

EXPATRIATION OF ART TO ITS PRODUCERS

The Ethnographic Display as a Strategy of Reparation

— by Branislav Jakovljević

In the last decade or so, the biggest change in Western art was not concerned with formal and technical procedures of art-making (abstract, conceptual, performance art, etc.), or even with the subjectivity of the artist (male or female, Western or non-Western), but with the ways in which art is exhibited. In other words, at the center of the debates about art is no longer the artist, but the beholder. Museums and galleries are, finally, forced to reexamine their own positions regarding the art they are putting on display. The key question is no longer what is exhibited, but how? These questions influence the presentation and reception not only of contemporary art, but also of artists and works that were believed to have a secure position in the narrative of art history, and in its twin, the art museum.

For example, in 2021, the Isabella Gardner Museum accompanied the installation of the exhibition “Titian: Women, Myth & Power”, which featured six large scale oil paintings that the Venetian painter made for the Spanish king Philip II in the late 16th century, with the newly commissioned work by the acclaimed feminist artist Barbara Kruger. This unusual decision was motivated by the subject matter of Titian’s paintings, which included, most (in)famously, his painting “The Rape of Europa” (the exhibition organizers screened the video of the same title by Mary Reid Kelley and Patrick Kelley). Two years earlier, the exhibit “Gauguin Portraits,” co-produced by the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa and the National Gallery in London, was accompanied by labels and the audio guide that directly referenced the celebrated artist’s questionable ethical practices towards his hosts in the Tahitian islands, and especially his predatory sexual behavior towards girls as young as 13 and 14 years of age.

As even these limited examples suggest, there can be no uniform answer to the challenge of presenting ethically questionable art. One thing is for sure: the uniform space and universal time of what Brian

O'Doherty called the “white cube” has been disturbed and fractured. It seems that the ideological veneer that supported the growth of the art industry is beginning to crack under its own contradictions. In certain cases, a museum presentation needs to address not only aesthetic, but also ethical properties of the work of art it puts on display. The white cube is uniquely incapable of doing that. In order to account for the questionable art practices of Otto Mühl, the art museum has to depart from conventional exhibition strategies. Here, imposing framing devices such as explanatory labels in the case of Gauguin or commissioned artworks in case of Titian would be easy, but it seems hardly appropriate. In order to show the work that abandoned traditional art, the museum has to abandon traditional ways of art display and adopt strategies developed in ethnographic museums. The ethnographic approach is uniquely capable of addressing an art project that involved a number of people, many of them against their will. In the case of Mühl's AA Commune, the symbolic violence of Titian's paintings and implied violence of Gauguin's becomes all too real and explicit. It was an inherent part of this artist's highly abusive strategy in pursuing one of the most radical avant-garde objectives, that of fusing art and everyday life.

Following more than a decade of painting, making installations, and staging actions, in 1971 Otto Mühl decided to leave behind art making. Even the unconventional art he pursued in his performances was no longer sufficient. He stated this decision in a letter to his friend Oswald Wiener: “[...] I have no fun producing art anymore. I also don't want to do actions anymore. I just think it's stupid to perform something for people. Where are we anyway? I don't want to stop, but to let everything overflow into art itself” (in Klocker 2012: 382). This was not only a turning point in his artistic career, but also the clearest possible indication of his own understanding of his artistic practice. Among other things, this statement, as well as Mühl's subsequent activities, raise important methodological questions pertaining to the study and display of art from the perspective of its end.

Arguments about the end of art became prominent at the turn of the 21st century and were based either on a certain philosophy of history, as in the case of Arthur Danto, or were positioned squarely within art history, as was the case in the claims of Donald Kuspit. Neither one of them offered workable propositions about the change of cultural

position of art after its end. These arguments about the end of art don't address the role of the art museum and its strategies of exhibiting art. If anything, they seem to reinforce the purpose of the art museum as an institution that preserves the past without questioning its politics and methods of display. However, in the shadow of these art-theoretical propositions about the end of art, there were artistic practices that engaged that same question in a way that was much more specific, hands-on, and risky. One such line of inquiry, which seems to have started in the late 1980s, gained visibility with the publication, in 2013, of the book *Walter Benjamin: Recent Writings*¹.

The central premise of this book is that modern art is inseparable from the dominant discourse about art, that is to say, from art history. While not engaging directly the distinction that Walter Benjamin made in the 1930s between the "cult" and "exhibition" functions of art, this book argues that both art history and art museum emerged from the separation of these two functions, with the latter taking primacy over the former:

"Art is not some kind of universal category achieved and materialized through the work of some specially gifted person called an artist. Nor is it a specific human activity characteristic of all cultures, from prehistory until today: cave art, Greek art, Christian art, African art, Chinese art, Aboriginal art, American art, etc. Art is most likely a notion defined by the story called art history, and it exists only within that story." (W. B. 2013, ed. by Khonsary: 144)

The main support for this argument comes from mid-20th century abstract art produced in Europe and America: for example, a painting by Piet Mondrian has the status of the work of art only within the context

1 This publication may be regarded as a kind of artistic research project which, long after the philosopher Walter Benjamin's death in 1940, appeared under the title *Recent Writings* by Walter Benjamin by Walter Benjamin, with the note "A Copy is a Meta-Original. W.B." printed on its cover. The volume assembles texts that pretend to be recent lecture manuscripts or writings by Benjamin. These contributions continue Benjamin's thinking and engage with one of his central ideas, articulated in his early essay on translation: namely, that a crucial property of the "original" lies in its translatability — that is, in a quality that emerges only subsequently and beyond the original itself in a transcriptive movement. Benjamin discusses the issue that a certain meaning inherent to originals only becomes manifest through their translatability. In this sense, the editor and the authors of the volume might claim — by writing with and after Benjamin — that the originary force of his thought becomes visible only in its translation into the present of their texts. The volume will henceforth be cited as: W. B. 2013, ed. by Khonsary. This footnote was added by the editors of the present volume for contextualization.

of art history and in the art museum. Without them, it is just a surface covered with painted squares.

According to this logic, if art history as the foundational narrative and the life-giving rationale of modern art has a clearly identifiable beginning, then it also ought to have an endpoint. The same goes for the art museum, which presents the same narrative as art history, only through objects rather than discursively. The termination of the story of art, an exit from it, must reflect on the museum itself. Not that it would fall into disuse and disrepair: instead, it would change its purpose and techniques of display. The most significant change concerns the status of the aesthetic objects: instead of artworks, they become “specimens” or “artifacts,” that is to say, examples of a specific kind of social production of objects. The institution that houses and displays these objects would not be some kind of “post-museum” or museum after the museum, but a “meta-museum.” It would be a museum not of, but about the modern art and its narrative, which is to say, a museum defined by its ability to establish a conceptual distance in relation to its subject. This repositioning of the museum’s function calls for a reexamination of the ways in which these objects are organized and displayed. Crucially, “in this museum, art is presented ethnographically. Through this museum we are looking at art from the outside, as a specific Western invention, in the way an anthropologist observes a foreign culture to try to understand it, but does not belong to that culture” (W. B. 2013, ed. by Khonsary: 115). This shift in the perspective imparts a different status on the objects on display: “This approach should not be one of a passionate believer and admirer of art, but a diagnostic one: the almost cold approach of an ethnographer” (161). The book takes this idea to its logical conclusion: “In order to fully establish this “dispassionate” position, some of the existing art museums would have to gradually transform into anthropological museums about art. This will be a new kind of museum that enable the de-artization of existing works of art into non-art artifacts, the way desacralization of religious paintings and objects changes their meaning by moving them from churches into the art museums. Until this (de-artization) happens, perhaps it might still be possible to apply this approach on individual works of art within art museum displays [...].” (W. B. 2013, ed. by Khonsary: 168)

Unlike Danto's and Kuspit's, this idea about the end of art is not totalizing in nature: it leaves a possibility to individual artists and even art projects to depart, or step out, from the art historical narrative. That is exactly the gesture that Mühl made with the re-coding of his practice from artistic production to building a social community in Friedrichshof. In itself, that brings a number of questions: How to evaluate this artistic production? To what degree are aesthetic categories sufficient and operative in this case? If not aesthetic, what other categories could be useful in assessing and evaluating this art? No less important is the question of display: what are the limitations of established gallery and museum practice in presenting this work that was based on a claim that it had departed from the constraints of aesthetic practice?

I want to highlight three specific aspects of this change of perspective on Mühl's work from art-historical to art-ethnographic.

1. PERIODIZATION

Mühl was not the first artist to make an exit from art. At one point or another, a number of artists felt that they had reached a logical conclusion of their projects, or were simply fed up with the art world, its hypocrisies, and the dictatorship of the market. We need to go no further than Hugo Ball in the aftermath of the Dada explosion in Zurich, or Jill Breakstone, Preston Heller, and Andrew Menard, the members of the politicized conceptual art scene in New York, who stopped making art in the mid-1970s. What sets Mühl apart from them and many others is that he did not just abandon his aesthetic practice, but turned it into a social, or rather, micro-social activity at the center of the AA Commune. There are no clear cuts between Mühl's "periods" of painting, actionism, commune, and post-commune activities. Rather, they are elaborations of the same idea of the privileged position of artist as a Promethean figure which blazes the trail for others, who dare not take the same kind of risks. At the same time, it is important to recognize and explore the significance of these different phases of his work, especially the far-reaching effects of his decision to exit the artistic practice narrowly defined as the production of aesthetic objects and events. The larger claim of this gesture can be seen as a suggestion that art as a distinct practice has reached the limits of its social usefulness. It was, in effect, an attempt to take art

into its afterlife. In this case, the response to the question “What comes after art?” is not its complete renunciation, but its conversion into a set of social relations. Importantly, his decision to stop making art informs not only his subsequent activities, but also those that preceded it. In retrospect, it is clear that from the very beginning, his artistic practice was oriented toward that *end*, i.e. goal.

Art history and criticism are constrained by their own aesthetic limitations. Art that its author programmatically positions outside of art, in some kind of post-art state, demands a different approach, which is not based exclusively on aesthetic principles. Any exhibition of Mühl’s works, especially those produced in the AA Commune, comes with an imperative of spotlighting precisely that aspect of his exit from art which he decided to completely disregard: namely, that it amounted for a passage from the aesthetic to the ethical terrain. Since the early 1990s, these three areas of his activity have been carefully compartmentalized. The very existence of “Otto Mühl” as an artist depends on that compartmentalization, whereas the fact of the matter is that they have never been, nor can they ever be, clearly separated. Ethnographic approach to Mühl not only expands the approach to his work to include the social setting consisting of an extended group of people who worked with him, but also goes directly against the art-historical idea of periodization, which neatly distinguishes his beginnings from his Actionist period, marks Friedrichshof as a hiatus in his artistic activity, to which he returns in the post-commune period. Even at the moment when he denied it, art remained his main justification for a whole series of practices, up to and including the activities in the commune.

2. CONTEXTUALIZATION

If the main organizing principle of the art-historical approach is narrativization, the main organizing principle of the ethnographic approach is contextualization. Here, what I call the “ethnographic approach” should not be understood in the sense of a museological ideal, but in the material sense, according to which the museum becomes a medium. Starting from the 1960s, a number of artists had explored the medium aspect of the museum, some of them focusing specifically on ethnographic procedures. This approach has proven to be especially effective in addressing subjects

marked by excessive violence and generational trauma. Speaking of his landmark installation *Mining the Museum* (1992), in which he put on display the evidence of the history of racial segregation he discovered in the collections of Maryland Historical Society, African American artist Fred Wilson emphasizes that his “work is all about context and the underlayers of context” (Williams/King-Hammond 1994: 33). This is an argument against the formalist approach that erases the background and privileges the work of art over the conditions of its production. The goal of this radical contextualization is to jolt the audience members from their passive position of observers and allow them to engage with the work in ways that are more ethically complex than the simple relation of perception, admiration, and, ultimately, ownership. What *Mining the Museum* shows is the degree to which the privileging of the (art) object and the single perspective is not only insufficient for presentation of complex art and social histories, but directly injurious to those who were objectified in these art and historical processes.

Working hand-in-hand with art history, the art museum imposes a unified vision on the works of art. That outlook is reinforced through its display techniques, such as that of the “white cube,” and by the predominance of visual over discursive and all other means of representation. Text, sound, and spatial organization of the gallery display are subordinated to the work of art, and are meant to support, promote, and elevate it from the murky surroundings from which it emerged. If the art museum display is organized in such a way to position the object – the work of art – at the center of a single dominant narrative, that of art history, the ethnographic display stands at the intersection of multiple narratives. Unlike the art museum display, it is distinguished by its impurity and heterogeneity: instead of foregrounding a single medium in which the artwork is produced – easel painting, video, or sculpture – it uses multiplicity of media organized in a non-hierarchical way. As such, it has the potential to present a multiplicity of perspectives. This work on contextualization is irreducible to explanatory labels, audio guides and other exhibition techniques. Mühl’s work demands a more radical approach that separates that work from the individual artist to make visible its proper milieu: the collective that made it possible in the first place.

3. REPARATION

Over the past two centuries, the art museum has devised techniques of display based on a formalist approach to art, with the ultimate result of foregrounding a certain narrative about art and situating particular artworks within that narrative. In short, the art museum privileges the art historical narrative over all other narratives that are necessarily involved in the production of art. The very organization of gallery display is integrated into a larger ideological edifice of modern art, which has the principles of authorship and originality built into its very foundations. The job of the art museum display is to put on the pedestal not only an individual artist, but the very idea of authorship and originality, those very properties of the Promethean personality that Mühl claimed and used to his advantage and to the disadvantage of other members of the Friedrichshof commune.

Importantly, one of the main promises he made when he rejected the institutional framework of modern art was to relinquish this privileged position; as it turned out, the central hypocrisy of his post-Actionist period was that he didn't. Quite to the contrary, from conventional artistic practice of manipulating art materials, he moved to non-art materials, then to people, a tendency that he started exploring with the use of "models" in his actions and brought to extreme in the commune. In the process, he monopolized not only his position of the artist, but all processes that supported and sustained it. It is only through an ethnographic approach that this "work of art as life" and "life as art" can be dismantled and held accountable for its original, unfulfilled, promise.

The increasing demands for the return of the art objects that have been illegally and unethically taken away from their rightful owners is another development that has been reshaping the art industry in the West over the last decade. This process has been often referred to as "repatriation" of artworks. In the case of Mühl and the Friedrichshof commune, this word choice may not be useful, and could be, in fact, injurious. Namely, in the name of the overturning of the traditional patriarchal family, this artist had established a new model of "family" that gave him more power and opportunity to abuse the unprotected minors that a conventional nuclear family ever would. Taking that into consideration, it is inappropriate to call for the return of artworks to

that kind of family, its repatriation. Instead, we should call for taking them away from it, or thier expatriation. Here, the idea of reparation cannot be seen in the limited sense of the return of the works to their rightful owners. Much more important is the return of these owners to their proper status, which is not that of the “materials” Mühl used in the production of his life/artwork, but of the subjects, or producers, of their own works and lives. They are not the property of this artist and have never been. Allowing the work to be seen — that is to say, shown and displayed — in that way would be to perpetuate his predatory practices.

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