to me, and it came out this morning also, particularly in Mari Carmen's comments. And so I've left. How much more radical can I get?

**AF.** Well, I thought about it. You said you were thinking about it.

**NR.** Nobody wants me.

**AF.** Of course I stopped at the problem, and I certainly don't feel that I'm in a position to recommend solutions. It seems that most museums at this point are functioning within what is essentially a mixed economy model, with some variation of percentages of their budgets covered by public subsidy, private contributions and earned income. I think the norm in the United States is a third, a third and a third, although in some cases, that varies enormously.

My general point was – and I think what we did not see in the past decades in the United States, and again I can't generalize so much in terms of the European context and certainly not Asian or Latin American contexts – is that with the rise of the new patron class that you introduced and that I was bringing in from another angle, museums have not engaged in a kind of broad-based lobbying, of broad-based political engagement. At least, I haven't seen it. Well, you were in the belly of the beast. But when we look at the NEA crisis, for example, when we look at the various kinds of cultural wars that flared up in the United States, the response of museums was generally very weak. Museums did not rise to defend public funding when it was under threat, museums did not take sides in the big government/small government debate.

And now museums are feeling the effects of that, and it has also a lot to do, of course, at this moment with the consequences of the expansionary frenzy that you mentioned, which itself is also linked to some extent to globalization and the emergence of the field of museums as a highly competitive global market, where museums are not only competing for sources of funds as well as exhibitions and personnel within a local and national context, but now have to compete internationally for support from new transnational elites, which of course also include artists and curators as well as patrons. So this all kind of contributed to this expansionary frenzy that we've seen in the past decade, which, as you noted, will now have to come to an end. And there'll be a period of retrenchment, and again, what are going to be the politics and principles that guide it?

**NR.** I think that you have a very good grasp, both in your paper and these comments subsequently, of the conundrums that exist, trying to function with something that's been changing. Institutions don't change as quickly as the culture and the economy, apparently. So, practically speaking again, the issue right now for at least American museums is that the wealth that has supported them, private wealth, is conceivably substantially diminished. The members, the attendants, no matter what is going to be offered, it all has to be diminished in some way. It is just a rule of capacity, I think, more than anything else. So, there is the practical front of what to do. Just to survive, and I really mean that there is going to be a court crisis of survival, if there isn't already, because the operating endowments are down twenty percent, thirty percent. And yet the buildings aren't, and the staff aren't, that's what's real.

But I think that this crisis is an opportunity. We all like to say these things because we are leaders, and we believe them, we really do believe them. I think it's a question of getting really smart and figuring out not just what will work, but going back to our values and our core principles of why we exist, why we are doing what we are doing, and then say: this is my priority. Let's make sure we do that ferociously.

Everything else has to come into that zone. It can't be: 'Well, let's do this and this in order to do that,' I think that's what I wouldn't even call retrenchment; what they call it in the stock market is adjustment, and I don't think that's wrong. I think there are cycles, and yes, people have been greedy and there've been all sorts of... Some of the remarks you made I accept. I think we've been indulgent, and so on and so forth, but the reality is still not going to go away, whether we agree or disagree. And the question is how much can this social fabric that we

function within support, and I think we are way overpopulated. That's the problem, as I see it.

Many of you don't face these issues, but in this country, let me tell you, there are museums and arts centers all over, and they do serve communities, they do serve artists' communities as well.

I think what is critical, and I think you hear it from President Obama and others, is that it's important to move forward, it's important not to repeat your mistakes. But some of them are legacies. I look at some of these buildings, and I think: what do we do with them at this point? Is that such a burden? Maybe not. I'd love to hear more from an artist's perspective, from a practicing artist.

**AF.** You are doing my best impersonation of a cultural policy wonk. I'm not actually here as an artist today.

**NR.** Okay, sorry.

**AF.** I think the question of criteria that Benjamin Buchloh raised this morning is an important one. I don't think that I would necessarily approach it in the same way as he would, and I think Mari Carmen's response was very... I also agree with Mari Carmen's critique of the way he was framing it, but I think that one of the issues that I see with this sort of enormous expansion and this sort of intimate, often very porous, relationship to the art market and to financial interests in the art world that have come to be the norm, I think, in museums in the United States, does have to do with the kind of realignment of criteria, and that gap, for example, that we see in museums and museum collections and exhibitions is [...] but certainly that is a very big part. There are social criteria that define values and success in the art market and so on and so forth, that have clearly come to dominate many programs of museums in the United States. I think a lot of that has to do, and this has been much discussed, with the influence of trustees and the relative autonomy of curators within those institutions and relative to the often very vested interests of their trustees and patrons.

But the question of criteria, I think, becomes... well all of that may be obvious, but I think the question of criteria, which is a question that I think curators and museum directors have to engage vis-à-vis their programs, is going to be very important in rethinking what is this public

good that art represents, that museums represent. Which is going to be very important to whatever the legitimizing argument for new forms of public funding are going to be.

**NR.** Can I just say – and I'm realizing through listening to you we share our position more, which is great – I don't believe in autonomy. I don't think anybody has autonomy, and even as a concept it is erroneous. I think you said 'relative autonomy'?

**AF.** I always say relative autonomy. Is autonomy relative to you, for example? I said, relative to something and something else.

**NR.** I don't think we have autonomy, that's where I really take exception; I think we are so interdependent, and the question is: can we discern the nature of that interdependency in such a way that those criteria can be realized in a meaningful way? Because it's great to have criteria, and it's great to believe you're autonomous, but in fact, we all know that that's just not the case. I'm not trying to be argumentative for the sake of argument, I just think that it's not real, and those of us who work with boards and staffs and artists are at the point where it all comes together, and the tension is just unbelievable, because the belief systems don't align. I'm not complaining about that, I just think that the engineering – maybe that's a harsh term, the alignment – of these various constituent elements is probably what needs to be rethought. You have to have the criteria, you have to know what they are, you need to communicate them, but you also, to be a good leader, need followers. You're not just saying 'I am a leader', you need people to come with you.

**AF.** If we look at the last two periods of – I'm not a historian and I have never studied the sort of developments in the museum world during the Great Depression, but broadly, my sense is that what took place to a large extent after the crash in 1929, and certainly I think what took place in the museum world in the United States, and to some extent in Europe in the 1970's, was the shift of the legitimizing logic of public funding – and to some extent I would say that this also applies to private funding – from one of a sort of symbolic capital prestige to a much more instrumental logic of funding.

This also – and I'm sort of picking up on the kind of question of autonomy, because one can of course define autonomy or even relative autonomy in all sorts of ways, and I stand behind the notion of relative autonomy – but I think that one of the very complicated questions that

museum professionals are going to face is what is going to be the rationalization, the legitimizing rationale, for public funding, and for private funding for that matter? But if I want to kind of advocate the pursuit, the expansion of public funding relative to private funding, what is going to be the rationale in what we've seen in the past is, and what we saw in the discourse of cultural policy in the United States in the 1970's was, a kind of instrumental term, advocating for public funding in terms of community development, urban development and so on, and also economic development, and these were the rationales... I'm not actually exactly sure where I'm going with this.

**NR.** I'll tell you where you *were* going. We're done.

## SESSION 3

### TRANSMITTING: DISPLAY FORMS

#### INTRODUCTION

**Christine van Assche**

**Christine van Assche (CVA).** Good morning. It's an honor to introduce Françoise Vergès and Christophe Cherix.

Françoise Vergès is Professor at the Center for Cultural Studies at Goldsmiths College, in London. She is also President of the Comité pour la Mémoire de l'Esclavage ([www.comite-memoire-esclavage.fr](http://www.comite-memoire-esclavage.fr)), and Project Director of the Réunion Island Museum, in the Indian Ocean, called Maison de la Culture, on which she is going to talk. She has published several books: *Monsters and Revolutionaries: Colonial Family Romance and Métissage*, in 1999; *La Mémoire enchaînée: Questions sur l'esclavage* in 2006; *Nègre je suis, nègre je resterai*, with Aimé Césaire in 2007. She has also published several articles on contemporary artists, among them Isaac Julien.

Christophe Cherix, well known at MoMA, has published several *catalogues raisonnés*, including one on Henri Michaux (with Rainer Michael Mason) and another on Robert Morris. He was co-director of L'Usine in Geneva between 1995 and 1997, and he organized exhibitions there with Liam Gillick, Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno, among others. He's the co-founder of the publishing house JRP Editions in Geneva, with Lionel Bovier, and has published books on Allen Ruppersberg, Steven Parrino and Hanspeter Hofmann, among others.

He was the Head Curator of the Cabinet des Estampes in Geneva from 2005 to 2007, and organized shows there with Carl André, Barry Le Va, Mel Bochner, Fabrice Gygi and other artists.

Today he is curator of the Department of Prints and Illustrated Books at MoMA. He organized the show that you can see upstairs called Project 88, with the artist Lucy McKenzie. His next exhibition will be in July 2009 here at MoMA too, and it is called 'In and Out Amsterdam', based on the conceptual art scene from Amsterdam in relation to art works from Los Angeles and New York. After their talk there will be an exchange between both of them.

## **SPEAKER**

### **Françoise Vergès**

**Françoise Vergès (FV).** Thank you; thank you for inviting me, and thank you to Christine van Assche for suggesting my name. I'm not artist-oriented, I don't work in contemporary art, so I'm not really part of your crowd, but I hope that my presentation will have some interest for you.

I brought some images of Réunion Island, where I'm from, and I was wondering if I would show them. I was a bit afraid of the exotic, but in fact it is exotic, so you might have at least a little idea of what I'm talking about, the society.

The Maison des Civilisations et de l'Unité Réunionnais, of which I am the project director, is a 'museum without objects', which in 2010 or 2011 will open on Réunion Island. It is the Regional Council's major control project for the island; its estimated cost is eighty-seven million euros, of which the Réunion Regional Council is contributing two-thirds; the rest is divided between the French state and the European Community. The building will cover nine thousand square meters, and there will be a permanent exhibition, temporary exhibitions, a space dedicated to video, a library dedicated to poetry, shops, a restaurant and bar, rooms for seminars, a theater, a garden, a panoramic terrace and a park.

So why did we want to do that – the challenge of building a museum? There are two museums that were built under the colonial regime, and none since. The idea was to build a museum in a society which has produced no art object, no palace, no great school of art, but which has contributed to the production of immaterial culture. Here, I borrow the words of Aimé Césaire to speak about people who invented neither the steam machine nor the compass, but without whom the Earth wouldn't be Earth as we know it. Or, as Achille Mbembe said about our project, we are speaking of 'a society with silhouettes, with specters, which deserve a space where their lives and production are shown'.

The other challenge was to visualize an immaterial culture: human interactions, what conversation is made of, friendship, love, fear, courage, desire. It was also to visualize

resistance, and memory as a site of resistance; the voice of the witness; the souvenir against hegemonic narrative; voice, word and image, searching to evoke rather than to claim authenticity.

Another challenge was to be a 'museum of the living present', starting from current questions to interpret the past, and imagine the future. The present, as it is invented and created, with no past or future, but informed by both, ephemeral and yet producing meaning, proposing also other categories of the word – not a North-South hegemonic map, but showing South-South connections, East and South, South and North, departing from the way imagined and imposed by the European power.

Very quickly, the genealogy of the project, a rapid summary of the island history.

There was no native population when the French colonized it in the 17th century. For the next two centuries France purchased hundreds of thousands of captives on the coast of Mozambique and Madagascar to bring them to work as slaves on the island's sugar plantations. Slavery was finally and permanently abolished in 1848. France then imported workers from Southern India, the Comoro Islands, Madagascar, Mozambique and Southern China to replace the slaves. Meanwhile, migration from the European colonial empires in the Indian Ocean brought also people from Gujarat and China. The last indentured workers arrived in the 1930's.

Anti-colonial struggle led to the end of colonial status in 1946, and Réunion became a French department – is still a French department, and now also a European region – but the French state resisted the implementation of equal rights, and until the late 1970's cultural repression was ferocious and the French language was imposed. White was beautiful, the Creole language was forbidden in school, and Christianity was hegemonically imposed.

In summary, the island has been entirely populated by foreigners, by people who did not speak the same language, had not the same religious beliefs, cuisine, cultural practice, concepts of masculinity and femininity, ideas about power, freedom and servitude. Practically everything was imported to the island: women, men, gods and goddesses, food and vegetables, animals, ideas, languages and practices. There is just one food which was indigenous there: everything else was brought in – lychees, pineapples, mangoes.

Within the three centuries of its short history, the island has been an intense contact zone between very diverse cultures, beliefs, languages and practices.

More recent migrations include Muslims from the Comoro Islands, and people from metropolitan France. It is, as I said, a French administrative region. Its economy is very fragile. Sugar cane was the main industry, and that's falling apart. Its population is close to one million, Creole is still the main language, and Réunion society is facing many challenges.

**[slide]** It sits on the African-Asian axis. Right down Africa, you have Madagascar, and then you have two little dots there: one is Réunion and the other is Mauritius.

So that is the local context within which our project has emerged. It is a ground-roots project, inspired by the history of anti-colonial and postcolonial struggle. Now for the national context in which it emerged. In France, for the most part, cultural projects travel from top down: the state decides to build a cultural center, museum curators and professionals from the Ministry of Culture are sent to investigate and to write the project, and 'voilà!' In our case, it is a project entirely born on the island, resting on the experience of local struggle and knowledge of experiences in Europe, Africa, Asia and the Americas that have similar approaches: the history and practices of the anonymous, of those who do not matter; the valorization of immaterial and vernacular culture; the processes and practices of Creolization.

It is also a project emerging within the current context of France's state of denial, her resistance to revising her national narrative, to expanding the border of her national cartography, to confronting her colonial past and postcolonial present. It is also a project that must deal with France's ignorance of the contribution of its overseas territories – you may know that even to this day, when they show the map of France, there is only hexagonal France and Corsica: they never show New Caledonia, they never show Tahiti, they never show Mayotte, Martinique, Guadalupe or Guiana. France's map remains within the borders of its 16<sup>th</sup>-century map. Its geographical map is its mental map.

France is now at a turning point. Riots in 2005 against racial and social discrimination, anti-immigration policies; controversy over the memories of slavery and colonialism; the attempt by Parliament to enforce education of the positive side of colonization in schools, all brought

centre-stage France's *malaise*, with its mission to civilize, to dictate who is enlightened and who must enlighten others. Race is the organizing principle of this mission, and the color line in French history – always the color line.

This has always been, in fact, the focus of my work: who matters, who doesn't matter and why; the fabrication of disposable people, the body as the primary resource to sell and traffic, and the places with 'no name', like Réunion Island. Still today I have to tell people, you know, 'You have Africa and you have Madagascar, and this little dot, this is where I'm from.'

What is on the map and what is not on the map, that's also important, very important.

The project is a counter-hegemonic project and it seeks to build strong ties with creation. We have struggled to build its legitimacy, and for this, we turn to the population. Long before the opening, we have been working with people, with the public – the unemployed, which is close to twenty-seven percent of the active population, people with physical challenges, adolescents, children, the elderly, the illiterate – there are a large number of illiterate people. All these meetings and exchanges raise questions: should we have a lot of writing in the museum, because people do not read; what to do about the fact that the public in Réunion don't go to museums, museums are for the elite, for white people, and they will not go. For them it's a forbidden place. People are usually never asked what they want in terms of cultural activity, and they consider that museums are not for them.

We launched a campaign to collect donated vernacular objects that would testify of their lives and world. We collected oral and film testimony. We also launched a program of donating plants: people love gardening. We work with schools. In 2004, we created an honorary title, called *Zarboutan Nout Kiltir* (Creole for 'pillar of culture'), for women or men who have worked to create and transmit vernacular practices. We go around the island to present the project and discuss the objectives.

During these exchanges, we say: 'Okay, are the objectives understood, are they accepted?'

First we say, okay, look, our ancestors came from very diverse civilizations and, contrary to what we usually learn and hear, these civilizations were already highly complex when the Europeans arrived in the Indian Ocean.

Then, second, we speak of the process and practice of Creolization. A small island, contacts between so many cultures... how did Creolization occur? Cultures arrived in traces and fragments, and they colluded with each other in the colonial regime, with its practices of exclusion and racial hierarchy. Yet, through resistance, through negotiations between slaves, colonial settlers, migrants and indentured workers, a new culture and a new language emerged.

And third, we aim to give the present an important place, to make space for current affairs, economic globalization, new cultural emergences, new conflicts and resistance; to look at the past from the present, explore the singularities of its expression and avoid a deterministic approach.

From the beginning we said that those were the objectives, and then we said, okay, these objectives, are they understood, accepted? So we went to the population, we worked with the teachers, the schools, and we met also with people, we gave a presentation to the French state representatives, explaining why we should have this museum, and why we should call it a museum.

It is a museum without a collection and without objects, why? On Réunion, the encounter between very diverse groups which met on an unequal basis – and that is very important – produced a social and cultural creation. But rather than focusing on the objects produced, which are very few, we wanted to focus on that immaterial moment which speaks of exchange, which is the encounter with otherness. So the object is not at the center of the museum. And also, because very few objects exist that can testify to the lives of the poor and the exploited, there is absolutely no material testimony of the lives of the slaves, no material testimony of the lives of indentured workers, no material testimony of the lives of the poor. It's mostly the world of the wealthy elite that has been preserved by the French state and the local administration. And you may note that France has no policy of archaeology of slavery, so nothing has been researched. And many sites have been destroyed because of indifference or contempt.

We had to deal with an absence. We don't have any objects, so rather than trying to fill this absence, we chose to work from it, to transform it into a presence, and through fragments,

existing bits and pieces, to retrace the lives of the anonymous. We did not want to sacralize the object as the authentic marker of human action.

We think that violence and resistance can be shown through sounds, images, plays or a story. The object is just one tool among others. An installation of image and sound can testify to violence, resistance and the human condition. We thought about the human voice, how it can carry the testimony and evoke exile, splendor, suffering and joy. A story that can be a very important to recreate an event, and the narratives are important mediators of visualization. The idea is to combine objects, images, sounds and narratives to evoke the Indian Oceanic world from which the ancestors of Réunion people came, as well as the current world of exchange and encounters.

One example: when the Portuguese entered the Indian Ocean in 1488, they brought with them violence. Negotiation was not an option. Peoples seen as the enemy had to be crushed, massacred and destroyed, but we don't have images of that. They imposed monopoly on trade, destroyed cities. How could we show these events? We could have accumulated weapons and corpses to show massacres, but it would have been a little too morbid. And we thought that perhaps, just, for instance, an image of the Portuguese fleet would be enough, just to show that – because the Portuguese represented over and over their armada arriving in the Indian Ocean, and you always see their cannon bombing some city, so that could be enough to evoke that moment: an image of the Portuguese fleet and its cannons.

Another example: the resistance of slaves. We can show it through the creations of today: music, poems, the fact that the world, as I often say, would not be the world as we know it without the African presence. Brazil would not be Brazil, the Americas, the Caribbean, the Indian Ocean, Europe would not be what they are, in terms of music, of poetry, of ideas, of philosophy, without the struggle for freedom.

We looked a lot at the museums devoted to slavery: usually slavery is seen there from the perspective of the abolitionist's doctrine. I mean, you go through a museum on slavery to be told it was bad, which is of course quite self-evident. And we did not want to have such a self-righteous moment. We wanted to show why and how it lasted for centuries, and since it lasted for centuries, to make the visitor aware of the difficulty and the need to struggle against

injustice and inequality. It's not enough just to say it's wrong; you must show how a widespread support for injustice is fabricated.

Again, another example: the world of the maroons. Maroons were, I argue, the only *free* people on the island. Whites were the king's subject and slaves were private property; maroons were the only sovereign subjects with autonomy. They gave themselves names and they named the territories on which they lived. Hence, when you go to the island, all the interior has Malagasy names and the coastline has Christian names: Saint-Paul, Saint-Pierre, Saint-Louis, Saint-Marie, Saint-Suzanne, all the Saints, Catholic saints, and inside you have Malagasy names, Cilaos, Mafate, Salazie...

But how should we show this world of sovereignty and freedom, if there is no material testimony, no biographies of the maroon? So I suggested that we could have a space where a fictional narrative would be heard, based on historical elements and fragments of Malagasy oral history, and evoke courage and resistance through voices. A 'theatrophony' as an installation about resistance and freedom.

Our goal is to evoke a moment, and we don't want any authentic object, we don't care about that. About each moment, we asked ourselves: 'Okay, how do we show this or that?' We wanted to deconstruct the notion of the 'African slave', the 'Malagasy slave', the 'Indian coolie', and to give back the singularity of the lives of these people, so we said: 'Okay, we will pick up the metaphor of the itinerary in which to evoke displacement and settlement, which is metonymic of the Réunionnèse culture and embodies the process of Creolization.'

We don't have any biographies of slaves – in the French empire you don't have any biography of slavery, no autobiography, nothing. But what we could do was to show what Mozambique was like at that given moment; what was the route of capture, what the port from which the captured left, what kind of ship took them to the island, what kind of plantation they found there, and through that, some singularity will emerge.

And of course, there's an inseparable process concerning the economics of the project. On the island we have no oil, diamonds or gold. We do not have palaces, statues. So that's the reality, and we do not want to live beyond our means. It would be absurd to build a place that will

prove too expensive, and with the current crisis, it would be pure madness, we would really be off the beaten track. Right now, practically everything is imported!

And since we're speaking of the processes and practices of Creolization, as a survival creative strategy against hegemonic monoculture, we thought to apply this approach to the economics of the museum. And we asked, in 15-20 years on what economy will the project rest? What kind of economic foundation can we give it? If we turn to media techniques, is it necessary to dazzle the visitors with high technology? Or is it better to mix bits of high technology with *bricolage*, leaning toward an economy of recycling?

The museum must reflect the island's economy, seen in relation to its environment and the way in which inequalities are winding through the world and the region, so the real object of the Maison is the encounter with the other – any kind of encounter: conflict, friendly, curious, indifferent, interested and commercial.

I will say two words about the permanent exhibition. It is called 'Sixth World, Réunion Island'. Sixth World because the people came from six worlds: Madagascar, Africa, Europe, the Muslim world, Indian – Hindu – Chinese and Réunion. We adopted the chronology of Réunion Island, we did not follow the chronology of France, or India, or China: that would be absurd. We also wanted to integrate the island itself, because it's part of the imagery; it's very high, very mountainous, it has hurricanes, an active volcano, an ocean, which have impacted a lot on the imagery and the culture of Réunion.

We insisted on the importance of language: the Creole language and all the languages that have been spoken on the island at one point or the other: Malagasy, Hindi, Tamil, Cantonese, Urdu, Gujarati, French, Swahili. The exhibition will start with the Indian Oceanic world as it was before the island was colonized, because time does not start with the Europeans. In the Indian Ocean, Asia met with Africa and with the Muslim world – the role of Islam has been very important in that part of the world – and we will show the emergence of the Swahili civilization, which was also the process of Creolization. Today the Indian Ocean is still a very important geopolitical space: the majority of oil goes through it; one of the most important US bases is there, Chagos Island, from where planes go to bomb Iraq and other places. We are in the middle of this important geopolitical place. Our objective is also to show millenary South-South connections, the routes of exchange, conflict and encounter, to propose another

cartography, a mapping of the world in which Europe is a province among others. It's not that we think there is no longer a center and a periphery; we think there are many centers and many peripheries.

We will present Réunion today in all its complexity, and the exhibition will handle current affairs, economic, cultural and geopolitical issues; what it is to live on a small island in a space deeply transformed by the emerging regional powers – South Africa, China, India - which are using today all routes and connections or inventing new ones. Réunion does not live outside the world. In the aftermath of decolonization, the end of the Soviet Union, the current global war on terror, Réunion people are aware of current mutations, and they know that they need to situate themselves within emerging challenges.

Réunion also confronts the political circumstances of our time. We live in a cultural and geopolitical space that coalesces current issues: the conflict over oil, US military adventures, the new Southern routes of exchange, the role of China and India in that part of the world, the present state of Islam, and so on. We want to resite Réunion within a network of solidarity, exchange and imagination that links cultural and artistic movements which work on these issues. We want to be a critical agent of radical citizenship in the world today.

I want to show just two minutes of a video showing the building the architect designed, so you get an idea of what the building is about.

**[Video]**

## **RESPONDENT**

**Christophe Cherix**

**Christophe Cherix (CC).** I feel privileged to be today's respondent to Françoise Vergès' presentation, which I found very stimulating. As Christine van Assche told you, I'm a curator here at the Museum of Modern Art. So, 'a museum without objects,' as Françoise sometimes calls her project, can be a terrifying idea, in my position as a curator whose very first assignment, amongst a larger body of curators, was to watch over, study, and expand precisely a collection of objects.

However, I have to admit here that there is something incredibly liberating, at the same time, to hear Françoise's talk, for the problem she is facing can be viewed as an extraordinary opportunity as well. Les Iles de la Réunion were an empty land until the beginning of the 17th century, 'entirely populated' – to quote her – 'by foreigners, by people who did not speak the same languages, had not the same religious beliefs, cuisine, cultural practices, concepts of masculinity and femininity, ideas about power, freedom, and servitude.'

In summary, it's a place whose singular identity is to be found, since its creation, in the cultural diversity of its population. This is an incredible place to start a museum today, as it is precisely the direction that most museums are taking in this new global age. *Le Musée du temps présent's* second good fortune is to be imagined today. Very rarely does an institution have the opportunity not only to invent itself, but also to imagine, over a certain number of years, its singular relationship to a community.

The role and nature of collections and museums have changed considerably over the centuries, from small, essentially private, humanist Wunderkammern, to large, public, enlightened, encyclopedic museums. MoMA, a fairly young museum, founded in 1929, was also dedicated at the time of its creation to the present time. Its first director, Alfred Barr, supported the idea of a resolutely modern collection, visualizing it 'graphically as a torpedo moving through time, its nose the ever-advancing present, its tail the ever-receding past.'

Just like the artifacts they keep, museums are themselves undeniably part of a specific moment in time. For this reason, every new museum carrying a new model and a new way of reflecting the world has an impact on its forerunners. The project of the Museum of the Living Present seems to ask us how a museum such as the Museum of Modern Art, or any art museum, can from time to time be less object-oriented in order to tell a broader, more complex story, and how it can open itself to a plurality of stories, setting aside, now and then, its predisposition to propose unifying narratives.

When Françoise wonders how a museum can represent a moment, strangely reminding me of an Alphonse Allais painting, 'The Portuguese entering the Indian Ocean in 1498 bringing with them the violence of years of intense and brutal religious wars in Europe,' it gives me pause. I thought that telling the story of Fluxus or conceptual art was a real challenge! What I've learned from my own engagement with this material is that not all stories can be deduced

from objects, however well organized, however thoughtful and inventive a display may be. I've learned as well that the best education, when it comes to giving a representation of the world, can be found in the work of artists, who often answer our questions before we even think of raising them.

Since at least the early 1960's, some artists, for instance, walked away from the production of objects, opting instead to make immaterial works, using very surprising modes of representation. An example I like to cite is Stephen Kaltenbach, who made in those years, I believe, one of his most important works, simply by spreading rumors. He told someone that he had made a piece, which wasn't true, and let this person repeat it to an art critic, who ended up writing about it. Another of Kaltenbach's works that I'm very fond of, but that he cannot make again, as he became a devoted Christian, consists of three words: 'TELL A LIE,' which he printed in a small ad taken in an art magazine. Wouldn't it be liberating for a museum to engage in such a way with its audience? Not to ask the visitors to tell lies or to make them believe in shows which never existed, even if this would be quite tempting, but to consider its public not for what it can take away, in terms of experience, knowledge or even entertainment, but for what it can bring, and how it can contribute to the general discourse.

A number of curators, a position often overlooked in art history, as the art of the late 19th and 20th centuries is deeply intertwined with the history of its exhibitions, also imagined ways to open the museum's doors to a larger, more diverse public. Many examples could be given here, as the history of exhibition appears inseparable from modernity's greatest collections. Allow me to choose just one: the show Walter Hopps organized in 1976 in Washington while he was serving as the NCFAs curator of 20<sup>th</sup>-century American Art, called *Thirty-Six Hours* at an alternative space whose name, the Museum of Temporary Art, could have been an alternative to Françoise's project. The show was, according to Hopps' own words, 'literally organized from the street, as there was practically no budget, no money.' The show was based on a simple principle: 'Anyone who brings anything can be shown,' – not just artists, anybody. Hopps' only requirement was that 'it had to fit through the door.' In an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Hopps recalls: 'It's interesting how few people who were not really artists showed up. My role in this was to be there all 36 hours, meeting and greeting every single person who brought in a work. We'd walk to a space and they would help install it, right then and there.' So when I heard that the Museum of the Living Present suggested to the island's inhabitants they donate plants to build its park, and was quickly overwhelmed by the public's participation, Hopps'

great story came immediately to my mind, as another way to allow the public to reappropriate the museum.

If museums are today to broaden their reach towards a more global audience, to diversify not only the public but their collections as well, to open themselves to a plurality of narratives, and to walk away from the establishment of any authoritative model, in my opinion, the only way to operate such radical changes successfully is to allow ourselves to *re raconter* – to tell again, to use a term dear to Françoise – from a multiplicity of perspectives the different moments which we feel are singular to our existence as institutions. In *Monsters and Revolutionaries*, a book published by Françoise in 1999, she very appropriately quotes Michel de Certeau, for whom ‘History is always ambivalent,’ for the ‘place it gives to the past is equally a means to open the way for the future.’

And I can only hope, following the example of the Museum of the Living Present, that our museums, facing today the challenge of a larger world, will bear that in mind through the transformation they are about to make. Thank you.

## **OPEN DISCUSSION**

### **Christophe Cherix and Françoise Vergès**

**Christophe Cherix (CC).** When did you decide to create your museum? Did you have a model in mind of another existing museum?

**Françoise Vergès (FV).** No.

**CC.** Absolutely? Did you look for one?

**FV.** Yes. I had visited museums, even before taking the job. There were things here and there that I picked up.

**CC.** Like what?

**FV.** For instance, at the museum in Sydney, the city of Sydney, I thought there were very interesting ideas. For example, the fact that there were very small objects, in the sense of

nothing with commercial value, such as letters that the convicts wrote to England, the things that had been erased from history, a certain kind of archaeology, of singular lives. It was really very evocative. And the Museum of Apartheid in Johannesburg, where they used a lot of images and sounds.

I remember also a show in Zurich about mountains, snow and the importance of nature, and I thought it was absolutely fascinating and fantastic: how you could evoke natural elements as part of the imagery? What else? So many little things.

**CC.** It was basically a collection of fragments.

**FV.** Yes.

**CC.** Do you have any artists in mind with whom you wish to collaborate?

**FV.** Yes, we do. In Réunion, we met them, we've talked about it, and we hope that some artists will be interested in working with us.

**CC.** Why wouldn't they be?

**FV.** I don't know. It's far away, a little place: they might think it is better to be in the 'metropolis'. But we're working with young people in Réunion Island too, and as I said before, we want to dedicate the gallery to video only, so we can work with young people in Maputo, Mumbai, Antananarivo or, you know, other places, because when I travel this is what I see them using, the camera. It's easier for them, and for us it also keeps the costs down. Because otherwise, importing objects, with insurance, will be very costly. We had to think of the economic dimension of borrowing material works from artists. We had no illusions. So we are thinking about all this too, and you know, a video will travel well ... It will be cheaper, within a 'sustainable' economy. And also the young people there on the island will enter into a conversation with young people in Shanghai or Mumbai or Maputo. That's also the kind of art we want to promote.

**CC.** Will the museum be related to an art school? Or...

**FV.** There is an art school in Réunion, a recent one, but it's still an art school following the French model, and they don't learn enough about India or Madagascar or Africa, which are right there. I think that things are changing – the middle classes are sending their children to school now in India and China, for instance, so it's changing slowly, it will change. And I think in 10-15 years things will have changed quite a bit.

**CC.** And do you hope to be able to collaborate with other institutions nationally and internationally as well?

**FV.** Yes.

**CC.** Because in a way these experiences should be shared and...

**FV.** Very much so, yes. But I have to say we have encountered much more interest in Australia or the United States or Canada or in Japan... than in Europe.

**CC.** So not in France.

**FV.** No, not in France. In France, you know, in every region you've got a DRAC – a regional director of cultural affairs.

**CC.** It sounds important.

**FV.** And we have one in Réunion every three years. I think there is an inevitable position: the French may be very nice to you when you meet them in Paris, but when they come to Réunion, in no time, in two months, they adopt a colonizing attitude. They want to impose their view, they want to change things, they want this and that, we have to think like this and we have to think like that... It's a little difficult. Sometimes it's easier when we go to Paris and meet with the people there directly. For instance, we met with Christine Van Assche of the Pompidou Center and other people and it went very well, but when some of them come to the island it's as if something happens to them, they transform themselves, there is something, some inner colonial child emerging.

**CC.** Great, any questions from the public?

**FV.** None, you see, there's not...

**Homi K. Bhabha (HKB).** The communities in Réunion, what versions of their own, say of India or China, what is the nature of their connection today? And I ask this because, for example, in Trinidad in the early twenties, the Brahmin communities there already only had a very vague sense of India, or of the caste system, or of Brahmins, and yet it held them together, in a very vague, attenuated sense. So I'm just interested in knowing how these different communities... What's the kind of cultural base there, of their indigenous origin?

**FV.** Well, they brought with them, of course, religious... Well, it is different, for the Indians, the agreement between the UK and France was that they should be allowed to practice their religion. So, on every sugar plantation you had to have a temple. However, there is an interesting thing: the British and the French thought that all indentured workers were Hindu, because they came from India, but some of them were Muslims, so in the temple you have what's called a *nargulan*, which is in fact a place for the Muslims within the Hindu temple, and they sacrificed animals their way, and that was allowed. And if something was lost, there was nonetheless an important oral transmission.

If we look at Chinese, the first Buddhist temple was built in 1910. The first mosque is the oldest mosque built in France, even before the mosque in Paris. And you have also Afro-Malagasy rituals, which were heavily repressed by the French state.

There is a history of struggle for freedom of religious expression and religious practice. In the last 15 years, people have traveled back, to India, to Mecca, to China... and they have brought back ideas from there. It's transforming Réunion. There is a tension right now between the Creolized version of the cultural origins, or whatever they were then, because they were altered through time and current reinvention of tradition. The Tamil people who arrived in 1830 and those who arrived in 1870 were already no longer the same, and then the island itself had changed. The process was always dynamic, wave after wave of migration.

In the last 10-15 years you have a tension between those who are defending the Creolized version of these practices and those who want to purify it and bring back the 'true' Buddhist practices, the 'true' Hindi, the 'true' Muslim ones, so there is tension right now. But this is also

part of the process of Creolization. Islam has been revived by the people from Comoro Island, because earlier Muslim migrants were mostly Gujarati, which was a different form of Islam from current ones.

All this is changing, it's not fixed yet. And now you also have new evangelical churches, quite important on the island; some Mormons and other evangelicals have settled there. The landscape is constantly changing, transforming itself. But, to go back to your question, you don't have any castes on the island; they were mostly erased. It's different from Mauritius, where these were kept.

**Kasper Konig (KK).** Have you considered, given your wonderful transmission project, another title rather than 'museum'? Because 'museum' implies very much a kind of enlightenment, a very particular tradition, so I understand arguments in favor of calling it a museum, because this is a conference related to museums, so it gives you a platform to talk about this wonderful project, but have you considered other... you know, rather than museum, to give it another kind of ...

**FV.** Name?

**KK.** Yes.

**FV.** Well, it's called the *Maison*, the 'House', Maison des Civilisations et de l'Unité Réunionnais, but when we say museum, when we use the term, the notion of museum in our program, it's a political gesture for us; it's saying that though museums are related to enlightenment projects and the civilizing mission, you can also have a new form of museum. When we met the people in South Africa, or elsewhere, this was also what we were talking about: how to have a place where you visualize other things, how to invent a new kind of museum. And the name museum for me is a strategy, a moment – like, in 15 years it may not matter anymore. But it's important today to say to people in Réunion: 'Yes, your lives deserve a museum.'

**KK.** And those of us who are involved in museums can really learn from a new form of museum.

**FV.** Yes, when I said it was a political gesture it's really to say to people: 'Yes, you deserve it, your lives deserve a place like that.' Because the objects we collected, which were really *objets de rien*, as we say, the 600 of them will be presented as if they were works of art, and they will be the only objects treated as such. It will be the 'Gallery' of donated objects, like 'fantastic', marvelous things, with the name of the person, Mme. Payet, Mr. Rammassamy, Mme. Marimoutou, and so on, and that will be that. That's just it.

**Alicia Chillida (AC).** I would like to ask Françoise what was the starting point of the project. Who were the promoters...?

**FV.** We must go back to the 1960's. In 1946 colonial status ended, but the French state really resisted the implementation of the law, the question of equality. Equality, social equality, was only achieved in the late nineties, ten years ago, so you see how the French State resisted...

And there was a real imposition of 'Frenchness': 'You are French, it's the only thing valuable, you have just one origin, one language...' And we were saying, 'No. We are not. Just look around the island and you'll see it is not possible.' So it was to reconstitute equality, the fact that we came from China, from India, from Africa, Madagascar... There is no hierarchy of civilizations, of culture. This was the first affirmation [of that].

The idea was launched in the 1960's, in the middle of really strong resistance to cultural and political repression. Most civic rights were violated; you didn't have freedom of expression, voting rights... My own family (I was a little girl then) was the target of brutal harassment. Réunion counter-postcolonial discourse was saying: "'We have a history, we have a language, we speak Creole, we have a history, our history is not just French history, we come also from elsewhere, we live in a world called the Indian Ocean, which has its own history, a millenary history.'

When we emerged as a human society in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the people who were brought to the island already came from very complex worlds, worlds that had already met each other. Africa and Asia had already met. Theater, music, literature, research took Réunion society, culture and history as their terrain of creativity. Cultural and political repression slowly weakened (though let's not be naïve, it's still there). In 2000 the Regional Council, which had a

Leftist majority, decided to launch the project, so there were studies and in 2002 they asked me to come to work for it.

I wrote with Carpanin Marimoutou, poet, writer and professor of comparative literature, the scientific and cultural program in 2005. In 2007, we organized the international architectural contest; the X-TU team was the laureate. This year, we have been working with them and the engineers, and the building permit should be through at the beginning of next year, and building should start.

Meanwhile, we are working towards realizing the permanent exhibition, which, as I said, will be like a trek, a journey; we imagine it as traveling – and you will travel, as if someone was telling you: ‘Okay, come, we will travel through time and space.’ We also had to think about the fact that people don’t read, that we moved from people who were illiterate, who had no books, to people who own TV and radio. From total illiteracy to TV, and we skipped the book moment.

So people don’t read, really, and people don’t master French that much, even though we have had an overwhelming French public system since the late 1960s. Creole language and French look almost the same, but they are not, it’s not the same meaning, even if sometimes it’s the same word. So we also have to think how we will transmit knowledge not through the written word, because otherwise we will fail.

So how about through people telling a story? For instance, you will listen to the narrative of the travels of Ibn Khaldûn told by an actor, instead of having to read them, or listen to the diary of Vasco de Gama, how he destroyed Calicut, and Calicut will be evoked, too...

**Kian Chow Kwok (KCK).** I'm curious... You're doing this presentation to an art museum conference; would it be very different if you did it to a history museum conference, or an ethnographical museum conference? And is there a particular value to an art museum forum in relating to your project?

**FV.** Is there a what?

**KCK.** A particular value in the way we approach this question of museology.

**FV.** For art museums? Well, you have to answer that. You are the one...

**KCK.** Why have you chosen this forum as opposed to a history museum forum?

**FV.** Well, I talk at colloquiums on museums of culture and civilization as well, you know. I don't think they're that different. I will say that when I visit art museums, I think... How can I say it? I do think the evocation of a moment, an event, can work through literature, poetry, painting – there is not just *one* thing. People from art museums want to talk to me and help me to think it through. So perhaps people from the art museums have nothing to learn from me, but I'm learning from them – from you.

**Kathy Halbreich (KH).** Just to follow up on that question, Françoise, I found the ideas that you just put forward fantastic, and you're really dealing with so many issues about history and memory and stories that can't be told through objects. And Christophe, you in a way presented the notion of what objects can do, what they can't do, and the Kaltenbach example's really fantastic, but I just wonder if the two of you could talk a little bit more about what we need to be doing, the stories we can tell that objects can't. We all – or many of us – have extraordinary archives and other material that is much more in the realm of material culture, and I wonder if the two of you could talk a little bit in that direction, because that seems to me maybe the reason why, Françoise, you're here – and Christophe, you got to that. So, are there some strategies or ways we could be talking about display that isn't always about objects? Not that I don't know objects...

**CC.** I think we are in practice doing that, as best as we can, if we want to document, let's say, a generation of artists active in the sixties, very much related to dance-, performance- and time-based work. It's really something which is on our minds, I would say, almost constantly now. And I think your question about display, we faced almost the same question, because suddenly we are facing art works that we feel are absolutely important in our history, but we cannot represent them as easily as we can the history of Cubists in painting, or something like that. So I think it's an ongoing dialog and reflection.

What I really like in Françoise's project is that – and I think Kasper König was right to ask if it was a museum; maybe it's not – but the question is more 'Does the future of museums lie in museums?' Maybe not. And I think those questions are very interesting today.

**FV.** Well, I was thinking, maybe the question is how to use the object in different ways. Imagine we announce there will be an exhibition, and start to work on it, called '*Kosa in soz*' (Creole for: 'What is a thing?'). We take 150 signs, following Barthes's idea of the 'empire of signs', that we think are related to Réunion – anything, you know. For instance, there is a kind of bread we call 'makatia', or from the fact that French gendarmes wear shorts and socks, the term *gendarmes à chaussettes*, and other things – the volcano, or whatever...

We take these things, the 'signs', and we travel and say to people: 'Okay, tell us, which of these are the five most important for you who relate to Réunion culture.' We have tried it and works incredibly well, and people bring other things, and then nominate things that are not objects, but for them are as important in describing Réunion society. One of those words was, of course, mixing, *métissage*, Creolization. But this is not an object, right? It's not an object, so in this puzzle we also import words that evoke something, intangible things. It's a mix of all this, tangible and intangible, that in fact constructs the world we live in. What also matters is memory.

We call it a 'house' because in a house you find what you left and what you took, but you also have to give things away, because you can't keep everything. We think that we don't have to sacralize the legacy. Part of it can be discarded, or you cannot live in the house, there is no room for you. It is also partly about getting rid of objects, so that you can have more space to think, to act. And even the objects you have kept will change, because you need to have new things in your home. You change a lamp, you get rid of that, because you are tired of it, or it evokes some sad memory...

One last thing on the question of how to say things that objects cannot tell. We thought: 'How will we evoke all the people, women and men, who died there during the slave trade, during slavery, and had no names?' They had no names, and no graves.

On Réunion Island in 1848, when slavery was abolished, 60,000 slaves became free – out of 100,000 people living on the island, so an important majority. And nothing was collected, no

testimony, nothing. They disappeared without trace; there was nothing left of their lives. So how are we going to evoke that? How are we going to create their lives, their presence?

So there are two things. One is you need to have a place of mourning. All human beings need to mourn at some point, so there will be a place we will enter, and it will be dark and silent. At the end of it there will be a place – in Réunion Island people are very religious – a place where you put a little stone in memory of those people. Because what can you say? What else can you say? What else can you do? You're going to talk and it's going to be empty. So how to, nonetheless, say something without trying to say everything? Because you can't, you just evoke little things.

**HKB.** I just wanted to ask you what would be the experience of otherness in this context? What would you be making different in a museum? I can see absolutely the reconstructive aspect of it, I can see the reflective, I can see the representational aspect of it, but what would be the moment of otherness?

I was thinking, for instance, when you talked about the invisibility of that traumatic history of slavery, what you said just now, maybe that could do it. What would it be, and how could it be represented?

**FV.** Well, there is also the fact that we leave things unsaid, we don't try to cover everything. For engagement or history to be made, you have to leave an empty space. If you fill everything, there is no place for new imagination.

And the aim of the exhibition is more like, when we thought: you have traveled through time and space, the Indian Ocean and beyond, all this history and you arrive finally at Réunion, so what is Réunion? And this will be thought mostly as something that will be constantly renewed by the people themselves, by the visitors, because it's about them, it's about their world.

So we will just suggest two or three things, organize two or three things, because it's not just empty, and you have to offer something. But they will bear testimony about – for instance, we will address the world of sugar cane, because that was so important, what people know about that. We are not going to be the ones to say everything about that. The people of Réunion can still bring archives, words, testimonies. There will be a studio to film and tape, where people

can go and give their testimony if they wish to, and this testimony will be put back in the exhibition. It will be as dynamic as possible.

**CC.** I think we have to stop here. Thank you so much.

**FV.** Thank you.

## SESSION 4

### EDUCATION: HOW TO EXPLAIN

#### INTRODUCTION

##### Melissa Chiu

**Melissa Chiu (MC).** Good morning, everyone. My name is Melissa Chiu, and I'm director of the Asia Society Museum. It was a pleasure to meet all of you yesterday. My responsibility today is to introduce our speakers for our final session before our workshops. We have the honor of having Homi K. Bhabha as our main speaker, and Gustavo Buntinx as our respondent.

Homi K. Bhabha is the Anne F. Rothenberg Professor of the Humanities in the Department of English and American Literature and Language at Harvard University, and the Director of the Humanities Center at Harvard. He is the author of numerous works exploring colonial and postcolonial theory, cultural change and power, and cosmopolitanism, among other themes, and I doubt that there's anybody in this audience who hasn't read one of his texts on postcolonial theory.

His works, of course, include *Nation and Narration* (1990) and *The Location of Culture* (the later second edition includes a new introduction, and was republished as a Routledge Classic, 1994), which is currently translated into nine languages. Harvard University Press will publish his forthcoming book *A Global Measure*, and his next, *The Right to Narrate*, will be published by Columbia University Press. He serves on the Advisory Board of the Aga Khan Architectural Prize and is a Trustee of UNESCO World Report on Cultural Diversity.

Gustavo Buntinx graduated *magna cum laude* from Harvard University. He is a curator and art historian and works mainly on contemporary art, but also on colonial and republican aesthetics. On his business card he prefers to go by the title of chauffeur or driver, which I think is quite unique. He has curated exhibitions at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MARCO) in Monterrey, in the New Museum, here in New York, which we will visit later today, and the Antoni Tàpies Foundation in Barcelona, as well as the Institute of International Visual Arts, otherwise known as INIVA, in London.

He also has a strong museum practice, and is known as the driver of the Micromuseo, otherwise known as *There's room at the back*. He has in this way articulated a response to the

lack of Peruvian museums. The project so far has accomplished dozens of exhibitions, publications and critical interventions. Between October and December 2009 the Micromuseo will have a large presence at the next Trienal de Chile.

Please welcome both our speakers, and first up is Homi K. Bhabha.

## **SPEAKER**

### **Homi K. Bhabha**

**Homi K. Bhabha (HKB).** Good morning. It is a great – if somewhat intimidating – mixed pleasure to be here today in your company.

As I grow older, people, I think, tap into my senility – or my coming senility – and ask me to talk about all the things I am not qualified to talk about. But being a sucker for their invitations, I take a chance at it. It's been a great pleasure to have been originally contacted by Manuel Borja-Villel, who very generously asked me to be here today, and I must also thank Pilar Cortada for various arrangements that she has been making over the last several months. It was also a great good fortune to follow my friend and colleague, Françoise Vergès, who is now embarked on yet another wonderful chapter of her life. It was great to hear you, Françoise, thank you.

I'm going to talk today about some of the preoccupations I have about time and cultural representation in the whole area of difference. I thought I might just give you a brief roadmap, since I have written this talk in a narrative style. I will talk about my early kind of museum memories in Bombay. When Bombay was not Bollywood, or not quite Bollywood, and there weren't as many galleries, and the artists from India were a fairly obscure lot, and the Sotheby's catalogues did not arrive in Bombay – nor did they arrive, as they now do regularly on my doorstep, asking me to buy things that I cannot possibly afford.

So it was a different time, and I thought that I might start with some early memories of what it was like to be, as I was, a gallery brat in Bombay in the sixties and seventies. Then I want to think a little bit about museum time. Being in this building, I thought that thinking about the temporality of the museum and its revisionary and dynamic possibilities might be of some interest to you. So I'll try to do in my own style a rather tendentious reading of Alfred Barr, and

try in a way also to put into perspective something that I see increasingly in the assessment of new museums, or indeed of new exhibitions, which is a sort of a spatial metaphor, that the critique of museums is very much in spatial terms. And this seems obviously the right way to go, but I'm going to suggest that it may be limited.

I then want to explore the notion of the museum's contemporaneity as a form of transitional time, and I will end with some issues and examples relating to time representation, witnessing display and the exhibitionary impulse. Thank you so much for being here this morning.

I grew up in a great cosmopolitan city, Bombay, which in the late sixties and seventies had one museum, and two private galleries. Bombay's Prince of Wales Museum, founded in 1922, was decidedly 'museal' in the deathly German sense of the word. 'Museum-like,' Adorno observes, 'describes objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship, and which are in the process of dying.'

The museum, located in the heart of the old city, was the preserve of some great classical and traditional art: Chola bronzes, Ragmala paintings, Mogul miniatures. These works had played a double role. They established the directionless canon in British times, while authenticating a postcolonial sense of heritage pride, what Nehru referred to in another context as the nationalist discovery of India.

The highly decorative Indo-Saracenic edifice, which unfortunately often symbolizes bureaucratic bungling and municipal neglect in India – I'm sure many of you have been to some of the old railway stations, the post offices, all built in that style, to say nothing of the courts, and all are a real bureaucratic mess in most cases... The highly decorated Indo-Saracenic edifice, which so often symbolizes bureaucratic bungling and municipal neglect in India, had become better known as a transport hub than an art destination. You went to the museum to change buses, not to visit collections. Busloads of tourists from smaller towns and villages were routinely processed through the galleries in silence and awe, but without much pleasure or instruction. The fun happened outside in the gardens, where schoolchildren played games and sucked on fluorescent ice creams. Not so different, I suppose, from the glossy Victoria and Albert ads some years past, which suggested – ironically, of course – that there was a great restaurant attached to an interesting museum. This caused quite a stir in London. Nothing so witty could unfortunately be said about our Prince of Wales Museum. Almost thirty

years later, the impoverished website languishes, not having been updated since 1997, and the director's message draws a blank 'No text available for the time being. Check back later'.

Believe me, I say this with feeling.

A little further along Mahatma Gandhi Road, in the loft of a rather intriguing semicircular art centre designed by a pupil of Frank Lloyd Wright, you arrived at the privately owned Kamal Art Gallery. Half a mile along the same street, just across from Bombay's famous landmark Flora Fountain, you came to Pundole Art gallery. If the Prince of Wales Museum seemed to be struck by a serious form of curatorial catalepsy, the Kamal and Pundole galleries were hives of Bombay's famous cultural entrepreneurship. They were exhibitionary spaces, salons of intellectual enquiry and sites of cultural experimentation. If the museum seems stagnant and statist, studios deserving the national past, the life of the galleries was composed of a posse of provocateurs, artists, advertising executives...

Actually, advertising executives in the sixties, seventies and eighties were very much patrons of the arts. And they were very involved, they often wrote about them in Bombay. There is actually something to be written about the whole social history of the accompanying discourses, and the accompanying professions around artists, and the kind of milieu in which they lived, which hasn't been written. It's a kind of informal history, an experiential history, but a very important one in terms of how the movements of art were fostered by a whole range of intellectuals, a very interdisciplinary kind of world.

If the museum seems stagnant and statist, studios deserving the national past, the life of the galleries was composed of a posse of provocateurs, artists, advertising executives, publishers, writers, actors, filmmakers, journalists and juveniles like me. I felt that I belonged to a cosmopolitan demimonde with a vernacular vigor. When I now look through the resplendent auction catalogues for contemporary Indian art, I can hardly believe that most of the artists hung out at the Kamal art gallery's adopted restaurant, the Samovar, and were often in hock for tea, beer and biryani to the owner, who was once a prominent member of the Communist party.

The artists in the main were unknown and underprivileged and sold for small sums. The market was largely middle-class and local, except for the celebrated Herwitz family from Massachusetts, who bought boatloads of contemporary Indian art that is now housed at the

Peabody Essex Museum in Salem. For me, Massachusetts was just another cold country, and the Herwitzes seemed as if they were part of some Waspy cargo cult. The entrepreneurs were self-taught connoisseurs, the critics were art-page generalists, the artists were learned, generous and inventive, often waiting to explore the great cities and museums of Europe and America.

The founding group of modernists, Padamsee, Souza, Husain, Tyeb Mehta, Raza and others, named themselves the progressives, and their practice of the new echoed Gramsci's statement: that whatever announces itself as new is a variable combination of new and old, a momentary equilibrium of cultural relations. The new is itself, in my view, a process of transition.

What held it all together and allowed fairly generous affiliations across classes, languages and cultures was the sense of a postcolonial avant-garde, tilted away from the orthodoxies, eastern and western, coexisting now in an excited atmosphere of innovation and experimentation.

Museum and gallery were asymmetrically arranged, neither in collaboration nor in competition with each other. The heterogeneous haphazard side-by-sideness was further emphasized by what Bouvard et Pécuchet termed the bedlam of the show bazaar, the thieves' market where you went to buy stolen Indian antiquities, 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century prints or a vast number of British ceremonial portraits demobbed from military barracks and English clubs.

The Bombay art scene, as I remember it those energetic emergent years, made no claims to aesthetic or civic order. Everybody was caught up in the pell-mell project of trying to survive. Nobody in Bombay subscribed to that ruling fiction of the museum world, which Eugenio Donato felt compelled to puncture in his remarkable postmodern essay *The Museum's Furnace*: I quote 'it is no longer possible to sustain the fiction that, by attaching an object to a label, or series of objects to a series of labels, one can still produce a Bouvard et Pécuchet bedlam presentation, which is somehow adequate to a nonlinguistic universe. Such a fiction is the result of an uncritical belief in the notion that ordering and classifying, that is to say, the spatial juxtaposition of fragments, can produce a representational understanding of the world. Should that fiction disappear, there is nothing left of the museum but bric-a-brac.'

Truth to tell, I encountered no such museal fiction. Ordering and classifying had atrophied in the Prince of Wales Museum to such an extent that it was unable to signify a naturalized representational image of the world. It signified only its own anachronism. We lived the reality of spatial juxtapositions, the museum sited across from the galleries. You might say that post-modernism arrived a decade earlier in Bombay, only we didn't know quite what to call it. And we had no sense at all that it would have such a remarkable academic career.

In fact, come to think of it, multiculturalism of a more militaristic strain also had a long and lively colonial rule, but we'd just got on with it, without all those deep metropolitan discussions about the problems of inclusion, exclusion and liberal consent. But then, of course, the colonized and their heirs were never really considered to be consenting adults.

On my frequent walks down Mahatma Gandhi Road, I became aware of my growing sense of dissatisfaction with both museum and gallery. My unease had something to do with the alternatives that I was offered, the dead hand of an impoverished unimaginative cultural bureaucracy, arranging art objects in a historicist narrative that celebrated the classical past of a relatively new postcolonial nation. This was set against the invisible hand of the burgeoning bourgeois art market – Adam Smith was a curator of sorts – uncertain of its own historicity, struggling to push past the enclosures of ethnic essentialism, as well as the iconic refuse of empire, striving in its own way to become a cosmopolitan hybrid culture of a progressive strain.

Shuttling between the public museum and the private gallery, I became dimly aware of the cause of my unease: both institutions, in their different ways, one focused on reconstituting classical civilization, the other focused on celebrating contemporary culture, were complicit with an important aspect of social and cultural value associated with the aesthetics of modernity. Both institutions were complicit, despite their opposed curatorial intentions and programs, with an exultation of the present, as Habermas calls it.

In the case of the museum, there was of course a structural irony in the fact that the present was treated as the past, or so at least it seemed in the artless, airless displays that cultivated a sense of the authority of the ages sealed behind foggy vitrines.

The private galleries, on the other hand, articulated the exultation of the new by participating

in a familiar avant-garde self-understanding, equally uncritical, that its own aesthetic time-consciousness was itself invading uncharted territory, exposing itself to the dangers of a sudden striking encounter, conquering an as yet unoccupied future, a brave new world.

In both instances, however, the museal present of antiquity and the avant-garde seemed strangely uncritical and stable. Museum time, as an affective and cognitive moment that emerges through the archive or the collection or the making and remaking of the exhibition or the gallery, suddenly stood still.

What was missing from both the terminus of tradition at one end of Mahatma Gandhi Road, and the departure lounge of the avant-garde at Flora Fountain, was the sense of the present as transitional.

The antiquity of the museum was indeed transitional; it was, after all, part of a translation of an earlier directionless canon for nationalist purposes. And the avant-garde was an experiment in internationalism, which had that same self-fulfilled sense of destiny. In the exultation of the present there was no sense of the restless movement of passing time that unsettles the construction of any collection or archive, museal or indeed belonging to other institutions of memory and learning, such as the university. That sense of restlessness in the archive that Michel Foucault has briefly and beautifully described as the never-completed, never-wholly-achieved uncovering of the archive. Any form of curatorship must engage with ideas and objects that are antagonistic or asymmetric to its practice, ambivalent in their structure, and therefore, through that ambivalence, through that unsettledness, open to translation and transformation.

Because translation is not about resemblance and semblance, it is about the shock of recognition, each time anew; not simply something that reminds you that translation is not a pale imitation of the original, but each reworking of the archive, each reworking of the collection, each replacing of the most familiar, iconic moments of the exhibition, of the collection, should emerge as a shock of recognition, newly positioned, newly placed, newly evaluated, newly significant.

New, of course, only in that sense that I said earlier. The new is always an incubational category, a momentary balance, no more nor less than that.

You guessed it, what was missing in midtown Bombay in the late sixties and seventies was a launch pad for something like Alfred Barr's 'torpedo in motion', which was mentioned earlier this morning.

Now it takes temerity on my part to talk of Barr in this place and in the present company. However, I feel compelled to draw upon Barr's concept of the museum as the locus of what he called an unfolding present, a transitional torpedo, if I may, at a time when architecture so often provides the museum with its most visible insignia of status, identity, innovation or transformation.

It is hardly surprising then, that the language of criticism is dominated by spatial metaphors in the assessment of aesthetic values, cultural norms and professional taste. And you museum directors must be held responsible for this. You have a facility for raising a lot of money, building a lot of beautiful buildings, and then getting flogged for rearranging your collections. Lead a quiet life, carry on with the old buildings, give the impression that you are struggling to survive, and you will have a much more highly praised professional existence. Don't do it, you've suffered too much.

So it is hardly, as I was saying, surprising that the language of criticism is dominated by spatial metaphors in the assessment of aesthetic values and of professional expertise. Now you might argue that there is an obvious reason why it is appropriate to evaluate a museum's success by relating its curatorial choices to its disposition of spaces, and reading the narrative of its collection in terms of the construction of exits and entrances, the possibilities of circulation, and the priorities of placement.

But there is more to the uses and abuses of the spatial metaphor than an exploration of the archaeology of the physical museum and the relocation of its archive. Spatial metaphors contain their own special pleading for the ordering of art as conforming to a particular ordering of life. Spatial critique, if I may call it that, takes its aim at professional expertise and technique, when what it really mourns is the passing of a certain tradition, or a certain convention.

For those of you who are acquainted with Jed Perl's 2006 jeremiad against MoMA, I bring you

some comfort in the form of Perl's recent reconsideration of the museum as an errant institution finally returned to spatial order, or what he calls a sense of place. Just see the way in which the spatial metaphor works in this passage from Jed Perl: 'MoMA feels better today than right after it opened. Cézanne's Bather has been returned to its central place at the beginning of the permanent collection, and Mondrian has once again been given a room of his own. These are not matters of blind obeisance to the past, for the reaffirmation of the old choices is a reaffirmation of enduring ideas. To the extent that the museum feels a tiny bit more the way it used to feel, the people in charge are honoring a sense of place, honoring the sense that the Modern was, for generations, The Place. And in doing so, they are reminding us that the sense of place is inextricably associated with the sense of memory – and with aesthetic value. After seeing the New Museum and BCAM, I find myself again warming to Taniguchi's building.' And now the lyrical passage: 'The entrance, with the dark staircase to the right and the Sculpture Garden beckoning, has a whisper of pageantry; the details of doorways and railings have a lovely clarity; the atrium, though turned into a dumb-ass playpen by Eliasson, pulls together the disparate parts of the museum.' Beautifully written.

But I hope it makes my point that so much of the recent spatial criticism and spatial evaluation of curatorial intentions happens because new buildings are built. And somehow, the fact that the one should not necessarily neutralize the other, and there may be another standpoint from which to make the critique, is not something that is taken on board.

There is, as I said, a natural sense in which, of course, you're working with rooms, you're working with galleries, you're going to display objects, but I don't think that that normalization or that naturalization should be the criterion for thinking about museums and display and the curatorial intention. In fact I think that what is bred of this, a sense of the place, beautifully though it's written – and I believe in the plurality of democratic voices and dialogue, so I think that this should be said, and must be said – but I think that the question of time, the question of temporality, the notion of the life of the museum in that conceptual register, has been willfully neglected.

This is the moment, I believe, to return to the creativity of Barr's concept of the museum as a medium of time, continually revising its sense of the present as well as its presence in the world by translating the relational value of its objects and practices. Relational value is neither simply the idea of the comparison of one autonomous work or event or period with another,

nor is it some kind of unbounded relativism, as it is often accused of being. Relational value represents the way in which the transitionalism of the museum's space is used to make new aesthetic or sociopolitical connections, which may be causal or entirely contingent to the history of the collection, but in both cases are what Walter Benjamin describes as constellations.

It is not that the past casts a kindly or critical light on the present, or vice versa. The mode of illumination that I am trying to suggest, in terms of the temporality, the transitionalism, of the constellation, is more difficult and dialectical. For while Benjamin writes that the relation of the present to the past is seen purely as some kind of historicist continuity, the relation, the constructed relation of what has been up to the present is dialectical and figural. What would this mean in practical terms, if I take this position and relate it back to what I called the critique of the spatial metaphor?

For instance, then, let's go back to Jed Perl's first piece, in 2006. To locate Cézanne's *Bather*, as he complained, far from the entrance to MoMA, on the fifth floor, and then at a later time to return it to its more central space may not simply be – to Jed Perl – a bad curatorial decision; it may be the creation of a new figural constellation, proposing and developing an innovative relationship between meaning and form, institution and archive. It may indeed be, as Glenn Lowry suggests, a sign that the museum is constantly revising the narrative of its own history. The displaced itinerary of an iconic work like the *Bather*, its movement over time and place across the museum, might well be the occasion for a contest over the historical meaning and the aesthetic positioning of the canonical origins of Modernism.

Are origins most usefully and pleasurably experienced as the *a prioris* of the museum display? Must they be seen as you enter the museum? Must they be seen in one time and place? Or are beginnings better glimpsed in a series of interruptive and interstitial encounters that display, via their displacement, the ever-changing and never-ending endurance of the masterworks of the tradition, the contingent refiguring of the past in the present, the past reconstructed in the present – as, indeed, the present is refiguring itself? Masterworks seen now as icons, now seen as specters, now as ancestors, now as antagonists, now dominant, now dismembered.

With a cosmopolitan spirit of intercultural exploration, Annie Cohen-Solal writes: 'Barr's project of anchoring the museum in an unfolding present contributed to further accelerating

his country's cultural awareness and to instilling a symbiosis with the present, the past and the future of its times.' Very similar to what I'm calling a constellated approach to both the construction of curatorship, and the rethinking of an archive. 'Such a concept of a dynamic museum,' she goes on to say, 'appears again when, in order to describe the permanent collection, Barr invented the metaphor of a torpedo.' What I have called Barr's sense of the museum as a medium of time, as transitionalism in this case, is beautifully demonstrated in his celebrated diagram of the museum collection as a torpedo in motion.

'Who is to say what is really important?' Barr famously asked, and his diagram negotiates the relational value of art objects or periods at the intersection of the museum as institution, both building and builder, with the museum as a practice, a performance of pedagogy, a museum constituted through the relational and contingent time of an unfolding present. The torpedo graphically restructures or revises itself from tip to tail as it keeps, in Barr's phrase, 'moving through time' – the sense of the transitional which I missed in both the avant-garde gallery and in the traditional museum [in Bombay].

And it is this living spirit of the dynamic museum that gives a marked urgency to the compendia of questions raised at this conference. How can the archive of a museum be prevented from becoming instrumentalized? How should museum directors assign their loyalties and responsibilities between the various constituencies they serve? Custodians of their collections, advocates for change, civic leaders in search of new constituencies and affiliations, skilled courtiers to the great moguls, who are, of course, our colleagues and friends, have to be carefully cultivated so that they may be at some point handsomely harvested.

What are the challenges faced by curatorial display and critical discourse in a context in which institutional interests and exhibitionary structures aspire towards global networks, international biennales, Neil McGregor's concept of the word 'museum', the New Museum here as a hubbing consortium, the Guggenheim's global brand, while contra to this global networking there emerge markets and arriviste art scenes that demand practices of representation and recognition that are regional, ethnic and national? The new Chinese, the new Indians, the new Emirates market, the new Iranian artists... And then, finally, how has digital communication redefined our sense of location, space and site, so that to say 'There is no there, there' is no longer a matter of regret, because the simulacrum of this show or that

object or the other biennale is digitally disseminated everywhere and at all times.

Finally, on the matter of museum education, which is my special grief, Manuel Borja-Villel has set me a testing agenda: How ready are we to accept antagonism and ambivalence as structures of representation and strategies of organization? And I have partly answered that question by arguing for transitional revisionary timescales: the museum as a medium of time.

Can we, he asked me, rather flamboyantly follow Pasolini in his Lutheran letters, when he said that we should go beyond curricular education and move towards the things of life? It's towards the things of life that I now want to move.

The pedagogical function of the museum provides both a civic mission and a sentimental education in our time, but not exclusively for our time. And it is this experience of being in our time but not exclusively for our time, that the museum, the gallery, the curator show really brings together, in a more graphic and dynamic way than many other institutions. It is the acknowledgement of this temporal dissonance or discontinuity in our time but not of our time.

Contained in what I call museum time, that enables the museum director to achieve, in Ned Rifkin's terms, a sense of responsibility. Quite literally, the ability to respond.

And I've been thinking that the museum as time, conceptual though it is, allows you to rethink the stages of response in different ways to different constituencies, in terms of policy today, in terms of politics tomorrow, in terms of art history the day after, in terms of pedagogy.

All of us, directors, curators, critics and artists, negotiate a dual responsibility: to be resolutely of our time, but not exclusively for it. In our practices of instruction we make ethical and aesthetic commitments to the contemporary as an imminent moment in which the unfolding present occurs.

The dialectical of recognition now happens. At the same time, our commitment to the contemporary embodies agential action and curatorial intervention. The moment is now, but the moment has to be constructed as being now, to make the different objects, practices or periods contemporary with each other – not coeval with each other, but contemporary with each other. Sometimes collaboratively, always translationally, in relation to each other.

Such a dual time makes differences occur together, consensual, conflictive or coeval, in the same time or place, resulting in flashes of emergent constellations and the fire of controversy and contradiction.

The unfurling present of Alfred Barr in which we read the signs of our times, while interpreting and interpolating and interrupting our times with the differences of others, is nowhere more beautifully located in the life of the dynamic museum than in W.H. Auden's ecphrastic poem 'Musée des Beaux Arts'. In the unforgiving winter of 1938, having just witnessed the enormous suffering of the Sino-Japanese war, Auden reflects on the fascist fate of Europe and the moral apathy he sees around him. He sets the poem in the Palais des Beaux Arts, in Brussels, where he reflects on Brueghel's world landscapes – two of them that he mentions are in Vienna, in this case principally 'Landscape with the Fall of Icarus', and it is very interesting from a kind of internationalist perspective, Auden being an internationalist, that he chose the world landscape concept from Brueghel. I'm sure many of you know this poem, so forgive me for reading it aloud. It gives me such a thrill that I do so whenever I can, never more appropriately than here:

About suffering they were never wrong,  
The Old Masters: how well they understood  
Its human position; how it takes place  
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;

That's the opening of the poem. It is the aesthetic attention, and the moral intelligence that goes with it, that is brought to light in the moment of museum time, enabling Auden to assume what he calls a human position; a visual and moral alignment with Brueghel's art in the museum that quickly opens up, within the present moment, those other Brueghels. But it also opens up its rendition of the Icarian tragedy, the shell-shocked horror in Hankou that he witnessed, the banality of evil in Brussels, where the anti-Semitic Catholic Church turned a blind eye to *Kristalnacht*, which had happened only a few months before. There is of course no synchronicity in suffering, nor symmetry in the horrors of history. Auden's multimedia curation – epic, poetry, painting – alights on the iterative figure of Icarus to ask what constitutes the value of the human position – the human *position*, not simply the human being; human agency in life and art – when we never fail to say 'Never again', while knowing that the global cycle of

suffering and violence *will* occur again and again and again.

It's actually one of the simple truths of my new book, that whereas in our time we have to construct the narrative of 'Never again', we construct it through international conventions, through international law, through bodies of governance, through education... It will never happen again. And yet, I feel that, unless we are ethically committed to another form of narrative, and another form of temporality which says 'It will happen again', unless we are torn ambivalently between these two moments of 'Never again', the progressive view of history, the Kantian view, the Hegelian, and on the other hand the other much more problematic view that it *will* happen again. Unless there is this split between the ethical and the epistemological, or the ethical and the idealistic in a way, we are not going to be able to be responsible. We are not going to be able to assume the responsibility of the human position.

I continue with the poem:

In Brueghel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away  
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may  
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,  
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone  
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green  
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen  
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,  
had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

From his contoured collection of cosmopolitan texts and contexts – Roman, Flemish, Chinese, Belgian and British – Auden forged a human position, at once craftsman and citizen, that was committed to the due responsibility of the contemporary to be resolutely of our time, but not exclusively for it. In the unfolding present of his poem, there is however an elision. His experience in the Chinese field hospital in Hankou, which was the immediate source of the poem, does not appear as location or figure. Of the other places that construct its *mise-en-scène*, there is some trace or trope.

In this final section, as I end, I want to talk about a work that has explored the sense of the

transitional that I have traced in this talk in its diverse modes and tropes.

I want, then, to begin, by turning to what Auden ignored: the work of the Chinese artist Shi Jinsong, whose work explores the sharp liminal edge between barbarism and civility, the same irresolvable paradox presented in Auden's final verses:

And the expensive delicate ship that must have seen  
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,  
had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

**(Slide)**

As I entered the main gallery of the House of World Cultures to see the show *Re-imagining Asia*, where I'd given an opening talk for the show, curated by Wu Hung and Shaheen Merali, I had this insight of both the duality that I've been talking about, the duality of contemporaneity and indeed, the necessary transitional nature of time to which we have to commit ourselves, both as ethicists and curators, because otherwise we will not be able to consider, not the common conventional modes of change, but change's contingency, change's juxtaposition and change, which I've called constellation. The alterity of change, not the teleology of change.

So, as I entered, I saw, a work by Jinsong – he moves between Wuhan, Beijing and Zurich. At a distance I see a collection, this sort of distance, even more finely designed high-tech, child-friendly nursery objects entitled *Baby's Miscellaneous, 2007-08*, more architecturally accomplished than such everyday objects usually are, these matt-black, high-profile objects a pushchair, a cradle, and a stroller have just the look that would capture the market in this era of the commodification of designer childhood in the West.

It is the peculiar scale of the works, somewhere between nursery toys and actual objects, that provides the regional reference, that's what makes this transnational, regional reference, this movement, this continual movement, between the West and China, a movement, a form of transitionalism.

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, more than 80% of children's toys sold in the US come

from China. There is also a more global reference in the second annual American Express Platinum Luxury Survey to the rapidly increasing market for the gold-plated nursery must-haves. According to a Salon.com article entitled 'Bringing Up Baby', the people behind the posh dog catalogs have seen fit to combine the uniquely incompatible worlds of child and chandelier, by selling children's nursery chandeliers for a great deal of money.

'Art displays hidden messages, and I try and make them overt,' Shi Jinsong writes. 'I try to make it easy to see the dark side of an object; that's why I stress the violence and danger. When you come closer, you see that each of these caring apparatuses of the nursery is composed of military hardware. Guns, shields, visors, bullets: the dark side of childhood has both a regional and a global significance. The heavily armed crib and pushchair are themselves cradles of the increasing growth in child soldiers across the world. Drugged, half-demented children under the control of warlords are sent out like packs of dogs to wreak a destructive, barely understood fate of doom and destruction, and they are only children.'

From a distance, the implements of infancy have a kind of surreal modernist irony, a subversive civility that is part of art's witty effect. On closer inspection, there is the barbarity of the juxtaposition of child warfare with the hideous commodification of 'Bringing Up Baby' ringing in our ears. In disclosing the dark side of the object, Shi Jinsong opens up the dual responsibility of the contemporary, as I tried to describe it, in the very nature of the objects of a commodified, highly technologized consumer childhood.

Bombay, Brussels, Berlin. In each of these locations, I've attempted to explore the idea of the museum as a medium of time coexisting with the contemporary world, its archive of objects and subjects, its pasts, caught in a transitional and translational relationship.

In elaborating this museum time, I drew upon Barr's 'torpedo in motion' to explore what it would mean to work in and with contemporaneity as an unfolding of the present. Being caught in the midst of such temporal constellations as these, China, India and the West brought together childhood, which is also a marker of time, with the nursery, and at the same time with child soldiers and a different history... Being caught in the midst of such temporal constellations does not simply provide a challenge to one's intelligence, one's expertise or one's professional technique. These patterns of double or dual time with which we work in our archival institutions of memory, knowledge and pleasure and desire, be they the museum or

the university, also provide us with ethical and political challenges. The position of possible global ethics and aesthetics for our institutions lies somewhere between the memory and the present.

It dwells in that transitional moment – the to and fro between a past whose ghosts refuse to die and a future whose gods refuse to await the moment of their destined birth. We are caught between this time, and the past that returns and the future that turns round and says, ‘What were you doing?’ ‘What did you do?’ ‘What did you make?’ ‘What did you write?’

The language of the now and the new, which so often prefaces global discourse, is less convincing than ever before. It is therefore in the human interest that I want to suggest to you that we take a dual stance now on the museum as a medium of time.

If we must step into the stream of time to feel the fast flow of progress and its cleansing contemporaneity, we must also wade knee-deep in the sewers of history, feeling the tug of the dark and the deep, and in the tension through which we move hither and thither, tendentious and transitional, there will emerge a current that sustains us, and a currency of creativity that may not save us, but will, at least, help us to survive. Thank you very much.

## **RESPONDENT**

### **Gustavo Buntinx**

**Gustavo Buntinx (GB).** My appreciation, of course, to the organizers of this conference, as pragmatically efficient as it is intellectually enticing and provocative.

Allow me to begin by apologizing for the limitations of my intuition, unable to fathom the actual extent and intent of Homi Bhabha’s fascinating address from the succinct abstract offered as its sole intimation until today. I hope I am therefore forgiven if I have taken the poetic – and political – license of preparing a response more in tune with my own anxieties than with those just revealed to us.

My peripheral anxieties, I would add, were it not for the fact that yesterday morning I almost quit the conference, at its very beginning, when we were suddenly enlightened by the wondrous news that the center no longer exists, and the periphery has just dissolved into the

ethereal Neverland of First World museums. Imagine my exultation. I could barely repress the urge to immediately abandon everything and travel back to Peru in order to spread the good word amongst the Modernist faithful.

But, they will have to wait: duty calls, and here it is; my non-responsive response to Homi Bhabha's paper – which, interestingly enough, I find in illuminating friction with what I have now to say. *El azar no existe*: there is no such thing as chance.

### **QUE LA DIFERENCIA REFULJA: LET DIFFERENCE SHINE**

We are the final men. And women. And else. We live the terminal condition of humankind. Technological folly, ecological madness, ideological delirium, all combined with the hubris of genetic engineering, make of us one of the last generations that could be properly called *homo sapiens sapiens*.

The digitalization of culture is but the preamble to the digitalization of nature, even of matter itself. What is the fate, under these extreme conditions, of that essential element Martin Heidegger called *thing*, of that irradiating essence Walter Benjamin named *aura*? The key word for our twilight epoch is not revolution but *mutation*. Transfiguration, transubstantiation, also in its more radical sense. Spiritual and political.

Mutant times, apocalyptic cultures. And yet *apocalypse* means revelation, and in this end of times all is to be revealed in its essence of difference and contradiction. In its ambivalence and self-contained otherness. In its *alterity*.

Even the very objecthood of the museum object. Even the art museum itself, impossible to be any longer regarded solely as a temple of the Muses or as a pedagogical instrument or as an academic beachhead. Nor even as a preferential referential tool for pre-post-modern avant-garde ironies. It is absolutely necessary to go beyond Marcel Broothaers' Belgian chocolate museum fictions, in order to confront the harsh museum *frictions* brought out of extreme peripheral conditions, where, in spite of it all, the institution of the museum remains an object of radical *desire*.

Contexts such as that of Lima, almost the only Latin American capital that until recently

flaunted its almost absolute lack of a museum of contemporary (or even 'modern') art. An extreme absence: the issue here is not the somehow deprived museum – we've heard all about that over these two days – but the very deprivation of a museum. Our grand *museum void*.

Although I conceived that category two and a half decades ago, its artistic prefiguration dates back at least to 1970, when Emilio Hernández gave it literal as well as metaphorical image by publishing his *El Museo de Arte Borrado (The Erased Art Museum)*: a 1970 photographic intervention in which the then traditional Museo de Arte de Lima disappears from the urban context, leaving as its trace an eloquent blank cutout. A void. To be filled, to be fulfilled.

A cutout (in space and now in time) ever more replete with meanings. Confronted ones: the extremity of the Peruvian case makes evident how the very idea of the museum constitutes a contentious site for the performance and *mise-en-scene* of identities in permanent struggle and transformation, even where the existence of the museum is uncertain or null. It thus becomes necessary to rummage through not just the museum void, but also the *museutopias* constructed on that lack, that absence, that abyss.

That hole: the museum void can, at the same time, be erotically perceived as something clamoring to be filled. Where there is a void there is a desire. Just as significant as that museological failure is the different libido generated by the consequent frustration amongst certain sectors, anxious to generate new scenarios, renewed scenes, for a current and autonomous sense of culture.

Out of those overflows gradually emerge, since the early 1980's and with different names, the proposals that now identify Micromuseo (Micromuseum), an ambulatory collection and a strategy of critical interventions whose meaning might be summed up in its motto and slogan: *Al fondo hay sitio (There's room at the back)*, that customary phrase shouted as a persistent litany by the so-called *llenadores*, the 'fillers' of Peruvian minibuses, attempting to capture prospective passengers above and beyond the numbers permitted by traffic regulations and the laws of physics.

At least in cultural terms, however, there is indeed room at the back. Beginning with its very name, Micromuseo announces itself as ductile and mobile, willing to sustain its autonomy on

an elementary but sufficient economy, independent of the powers that be and of Power itself: despite the well-recognized importance of its collections and initiatives, there is neither a permanent physical site nor corporate or state support for the project, which is entirely – and precariously – sustained by civil society (a term, by the way, sorely missed in yesterday's discussion).

That almost anarchic autonomy and its symbiotic relations with other entities allows this project to fantasize itself as an informal urban microbus, that reduced but ubiquitous means of transportation popularly referred to as simply *micro*. Literally and metaphorically, the prefix that defines this Micromuseo must be understood not only in its necessary vindication of the small, of the immediate and accessible – 'small is beautiful' – but also in its allegorical allusion to the daily instrument of mobility and mobilization – for the city and its citizenry. Hence my job description not as a director or a curator, but as a chauffeur or driver. And our advisory board is called *taller de mecánica* (mechanical workshop). *Et cetera*.

Micromuseo's mission is not limited to treasuring and exhibiting works, although the organization of shows and the formation of a collection form part of its objectives. This museum does not just accumulate objects: it circulates them. It does not consecrate or enshrine: it contextualizes. It does not have a single location: it travels and distributes itself according to the characteristics of each of its projections.

A wheeling museum, a rolling museum, no longer articulated primarily in terms of alliances with economic and political powers defined on the basis of the global, but rather as a specific, local encounter between the lettered *petite bourgeoisie* (persons such as you or myself), and the emergent popular experience (everything that surrounds us). Creative frictions in which the subaltern irrupts into – interrupts – any illusion of unfissured continuity between the dominant cultures of centre and periphery. But also into any naive notion of homogeneity for the critical cultures thus constructed through not always harmonious counterpoints.

*Frictionary strategies* whose main dynamizing principle is *not to repress but to productivize difference*. To render difference itself productive by placing on the critical scene the discontinuous character of history and culture and politics in a Peruvian society made of fractures: a country that is not a country, much less a nation, but rather an archipelago of dislocated and harshly superimposed temporalities. An unimagined community where no

present cancels all the unresolved pasts that pour and collapse over us. Or their symbolic inertias.

A rolling museum, a wheeling museum, conceived on the premises of *the empowerment of the local* (no more Guggenheim franchises, please). Micromuseo's purpose is not to communicate relations of cultural power between the elites of the centre and those of the periphery, but to serve as a vehicle for new home-grown communities of sense, communities of sentiment. Motion and emotion, articulated by mobile units whose deliberate mixture of the most varied passengers proposes a *mestizo* museality. A mongrel, mixed-race museality in which even the words 'artists' and 'artisans' are gradually replaced by that of artificer, seeking in that way to signify the crisis of these and other distinctions in a terminal culture increasingly made up of the impure and the contaminated.

A *mestizo* museality, a *promiscuous museality*, in which works termed artistic coexist with their learned referents, and at the same time with mass products or recycled objects of industrial origin, in addition to notable examples of the multifarious popular creativity – including those crude 'hechiza' (hand-crafted, homemade) shotguns that played a dramatic role in the various violences that (re)define Peruvian (post)modernity. Everything amongst an impressive mixture of cultures: the pre-Hispanic and the modern, the colonial and the contemporary, in illicit, startling associations, although not foreign to those offered by our permanent experience of apparently disconnected simultaneities. And in a more than contextualizing relation to it all, every sort of documentation, perceived not just as referents but as debris, the material remnants of an exploded reality.

Material remnants, material culture. It is under this broader horizon that Micromuseo places its almost entire praxis, converting art into an inevitable but non-hierarchical portion of a more complex factual and symbolic conglomerate that confronts and converts and upsets – alters – this much mystified category. High and low? Quite often low and low. Low and *lower*.

All of which is articulated from a theory of value that shifts this economic and aesthetic (not to say aestheticizing) notion towards the chemical – and political – concept of *valency*: the capacity to combine and blend and mix regarded as one of the principal attributes of each gesture and piece. A ceaseless game of free associations designed to liberate the repressed potential of meaning in objects thus de-familiarized and returned to their disquieting

strangeness, their sometimes uncanny or sinister condition, to use some Freudian terms already rehearsed by Ticio Escobar.

The point is not to illustrate, but to put into friction. Also in the ideological sense proposed by Nelly Richard in her call to counterpoint the politics of the signified with the poetics of the signifier, making it possible for identity to become difference, and for difference to become alterity. To constitute ourselves as a *differentiating difference*: a theoretical proposal that Micromuseo has been making operative through a museum praxis that juxtaposes the scattered fragments of our many expressions, reciprocally illuminated by their differences as much as by their articulations.

The idea is to capitalize even the endless defeats, transforming them into experience by activating as memory the fragments of our so-often broken history. Reminders turned into reminders through their reincorporation into a continuum that is forever interrupted, yet always recomposed.

Recomposed always, but with transmuted meanings. In many of Micromuseo's collections and interventions the object becomes an allegorical construct, whose elements are articulated through relations not of identity, but of analogy and friction. An allegorical structure of museum language born out of the ambivalent structure of feeling in our transitional times. Dialectical images whose paradoxical strength lies precisely in contradiction: what is staged through them is not a seamless totality, but a radical consciousness made of harshly superimposed fragments. Not the adaptation of difference, but its exaltation.

In order to exemplify this praxis, I would like to quickly display here an iconic drift of highly charged images, related in their sequence to various exhibitions and publications put forth by Micromuseo in the last few years, often in compensatory relation to that blank cut-out that is the historical index of the Peruvian museum void. The absent museum that can also be read as a phantom, a phantasm, and hence as the Lacanian absent phallus.

[slides]

A suggestion inscribed in Micromuseo's continuous collaboration with Giuseppe Campuzano's Peruvian Transvestite Museum, a project intent on historicizing the image and representation

of that carnal paradigm of alterity – to the point of including this artificer’s own semblance crossed-dressed as the Virgin Dolorosa, or with his official identification card in drag.

But the travesty of these displays also encompasses the very nature and techniques of the objects thus assembled: grand pictorial endeavors, such as Christian Bendayán’s tropical fantasy of exuberant (fe)male Amazons, set against the all-too-real, worn-down silvery high heels of La Carlita, a Limeña transvestite prostitute murdered in some Italian cheap hotel. Wildly mannered street posters and complex articulations of Shining Path’s propaganda images and Warhol’s sophisticated silkscreens. Graphic and photographic examples of the sardonic uses of transvestism in contemporary political caricature and during initiation rites for military school freshmen during the 1950’s. Even the journalistic evidences unearthed during the research that made it possible for Micromuseo to reveal the primal scene of modern Peruvian transvestism in a forgotten and ferocious journalistic persecution of the participants in a 1959 drag ball. And the hand-lettered signs for a unisex beauty parlor, obtained in the jungle streets of Iquitos, along with Bendayán’s moving artistic rendition of a terminal AIDS patient in that city’s charity hospital, abandoned by all but by the phantasmic projection of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

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Religion is probably the most represented emotion in Micromuseo’s collections. Frequently as an act of faith, of course, but more poignantly as a cultural matrix, a troubling historical presence that permeates even political violence. As much is suggested by our frequent allusion to colonial prints demonstrating the iconic pedagogy of Catholic evangelization for the American natives, confronted with the journalistic photographs of Shining Path Maoist militants, using the same visual methods for their own fundamentalist preaching. Or the imposing presence of a crucial monumental painting, *Caja Negra (Black Box)*, an ambitious two-and-a-half-meter-high allegory of our past and present civil war, finished in 2001 by Alfredo Márquez and Ángel Valdés and juxtaposed by Micromuseo with both its 18th-century baroque referent, and the minute three-inch-high plaster versions offered as the *Señor de la Justicia (Lord of Justice)* for popular devotional purposes. And here, by the way, transfigured into the Peruvian flag, by the red-and-white curatorial disposition of their garments.

[slides]

The most ambitious artistic concoctions and their least considered serial derivations, assembled and displayed in radically equal conditions, as part of one and the same iconic flux and complex. As in those centuries-old representations of the Holy Trinity incorporated into a single painted face of the divinity, a 'monstrous' composition translated in contemporary terms into popular paintings (such as these dizzying icons painted by Fredy Ortega) or erudite ones (such as this other one by Álex Ángeles, Carlos Lamas, and Ángel Valdez). And even into leftist political iconographies that, in merging three faces of José Carlos Mariátegui (the founder of Peru's Marxist tradition) unknowingly perpetuate a forgotten Catholic icon. Such as the triple imprint of Christ's face in a colonial Veronica, which we have chosen to confront with Manuel Moncloa's surprisingly faceless version, a disturbing distortion of Zurbaran's model that some could also read as a poignant analogy of the Hernandez's blank museum image. Also in the sense of inciting the desire to overfill that hole: beneath Moncloa's hermetic allusion to sophisticated theological concepts (*Deus absconditus*, the hidden God), unconsciously lurks a discreet comment on the iconic metastasis of a popular religiosity whose more jarring objects Micromuseo always exhibits alongside Moncloa's almost esoteric abstraction.

*Dios se mueve entre los cacharros* (God moves amongst the kitchen pots), wrote Saint Teresa five centuries ago (we must definitely return to the Spanish mystics). And God moves as well amongst the cheap illusions of those inverted Veronicas popularly sold during Easter. Or amongst the plastic icons of Chinese crucifixion clocks (please note the erotic-kinetic insinuations of the needles). Or beneath the lubricious connotations of an acrylic, almost naked Christ nailed to the humid cross made of suggestive seashells. And in the mystical-monetary purposes of ceramic money-boxes in the shape of the Bleeding Heart of our Saviour. Or in the macabre humor of those other money-banks, made of painted plaster, with the exaggerated forms of skulls that remind us of a Baroque *memento mori*, and of current bizarre cults to embellished animal skeletons adored in Qosqo (Cusco) as a syncretic child Jesus.

[slides]

Colonial remnants that transform themselves into adolescent sticker icons, which are themselves transmuted into complex erudite compositions by artificers such as Harry Chávez. Or into the hybrid cults of Sarita Colonia, a *mestiza* popular saint, whose enormous devotion has made hers the mystical face of migration, despite the continuous condemnation of its cult

by the Catholic Church. Micromuseo has researched, registered, collected and exhibited its protean image in the most varied supports and guises. Captured in her only original photograph and in her more traditional devotional prints (out of which we have derived the tetracurved frame for one of our logos). Or collaged on the musical reliquary of a 'greatest hits' compact disc and into the cultural altar of slanted political works of art, such as this *Ejército rosa* (Pink Army) by Cuco Morales. But also painted on street signs, printed on the commercial packaging of soup concentrates, held in the hands of traditional Andean women and *mestizo coquettes* attempting extravagant mixtures of cosmopolitan looks. Even carved into the tattooed skins of criminals and prostitutes. (I will not get into the details of the fieldwork implied in these acquisitions, these almost literal incorporations).

Such instances could multiply infinitely, but worry not, I'm about to finish. What is decisive here lies not in the objects or in the images but in their association to an attitude that refuses to assume the museum void as a strictly museographical lack, rather than as a complex museological challenge. Contrary to what is amongst us generally believed, a museum is not a building but – in essence – a collection and a critical project. It is not a *place* but a *space*: social, cultural, civic. Political, in the best sense of the term. Justo Pastor Mellado has already defined it by positing the figure of the 'curator as a constructor of infrastructure': a complex concept that involves the latter category with critical notions of history, of art, of collectionism, of the archive. And of museality itself. And of the notion of the social inevitably erected through its elaborations of meaning.

There is a certain vulgar materialism in the opposite logic that behind the crucial and multiple idea of infrastructure it is only possible to perceive a physical plant. It is not by erecting or remodeling a site that the Peruvian museum void will be solved. To build is not to construct.

Such convictions allow Micromuseo to concentrate its libidinal investment in the criticality of its endeavors, forming alternative ensembles of objects and practices. Alternative elaborations of meaning, in tune with our sensual, our sensorial times. Exchanges of fluids in which the subaltern occupies a new place, no longer as an imaginary representation but instead as an irruption, a factual interruption in the discourse, in the artistic intercourse.

A politico-cultural copulation under which the very name and notion of a museum of contemporary art becomes a contradiction in terms: in order to be genuinely contemporary,

the museum has to forsake any exclusive vocation for the artistic. Art today is but an additional ingredient of the overwhelming new visuality that rules all, and subverts everything. Even our erudite existences and gazes must now negotiate their ways and means, their very meanings, not with the lettered city, *la ciudad letrada*, as Ángel Rama posited barely a couple of decades ago, but with the iconic megalopolis, with the electronic cyber-sphere. And with the symbolic inertias of our many pasts, all truncated, and yet none quite cancelled.

The final attitude for final times is to fully, wholly, come to terms with our *mestizo*, mutant, cyborg bodies of culture – and flesh. And desire. The indispensable, inconceivable, exchange of fluids between Benjamin and Heidegger. Against the trituration of aura that awoke such illuminating obsession in the messianic Jew. Against the darkening of the world that the existentialist Nazi glimpsed in the flight of the gods, in the modern hollowing out of the earth.

Against the dazzling glare of commodity fetishism. *Let difference shine.*

## CONCLUSIONS AND CLOSING REMARKS

**Kathy Halbreich, Zdenka Badovinac, Melissa Chiu, Sabine Breitwieser, Christine Van Assche, Lars Nittve and Kasper König**

**Kathy Halbreich (KH).** I am Kathy Halbreich, and some of you know me from my other life, which was at the Walker Art Center. Happily, I'm here today to tell you how thrilled I am, as a MoMA staff member, to try to summarize the very juicy conversations that have been going on for the last two days. I guess just on a personal note, I want to say CIMAM really is my favorite group, because the conversations are always spirited, muscular. And I think that the last two days have been extremely stimulating, and extremely well organized. So I want to thank the leadership of CIMAM, as well as Pilar, for bringing us all together in such a graceful fashion, and giving us so much to think about.

I have been assigned the moderator's role, but usually a moderator knows what she is going to moderate, and I have no idea, since I have only been in one workshop this afternoon. But what we thought we would do is take the next hour and in the first part I will ask each of my colleagues to report on the workshops, and then we'll try to have a conversation among ourselves, and then of course with you. I realize that you all have been very patient and probably are boiling over with questions and responses to the last couple of days. So we will definitely want to hear from you.

The good – or the bad – news is that the galleries will be open from four to five today here at MoMA, for those of you who didn't quite get up early enough in the morning or need a little bit more time. We'll try to complete our conversation to allow you to do what, when you are home, you don't get to do enough of, which is look at art. We'll get started. In no particular order other than the fact that Kasper asked me if he could go last, we will begin to tell you what we heard in the various workshops, so that we are all on the same page.

**Zdenka Badovinac (ZB).** I have to say it is a very difficult task actually, to summarize what we were talking about in our two workshops yesterday and today. First, I have to say that we had discussions, but it is very difficult to talk about the results, the conclusions, as we were not very productive in that sense, in terms of capitalistic terminology; but in terms of exchanging opinions, experiences, we were very productive. I was responsible for the group which yesterday discussed the question 'Are we proprietors or custodians?'. First, we recognize that

already the terminology is very difficult, especially the term 'proprietor', because we are from different parts of the world. For me, in my first contact with Andrea Fraser, that was the first thing to be discussed, and later I recognized that my colleagues also had similar problems. As we come from very different contexts we try to find the similarities, similar issues, similar problems, and possible answers to them.

So I will try to shape, to structure, the conversation in two questions. First workshop: the question of various or even alternative ways of financing. We were exchanging experiences of private/public financing, and we discovered that there was no bad or good financing, that the best is actually to combine as many different sources of financing as possible. So there was the question of how free and autonomous we are in terms of different supporters and financiers. The more sources there are, the freer we are. This could be the conclusion of the first question.

Then we discussed visions, and possible collaborations in times of crisis. The question was, are we just the victims of the crisis, or can we also be active, the subjects of possible changes? So we discussed possible ways of collaboration between different institutions.

Also, regarding collaboration between individual professionals, we discussed the issue of sharing the collection, sharing the staff, sharing the commissioning of art works. There were very interesting... I was very surprised, I didn't know that the practice is actually so vivid already in these terms.

Today we have had so many interesting issues already. The discussion and the lectures were really inspiring, so I tried to propose to my group to discuss again three different terms, which I have found are common to all the lecturers today. So the first term was the question of contemporaneity, the living time in the museum, which I think all the lecturers today somehow touched on, and we find it very important to think that museums today are different from in 1929, when MoMA, for example, was established as a museum of living time. Of course we know that after a decade it became a museum of history, so of course it is not just a question of the art, but also a question of momentary balances – as Homi Bhabha said, responsibility and commitment to contemporary time. So it is not just about art, but it is also about responsibility to society. And there was also an interesting issue of informal histories. Françoise Vergès started it with the question of stories, oral stories, and then Homi Bhabha

touched on the issue of Indian intellectuals who fostered important movements, and these facts are not recorded anywhere in the official histories.

So the question was how museum professionals should be aware of the informal histories and how to consider, also, the display, in different contexts in terms of informal histories and how important they are. So we discussed different possible understandings of informal histories, from the artists doing the archives with fictive and real histories to, for example, the notion of the friendship, that art history could be the history of friendship. So, many different moments which maybe the professionals are not very aware of, and maybe it is very important.

**KH.** I was just going to ask you a question about... Did you discuss how actually to bring those histories into the galleries?

**ZB.** Yes, and there was also the third question we discussed, the form of the display; how to consider history, 'formal history', in relation to 'informal history' in terms of form, the form of display. Of course very diverse models of display are possible, as we saw of course in the last lecture of today, which was about the museum as an art project. So it inspired me to think that display in terms of art installation is something very temporary, something that reminds us of the temporary situation on a stage, maybe. So this could also be the comment that displays are not objective, are not fixed history, but we have to make this plurality of narratives through the displays.

**KH.** Thank you. Melissa?

**Melissa Chiu (MC).** Instead of addressing each session, I am going to go through some of the major issues we discussed in our session, because there were a lot of concerns that kept coming up. The first was the idea of the canon, including the related issue of language and translation – of how certain art works are translated and understood differently in different contexts. There was a strong consensus toward the idea of integrating different works from different cultures to provide a broader understanding of what we mean by visual culture today.

There was also discussion of different canons as they have evolved in different places. There is often an assumption that there is one canon, for example. One of the members of our group

talked about the Leeum Samsung Museum in Seoul, Korea, and how he as a European had enjoyed seeing an integrated arrangement of contemporary or modern Korean artists alongside their European and American counterparts. This is of course much easier to do with contemporary art than modern art, yet it represents the beginning of another sort of canon formation.

The other issue, on a more practical level, was that of loans. We discussed at length the issue of where loans and art works go – who decides, what the economies are in terms of being able to get access to important works for smaller museums. Above all, I think there was a sense that we should see loans as increasing our understanding of objects, so bringing in one important work from a major museum to complement other objects in some museums was thought to be of great importance. Which brings me to the issue of display, and one issue that came out of our discussion was how to address ephemeral material, especially that which was produced in the 1960s and 1970s. So there was an idea that perhaps witnesses of some of the more ephemeral events or performances and interviews with those witnesses could actually be brought more into museum displays, and the thought was that integrating this kind of research would be of great benefit. The works of artists involved in Fluxus and Gutai are examples.

Homi Bhabha's presentation prompted a lot of issues for our group. And I think that one of the benefits of his lecture today was this issue of the transitional moment that we might try to capture in exhibitions through a constellation of disparate objects. How do we best capture this in exhibitions? One of the last things we talked about was the re-hang of collection displays, not just here at the Modern but also at Tate and the Pompidou. There have been efforts in these areas to change the canonical arrangement of works as they tell the story of modern art through thematic rather than historical displays.

My final word would be that we had lots of questions for Gustavo. We wanted to know whether in fact he drove around in a bus (his Micromuseum), and how many exhibitions he had... it was a rather practical discussion, so Gustavo, I am sure that you will be approached by many members of our group. Thank you.

**Sabine Breitwieser (SB).** We actually started also discussing quite practical issues. My group was also interested in a sort of set of issues, practical issues or questions concerning museum

management in some way. So the question of audiences came up – who was our audience, to whom do we turn, and how does this affect us. This is something which came up all the time. And of course the question of the management of knowledge, what is the appropriate way to do it. We were all very aware of the fact that each museum or institution is quite different, but there is still a lot to share – first of all that we are working to long-term goals. That turned out to be the subject, really. And then also the complex relationship with the market, as it turned out that there are quite different codes of practice in the US and in Europe. I learned from my US colleagues that it is quite common, in case of trouble with sponsors or possible donors, to refer to existing codes of the American Association of American Museums, which I have never heard of before in Austria or elsewhere in Europe.

**KH.** You mean because those codes don't exist?

**SB.** Well, for example, the director of the MACBA museum in Barcelona said he would probably lose most of his long-term loans if he practiced the same conditions as museums in America, as a matter of fact.

**KH.** Can you just go three sentences more on that?

**SB.** Well, obviously in the US it's the practice that you only agree to show a collection if it's promised as a gift.

**KH.** To an extent, yes.

**Lars Nittve (LN).** I thought that was the practice in Europe as well.

**SB.** Clearly not everywhere, in fact. So, there was an interest in setting up a code of ethics. Well today, of course, Homi Bhabha's presentation, and also Françoise's, had quite an impact. Again we were discussing the question of criteria and of canon, related to both center and periphery, and these contextualizations, how one looks at the center or starts deconstructing it. So probably, not being in New York, not being at MoMA, one sees the canon differently and deals with history in a different way. So this was an important point, as was the notion of the museum as a torpedo in motion, and the notion of time, of course. And the issue of simultaneity came up. So probably, and necessarily, this notion of the museum is not as linear

as we sometimes envision it. But at the same time, there was also a need for clarity, so chronology makes some sense. Also that we are dealing ultimately with objects, relating to objects, which was another thing. Then another important discussion was the notion of the new and contemporaneity, and also the question of the transitionalism of the object, and how to construct the new.

**KH.** And were there any outcomes from that question?

**SB.** Well, the need to construct the new was a discussion about the fact that it is often an internal design, not coming from the outside, and another on the fact that it is often related to new media, and there's hardly anyone dealing with that in a very interesting way. So that's still a challenge, obviously.

**KH.** Maybe, but we want to come back to, circle back as... Are there different criteria applied to the new? Christine.

**Christine Van Assche (CVA).** Our group was composed of curators, directors and academics from very different parts of the world: different cultures, different economic and political institutions. So we had, of course, very different questions raised during these two afternoons. But if I may synthesize, I would say that there was one very practical point about transportation, transfers, loans... between different kinds of institutions, different kinds of countries. And we mentioned that there is another museum group called the Group Bizot, which deals with these more logistical questions, and that the conclusion of that group should be reported at the next CIMAM conference, or maybe on the website.

From a more theoretical point of view, we talked about a new model for museums of the 21st century. Are alternative models possible? Are those models going to be object-based? Are they going to be created more cheaply, of course, and probably with less travel? So that means we have to exchange more expertise, more research; we need a more collective intellectual-exchange process, rather than an object-exchange process. So we also discussed the possibility of talking about these new models from different parts of the world at the next CIMAM conference.

**KH.** Since I was in Christine's group, let me just add another issue that is embedded in her summary, but let me clarify it, since I think it was actually directed at me, or at least at MoMA. The question is, if institutions such as Houston, MoMA and Tate – in other words, large, relatively secure institutions – accelerate their buying or acquiring in countries that are not as privileged economically, should there be some cash reciprocity to the countries in which we are doing our research and acquisitions? I think that's the clearest summary. Of course, it raises tons of questions, there was quite a... I guess I would call it a utopian drive toward a World Bank-like situation where great objects could be held in public trust and borrowed. And I think the question of patrimony is no longer lodged in Greek sculptures, but I think it's coming very much alive in work made... let's say from the 1950's on. So I would really encourage CIMAM to have a serious conversation about this. We just scratched the surface, I think. I'm not sure you can legislate, but that's my personal opinion. I do think that it would be very helpful for an organization such as this to come up with some guidelines. I frankly think that there are lots of currencies circulating, and it may not only be about cash exchange, but I do think that was a very hot topic.

**Lars Nittve (LN).** Group 6 was a wonderful – though shrinking – group, and I should thank all who participated. I think we had phenomenally good discussions, and it's worth noting that I heard some early criticism of the fact that we kept the same group the next day. But I think it turned out to be a really good thing, in that no one was shy, and everybody spoke more openly the second day. That was really good for the discussion, which was, to use your word, very muscular.

There was a very good discussion, and I think that you can say that yesterday I would have said it was an inconclusive discussion, and today I should say that it was a fundamentally inconclusive discussion. I think it turned out to be fundamentally inconclusive almost on principle, because we – like so many of the other groups – came from such different backgrounds, in terms of the character of the institution, its funding, and geography. We were from the USA, from Georgia, South Korea, Sweden, Japan, Denmark, etc; our backgrounds and our different institutions were so different that in a sense, we could all embrace issues about difference too, and the importance of maintaining and working in a creative way with the differences.

We started out, quite interestingly, by talking a little about... my note says 'All are putting up a fight.' I think that was in the shadow of Benjamin Buchloh's talk yesterday, when there was this feeling of the downfall of the museums. I don't think we all agreed with... we certainly agreed with some parts of his description, but not with all. But many of us felt that it was implied that in this downfall we have also sold out, as individuals, as directors and curators, and I think that everybody wanted to state that that's not the case. Whatever the circumstances we are working in, we are actually putting up a fight. We're fighting against this downfall as individuals. So we don't want to be implicated in this, as individuals and professionals.

Otherwise, I think we touched on many of the subjects that have been mentioned here: issues of translatability, of course, all the questions about display types, ways of displaying a collection. The shift in history: the Tate and MoMA and the Centre Pompidou, Big Bang, re-hangs were of course discussed, and what was, I think, a valuable phrase, the transitional ability of the museum's space, which Homi Bhabha talked about and we discussed too. But also about, if you actually have a big collection, the different ways of making that collection accessible, starting with Schaulager, to mention what we have done at the Moderna Museet, which is basically a jukebox for art, where the actual works appear in front of you with the help of a robot. It's an in-between space between the gallery space and hidden storage, called the Pontus Hultén Study Gallery.

But we also talked about different models for creating this third space, in a sense, for the collection. One thing we touched on – and it was inconclusive, probably also fundamentally – was the distinction between a public museum and a museum which has a public-service ethos. A public museum can basically do the same thing as the other type of museum, but they will still each transmit or create a different type of experience for the visitor. You can have educational programs, all these things, but there's something a museum has, when you get a feeling as a visitor that it is a public service museum, and it is that ethos. And we were trying to figure out what made that difference, so we talked about two examples that turned out to be Japanese, the Mori Art Museum and the museum in Kanazawa. Both are public museums, but probably the latter, you could say, is a public-service museum as well, which has that sort of ethos.

**KH.** Kasper. Maybe just two or three minutes.

**Kasper König (KK).** I was in group 3, and yesterday it was more like a group therapy, and today was a workshop. Yesterday it was sort of self-commiseration and candor; it was slow, but it dealt with the notion of crisis, with a certain sense of being surprised by the self-pity of some of the American colleagues having to deal with that crisis, and then having colleagues in the group who have experienced this situation all their professional careers.

Well, there's this kind of proverb from 1968 in Germany: 'Du hast keine Chance, nutze diese,' i.e. 'You have no chance; use it.'

Today, it became quite clear – at least within the group – that it is not enough to focus on the object, but it doesn't work without the object. But that object should be informed by some kind of intangible cultural heritage, which means complexity, and I feel that today we have learned a lot in terms of reflecting on what was going on yesterday. So the preface to it all is, can a civil society... And I remembered – I had to find out the title of the film, which was very close to this particular location – a film by John Cassavetes, *Shadows*, from 1959. It takes place in the garden of the Museum of Modern Art, and the key picture, the key symbol, is this extraordinary sculpture of Gaston Lachaise, a superwoman, an enormous sculpture with huge breasts. It hasn't been shown here for years, but this is personal, though it's the result of workshop talking about continuity and discontinuity... So a museum does have a function the way a film club does. Many of us were socialized through other attitudes, and ended up in the visual arts. This is the most important thing. I think we learned a lot from the consolation of yesterday and today that the civil society is our goal, in terms of making a contribution, so we also talked about the visitor, the public, to look at it from the point of view of the public. And there was an interesting experience from a colleague from Australia. There are particular experiences that cannot be generalized, but we can learn from them, because we have different experiences, but it makes it more interesting to deal with contradictions. That is basically...

**KH.** Does anybody who was in a workshop want to add something to the summary of their 'true leader'?

**LN.** Please do.

**KH.** Let me pose a question to us all. One of the things that fascinated me about today, in the context of yesterday and tomorrow, was the remarkable presentations by Françoise and Gustavo, which actually reminded me of the urgency of what we do, as well as the agency of what we do: that we really are not in the business of decor, we really are in the business of human lives and the liberty to be expressive. So one of the things that I have been thinking about during the day has to do with something Kasper just mentioned, which is that I'm very aware many of us have worked in different institutions with fewer resources than the one I presently work in – some of us have worked in institutions with almost no real resources, and the two speakers this morning, two of the speakers who are a museum directors or 'chauffeurs', really led me to wonder what we can learn from our colleagues who come from economies of scarcity, as we all in varied degrees move into a scarcer economic climate. And this comes out of my sense of optimism, in a certain way. I think that we are at a moment where there is a recalibration of values, and I am very much aware that, for example, PS1, which I hope that we will increasingly think of as part of MoMA – as it is – started at precisely a time like this in the seventies. So I am very curious – because Gustavo really talked about artists – I am very curious what we all think; whether there is something to be learned from more and deeper conversations with colleagues who have nothing other than great passion, intellectual commitment, and knowledge.

God, I feel like I am talking to Minnesotans!

**SB.** I guess we all would like to be drivers, so to speak.

**KK.** Anyone who would like to answer the first question can pick a work by Picasso.

**KH.** Bernice.

**Bernice Murphy (BM).** Margit came up with a very interesting idea as we were walking upstairs, and she has her hand up, so I think she should speak.

**Margit Rowell (MR).** Listening to Françoise this morning, I brought it up in my group and Melissa mentioned it briefly. Françoise said something about when they had a sugar-cane display, people who came in and who had had an experience were recorded, and their testimonies were retransmitted into the display. And I said to myself, wouldn't it be great if

somebody did a Robert Morris exhibition, because I know that Christophe, for instance, has worked a lot on Robert Morris, with films and performances and things, and if there were some of the living witnesses of those theater pieces, dance pieces, who could be recorded informally, and it could be put back into the exhibition spaces. In thinking a little further I was thinking that this is the kind of thing that we do; we go out and do interviews and print them in our sort of erudite catalogues that most of the visitors don't read. But if there were monitors somewhere in relation to the exhibition it would contextualize the work, and we would also save for our archives participants from those periods. So that was the idea that I got from Françoise's presentation.

**KH.** Françoise really questioned who gets to make the stories, how the stories get told. I think that is actually all of our businesses, so that was a very interesting set of questions she raised for us, as well as... I think she raised a question about expertise, and I wonder increasingly, as we are being asked to become more expert in things that we weren't born into, all of us, are we sure we are the right storytellers?

David.

**David Elliot (DE).** [inaudible] ...that you weren't born knowing about contemporary art, and you can do it as easily with other cultures, if you want to, and are prepared to spend the time.

**KH.** In fact you have done remarkable work in a number of cultures. Can you tell us about when you went to Japan for the first time? How did you begin your research, and how long did it take you in post-war Japan until you got to make your exhibition?

**DE.** I worked with a Japanese researcher, of course, and she had been doing it as a field subject. It took two or three trips there, and we put the show together. I needed her expertise to do it and I learned from her – and from others as well, just as you do growing up. I think it's the openness of mind. If people are really open-minded and think there is no barrier, then there isn't.

**KH.** Did you ever find, when you were looking at artworks that were somewhat or entirely unfamiliar, that your first impression was wrong?

**DE.** Yes, with Western works as well as with works not from my culture. Sure. I am wrong all the time. When I start being right then I know that I am wrong.

**KH.** I actually think that's an important ingredient.

**DE.** Openness of mind? Yes, absolutely.

**Janne Gallen-Kallela-Sirén (JGKS).** I'd like to comment on the economics of scarcity, because I think there are different kinds of economics of scarcity. New York used to be my home town, and now I live in Finland. New York also has a scarcity of space that a place like Finland doesn't.

So I think it has more to do with the economies of humility, really, than with the economies of scarcity, because you can have an advantage somewhere because you have a great old collection and lots of money, but elsewhere you have more mobility, because you don't have the weight of that monumental collection on you, and you can invent identities and even collections in a different way. But I think the problem arises that we have a certain inherited sense of hierarchy within the international constellation of the museum community. That is why I would advocate, as a New York Finn, the economy of humility as a substitute for the economy of scarcity.

**Audience 1.** A couple of things. One: in response again to what David said, in 1997 I had the good fortune to be working with Vishaka at the Asia Society, who decided to mount an exhibition of contemporary Chinese work. Of course I knew nothing about this. We put together a team which included Gao Minglu, who had been in China through the 1980's, come to the West and studied at Harvard, but was intricately located within those artists' network; a classic Chinese scholar, an American who was an expert on the Song Dynasty, traditional work – and me, whose primary experiences were post-war West. And we had the most fabulous, amazing conversations coming from the very different perspectives. I think we learned from each other, and our exhibition was the better because whenever we could reach consensus about the interest or value, the way it spoke to all three of us, we knew that we were on the right path.

I think those kinds of collaborations where we can bring each other together from our different points of view and learn from each other have an incredible value. From that, which I

was picking up a lot today, was the contingency of objects, that they moved through either time or space, and accrued different values and meanings as they continually changed their position, their relative positions, either physically or in relationship to other objects, or in relationship to our understanding of them. For me that was realizing again something I know, but it's wonderful to have it reaffirmed: that objects are constant in their motion, in their meaning, and in their kind of intellectual framework, the framework of ideas and understanding, and meanings and context that we bring to them constantly allows them to transform, and give in a different way.

I have to say that this is my first CIMAM conference, and I'm very glad to learn from all the different perspectives that people bring to it.

**KK.** I would like to make a short reference to the question about economies from the colleague from Finland. I just realized that I made it too brief. When I mentioned the John Cassavetes film *Shadows*, which aroused huge controversy, because when Cassavetes made and presented it it was much lauded by, among others by Jonas Mekas of the *Village Voice*. People were very much in favor of films by independents – not against Hollywood, but independent of Hollywood – and then Cassavetes, who had overextended himself, cut a release. The company insisted that he re-edit it, that it was impossible to show the film, which had so much positive feedback, for various reasons; film reasons, but also because the story dealt with a multi-racial context. So, till then Cassavetes was always slighted by the film people, because he sold out. I have seen both versions, and the commercial version is still a grand film. I think this is what a museum also has to deal with all the time. We all want audiences. We want to keep the audience we have and acquire new audiences, and it's really interesting to make it available to everybody or nobody, but how far do you go and how do you do it? This is something where you cannot establish rules.

Many museums have had great times and gone under, and some have a chance to revitalize themselves. But I think that in future most contemporary museums – at least looking at it from the European point of view – are not going to survive on an inner spiritual momentum. Therefore today's session was really important. Not that we can get role models to be applicable to us, but we really can learn to be self-reflective and make sure that it is part of an evolutionary, social, understanding.

For instance, even prisons are run privately because they are more profitable that way. And I think a museum is like a kindergarten or, negatively, a prison. It's part of society, and this *civitas* momentum we have to keep up. So, Buchloh made good points, but he was just so goddamn old-fashionedly moralistic about it. But he made wonderful points about the architecture. He could have shown it on television and millions of people would have understood what he was talking about.

**KH.** I'd like to hear if there are things you do in your institutions to make time for the kind of research that may be necessary to umbrella the complexity we're talking about. One of the things Jonathan said in my workshop was that so few of us have any time to think, which was how I felt too. But what I have tried to do in every institution I have worked in is to make it mandatory that we take some time to talk to each other and do research together.

Is this an interesting topic for anybody? Maybe it's something we should talk about in another meeting. We are all so driven to produce, that I wonder if pulling back a little from production would be a good thing.

**Jonathan Fineberg (JF).** I raised that point, so I will say something about it.

I came into the Philips in a peculiar way, because I really come from academia – I'm not really part of the regular board of trustees, and I found that helping the university to come in and build a research centre was like putting an extra leg on a body, because it was something that didn't exist before. It's been really fascinating to watch what happened, because we have a new director who has really embraced this. She now comes to all the programming community meetings of our research centre, and because she comes, the curators all come, so it is affecting the whole institution. We all take time, as a result, to have conversations about, you know, 'What kind of symposiums do you want to have?', 'What are the subjects?' And we get into really good conversations, and I think that director has had to say 'We are going to take a certain amount of time and we are going to have these conversations among the staff.' And the result has been very positive. Everybody's really enjoying doing it.

**KH.** Do you meet weekly?

**JF.** It varies. The program committee for the center itself meets irregularly, like once a month, sometimes even every two months. For other programs, something we did was try to get curators from Washington. One thing we discovered is that most curators from other institutions never talk to each other, let alone talking between institutions. We began by taking a topic; we would say 'The National Gallery has just done a Jasper Johns show, so let's all get together on Saturday morning at the Philips and talk about the Jasper Johns show.' Whenever people came from a variety of places, we had a really fabulous time. It was wonderful, and I think that it nurtured everybody's work.

**KH.** Bernice.

**BM.** This time I'll speak for myself. I am engaged in setting up a study centre as well, and I find that in engaging myself to set up a study centre for other people to be able to take time, I'm spending so much of my own time that I don't get to think very much about even that, just the process of executing it. And I have a question from a colleague who said 'Suppose another institution said "Suppose I collaborate with you on this. When do I get to do anything?"' and I think this is a really very interesting question. That ought to be taken up at a future meeting.

**KH.** Can you just expand on that a little? What would the issue be?

**BM.** The issue is that if you make a study centre, you spend a lot of time making a study centre for others to benefit from, and it's about your ideas, perhaps of what ought to be studied, but you never get to execute any of those ideas, because you never get the time yourself.

**KH.** I think that's called being a museum director

**BM.** Well, I'm not a museum director.

**KH.** You are leading a centre. I think that is one of the perils of leadership. You are providing a platform for others. What do you guys think?

**LN.** In a sense, aren't these questions we ask ourselves and our colleagues every day? It's one of the main battles in our lives. I think it's not just the pressure to produce, but actually the urge to produce and realize things that relatively soon meet an audience, so you see the

results, and the conflict between that and having the time to think without a defined goal – to think and discuss more broadly without a defined goal.

I can't say that there is a definite solution to it, whether it's called a study centre or whether you meet on Saturdays. It's quite indicative that you met on Saturday morning, not on a weekday, to have these discussions and so forth. I think it says something about our daily lives, I would say. The solution is of course that we find ways of... How should I say this? I think there is pressure. No, I don't have the solution. I skip that. I am not going to speculate on the solution. I leave that to someone else, because I don't have it.

**SB.** I think it's also a great opportunity to have resources, to have an institution and to produce. And I think it is a real privilege also, being in the art world as a cultural producer, whatever you call it – curator, director. Whatever your role is, it depends also on the size of the institution, I guess. But I think it is a real privilege, to serve the public.

**KK.** Some advice I can give as an old hand: it's very important to be clear about what you don't do, because things do themselves, and then everything looks alike. Each of us gets every day a stack of glossy invitations, press releases, and sometimes we wonder what the hell we are doing. Do we want to add to all this machinery? It's pretty good for a museum to have connections; it's kind of local, and has a kind of global or universal momentum to say 'no'. It's hard, but it won't be hard for too long. The problem is that too many good subjects are being used for something and then they're burnt. There are too many mediocre one-shot kind of affairs. That shouldn't be a reason not to do something and focus on it. There was talk on Monday about over-extension, too many buildings and so on. So there should be more investment in software and not hardware. That's important.

**Manuel Borja-Villel (MBV).** I wanted to say something in answer to Bernice. I think it's important that we do not only talk among ourselves, do not have those meetings, only on Saturdays. We work Saturdays, Sundays, it doesn't matter, but I think that one of the issues of this conference is to whom the museums belong. I think we may not have it clear – probably we should discuss if they belong to the artists, if they belong to the public. But I have the feeling that in Europe the politicians are clear, and in the States the trustees are clear, that the museums belong to them. They think they own them.

**KH.** I'm not sure that's true.

**MBV.** What I think is important is that we talk to them. We need time for research; museums are places for knowledge, places for crowds. I was talking to somebody over lunch about an institution that used to have twelve visitors a week. That's not much, but why not? It has to be very clear. I think that's the goal of this sort of meeting.

**KH.** We also have to be clear as to how we measure our own quality and the kinds of values that we promulgate. I'll come back you, Jonathan.

**JF.** I just want to clarify two things. Someone said we did this once on a Saturday and it wasn't as good as the weekday one; people didn't want to take time off. But the other thing I wanted to say, coming from academia – everybody's busy all the time. Once in my faculty we said 'Every last Monday of the month we will get together for two hours and talk about some subject in modern art, no matter what else you are doing.' I know for myself, I'm very busy, I just can't take out these two hours, but then I get in there and have a wonderful time. I think you have to, we all have to, decide this is a priority; we have to take this time. This is not something on the side; we had to decide we were going to take some time. And that's part of the job too. A director has to give you that.

**KH.** At MoMA, we have two curators involving contemporary art from every department meeting every week, for two hours; usually Glenn is there, and I'm always there, and the conversations are miraculous. Sometimes we drag along, but it is an opportunity really to talk collectively about the collection, the installation of it, what we've been looking at, down to do we think that the word 'rupture' is an appropriate word in terms of guiding us towards a reinstallation. It's a very wide range of conversations, and usually there is an agenda beforehand that we try to stick to, so it is really fundamentally important that we all can read each other's minds. There is something miraculous about being in the same room.

**DE.** But, we say, isn't it incredible that we work in the same organization? Actually, we talk together, we talk together about things that we have in common. This isn't rocket science. For me, so much of what seems to be said is, 'Oh, but there are things that are outside the box, and if we want to talk about those we have to make special time.' I would say the box is wrong. Change the box. It's not the walls of the museum, it's actually the mindset, the

educational system, it's the departments of the museum. Just really think how that would change and then you could have these conversations because they would happen naturally. But what you are describing – you're talking about stuff that we should be talking about anyway.

**KH.** What I am describing is what I heard from others, but that rarely happens. I was just encouraging it.

**JF.** We actually open to the public. There are people in the community who are interested in these conversations, and they show up.

**Audience 2.** I just wanted to underscore what Kathy said and what Jonathan said. I think that's when it starts from the top, when there is permission or a mandate from the top. But I think it's much harder when it starts from a kind of sense of urgency or malaise, when there is this general sense of 'I wish I could take a sabbatical to do all this', which I should be doing during my day.

And I think if there is some way to find that mandate from the top, permission, when it's not about research just for the next exhibition... I think that's sometimes the most frustrating part, you can carve the time if it's exhibition-based, but if it's just percolating an idea that may or may not lead to an exhibition, it's much harder to carve that kind of time. I think that's something that would be great to have come up at AAMD, and then percolate down. I think that curators would benefit tremendously from that.

**JGKS.** Just a comment on the expenditure of time, a small example of how time is carved out in my museum – the museum where I work presently, which is the Helsinki Arts Museum – for thinking about this. Basically, we cut from an exhibition schedule of twenty-three exhibitions annually down to seventeen, and the money is now being spent essentially on curators traveling around the world, because we don't have the greatest of historic collections in Finland. We've got nice collections, don't get me wrong, but they are not as monumental as elsewhere. So the curators are now traveling around the world as part of their work – not to act as couriers, though they do that as well, but just to travel.

**KH.** Let me ask you one thing; I think this is exactly what I was looking for. But how did you all feel when somebody said, okay, we're going from twenty-three to seventeen?

**JGKS.** Well, in Finland you can't get fired unless you commit a crime. And basically I just cut the exhibitions. As the director I just went to the board, which consisted of politicians and municipal politicians. They understood the justification for it, as long as the visitors were happy with our program, which they have been; even more so now, I think, because if the curators are happy, it makes for a happier public. If the curators are feeling like shit, it will make for a shitty sensation for the public, pardon my French.

**KH.** Have any of you had similar experiences to that one, in terms of really looking hard at the number of things you do? We always make this decision in times of scarcity as opposed to times of well-being. So actually, maybe it's the part that is not rocket science. Maybe it is the drive to do things, that is very, very strong, but I think some of us actually do more than our audience actually benefits from, so I'd begin to wonder whom we are doing it for, and I'd begin to wonder, if there is this drive for greater knowledge and research, why we are doing so much of some kind of things and so much less of other kind of things. I think that's a very interesting model for us.

A couple more comments. I'm conscious that we haven't heard from too many of our Asian colleagues this afternoon.

**Victoria Lu (VL).** It's just my personal opinion, but I notice that Asian curators, from Japan, Korea and Singapore, and now China, we all travel intensively all over the world. But I notice that our Western contemporary colleagues are not traveling as much as we do, and I want to know why.

**KH.** Anybody have a response to that?

**LN.** Well, at Panel 2 I heard two short answers: 'Less money', one said, and 'Less time', said another. I don't know whether either is true. I think there are other reasons, actually.

**MC.** I am not sure that it is true; most colleagues I know in Asian museums are just as strapped as anyone else. I think it's actually a set of priorities. They feel like it is a priority to see other places.

**KK.** I went to this meeting in Shanghai, where they invited me to lecture. I wanted to go for three days, and I asked to fly business class. They said no, so I said, 'Okay, I can't come.' So they booked me a first-class flight. But coming here I wouldn't take a business flight, because if I did there would be two or three thousand euros less, which is needed for catalogues or lecturers' fees or film presentations. I think again that it has to do with priorities, but since our colleague said that if the curators are happy the audiences are happy, I think Kathy should serve champagne, the very best, for all of us, so that we can make our audiences happy. The Museum of Modern Art should.

**KH.** I can't serve champagne, but the galleries are open. It's fairly bubbly up there.

I want to thank my colleagues on the podium with me, and thank all of you again for really special conversations – the ones in odd corners as well as the ones up here.