

Portrait of the Museum as a Rendez-Vous

Posthumous Conversations Between Artists

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[A N N D E M E E S T E R]

'Nobody comes from the moon as they say. Everybody comes out of a tradition.'
Johannes Cladders¹

New or different types of developments often begin with a feeling of powerlessness and impotence. Not to mention fear and confusion. A feeling of 'boundlessness' that can be channelled by reproducing what already exists. That is undeniably the case in the English writer A.S. Byatt's meandering essay *Peacock and Vine* (2016), in which she links the work of all-round artists William Morris and Mariano Fortuny in a positively inimitable fashion. Byatt declares that – paradoxically enough – the unique strength of the multi-talented Fortuny is the way he borrows and mixes existing motifs from different sources. He recycles elements from various parts of the world and different periods and 'restores them to new life'. With these combinations, Fortuny continually resurrects the art of the past, yet it feels brand new. In Byatt's musings Fortuny becomes synonymous with the peacock, a symbol of the constant cycle of death and resurrection in art. Byatt seems to suggest that it is essential, fundamental to keep reproducing, portraying and rewriting, rethinking and reformulating existing texts and artworks, and that this does not get in the way of originality and authenticity. A great work can withstand remakes. Moreover, it benefits from re-makes and re-enactments, constant rewording and reworking. Western art history, as we know it, is living proof of that. Since antiquity, making copies of existing works or masterpieces – whether they are faithful or not – has not only been a way for artists to pay tribute to what is good and worth imitation, but is also a pragmatic method for honing their own knowhow and skills, training the eye and improving their own technique. The fact that copying iconic masterpieces normally no longer features on the curriculum of most European art schools and that you seldom see (aspiring) artists sketching in galleries in Belgium or the Netherlands (in contrast to, for example, the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna or the Musée d'Orsay in Paris) is in that sense irrelevant. The 'peacock' is still present and parading, in all its glory, around the arts scene.



Jan de Baen (attributed to),
*The Corpses of the De Witt
Brothers*, c. 1672-1675,
oil on canvas, 69.5 x 56 cm,
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam



Anonymous artist,
Brigitinnenstraat / Rue des
Brigittines, Brussels

Eclecticism

Artists are not lone wolves, nor have they been brought up in total isolation, as Contemporary incarnations of Kaspar Hauser! Quite apart from training or personal interests, every creator is affected or stamped by his or her own time, as well as by the (cultural) history preceding his or her practice. Even CoBrA artists realised that it was impossible to return to a purely instinctive creative point zero. In that respect it does not matter whether artists do or do not use conscious allusions to the art of bygone eras in their work. Since the postmodern age, linear (Western) art history is only one of the many paths to the truth. Artists do not slavishly copy, they reference and collage, developing their own signature by mixing, freely and sometimes wildly, visual references and indirect allusions to artworks from various periods of the history of art and style. Even now, in 2017, eclecticism is still *de rigueur*. For contemporary creators, the gigantic art history sometimes seems to be archive of a grab bag from which elements are greedily fished and plucked. The peacock dies and is resurrected at an extraordinarily pace.

This interest in historic styles and artworks sometimes degenerates into aimless and uncontrolled referencing. At times sentimental, sterile and just plain impotent. In the recently published retrospective architectural manifesto *Solid Objectives: Order, Edge, Aura*, Dutch architect Florian Idenburg from the American-Dutch-Chinese-Greek firm SO-IL wonders:

'Does our inability to find a coherent attitude for tackling the past relate to our blank attitude regarding the future?... [...] Tabula rasa is for cowards, but there are no coherent rules for playing the game on a board filled with pieces. With this in mind we propose a dignified pragmatism: challenge what there is, reactivate it, make it part of the current but allow it to cause friction, to resist. The moment we let go of sentimental values but holistically assess the given and have it fight for its place in the here and now, we might reendow the old with new architectural agency.'

Anonymous artist,
Barthélémylaan /
Boulevard Barthélémy,
Brussels





Caravaggio,
The Sacrifice of Isaac, 1603,
oil on canvas, 104 x135 cm,
Uffizi Gallery, Florence

Assuming that architecture and the visual arts are still two sides of the same coin, this reads like a plea for transhistorical thinking in art that stands not for rational sums but for the sort of free addition and subtraction, division and multiplication that leads to an incalculable result. The list of artists in the Euro-American spectrum that is capable of this seems well-nigh endless. From Jeff Koons, Marlene Dumas and Kelley James Walker through Cindy Sherman, Bill Viola, Peter Greenaway, John Baldessari and Werner Herzog to Anton Henning, Kati Heck, Mark Leckey, Falke Pisano and Shezad Dawood. The nature and manner of the additions and subtractions to which the work of the Great Male Masters of the antique or modern periods is subjected are myriad. Roughly speaking we can distinguish three different methods. Firstly, working in the spirit of – (too) literally or otherwise – in terms of style or content (see, for example, Glenn Brown and Kehinde Willey). Secondly, carrying out a thorough analysis of the underlying mechanisms of the existing work, which results in something more abstract (see Pietro Roccasalva and Matts Leiderstam, Pablo Bronstein and Willem de Rooij). And lastly but certainly not least, a conspicuous third category consisting of contemporary artists, like Riet Wijnen (Marlow Moss) and Jan Andriessen (Torrentius), who draw attention to precursors who were marginalised or neglected in centuries past.

Posthumous conversation

Whatever the angle or method used, the interaction between contemporary artists and those who preceded them often resembles an intelligent, 'bubbling and allusive' conversation, but one which goes beyond the limits of the grave.



Anonymous artist preparing their version of Caravaggio,
Barthélémylaan / Boulevard Barthélémy, Brussels
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A dialogue that may be far livelier than the conversation that actually goes on between artists of one and the same generation or period. In one of her many essays the writer Virginia Woolf wonders how and what role conversation played for writers (read artists here) in the eighteenth century.

'One cannot imagine that writers then retired to their studios or worked by the clock. They seem to have learnt by talk; their friendships thus were important and outspoken. Conversation was a kind of strife, and the jealousies and contradictions which attended the display gave it at least an eager excitement.'²

Woolf seems amazed that the 'talking' – which she herself so enjoyed as a hostess, in London society circles – did not get in the way of artistic production. Contrary to what Woolf describes, the silent dialogue between living and dead artists often looks like one-way traffic. Contemporary artists chatter away without any response, allowing their own work to be influenced by the work of the 'silent other' and that seems to be it. But appearances are deceptive, the contemporary view of the masters of the past changes their work irrevocably, not in the literal sense but in the figurative. The interpretation of the old masters is altered constantly and fundamentally by the creators of the present.

An example from the past – one that is close to home for me – is Frans Hals. In the seventeenth century he was highly appreciated as a painter. Yet in the eighteenth century critics and connoisseurs looked down on his rough and casual, semi-spontaneous style that conflicted with the prevailing academicism. However, the admiration, not to mention adoration, of nineteenth-century artists such as Courbet, Singer Sargent, Mary Cassatt and Van Gogh ensured that Hals's work was seen and appreciated as 'modern'. Suddenly, Hals was no longer just a messy dauber, but a forerunner of impressionism and naturalism. The view of his nineteenth-century successors influenced and even radically changed the work – or at least the reception of it. Hals was a source of inspiration, but his work was also posthumously influenced by the view of artists who lived after him.

The Anxiety of Influence

It is often dangerous – but nonetheless productive – to apply theories from one branch of the arts to another area of culture. I will happily take that risk for the unorthodox former Yale-professor Harold Bloom and his classic *The Anxiety of Influence. A Theory of Poetry* (1973). Bloom believes in the 'necessity of the peacock', just as Byatt does. His often acclaimed and dissected book is an interesting mix of theorising about the function of creativity (with a psychological slant) and an erudite study of the dynamics of the history of poetry. Bloom describes how every (great, white, male) poet is influenced by those who came before him and is occasionally overcome by a paralysing anxiety (the anxiety of influence) that he is not original and just reproduces the past. He describes artistic development as a process in three phases. Firstly, the admiration and imitation of a great predecessor, then rejection of the same inspirational fig-



Mark Leckey, *A Month of Making*, 2014
Gavin Brown, New York

ure and, finally, the crucial phase 'misprision' (misreading), where the writer transforms and 'misforms' his idol's work to create something new.³ Edward Said wrote of Bloom's vision that

'Such a vision immediately plays havoc with the stability of texts and authors, indeed with the whole order of culture. The past becomes an active intervention in the present; the future is preposterously made just a figure of the past in the present. No text can be complete because on the one hand it is an attempt to struggle free of earlier texts impinging on it and, on the other, it is preparing itself to savage texts not yet written by authors not yet born.'⁴

In Bloom's eyes all literature is intertextual and there is constant productive strife in the work of the present, which is struggling with the past and engaged in work for the as-yet-uncompleted future. It seems natural, bearing in mind the peacock, to apply this loosely to art history and (visual) artworks too. Artists carry the past within them and change that past with every new work that is made. Regardless of whether artists actively reference their predecessors or are even aware of their existence.

The transhistorical museum

What role does the museum play in the polyphonic and posthumous conversations between artists? In fact, these silent dialogues take place mainly in creators' thoughts and feelings, in their studios and in their heads. Sometimes the expression of that exchange can literally be seen and felt in the work. More frequently the debate between the artist and what preceded him or her is hidden and encrypted in the work and therefore not immediately decipherable. In a very basic sense, part of the function of our museums is to make artworks accessible to those who do not have the privilege of being able to step into an artist's studio or workplace. Each artwork is essentially an accumulation of semiotic sediment. Museums that isolate artworks in their own period fail to explore and to expose for their visitors a whole spectrum of layers of meaning. Museums that think transhistorically, that facilitate a rendezvous between the old and the new, the artists of the past and those of the present, try to break through that isolation. This type of museum aims to link heritage and tradition to contemporary art and social questions (both contemporary and past), they question the traditional (art historical) categories and thereby develop new insights into the meaning and interpretation of objects (of art).

All artworks are essentially tran-historical. They are 'born' or created at a particular time and in a specific context. They survive that context and are shown and read years or even centuries later in a different era, a different setting, a different cultural context. In that sense all works of art are time travelers. 'They live in the present but in the company of the past', as John Berger put it. As a result, they always fall prey to *Hineininterpretierung* (eisegesis).

Museums that think transhistorically base their approach on the specific characteristics of the artworks. A transhistorical arrangement may mean that old art is combined with contemporary and modern art, but also that old works of art are subjected to a twenty-first-century interpretation that does not tally

with the approach in their own period. Transhistorical does not necessarily mean that arranging works by period is censured or rejected. It means rather that alternative and additional narratives and possible interpretations of objects of art and art history are offered. It is a transition from one linear Western form of (art) historiography to a multiplicity of histories, which are not necessarily chronological but are associative visually or formally, or in terms of theme or narrative, and they do not necessarily respect the limits of the Euro-American sphere. In a world that is becoming increasingly monocultural and in which the interests of the individual are becoming ever more dominant, this is a countermovement. Other and elsewhere are as relevant as us and here.



Erwin Olaf, *Exquisite Corpses, Still Life with the Heart of Count Egmond*, 2012,
commissioned by Gaasbeek Castle (Exhibition: *Exquisite Corpses / Hommage to Egmond (1522-1568)*. 1 July - 31 August 2018)
(original title: *Nature morte vanité avec le coeur de Sieur Lamoral d'Egmont*)

Transhistorical museums are, by definition, global. They are interested in reshuffling and rewriting current power relationships, in developing new configurations of meaning. Consequently, such museums always think about art – within the matrix of changing power relationships – politically. Including the Old Masters.

Until very recently, regardless of the type of collection(s) they housed, museums were unambiguous and important instruments in the canon-forming process. They perpetuated the fact that a more or less fixed group of artists, who were considered to be normative, dominated – and still dominate. This canonization is intrinsic to our need to classify, qualify and decide what merits the eyes and attention of our progeny. For a long time, museums claimed the role of guides and leaders in this, and allowed only one leading narrative. The museums of today benefit from being polyphonic, from allowing a multiplicity of sometimes conflicting or contradictory narratives. Museums used to be expressways that led straight to the truth. But times are changing, nowadays museums offer not only expressways but also meandering country roads and paths down which you can stray, exploring alternative scenic routes alongside the main arteries.



Anonymous artist preparing their version of Caravaggio,
Barthélémylaan / Boulevard Barthélémy, Brussels

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Eager, voracious thinking

Why is that desirable? In *Confronting Images. The End of a Certain History of Art*, the French thinker Georges Didi-Huberman maintains that visual representation has a downside, where apparently comprehensible forms lose their clarity and can no longer be understood intellectually. Furthermore, he claims, art historians have failed to engage with this downside. Their discipline is limited to the rational academic acquisition of knowledge and is based on the assumption that visual representation consists of interpretable signs, whereas images are actually full of contradictions and limitations.

Museums that *think* transhistorically try as a reaction to this not only to reason as art historians but also to think like artists. They complement their own museum methodology with an (artistic) way of thinking that cuts right through the constraints of time, space, culture and geography. In that sense, such museums do not simply respect the museum classification system but also complement their own methodology and frameworks (arrangement by medium, style and period) by embracing a way of thinking that goes beyond the limits of classification and is associative. A way of thinking that is not necessarily restricted by strict timeframes or national borders, but one that is eager and voracious, that scours a variety of different periods and geographical and cultural zones in search of inspiration. A way of thinking that is not tied to particular media or disciplines but is pluralistic and multifaceted, using forms that are appropriate for particular ideas at a specific moment. This kind of thinking encourages visitors to look at artworks – or read novels – and thereby to understand the world in a way that is not based on causal links but is more than anything else exploratory and associative.

Orhan Pamuk expresses this strikingly: 'Reading a novel (artwork) means understanding the world via a non-Cartesian logic – By this I mean the constant and steadfast ability to believe simultaneously in contradictory ideas...Novels (artworks) are unique structures that allow us to keep contradictory thoughts in our mind without uneasiness, and to understand differing points of view simultaneously.' ■

Translated by Lindsay Edwards

NOTES

- 1 In Hans Ulrich Obrist, *A Brief History of Curating*, JRP | RINGIER & LES PRESSES DU REEL, 2011, p.74.
- 2 Stephen Miller, *Conversation. A History of a Declining Art*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2006, pp. 183-84.
- 3 'Poetic Influence – when it involves two strong, authentic poets – always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation. The history of fruitful poetic influence, which is to say the main traditions of Western poetry since the Renaissance, is a history of anxiety and self-saving caricature of distortion, of perverse, willful revisionism without which modern poetry as such could not exist.'
- 4 Edward Said, 'The Poet as Oedipus', 13 April 1975, *The New York Times*.