

## **Transnational Practices in Collecting**

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The question with which I begin is relatively simple: what does it mean for the Van Abbe Museum to acquire and display Flying City's *Drifting Producers*, a multi-media installation dating from 2003-5? For a provincial museum in the Netherlands, situated on the north-west edge of Europe, to house and curate a work gifted to the museum by its makers, a South Korean art collective?

To see this work, the visitor may well have encountered the collections for which the van Abbe is renowned: Russian and Dutch modernism, as well as contemporary and recent art, with a tendency towards Dutch examples.

*Drifting Producers* comes to view, in a room of its own, flying off an upper floor. Close by, in a richly rewarding curatorial conjunction, are paper works by El Lissitzky together with *Energy Lithuania*, a film by Deimantis Narkevicius, dating from 2000, acquired by the museum in 2005. A special relationship is staged between the works on paper and the film, but the conjunction goes further, since *Drifting Producers* too has some echoes of Russian constructivism [flyingcity.org]. As it turns out, of course, the Van Abbe may be situated in a provincial location, but its collections and curating are 'international', and I will suggest 'trans-national'.

We have been asked today to reflect on collecting and identity. But, what comprises a museum 'collection' - the art works, related materials, the library, the archive, the shop, the office post-notes, the contents of the trash baskets? And we might also need some definition of 'collecting', as a set of practices. As well as considering – who is the 'curator', the museum professional, the invited artist or academic, the viewer or visitor as co-curator? But let me leave these questions on the table for the moment.

To begin, I will explore the collecting and display of art and artefacts produced outside the host culture and outside conventional notions of the European-North American canon; this will involve reflecting on the ways in which museums represent national culture, precisely through the staging of alterity. In thinking about what or whose cultures or cultural objects belong in the museum's collections, I will consider two concepts: that of restitution, and that of hospitality, suggesting that the question of 'return' haunts many historic collections, but that it can give way in the twenty-first century to the act of 'welcome'.

The Van Abbe museum's historic modernist collections offer an embodiment of what Okwui Enwezor calls 'global modernity' [Enwezor, 2002] They are usually understood within the narratives of an international modernism staged in and by European art and its institutions in the period before the 1939-45 war. In contrast to this version of 'global modernity' stands another earlier version, developed during the nineteenth century and notably within the nineteenth century's new public museums: this is the collecting and curating

of arts from outside the west. A third moment, is the moment of now, a period which has uniformly been identified as 'globalisation'. 'Globalisation' is a highly contested term, and there are many conflicting accounts from those asserting its neo-imperial reach, put forward in Hardt and Negri's *Empire* to those that advocate its contradictions, counter and resistant movements, its trans-national and diasporic networks (Amoore, 2005). The spectacle effect of contemporary art exhibitions seems to be central to a globalised art world.

For art museums in the west, the past 15 years or so have been a period of rapid and intense expansion at home and abroad. Their fortunes have been checkered by success and failures – I'm thinking here of the (Mc) Guggenheim with its rapid expansion in the later 1990s and its financial crisis in 2001. New museums and museum extensions have been designed by celebrity architects. Contemporary and recent art has been added to historic collections. Museums have a somewhat curious, and at this moment, changing relation to contemporary art exhibitions. I'm thinking again of The Guggenheim - in remaking itself, the museum has invested in the current American pavilion at the Venice Biennale. At the same time, museums are under specific pressures: funding often depends on national and or corporate imperatives, on policies geared towards social and political 'relevance'; on widening social access and participation; on shifting the museum from its primary role as guardian or keeper to one of active engagement in its communities. In a climate in which national cultures in Europe are breaking down, the museum's role as representative of national culture, heritage and *patrimoine* is in question. Yet at the same time, museums are assuming

central importance in the remaking of the nation and the rethinking of national identity. And museums have been reinvented as sites of memorial and remembrance, as for example in the recent Holocaust museums. Collections too are under stress: the 'longevity' of traditional forms of art may be challenged by the immediacy and transience of contemporary digital media.

The history of the western museum is too well-known to be repeated here, but some salient points are worthy of reiteration. As institutions of a newly-created public culture, museums were readily allied to local, national, and global identities, and specifically to what Homi Bhabha calls 'civility', a form of subjectivity forged in and by colonial and imperial relationships [Bhabha, 1994]. Bourgeois subjects constructed themselves in relation to 'others'. And central to the making of this subjectivity was the museum's collection and display of art and design produced outside the west. The museums played a central role in the creation of patrimony, heritage, and national identity, through the staging of alterity. Major museums such as those of the Louvre in Paris or the British Museum in London offered diverse routes for staging the national in relation to the global – whereas French painting has traditionally been showcased in the Grand Galerie of the Louvre, at the British Museum, any specifically national content has long been overwhelmed by an excess of art from beyond western Europe. Collections which thus emblemise the national do so by offering access to cultures outside their borders. The art objects in these European national collections were removed from their host countries in a range of differing ways, legal and illegal, often by private collectors or art dealers, and sometimes through the high stakes of the art

market. On these grounds, the British Museum has been nominated a 'storehouse of stolen goods' – this is its description by the Black British artist, Lubaina Himid. These collections of 'non-western' art are, then, haunted by the question of restitution, of return, repatriation, relocation.

Restitution conveys the idea of the repayment of a debit or debt, and it may take many forms. One of the driving forces has been the concept of the repayment of the debts accrued in colonialism or in the Holocaust. Restitution may be the return of the 'stolen' goods, or restitution may be a repayment in other ways. At the same time, this is a period in which museums and historic sites are being destroyed. We are all familiar with the looting and theft from major collections, as well as the destruction of museums and historic sites in Afghanistan and Iraq, the dispersal of major collections of west Asian treasures. Removal and therefore restitution are urgent concerns.

Central to the concept of restitution is the question of where does the object belong? What is its primary location? Can it be returned, and if so where and to whom? In many cases the primary location has been destroyed, transformed, disappeared. Often, the primary location may still be deemed unsuitable: this is one of the reasons given by the British Museum and the British government for not returning the Parthenon marbles, despite the very real damage done to them while in the 'care' of the British Museum.

Restitution of the object itself also throws into question the museum's belief in its role of as preserver. Restitution is, after all, a form of de-acquisition.

Restitution also threatens one of the central ideological rationales of the large,

imperial collections – that they are ‘universal’ museums. In 2003, the British Museum, the Louvre and others including the Metropolitan Museum in New York advanced the claim that they are ‘universal’ museums. They argue that their collections transcend national boundaries and serve a public not belonging to a single nation state. They have asserted their rights to keep hold of their collections in all circumstances, and so re-affirmed the global power of the western museum as the guardian of ‘world’ art. [britishmuseum.ac.uk]

The second form of restitution focuses not on the object, but on interpretation. Restitution returns the object not to a primary location, but to a primary community, a community with whom ‘lost’ interpretations are restored. Perhaps we should not be surprised that this is a strategy adopted by one of these ‘universal’ museums. The current re-curation of the Oceania galleries at the British Museum is being undertaken by a team of western anthropologists and curators together with Melanesian tribal elders. Another is the current interest in the enactment of religious ceremonies around art works: Tibetan altars are re-consecrated by Buddhist monks, Byzantine icons blessed by Orthodox patriarchs, or re-creation of festivals around the images of the gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon. At the British Museum, for example, in summer 2006, skilled Bengali craft workers created an image of Durga, seated on a lion, in the Great Court. In this last example, museums are seen as specifically interacting with, and having a special relevance for, diasporic communities settled in Britain, in this case from India and Bangladesh. A third example is a curatorial practice (introduced at the Horniman Museum, an ethnographical collection in South London), in which African diasporic

communities in London were invited to comment on African artefacts in the collections and to create new meanings for them in relation to their own contemporary present. And there are many others. Museums engaging in these practices have not only recognised the museum as a storehouse of material and visual cultures, but a powerful and formative institution in the making of knowledges and in the making of audiences and communities. Of course, such activities have been prompted by a marked emphasis in public funding and museum governance on accountability and multi-culturalism in 1990s Britain. And these projects have many of the pitfalls of multi-culturalism's fascination with otherness.

Restitution relies on authenticity. Restitution depends on the return of the 'stolen goods' to authentic cultures, people and places. Restitution in interpretation relies on finding those who can authentically authorise meaning, 'native' subjects who can inherit, speak for, and represent. Authenticity is also at stake in the objects themselves as well as in the identities of their makers. But many art works were not made within and for a singular context or culture. Museums are full of historic items and art works made for export, made between communities, created in the global circuits of modernity, the result of intercultural exchanges and influences. Similarly, artists, in the past as well as the present, have often been inter-cultural subjects, with hybrid identities and multiple allegiances to places and cultures. And European national cultures too have never been homogenised or singular.

Some new museum work is now exploring the interactions between communities, and art as intercultural. The new Portrait Gallery of Canada in Ottawa has a mission to tell the history of a nation through visual images and objects by native first peoples and white settlers. Curating is being undertaken by a team with expertise from both communities. Of course the project is fraught with difficulties. And its very existence is threatened by the changing political climate in Canada. But the Portrait Gallery attempts to create new stories of the Canadian nation, to re-think the nation now and in the past.

David Carrier written of the 'envelope' that is put around an object on entry in to the museum. Being in a museum collection limits, in some ways, *Drifting Producers* possibilities for drift, for restless circulation in the globalised circuits of contemporary exhibitions. Its place at the Van Abbe can be considered within the rapid acquisition of contemporary art by museums in the 1990s. Often these acquisitions and/or displays were in the business of new canon formation. The art on show was often produced by artists born or settled in the west, and/or readily familiar to western audiences. Is something else going on here?

As an art object *Drifting Producers* speaks about contemporary pressures of globalisation and modernisation on the urban environment, on artistic, cultural and creative practices. It was made in specific relation to changing urban environments in Seoul. In this sense, the work is site-specific: it relates to and is dependent upon a specific place at a distinct historical moment. But the installation puts forward the concept that space is actual and imaginary,

historical and of the present and the future. That space is produced, imagined, created by bringing together physical and mental geographies, materials and images. Thinking in this way suggests the kinds of knowledge produced by the object itself, as well as in the framing of its curation, in the frame of the museum.

*Drifting Producers* is equally, however, an art work made within and for a globalised art circuit. *Drifting Producers* is multi-media - it comprises: digital drawings, wooden maquettes, a DVD of 21 minutes, a powerpoint presentation of 6 minutes. The visual form is that of installation, the visual form of the 1990s, and now the stock in trade exhibit of the spectacular modern museum, along with film and video art. The written languages used by the artists on their website speak within well-known vocabularies of the delirious cities of post-modern North America, Situationist theories of city experience. They share the mapping and cartographic impulses of recent artistic practice. Urban development and transformations, the displacements of communities, and the significance of networking are all familiar themes in contemporary art and recent critical theory. Numerous exhibitions have focused on the city, and its predicament as a critical site of change in the later twentieth and early twentyfirst centuries. All of these references, and others which we can make, situate the work for us, help us to make sense of it as we encounter it, walk round it, cut through it, and as it bumps into us, cuts across our passage, forces us to detour and re-route. We may not make decipher of the south Korean references, or again we might, depending on our skills,

family and cultural traditions. It is a work that may well have, as Emily Apter, suggests, a form of 'translatability' built into it.

Yet there is I think also much that may well elude the beholder of this work, much that may not translate. A sense of not knowing, of bafflement, even bewilderment or incomprehension, is of course, all too familiar in the museum. Universal museums, like the British Museum, have tended to 'domesticate the alien', to borrow a phrase from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's analysis of the mechanisms of British imperial rule in India [Spivak 1985]. Through these processes of the domestication of the alien, universal museums make the art of west, south and east Asia, Africa, Oceania, spectacular for and/or enjoyable to their visitors, who tend to be a globe-trotting audience of tourists.

Chin-Tao Wu, the author of a fascinating analysis of the rise of western corporatism in the arts [title], has pointed out in a recent essay 'Worlds Apart' , that not all countries participate equally in today's globalising art world; not all are equally represented, or have the same rights of engagement. East Asian countries especially Taiwan and South Korea are, she suggests, relatively new players. As a result, she contends, for many western viewers, art works produced in these countries will be less familiar, the references more obscure. These East Asian countries may be less visited than others participating in the circuit [Wu, 0000]. *Drifting Producers* may be 'translatable', but it also has a resilience to translation. It signifies at the Van Abbe, I would say, as a sign of that cultural difference which can not be easily translated or readily understood.

Restitution will not work, for to whom could such a work be restored? Or to where might it be relocated?, since its creation is based upon an imaginative work of restitution, in the making of an imaginative space for displaced urban workers. It is perhaps Derrida's concept of hospitality that will be of service here. Hospitality is a doubled concept, in which cultural difference is recognised but alterity is neither celebrated nor fetishized; the host opens its doors, only to be charged and changed like the guest by the encounter.

*Flying city* are already familiar guests: through an exhibition at the Netherlands Media Art Institute in 2003, and at the BAC in Utrecht in 2004. These temporary invitations have been translated by the museum into 'leave to remain', a permission to stay. This act turns the guest into an equal and participant subject. It is the gift of *Drifting Producers* and its acceptance that marks a broader paradigm shift taking place - from restitution to hospitality. The concepts of restitution and hospitality were elaborated by Jacques Derrida, to help us to deal with the complexities of an ethical positioning on the urgent issues of today. And they help us make sense, a little, of the difficult questions that our hosts have invited us to consider: what should a museum acquire, what and whom should a museum represent, who are its audiences?

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