

## **Absences Felt and Unfelt**

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*Notes: This text was published in "The Absent Museum", a book produced by Wiels, Brussels for an exhibition of an imaginary museum in the city and a response to the plans of the Centre Pompidou to establish a dependency there in 2022.*

Museums are places where a society tells stories to itself. Art museums in particular, because they attempt to materialise the imagination, touch on about how a place wants to be seen and why it deserves to be significant among the cultures of the world. New York's Museum of Modern Art; London's Tate Britain and Modern; the National Gallery Singapore; the Museum of Modern Art of Rio de Janeiro (to name only a few) – all reflect their host nation or city's unique contribution to the world as seen from inside that location. Understanding this, it is perhaps unsurprising that Brussels has no national museum of contemporary art. The Belgian state is not a nation and its myths of origin and identity are fraught and divided, as well as less institutionalised than other European countries. The city museums that do exist are somewhat archaic structures that owe their existence to royal patronage rather than to the drive for national identity formation sponsored by an emerging bourgeoisie. There are important Flemish and Walloon equivalents of course, but they are not to be found in the capital city, and there is little contact between the institutions or official incentive for coordinating their activities across the country. Indeed, there was a time in the 1970s and 80s when the Van Abbemuseum was, slightly jokingly, considered as the displaced Flemish museum of modern art, though never the Belgian one.

Today, the absence of the museum of modern and contemporary art is seen not in terms of completing an unfinished national narrative or establishing a sense of what art might contribute to what Brussels might be or become as an urban imaginary, but as a gap in the necessary touristic infrastructure of a major European destination. This is the reason, presumably, why importing an outpost of Paris's Centre Georges Pompidou as the missing contemporary art institution is seen as the perfect political solution. It avoids having to confront the lack of a contemporary national mythology that an independent Brussels institution would have to face, while providing the formal needs and investment opportunities that are considered vital to the future success of Brussels as a top destination. So, Brussels continues to deal with the absence of a museum that might offer it a way to understand itself anew in the face of changing ideas of Europe, the nation state, participating communities and the various different publics that form the ground on which any museum stands.

While it is not within the remit of this text to speculate on what kind of institution that imagined autochthonic Brussels museum might be, I hope it is useful to explain how the Van Abbemuseum, once a significant player within the Flemish cultural ecology, has developed in the past decade as a way to think about what choices a museum in a particular location can and perhaps must make in the twenty-first century. To do so, I have to start with a story of the Van Abbemuseum as an example of a European organisation that was, at the turn of this century, almost entirely orientated towards a western European, modern, white and largely male, heterosexual narrative, and how that changed as the challenges of economic globalisation and cultural pluralism were faced. In this story, which cannot avoid being subjective, I am particularly interested in how a constructed narrative transforms into a description of reality and eventually into a dogma, and how to wind back the dogma so that it becomes just one way of looking at history or one choice among others.

At the start of my directorship in 2004 the geography and ideology of the collection had changed little since my predecessor, but one, Rudi Fuchs, so eloquently described it in 1982 in his preface to the catalogue for Documenta 7 as stretching from New York to Vienna.<sup>1</sup> It was this geography that was understood to drive invention, discovery and innovation globally. It took responsibility for modernity and the task of the museum was to represent and preserve the best artistic examples of this world-forming project – one that extended back to the roots of aesthetic modernism and, in some accounts, to the birth of the great European colonial adventure. To a large degree, this position was shared with the vast majority of European and American institutions, so no criticism is implied here – rather an attempt to understand what was often naturalised and taken for granted.

On arrival, my question, and my dilemma, was how to respond to the post-1989 expansion of the cultural map in a way that suited the position and capacities of a Dutch provincial museum that had maintained an unusually high profile in the western art world. I am fairly sure it was not a dissimilar question to the one Fuchs's successor Jan Debbaut sought to answer when he investigated new geographies (including Scotland) and eventually settled on Los Angeles as a place that was breaking new ground in a way that was consequent for the museum's existing western art collection.<sup>2</sup> To me, the acceptance of a Euro-American geography for the collection – a NATO collection if you will – was not sufficient in an increasingly diverse and divided Dutch society. The privileging of the United States based, however unconsciously, on the loyalties of the Dutch state after 1945 no longer seemed the only way to support the values of individualism, free exchange, aesthetic experimentation and internationalism. Other values, such as social justice, community cohesion and a new accounting of recent history, also felt like they were emerging as issues within the art world.

The changes we made in the early days were driven more by gut feeling and dissatisfaction with the status quo than with a clear plan of what the museum programmes needed to address. The collection policy was initially directed towards gender and geographic imbalances in the collection by focusing on women and the former socialist states of Europe, as well as works questioning artistic autonomy and the dominance of economic growth in western society. In retrospect, we were discovering the effects of what we were doing as we went and I would now want to inscribe a subsequent understanding of colonialism and decolonial theory as a way to understand the discomfort and the most significant motivation to change the operationally successful modes the museum had developed. To do so is best done in the words of Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano.

On his deathbed, Copernicus published the book that founded modern astronomy. Three centuries before, Arab scientists Mu'ayyad al-Din al-'Urdu and Nasir al-Din Tusi had come up with the theorems crucial to that development. Copernicus used the theorems but did not cite the source.

Europe looked in the mirror and saw the world.  
Beyond that lay nothing.

The three inventions that made the Renaissance possible, the compass, gunpowder, and the printing press, came from China. The

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<sup>1</sup> *documenta 7*, catalogue, Kassel 1982.

<sup>2</sup> Fascinatingly, Jan Debbaut was invited to join the team developing what became the exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* but withdrew at some point. It's a nice speculation to imagine what the collection would have become had that experience filtered through into the Van Abbemuseum collection's purchasing policy.

Babylonians scooped Pythagoras by fifteen hundred years. Long before anyone else, the Indians knew the world was round and had calculated its age. And better than anyone else, the Mayans knew the stars, eyes of the night, and the mysteries of time.

Such details were not worthy of Europe's attention.

from Eduardo Galeano, 'Euroeverything'<sup>3</sup>

If we Europeans are to take this story seriously, we need to reconsider our place and our culture's place in the twenty-first-century world. Not to do so would not only be irresponsible to the current age but also reveals our ignorance to the diversity of people who increasingly make up the public of the museum. Secondly, any attempt to ignore such conditions in the world simply reaffirms its imbalance and inequality. As Europeans, we could simply continue to keep on looking in the mirror and see the whole world... but would we not increasingly have to turn a blind eye, squint or turn away in order to maintain that pernicious fiction? Eventually, I fear, our peripheral vision would overwhelm the comfort of our own reflection.

There is a consequence to Galeano's challenge however, and that is that we not only have to look at the rest of the picture, but we have to take the focus off what was previously the whole view. New forms of social responsibility and understandings of the political potential of art and its institutions emerge when we choose to think, talk and look elsewhere. To ignore them and the artists that proclaim them is perhaps to maintain an established modernist lineage that was the prime motivation of the modern art museum, but it means to turn away from the world as it has become and to limit our curiosity. It is therefore hard to avoid the conclusion that incorporating decolonial thinking means dismantling the core of the modern assumptions on which the institution has been built. Decolonial thinking endangers the validity of artistic autonomy as a public good, recognises the deliberate alienation in the aesthetics of post-1945 modernism and its intention to appeal solely to a progressive, moneyed, European elite, removes the privilege of the ocular over the bodily and questions the neutrality of the sterile white cube – to name a few of the fundamental modern protocols that underpinned the historic value of a collection like the Van Abbe Museum's. In short, it threatens the basic justification of the museum as it stands, especially as any notional new settlement needs to be negotiated with contemporary users and new, potential stakeholders of the museum who might not assume the intrinsic value of modern art as an *a priori* given. This process of negotiation is already underway but what will emerge is still unclear.

At the same time, it must be evident to anyone with a grasp of historical change that in 2017 the world lacks the collective, common platforms adequate to deal with the multiple ethical, aesthetic and political questions that arise today. The forms of representative democracy developed in the nineteenth century are falling apart. The risk and the hope is that one of the few functional public sites left for those much-needed common platforms to be re-established and flourish is within culture more than within the existing political and economic fields, and specifically that the unexploited potential of the modern and contemporary art museum offers a public forum where the idea of the artistic and the educational can override the tendency to factionalism and operating within bubbles of mutual agreement. One of the main pleasures of the last ten years has been the discovery of how much the existing collection put together by my predecessors offers the contemporary moment once the works are removed from their modernist straightjacket and liberated for use in the here and now. How we learn anew from history, as well as how we rewrite it for the

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<sup>3</sup> Eduardo Galeano, 'Euroeverything' in *Mirrors: Stories of Almost Everyone*, trans. Mark Fried, Philadelphia 2009, p. 111.

needs of the present, have therefore become the strategic tools to apply to the collection and its forms of display. In doing so, two works of art and literature have been consistently significant. Both dwell on history, its purpose and what might be its effect on the contemporary moment.

One is a short passage by Walter Benjamin in his essay 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' and the second a film by the Lebanese artist Rabih Mroué. Benjamin talks about working with history in these terms: 'To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was" (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. [...] The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it.'<sup>4</sup> The museum is clearly often the instrument of that conformism but also potentially its opponent in that it has an independent if limited agency based on the modern idea of freedom of art and its institutions to critique and challenge the status quo. Making use of this space for action is what Benjamin's address to tradition anticipates. His past is a phenomenon with different aspects – in history, memory and tradition – and these nuances are crucial to how a museum might address its archives and collections. By looking at objects and relationships within the museum as elements within a history; as keys to unlock memory; and as traditions to be broken and/or upheld – we get closer to how the collections might be deployed precisely in the interests of wresting them away from the conformism that threatens to neutralise their potential. These Benjaminian conceptions of the past are given further shape in a short film by Rabih Mroué, *The Old House* (2003).

The artist films a building in a slow-motion process of collapse that is frozen and looped so that it oscillates between wholeness and disintegration. A voice-over by the artist describes the process by which memories are made and remade over and again. Of a story, Mroué says, 'I retell it. Not to remember it, no, but to make sure that I have forgotten it', and later on he repeats the incantation 'remembering and forgetting' not as a loop but as a refusal to go back to the beginnings, and what know we of beginnings. Throughout the short film, Mroué seeks a way to free memory from its truth and locatedness and in doing so he liberates us from one of the most persistent of modern images – that of the arrow of time shooting out of the present in a predetermined direction that must lead to improvement, development and justice. Mroué, in his work, turns the arrow back into the wheel of time of a pre-modern age in which the beginning is connected to its end. Modernity, in this moment, becomes a fictional option among others, its relevance depending on how we choose to remember and forget.

Benjamin and Mroué's form of thinking, of connecting and disconnecting times and locations and relaying narratives as emancipatory potentialities, can be understood as a kind of instruction to museums in how they can best use their resources for the public interest by taking a position as an active agent within a maelstrom of potential relationships. When they work best, art museums allow the members of the society that host them or use them to think collectively about relationships and social organisations that might tell the most effective and emancipatory stories possible. Ideally, they might practice those forms of being together inside the museum before applying them in the world. It is important that the archives and artworks engaged in this process remain independent of such narratives because they will need to be reused by others – this is the cycle that Mroué evokes. The museum is then a place

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<sup>4</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' (1940) in *Illuminations*, ed. and with intro. by Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, New York 1968, p. 255.

where interrelationships between people and objects are temporarily forged and deployed to address particular questions, needs or antagonisms. Art museums seen through this one possible lens are tools to rewrite the past from a located, contemporary position as well as to suggest relationships with other places for the needs of the present, both without losing sight of how the one is shaped by the other. In this process, the public art museum can identify a plurality of social and political roles that it can fulfil within its remit of presenting modern and contemporary art. Partly, its task is to test these roles experimentally and find the most effective one.

In the Van Abbemuseum, experimenting with the uses and displays of the collection have been and remain one of our primary focuses. There are various stages to the story of how our approach to the collection has developed and only a summary is given here. Initially, the existing modern and typological narrative of the collection was broken up and the fragments were revealed through a programme of discrete single room presentations ('Plug-Ins'). After a couple of years, the 'Play Van Abbe' series were developed as whole museum narratives in which works were connected to each other in new ways, differences were magnified and the public was equipped with new requests and expectations. Finally, a temporary coherence was reconstructed through the displays we called 'Once Upon a Time' and later simply 'The Collection Now'. Other collection-inspired projects that sometimes happened elsewhere and found their way back to Eindhoven include Superflex's 'Free Sol LeWitt', 'Picasso in Palestine' and Li Mu's 'A Man, A Village, A Museum'.<sup>5</sup> Often these projects shared a quite overt desire to deviate for its own sake from the established codes of handling the works in the collection: from agreeing to loans, to reconfiguring installation protocols with regards to copying and reproducing. This helped us to learn what we were doing and why we were doing it.

The paradox here is that in taking a position for the museum as a socially engaged institution that operates on behalf of a local and international public as well as artists, we were sometimes accused of alienating a public or abandoning art by the establishment art world. While we were certainly guilty of breaking certain protocols around copying, distributing or loaning works, for instance, these actions facilitated new ways of thinking about a modernist heritage and how it could be put to use in the early twenty-first century. Our recent experience in Eindhoven is that building relationships with the interests of specific local and not-so-local social groups in mind effectively minimises these criticisms by gaining the support of different users. A focus on a very literal conception of accessibility, for instance, working with small groups of people with Alzheimer's or aphasia, blind and partially sighted, deaf and others with different capacities has grown the local and national affection for the museum and become a significant demonstration of our social relevance from which other inclusive programmes such as 'Queering the Collection' or 'Deviant Practice' can stem. These latter initiatives bring new temporary voices into the management of the museum's activities, and collaborations with universities and academies speak to specific groups. In this process, the position of privilege enjoyed by the artist is shared with other actors who can claim the attention of the museum as institution in a similar way.

At a more abstract level, the narrow protocols of exhibition-making and collection-forming are part of a particular conservative understanding of modernity and its claim

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Esche et al, *De Collectie Nu*, Eindhoven 2015; Charles Esche et al, *Plug in to Play*, Eindhoven 2009; Christiane Berndes, *Free Sol LeWitt*, Berlin 2010; 'Picasso in Palestine' in *A Prior Magazine*, no. 22 (2011); Li Mu, *A Man, A Village, A Museum: Qiuzhuang Project*, Eindhoven 2015.

on the future. Where once modernity was disruptive, it has become nostalgic and narrow. As we learn to resist the urge to conform to the modern imperative, we can also begin to think beyond old modernist dualities – mind or body, west or east, public or private, state or corporation. To do so, we can call on the much more profound and unanswerable critique of modernity developed by decolonial thinkers such as Walter D. Mignolo or Boaventura de Sousa Santos. Their understanding of the unity between modernity and coloniality at a fundamental level (that one cannot be named, discussed or thought without the other) is a crucial act of recognition that impels museums with modern art collections to action. 'Decolonial thinking', as poetically invoked by Galeano, is a challenge to deeply-inbuilt assumptions about ethics and progress – assumptions that often find their expression in the ways that modern art has been presented and collected by a museum like the Van Abbe. Decoloniality questions much of the basis of a western European education, and thus Europeans' unconscious decision-making. It equally puts a bomb under comfortable post-Marxist positions and their tendency towards a disembodied criticality.

And yet, it remains hard to let go entirely of modernity as a system of potential emancipation. To discuss an alternative at this juncture in the world arguably strengthens the religious conservatives of all creeds that want to reassert theocratic control. Indeed, part of the appeal of Daesh or the Israeli and the US religious right are their anti-modern, anti-secular positions. But, just as resisting fascism did not mean simply defending the corrupt status quo, so the current monotheist revival is not the only way to demodernise our societies. It is simply a fact that 'there is no alternative (to modernity)' no longer works as a mantra for too much of the world. Above all, modernity's intimacy, not to say lack of distinction from colonialism, is something that renders it no longer fit for purpose across the planet.

For the next steps, the museum collection can therefore do little else but seek to leave modernity behind and move into an unclear future. In doing so, it seems right to remember and applaud what was modern as well as criticise and debunk. Modernity was a complex and often misunderstood condition and honouring its energy, wit, perseverance and capacity to support the ideas of individuality, emancipation and equality, even if relevant to only a small part of the world, is vital. At the same time, its universal claims to a single truth, its patriarchy, its white privilege, its refusal to recognise other forms of knowledge, and its destructive occupation of others' territories have to be reckoned with. To do so suggests something I believe we could call 'demodern thinking', as a parallel and subsidiary aspect to decoloniality. While our task is certainly to offer visibility, employment, power and platforms to decolonial possibility within the hegemonic west, it is the construction of a demodern discourse that might emerge as a way to follow suit and engage in internal western processes of coming to terms with the past differently.

What happens then once decoloniality and its younger sibling demodernity are centrally addressed? There is the potential to unmake the modernist form and its assumptions – not through critique but by turning away from its internal aesthetic languages and expectations. It would throw into question the modern rhetoric of a utopian order that is always postponed. It would attempt to include the peoples, classes and subjects, knowledge and understanding that modernism defined as backward or marginal. In the Van Abbe museum, Demodern thinking is our proposition in the Van Abbe museum for telling new narratives. It starts by looking anew at modern art works and recognising their place within the belief system of modernity and how they are subject to their time and place. In doing so, the process of applying demodern thinking is not only intended to create a distance between modern works and the world of today, but also to help liberate them from the mythologies of progress and universality and to create the space for new

interpretations and understandings based on located and contingent criteria. The demodern rejects claims to universalism and the singular story of modern art's development originating in the international hegemony of New York's Museum of Modern Art. Rather it pursues pluralist forms and narratives in which queer, deviant and intersectional thinking is given a place and the museum seeks to act in the present and with the people that are local to it, as least as much as the national or international art world. The only reasonable way to do so is to reach out to constituencies that are not yet constituted – to the refugees in your neighbourhood; to the indigenous and the excluded internationally; to teachers and schoolchildren whose school visits are reduced or abolished as a result of austerity; to the differently abled, the sick and the growing disadvantaged everywhere. It is through those who occupy the edges of our white, patriarchal, western vision that a decolonial, demodern perspective might begin to open up – or at least how the art museum might combine contemporary experiences, desires and struggles articulated by these people with the modern and contemporary legacies of art and its potential for imaginative emancipation. This is the only way to imagine that a possible horizon beyond the exhausted liberal mantra of 'there is no alternative (to modernity)' is to become visible. Such a horizon must relate to the consequences of globalisation because its rejection leads back to the worst excesses of modernity itself. Yet the difficult task of imagining a global civil society-in-becoming, has to begin in a single geographic location with all its inherent and accumulative diversity. Perhaps developing ways in which all protagonists grasp how they are subject to the legacies of coloniality/modernity can help, and this is something the story-telling and history-making capacity of art museums can do. Although it is true that this idea has not been present in the classical modern art museum, it is one of the core tasks we see before us at the Van Abbemuseum.

To return to Brussels, it is the potential inherent in the locally grounded, modestly-but-reliably funded, in-it-for-the-long-haul art institution that the city is missing. Although it might perhaps be a little unfashionable today, it is this kind of institution with a collection that can make a difference to the way groups within a place identify with it and among themselves. I have seen that happen on a small scale but to a transformative dimension in Eindhoven. Not all the time, and not with random visitors walking in for an art experience, but through the constituencies we build locally and internationally. That is the absence that Brussels would perhaps be well advised to recognise and to open a debate on how best to provide it.