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«Controversially, while «iconic» museums – and certainly not the Guggenheim – are never presented as political projects, they deeply are.»

KEEP QUIET PLEASE

Dafni Retzepi

Dafni Retzepi is an architect and PHD candidate at the University of Bologna, Italy. She studied architecture at Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura de Madrid, and EPF Lausanne, where she obtained her master's degree in 2017. She is one of the founding members of the architectural office Sujets Objets / based in Geneva. In 2019 she co-founded the experimental practice Arimna. Interested in the latitudes of practice and the highways of theoretical formulations, her projects and research examine contemporary architectural discourses under the light of relations to the recent cultural, economic and political past.

«Since the facts have the floor, let anyone who has anything to say come forward and keep [their] mouth shut.»(1)

Western institutions love silence. Signs for keeping quiet find themselves hanging on museum walls amongst paintings and security guards dwell behind each door, reminding the audience of the importance of keeping quiet. Silence is the prescribed behavior of respect. Respect for each other, respect for the adhered values, respect for the artworks that should be quietly contemplated by everyone in their turn. Interestingly enough, when silence is broken by protests, they often take place inside, in front, or against institutions, momentarily breaking silence in an act of cultural disobedience. The relation of «silence» to western cultural institutions is complex, obscured and multi-layered, ranging from economic and political strategies to — concealed or not — cultural agenda. However, despite the fact that the last thirty years have often seen the established institutional rules being broken by artistic and curatorial projects along the appearance of critical institutions, the architectural counterpart of the equation has remained largely undisussed, comfortably complying with the silence of «facts» prescribed by the client.

A MODEL OF DETERRENCE

«Please remember when you get inside the gates you are part of the show.»(2)

According to sociologist Tony Bennet in his book «The Birth of the Museum», published in 1995, the museum in its public configuration first appeared at the end of the eighteenth century as a development of what used to be the private collection and the cabinet of curiosities, evolving until the mid-to-late nineteenth century to its constitutive concept of showcasing pieces in an orderly format. Established along public libraries and parks as a way of educating the populace, and primarily addressing itself to working-class men, the museum was initially viewed as a means of «rational and scientific recreation», (3) a space of order intended to overturn the misbehaviors and chaos occurring during traditional entertainment procedures, such as itinerant festivals and taverns.

Moving away from undesired spectacle and towards repetition, rationality and order, the museum has historically assumed an instructional character which has persisted until nowadays. It is this character, which also renders the museum ambiguous, torn between its representative faculty as a public and social space designated to the masses, and its organizational apparatus as a means of governance and control.

Its architecture, evolving at the same time as that of international exhibitions and department stores — these last primarily addressed to women — is historically rooted to spaces of observation and control, where vision and parcours are meaningfully centered towards the singularity of that which is displayed, forging a rupture between what is located inside the perimeter, and the outside world. Consequently, museums inherently carry a polarity between their image, their facade, and their interior. In his text «L'Effet Beaubourg» (1977), Jean Baudrillard drew

a parallel between the museum Centre Pompidou in Paris, and the functioning of nuclear stations in terms of security and control, as within both spaces «s'élabore un modèle de sécurité absolue, qui va se généraliser à tout le champ social, et qui est profondément un modèle de dissuasion». (4)

«The art museum is unique in simultaneously organizing a division between those who can and those who cannot see the invisible significances of the «art» to which it constantly beckons but never makes manifest». (5) As such, the museum as a program, floats in an ambiguous terrain of inherent publicness and impulsive control, simultaneously embracing people and artworks, while requiring them both to keep quiet.

ART AND INSTITUTIONS AGAINST INSTITUTIONS

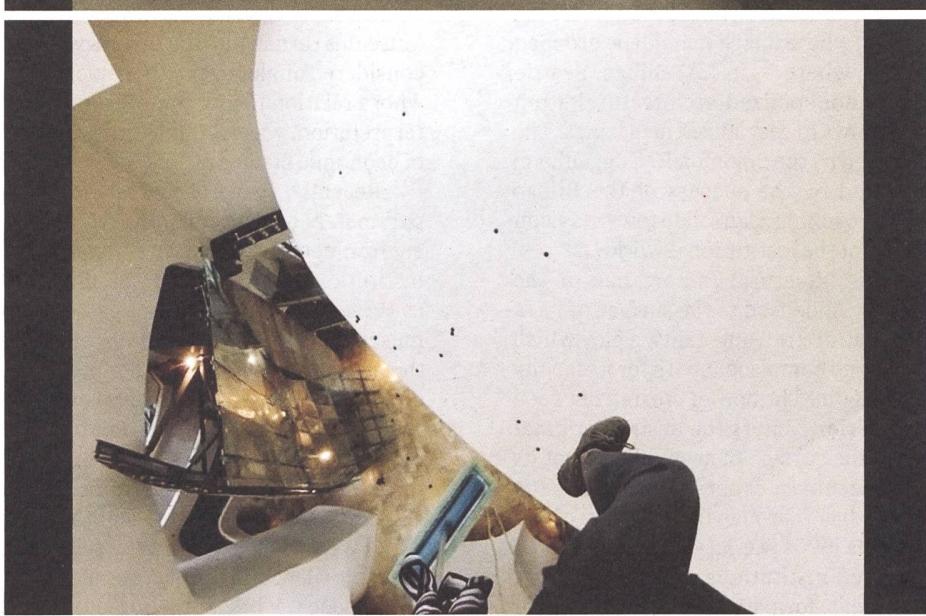
«You'll never get anyone to pay for the Guggenheim to stay empty all year, though to me that would be a marvelous idea.»(6)

Due to the surface composing the museum's exterior, art — and thus culture — is detached from real life, and subsequently depoliticized. Much like international exhibitions and department stores but also mausoleums and more recently casinos, this is precisely where the architectural importance of the museum is condensed: on its facade, on the surface filtering the city from the interior.

This architectural border has historically been the subject of controversy and artistic appropriation. As early as 1855, Gustave Courbet had objected to the rejection of his work by the organizers of the international exhibition taking place in Paris, proposing, as an act of resistance, his own «Pavillon du Réalisme» located outside the designated perimeter for exhibitions. Though modernism might have broadly consolidated the relation between artists and institutions, postmodern art has largely reflected on the ambiguity of this border in multiple ways, first and foremost through its reaction against the «white cube», but also through the rejection of elitist high culture by Pop Art, the references to industrial processes by minimal artists, the physical dislocation of land art, happenings and performances taking place inside the public space, as well as through artistic acts of active political disobedience.

More recently, during the decade of the 1990s, artists and curators have admittedly gravitated towards a collective review of the social implications of art, accomplishing what has come to be broadly known as the «social turn». According to art historian and critic Claire Bishop, this re-orientation «has been a shared set of desires to overturn the traditional relationship between the art object, the artist and the audience», (7) a reconfiguration of the paradigm imposed by traditional institutions, broadening thus the physical and conceptual limits of the museum.

The term «relational art», coined by Nicolas Bourriaud in 1998, describes a range of practices whose main artistic endeavor has been the provocation of relations. For the works stemming out of this category, participation of the audience is central both to their form and to their meaning, conceding pieces of their aesthetic responsibility and



(figs. a, b, c) Film stills from Ila Bêka and Louise Lemoine,
«Gehry's Vertigo», France, 2013

discourse to the sphere of the public. Placing community-based art in the center of artistic discussions, Bourriaud's theorization has also paved the way to «New Institutionalism», «a self-reflexive activity occurring at the time at art institutions, mostly in Europe, such as Rooseum in Malmö, Palais de Tokyo in Paris, and Bergen Kunsthall in Norway», (8) and where institutions themselves adopt a critical discourse against their own hegemonic status by reflecting on their broader integration within the city and the public sphere, by promoting audience participation, or by proposing educational programs. Institutional and artistic power and responsibility have thus gone through a period of self-scrutiny, recentering their discourse around social issues and silenced narratives, and establishing assumed political positions as a common institutional strategy.

A VERY LOUD SILENCE

«[T]he whole idea of the museum seems to be tending more toward a kind of specialized entertainment. It's taking more and more the aspects of a discothèque and less and less the aspects of art.» (9)

The decade of the 1990s might have seen the advent of cultural projects rejecting the established parameters of the museum while questioning its publicness and political role. Controversially, it has also been a decade of violent institutional expansion, both in terms of augmenting the size of venues, and in terms of expanding towards a globalized context. In the words of Claire Bishop, the decade «saw an unprecedented proliferation of new museums dedicated to contemporary art, and increased scale and a proximity to big business» subsequently leading to the museum's «current incarnation as a populist temple of leisure and entertainment». (10) Museums have gradually aimed for an enlargement of their inventory as a means of economic growth, firstly through the mere investment on assets, and secondly through the increased number of targeted visitors.

The museum architecture was thus reconceived as a container of capital: the larger its volume, the greater the profit. «Iconic» museums, whose image «[could] be dropped, indifferently, almost anywhere — in LA, Bilbao, Seattle, Berlin, New York», (11) monopolized architectural attention, from popular TV shows to specialized magazines. The investment strategy traced by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation was crowned by the success of the Bilbao branch opened in 1997, provoking a landslide towards «iconism» in certain branches of the institutional world.

Significantly, the architectural importance of the Guggenheim of Bilbao is condensed to the surface of its facade, to the border separating art from reality, a ploy which is extremely convenient and complacent both for its faculty as an «icon» and as a museum. The border created between the interior and the exterior confers the desired originality of form while being the surface of accumulation of its communicative power, technical expertise, as well as the greatest portion of the budget. Through the imitation of this example, the decade of the 1990s was largely defined by the proliferation of globalized institutions resulting in a museum boom: large buildings, formally detached from their

surrounding urban fabric, whose architectural impact is to be found on their own image, contrasting significantly with the newly acquired social sensibilities.

At the same time when western art and certain institutions had been broadening their vocabulary towards critical and political stances — often challenging the traditional perimeter of the museum and favoring artistic presence within public space — the dominant architectural paradigm for those, was that of a fancy, shimmering container, a thick, soundproof wall, purposefully designed to swallow, metabolize and preserve. Controversially, while «iconic» museums — and certainly not the Guggenheim — are never presented as political projects, they deeply are. As the composition of the jury for the Bilbao architectural competition proves, (12) the Guggenheim has since the beginning been a politically driven project, although the architect must neither have been concerned, nor considered, prolonging through his silence architecture's ambiguous stance of disengaging from the social in the quest of its autonomy, while willfully surrendering this autonomy to the altar of economics.

SUPERGLUE OR STICKING TO THE FACTS

«There is no neutral surface, no neutral discourse, no neutral theme, no neutral form. Something is neutral only with respect to something else — like an intention or an expectation. As a property of the work of art itself, silence can exist only in a cooked or non-literal sense.» (13)

Relational Art and New Institutionalism bloomed as means of spectatorial participation, as ways of opposing the traditional model of passive consumption inherent in the very conception of museum and exhibition spaces. Although «participation» might be significantly more complex than its imminent positivist first perception, it undeniably encompasses the desire for an activated existence. In contrast, during the 1990s and 2000s boom of iconic museums, architecture centered its discourse not only around the traditional model of passive spectatorship of art, but quite significantly around the passivity of architecture itself. Museums turned into flat images whose rapid diffusion was considered analogous to their success, voluminous objects whose relation to art, context, or any form of collective interpretation, was triumphantly silenced by the enlistment of economic facts.

Recently, a wave of civil resistance actions has burst the parameters of museums. In 2022, at least twenty cases of environmental activists intervened around artworks inside institutions in Europe and Australia. (14) What distinguishes these interventions from past examples of activism in museums is, first and foremost, their careful selection of the art piece in question, the interpretation of which resonates with the environmental causes pursued; secondly, their physical intervention, not against the artwork itself but against the architecture which surrounds it; and thirdly, the use of a new «medium» for disobedience: superglue.

Activists physically attach themselves to the frames, windows, or walls around the selected artworks, prolonging their silence-breaking presence and loudly performing their speech, while at the same time producing an almost

classical, motionless scenographic composition between themselves and the art piece. Their interventions simultaneously adopt and violate the institutional rules, resulting in photographic frames, images, postcards to circulate around the globe. The use of superglue between themselves and the museum, simple, almost invisible and harmless, seems to create a notable crack in its conceptual border. The perimeter has been broken, reality has somehow sneaked inside, institutional paperwork has been avoided, spectacle and disorder have come full circle.

The flat surface of glue creates a physical connection between the museum and the activists. At the same time, it transgresses the traditional institutional silence. The generated spectacle turns back into a flat image, temporary but permanent, whose currency sticks to the facts while reflecting a set of collective concerns and resulting in a violent clash with the generalized absence of criticality against museums, and with the conflation of icons to truth. Currently, architecture's preoccupations are far from constructing voluminous institutions. What the example of superglue might hint towards, however, is the reconsideration of the capital of iconic, abstract, floating museum buildings, the critical review of architecture's current and past relationship with power and politics, and the possibilities for an architectural and cultural attachment to reality.