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Inside Werner's World: a review essay

Paul Werner, *Museum, Inc.: Inside the Global Art Market*

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How is one to make sense of the effects of both globalisation and corporate culture in relation to the museum? What form of effective resistance can one envisage in the face of transnational museological hegemonies? These are enormous questions that need to be addressed with a lot of care and attention. They call not only for the adoption of a particular political perspective, but also for a solid theoretical premise to help frame the questions appropriately. Any answer also has to take into consideration the efforts (however one judges them) of the anti-globalisation movement and its attempt to re-think the possibility of effecting change in a situation where no change appears possible. It has to begin with *a belief* (necessarily naïve, but made obvious and compulsory) in the possibility of advocating a change of opinion amongst us and amongst artists, critics and museum staff alike. Paul Werner's short book, *Museum, Inc.: Inside the Global Art Market*, is a valiant attempt to answer these questions. It focuses on one institution and its

expansionist agenda and proceeds to raise a number of issues relating to the recent changes that have led this institution to abandon its national status to take on a global dimension. Besides this laudable attempt to tackle a burning and difficult issue, Werner's book is unfortunately not *the* book that will provide the answers to these questions.

The first thing that one notices reading Paul Werner's book, *Museum Inc.: Inside the Global Art World* is that it is above all a monologue. Werner simply talks to himself saying, "Yes, I am right in saying all these things about museums and their recent corporate tendencies." This monologue has several characteristics. Firstly, it is a monologue from Werner *to* Werner and not from Werner to the reader. This is plainly obvious if one pays attention to the way in which the author talks to himself: "...Art in General belongs to none, except that in practice it belongs to those who own the museum—those who set the terms of the debate, *remember?*" (p.12), "Mighty white of them, *eh?*" (p.14), "Doesn't exactly make sense, *does it?*" (p.16), "*See*, you can learn all kinds of things at the museum" (p.19), "Invisible Hand, *my foot*" (p.22), "*—you know*, three-market model" (p.33) (all emphases mine). *Remember*, *eh*, *does it*, *see*, *my foot*, are all interjections directed from Werner to Werner. There are also, it is true, some occasional interpellations *to the reader*, but these are never intended as an invitation for discussion, they are questions that do not call for answers. "Just *remember, darling*: it is better to look free-marketous than to be free-marketous" (p.36), "Get that, *boy?*" (p.40), "*Go tell* Marat" (p.48). There is also one instance when the author simply elicits the reader to attend *not* a dialogue, but *a further monologue* (and at a price): "Whether that makes me a laissez-faire capitalist, I don't know. Buy me a drink and *I'll tell you*" (p.33).

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with monologues. Many recent practitioners of art criticism and theory choose this style of writing in order to perform their practice with subtlety and nuance. The problem in our context is really the fact that the monologue is a rant. The problem with a rant is that it is usually repetitive, monotonous and unconvincing. A rant comes from an obsession, a feeling that completely occupies the mind. There is no space here to analyse or uncover the origin or the reason for Werner's compulsive obsession. What can be analysed is *the object* of his rant. The object of a rant is often an object of desire and lust. In our case, this object is Thomas Krens, Director of the Gug Foundation (Gug: buy me a drink and I'll tell you the rest of the word). *Museum Inc.* is not an address *to* Krens as such (that would be opening a dialogue); it is a desperate plea for K's attention (K: *ibid*). The first page of the book clearly shows the ambiguity of this object of desire and lust: it starts with "Actually, I kinda liked Tom Krens" (note the past tense and the use of the word "actually" clearly indicating that this object of desire and the desire itself are not objects of the imagination). Further down, the reader is told that "It's nothing personal. I rarely saw Krens, spoke to him only once, and he never spoke to me except near the end when someone must have told him *you're supposed to make eye contact with the crew* when the ship is sinking" (p.4). We have here the perfect justification for the rant: on the one hand, disbelief in recognising the object of desire, admiration, fear or lust and on the other, resentment that this object (this subject) is not responsive to the calling.

It is true that rants can also be a good thing, especially if they end up producing something useful. Unfortunately, in this case, the rant is fruitless. In fifty-seven pages Werner produces nothing. His book is a pure act of self-acknowledgement and self-

affirmation. It states that Werner is someone who can disengage himself from museum audiences and who can also tell us what museums are *really* all about. And this is the most frustrating and irritating aspect of *Museum Inc.* Werner has *no* vision. He does not propose an alternative to K's megalomaniac vision. He only complains. While reading Werner's rant, one cannot help but wonder what the Gug would look like if it was run by Paul Werner. The Gug as a long moan about the state of art in the world? This lack of vision, or this lack of understanding that K's free-market capitalist museological venture is not unique, is what always brings us back to Werner's object of lust. The reader's attention never manages to stay away from the mechanisms of lust and desire that are unconsciously or not instilled in this book. This is made even worse by the fact that the book is incredibly parochial. Although Werner accompanies K across the world to the various Gugs, the book stays firmly in New York. It is a vision of the world from Manhattan. The book pretends that it is about the global art market, when in fact it is about Werner's Central Park views of Krens' vision of the world. The book should really be called: *Museum Inc.: Inside K's world*. At no point in his book, does Werner acknowledge the fact that there are other museum directors who also have global corporate ambitions. More importantly, at no point in his book, does Werner acknowledge that, God forbid, there are also in the world, museum directors who have non-corporate global ambitions.

The main problem is not so much the rant, it is not even the autism of the book or the innumerable things that are missing in a study of this kind; it is how wishy-washy the politics are. There are many references to various key thinkers. Schiller, Benjamin, Habermas, Bourdieu, etc., are all there. However, one cannot help but wonder if these

thinkers are really the right ones for this topic. What do Schiller or Habermas really have to say about globalisation? Even if these references were relevant, or even if they were made to be relevant (which would have amounted to a great achievement), they are unfortunately left unexplored. It is as if these authors and their thoughts exist only to beef-up occasionally a monologue and not as elements of an on-going dialogue around the world. Werner is *on his own* telling us that, hey, *he* is the only one really to think about this. Not unlike an undergraduate essay, with its endless narrative diversions (do we need another account of the Motorcycle show?) and numerous sweeping statements, the book never manages to engage in any serious way with the issues developed by these authors. It's all slapstick commentaries that have no other aim but to draw the reader's attention, again and again, to the wittiness of the author: yes, yes.

As stated at the start of this review, the main issue in this book, rant, moan is globalisation and its perverse effects on museums worldwide. Many thinkers, writers, academics, critics and curators have attempted to address this issue. If one stays within the small realm of fine art, the examples are numerous. The theme of the last Documenta (shock horror: a world exhibition not related to the Gug or its programme) is one example amongst many of an attempt to address this issue. A quick glance at the catalogue shows that the curators and writers of this exhibition worked hard in trying to make sense of the effects of both globalisation and corporate culture in relation to art and the museum by using well-known models of thought on these issues (taken from the work of Deleuze, Nancy, Negri, etc.). Cross-referencing and a little further research shows that the issues have been discussed in many other instances and on many other occasions. What happens to all this in Werner's rant? Everything is reduced to K's *privileged* world and his

expansionist vision. At no point does Werner actually discuss what the word “global” means. Global? World? Mondialisation? Multitude? What’s all that? Everything is subsumed to pragmatic good-old-fashioned Werner-sense. There is never any sense that the issue of cultural globalised economy has in fact a wider set of causes that have been addressed many times by many scholars and that no analysis on this topic can be done without some form of acknowledgement of how this issue is now treated.

The task for any reviewer of a book of this kind is not to fill in the gaps or re-write the book. It can only be to rethink *the premise* of the book. This premise focuses on this simple question: how can one deal with the museum expansionist corporate greed? To ask this question is effectively to propose to rethink the political dimension of Werner’s book: how can one challenge or even *react against* K’s ambitious plans? If one is not going to simply moan or be jealous or envious, if one is not going to limit oneself to conventional museum histories, then, what position can one take? If it is indeed impossible to see any alternative to the corporatist tendencies of museums, then how can one react against it? These questions are not intended to provide answers, but to show that in the context of *Museum Inc.: Inside the Global Art World*, one has no choice but to begin (again and again, *for there is no end to this*) by throwing the premise of a reflection on museums and the political.

In an age of savage capitalism, there is effectively no possibility for a self-defeating rant against enemy A or B, K or Gug. In fact, there is not even the possibility of balance or poised reflection on the issue of the political in relation to museums. We are faced with incalculable or unquantifiable forces rather than one identifiable enemy or adversary such as K or to take a parochial example for England: Nicholas Serota, Chief

Executive of Tate Enterprises. These forces—in this case globalisation—represent the real threat to the point where the very concept of political responsibility becomes potentially incalculable. Who is responsible for what, at what stage of planning, in the face of what juridical body? Is it really Thomas Krens and his nasty corporate ideas or is it the nation state that is responsible for our globalised culture? There are no answers to these questions. Krens is *at once* responsible for corporate museum culture *and* a pawn in the much wider problem of globalisation. Perceived in this way, the compulsive obsession and the need for a rant evaporate. Without an identifiable enemy and/or without a real adversary, there is, even for the mighty K, no longer the possibility of thinking carefully and coherently about a political strategy or a course of action.

Because it is no longer possible to pause and reflect on the political and because it is no longer possible to identify an enemy, it would seem that there is only one imperative left. This imperative is to call *constantly* to wage war against war, whether this war is called globalisation or museum corporate culture. The imperative *constantly* to wage war against war has only one aim: continually to shake the foundations and to prevent at all costs the possibility of peace and reconciliation, therefore the possibility of closure. This imperative is therefore to subvert all forms of evidence that would establish a practice, a commonality, a global conception of art, a particular typology of museum structure, a specific conception of a director's duties, all the way to the very concept of humanity and that of the political as such.

The idea of calling to wage war on war is effectively a call to think the political amongst the ruins of leftist politics and against the imperialism of neo-liberal doctrines. In other words, the idea of calling to wage war on war is effectively a call *to concentrate*

not on the mechanics of corporate America or its hegemonic museum policies, but precisely on what Marxism left behind at the end of the cold war. There is no escaping this. Why again Marx? Why go back to this old inheritance when neo-liberalism works so well, as Werner keeps telling us? The crucial aspect of this inheritance can be expressed with one short question: how, in a post-Marxist context, does one keep the struggle (Marx's key notion) *at the level of struggle*? How does one wage war against war *without envisaging an end or a resolution* to this war? Phrased again differently, how does one maintain metamorphosis at the stage of metamorphosis and this without rest? Phrased yet again in a different context, how does one accept the idea of an action that has no other end but to maintain the action at the stage of action? In relation to Werner's text, this question would become: how does one actively participate in re-thinking the Gug *while* K or his greedy megalomaniac successors remain(s) in power? A question without a moan, a ferocious question that can be taken either theoretically (re-thinking the museum in a globalised culture) or practically, entering the Gug (for example, like those guys in the film *The Yes Men*) and denouncing or working *closely* with K, slowly to change his views.

In both cases, the most important thing is the fact that one has to maintain an activity that has *no end*, that *cannot* have an end. This imperative has one simple reason. It is no longer possible to *figure* the future as promise. In relation to museums, this reason can be transcribed in the following way: it is no longer possible to figure an ideal museum in the future. What Werner complains about is that the museum is no longer a temple of learning, but a corporate atrium of finance. This complaint is based on the premise of *an unacknowledged figure of an ideal future museum*: one not dependent on

money, but entirely dedicated to beauty and knowledge. But who, besides Werner obviously, can still base their thinking on such a premise? The idea of hanging onto an idealised vision of the museum has today frayed to such an extent that it is no longer recognisable. The future (in a Hegelian-Marxist sense) is no longer an organising principle. However much we love it or hate it, we have no choice but to acknowledge that globalisation has forced us into an empty notion of progress, a purely economic notion that still attempts to answer the totalising question of history.

With this perspective, the question put forward above about a permanent call for war becomes this: what political gesture can one propose in a situation where there is no longer an ideal in the future and the future can no longer be articulated by the promise? In other words, how can one keep the struggle at the level of struggle when there is no longer the promise of an end to the struggle in the future? In other words still: how can one resist K without basing one's resistance on simply rejecting his expansionist vision and naively embracing an idealised vision of the museum?

Perhaps the only answer to this question is to propose to recuperate this old and dusty future ideal (justice, liberation, egalitarianism, the proletarian state, absolute knowledge, museums as centres of learning and contemplation) from its state of always-being-yet-to-come or irretrievably past and to place it centrally and in all peripheries of human activities. The only way to do this is no longer to conceive the ideal (museum) as something lying dormant somewhere in the future awaiting its eschatological moment. It cannot even be conceived as structured by a promise of a justice to-come in a Derridean sense. It can only be concretely acted out or taking place here and now with every human gesture and through every single political agency, and this whatever its state of ideality.

In this way, the perfect museum becomes no longer a goal to be attained, but a *presupposition* that is not only always in *need* of constant verification, but is also in a constant *state* of verification.

From this presupposition, all forms of prognosis, projection, hope, etc. (and I include here both K's hopes of ever-lasting universal expansion and Werner's unacknowledged dreams of a less greedy museum) usually directed towards a time to come, expose themselves as occurring here and there, and at all times, that is, in no other time but the present time. Political activism in return becomes not the pursuit of political or social *ends* (for example, calling for K's resignation or for the abolition of corporate culture), but *the measurement of ideality* itself: a measurement that is not dependent upon the coming of the future, but upon the performance of the world in general and of the museum in particular. This measurement of ideality represents all the actions that occur here and now, from the political agencies of artists, critics and lecturers all the way to the efforts of the majority world to stop the global economic dictatorship of both the US and the EU. This measurement is not conceived as the evaluation of a situation (the Gug's expansionist programme) in relation to an imagined or real standard or principle (the Gug as it was originally conceived or as it "should" be in Werner's mind), but as the quick fading marking of the world, one that changes every second of time.

Conceived in this way, one can indeed say that there will never be a "better museum" or a "better Gug." There can only be an act of differentiation, an act that will make a difference, therefore a measurement of ideality. No matter how one positions oneself politically in the great swarm of possibilities and dead-ends that constitutes our contemporary world, one is always necessarily in a position of productivity and of

expenditure, over the edge of the abyss of the creation or invention of language. The result becomes a simple change of attitude. If one were to write a short book titled *Museum Inc.*, one would have to begin with a discussion on the necessity of inventing new protocols (ethical or otherwise) to address the issue of our current globalised museum culture. To propose or invent these protocols is not to put forward the museum as an object of positivistic knowledge or of programmatic rationality, but to put the museum forward as a community of subjects (good, bad, “cretins” (Werner, p.5) and geniuses) in which the thinking that makes the museum what it is today constitutes the performativity of ideality itself. In other words, this means not to put forward the meaning of the museum (in the past, the future or in an illusory “here and now”), but the museum *as* meaning and this, even if it comes packaged ready for consumption.

Free of the imposition of a museum ideal lying ahead in the future and of its necessary promise, a political engagement—like the one that Werner should have taken in his book—therefore becomes a *creative* act that shapes that which is to-come, the multifaceted and contradictory world that is *ours* today. This creative act or this act of differentiation has only one aim, that of realising the museum as an enterprise without objective. It is without objective because the museum no longer *has* sense, but *is* sense in the process of making sense even if, nowadays, it takes on the most hideous corporate body. It is what Kant understood with the famous expression “purposiveness without purpose” or what Agamben understands as the pure gesturality or the pure mediality of human beings.¹ This creative act of differentiation is one that can only take place through the multifarious world of an infinite number of political agencies in and outside the institution or the global market. The aim of this gesturality is not to propose a praxis (that

is a course of action), or a poiesis (that is, an action in and for itself), but the possibility of a *common* gesture that *relays* to the museum not the sphere of an end in itself, but rather the sphere of a pure and endless mediality. In this way, the revised premise of Werner's book should have been, not to put forward a self-gratifying antagonistic and antagonising pamphlet to satisfy the ego, but a structured performance for the continuing *questioning*—that is, for the continuing *invention*—of the Gug itself, in New York or in any other location *around the world*.

¹ Giorgio Agamben, "Notes on Politics," in *Means without Ends*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 56-9.