Art, Globalism, and New Modes of Curatorial Practice

How Do Latitudes Become Forms?

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

F
ollowing three years of planning, the exhibition How latitudes become forms: Art in a global age began its international tour this past February at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Featuring artists from seven different countries, Brazil, China, India, Japan, South Africa, Turkey, and the Walker’s home, the United States, the curators of this exhibition were cautious to avoid the well-trodden paths of their forebears. Exhibition models established by nineteenth-century international expositions have engendered, in part, the more recent regional exhibitions that bring ‘African,’ ‘Asian,’ or ‘Chinese’ art to the Euro-American world. Although many curators of these exhibitions intend to challenge the dominant paradigm rooted in the colonial order, the effect is often that they rely the very constructs they hope to obliterate. Rather than challenge categories based on difference, ethnicity, religion, or location, an exhibition of ‘Chinese’ art, for example, maintains its distinction, yet only nominally subverts the larger hegemonic structures informing categorization, collecting, display, and interpretation. The work in these recently organized exhibitions remains on the periphery of contemporary art and only slowly makes its way into European and American galleries, auction houses, and museum collections. How latitudes become forms confronts these structures through a series of case studies that focus on transforming contemporary curatorial practice through a very intentional blurring of boundaries.

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

How latitudes become forms features more than forty artists, many of whom – like the curators – transgress a range of boundaries. Through her Suitecase Series (2002), Chinese sculptor Yin Xiuzhen examines constructs from the socio-political to the environmental, to those we put on ourselves. Using unconventional materials, Yin creates models of various cities in oil suitcases from second-hand clothing of residents of those cities. For the artists, these transportable cities evoke the human body that is often overlooked in rapid urban development and a growing global economy, or, in her own words, ‘people in our contemporary setting have moved from residing in a static environment to becoming souls in a constantly shifting transience ... the suitcase becomes the life support container of modern living.’ Her work, the way of the many other artists in the exhibition, invites active participation from the viewer. Japanese artist Toshiyuki Ozawa invites the exhibition-goer to enter a museum within the museum. His Museum of Soy Sauce Art (1998-2000) recreates masterworks from Japanese art history in soy sauce and, with accompanying texts, traces a fictitious history of soy sauce art. As the visitor wanders through Ozawa’s museum, (s)he participates in a light-heart- ed yet poignant transgression of the authority of both the canon of art history and the museum. Numerous other artists in the exhibition, variously working with film, animation, performance, tin foil, and chalk, challenge conventions, boundaries, and even objecthood in a myriad of ways. Interested in disrupting hegemonic authority and its counterpart, the global economy, artists and curators alike transform display into activation, objects into events, and contemplation into direct experience.

By Alisa Eimen

Lessons from Looting: The Place of Museums in Iraq

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

T
he International Council of Museums (ICOM) has just finalized a Red List of Iraqi Antiquities at Risk to be distributed to all relevant border crossings. While almost everybody agrees that the US – the authority legally responsible for maintaining law and order in Iraq – was woefully negligent in protecting Iraqi national treasures, very few have attempted to take their inevitable toll. Iraq was ahead of most of the Arab world in cultural matters, including archaeology, museology, art, architecture, and music. So what may have led to this tragic situation? First, we now know that the invasion was in some respects the sad culmination of a process that had already gained considerable momentum in the aftermath of the first Gulf War. There are confirmed reports, in the most recent issue of Smithsonian, for example, of extensive illegal excavations in such Semitic and Babylonian sites as Uruk, Ur, Isin, and Larsa, dug up commonly by underworld groups under the protection of armed men. The current efforts of ICOM, the British Museum, and the College Art Association to control the trade in Iraqi antiquities are equally directed at the looting of Iraqi museums and the more intractable problems of illicit excavations and the illegal art trade. Second, whereas cultural heritage has often been co-opted for nationalist purposes, Baathist Iraq turned it into an instrument for the aggrandizement of the party and especially of Saddam himself. By appropriating the antiquity of the land,
Saddam linked himself with Assyrian, Babylonian, and Aburan fi gures, subsuming a humble original lineage. Bricks used in his megalomaniacal restoration of Babylon are stamped with his name, and a large inscription states that the city was begun by Nebuchadnezzar and completed by Saddam. Close identifi cation with a single ruler can easily backlash once the ruler is removed.

The third factor that seems to have contributed to the loot- ing of museums has to do with their origins under colonial rule and their persisting state of alienation in Iraq and other Arab countries. Most Arab museums still operate within an outmoded orientalist framework, displaying artifacts with lit- tle regard for local general audience or even specialists. My Danish colleague, Ingolf Thuesen, who conducted a survey of visitors to a regional museum in Hama, Syria, noted that the museum was primarily visited by foreign tourists and government offi cials and rarely by the adult Syrian popula- tion. The display of antiquities within the history of Japanese art is ‘to decorate, to adorn’. It can also be used in the sense of ‘to exhibit’, ‘to put on show’. Finally, kazari involves the idea of ‘being affected’, as in

Kazari

Kazari is also the title of the cata- logue accompanying an exhibition of the same name organized by the British Museum and the Japan Society of New York in association with the Suntory Museum of Art in Tokyo. Some two hundred exquisitely beautiful objects were on display at the Japan Society in New York (autumn 2005) and at the British Museum (spring 2006). Nicole Coolidge Rousemiere, director of the Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Cul- tures, and Tsuji Nobuo, Professor Emeritus of Tokyo University and cur- rently president of Tama Art Universi- ty, were co-curators. Both contributed introductory articles to the catalogue: Tsuji’s article centers on the role of kazar on within the history of Japanese art, whilst Rousmaniere’s concentrates on conceptual aspects.

In stressing the conceptual com- plexity of kazar, both exhibition and catalogue make an attempt to challenge the conventions of current art-historical discourse which, as Rousmaniere says, ‘has tended to categorise the arts artificially, as evident from terms like “visual arts” or “applied arts.” This exhibition seeks to break down such con- ventional boundaries between artistic forms, even between arts as apparent- ly different as painting and music, with the aim of presenting the “social life” of art, and to show them in the con- text of what Rousmaniere calls “a larg- er artistic programme” (p. 21). For example, the exhibition not only included high-quality hanging scrolls and painted screens, which would tradi- tionally be classifi ed as high art, but also spectacularly shaped parade hel- mets and skilfully decorated musical instruments, objects that would usu- ally be considered applied art.

The exhibition is arranged in six theme- sical sections, each centring on what are considered to be the six highpoints of kazari. The fi rst section deals with display in the reception rooms of the fi fth- and sixteenth-century elite; the second with the exuberant style of the early seventeenth-century samurai; the third introduces the taste for fi nery and splendour of late seventeenth- and eigh- teenth-century merchants; the fourth presents the fashions of high-ranking women of the eighteenth and nine- teenh centuries; the fi fth takes us to the pleasure quarters of the late eight- teenth and nineteenth centuries; and the last section explores festivals of the pre-modern period, with their colour- ful floats and costumes.

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

In fact, it is only in the fi rst section that the visitor can experience some- thing of ‘kazari in action’. In large showcases, reconstructions are made of the decorative treatments of the Muromachi period reception rooms. Hanging scrolls, screens, and small decorative objects are put together as they might have been in a sixteenth- century interior. The result is striking. However, hardly any other attempts are made to present an ensemble in this manner. Contemporary etiquette man- uals, pattern books, and illustrations are called upon to provide a context, but kinars (ceramic vessels), accessories, screens, small articles of furniture, and ceram- ics are still mostly displayed in separate cases, and are treated individually in the catalogue. There are no clashes of tex- tures and materials, no three-dimen- sional confrontations. There may well have been practical reasons (such as confi lting conservation requirements) for not putting objects together, but after the premise of the fi rst section one does expect more of an attempt to show items in ensembles.

The catalogue follows the layout of the exhibition. Articles accompanying the fi rst fi ve sections were written by Kawai Masatomo, John Carpenter, Yasumura Toshinobu, Nagasaki Iwao, and Timothy Clark respectively. The section on festivals has no compan- any essay, there is instead an article on the vocabulary of ‘decoration’ in early modern Japan by Tamamushi Satoko. Each contribution shows fi ne scholarship, and the captions and the descriptions of the indi- vidual exhibits, provided by a range of contributors, are highly informative. Much information is brought together here that cannot be found in any other English-language publication. It is the catalogue, more than the exhibition itself, which draws our attention not only to the objects themselves, but also to the quality of the workmanship, but also to an object’s use, its place within the dis- play

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

Finally, I agree that a few well-placed tanks in front of Iraqi museums and libraries would have prevented or at least min- imized their looting. But in the end such security measures, whether by US or Iraqi forces, only serve to deepen the rup- ture and further disengage culture from the population. Rather, I would like us to look a little more proactively towards the future, fi guring out how to have an impact, even if it takes time. There may well be new initiatives to contribute to the catalogue to make its point. In spite of these misgivings this exhibi- tion is of innovative value: both exhibi- tion and catalogue are representative of a perceptible trend in the study of art history (and also in other areas) that encourages scholars to move away from exclusive thinking, break down bound- aries, and be more aware of interrelat- edness, multifariousness, ambiguity, and ambivalence. Objects really are pre- sented in context, even if one has to read the catalogue to fully appreciate this point, and traditional boundaries are negated. Even a few ‘ephermeral objects’, as Rousmaniere calls them, such as a wrapping cloth, a decorated lantern, or an incense wrapper are included. This integrative impulve comes from application of the concept of kazar. When ideas are represented on such an impressive scale and at such a high level of scholarship, as is the case with the Kazari exhibition, they are sure to have an impact, even if it takes time for partitions to fall and long-stand- ing art-historical considerations to be challenged. Perhaps in a few years’ time we will be able to see all the fi ney of fashionable eighteenth-century ladies presented in one showcase, together with elements of the interiors in which they lived their lives.


Anna Beazers, MA is a PhD candidate at the Research School of Asian, African, and Amerindian Studies (CNWS), Leiden Uni- versity. Her research concerns eighteenth- century Japanese literature.

a.m.j.j.beerens@let.leidenuniv.nl

Editor’s note >

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

Helm in the shape of a peach with attached blossom forms. Early seventeenth century.