

HOW TO BEGiN?

**THE MUSEUM
AS MYTH**



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The surrogate birth of museums in Abu Dhabi is taking place on an island curiously dubbed the Island of Happiness—Saadiyat Island—itself designed as a cradle for international museum franchises gently rocked by the regional art world. The conception of these new museums falls under the larger scope of the myth-making laboratory of the Emirates. Currently at the center of this discussion, a new myth is born: Guggenheim Abu Dhabi.

Backtracking a few decades, precisely to a time when museums were expanding towards corporate ventures and the first Emirates were being formed in the Gulf, Christo and Jeanne-Claude produced a notoriously expensive, self-financed gesture by wrapping the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, actualizing their critique of an institution through their aesthetic intervention. The ephemeral spectacle has been kept alive historically by means of a public beyond the audience who witnessed the event, which took place over forty years ago, in early 1969. With its long-lasting public address, this work can re-emerge today in critical discussions dealing with the hyper-capitalistic commodification of art institutions and the relationship they have to their constituencies. The permission granted to the artist duo to wrap a public art institution is an example of the generosity and trust museums can grant to artists. Charles Esche and Jan Verwoert have both borrowed Jacques Derrida's notion of radical hospitality to speak about how institutions, such as museums, build their creativity from outside constituents, including the artists they present and their varying publics. Verwoert says, "the creativity of the host lies in the capacity to

allow for an unlimited agency of the guest.”¹ The notion of hospitality must be understood within a localized context; in this case, when describing the hospitality of the Guggenheim or proposing an understanding of its position as a host, we must keep the context of the Emirates at the forefront of any mapping of possible relationships the institution, as a host, will have to its constituencies, or its guests². The host-guest relationship asserts a shared agency between the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi and the artists and the public as guests.

To apply Esche’s and Verwoert’s notion of radical hospitality to the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi may amount to an interesting reading, but to head in that direction we would first need to assert that the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi is real in both its realm and its function. The truth of the matter, though, is that it isn’t: the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi is a myth. The museum, as part of a franchise, becomes first a name, then a representation, and then a connotation: “it’s the *Guggenheim*.” The museum therefore becomes a system of signification that circulates the dominant power values, much like advertising. Advertising is pure connotation, and according to Roland Barthes connotation is the realm of myth.

Understanding the museum as myth performs no devaluation of it as an institution, nor does it remark on the museum’s etiquette as a good or bad host (if one were not to concur of its mythical status). A myth simply as

1 Steve Dutton and Jeanine Griffin, “Something Like Nothing Happens Anywhere,” in *Research papers: Biennials and city-wide events*, eds. Steve Dutton and Jeanine Griffin (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: a-n The Artists Information Company, 2007), 6; also see Irina Aristarkhova, “Exotic Hospitality in the Land of Tolerance,” in *Manifesta Coffee Break*, ed. Paul Domela (Liverpool: Liverpool Biennial, 2005), 65-74.

2 *Ibid.*; also see Jacques Derrida, “Questions of Responsibility: Hostility/Hospitality,” (series of lectures at University of California, Irvine, April–May 1996), referred to in Irina Aristarkhova, “Hosting the Other: Cyberfeminist Strategies for Net-Communities,” in *Cyberfeminist International Reader*, ed. Cornelia Sollfrank (Hamburg, 1999); also quoted in Paul Domela, “The Bounce Factor: Recoding the International,” in *International 06* (Liverpool: Liverpool Biennial of Contemporary Art, 2006).

myth has value. It relies on artistic and symbolic realities in order to make the cult of contemporary art into an activity of substitution. The myth is a means of conjuring the act of both crisis and resolve on a symbolic level—that which cannot be solved on the political and economic fronts.³ The combined proposition of understanding the museum as myth and host allows for a distillation of the mixed debates produced by the critical skepticism addressing the museum-boom in the Gulf.

The museum as a myth clearly propagates a particular message. The myth, in essence, is a type of speech not defined by the object of its message, but rather by its suggestiveness. As its guests and as part of its constituents, the narrative we receive, and become part of, includes all the possible associations that can be conjured when thinking of the capitalistic commodification of the art institution, both its benefits and its evils. The museum, in this way, is more imperative than speech or writing. It is marked in its monumental glory, impressing itself on the minds of its guests, as an icon—a landmark, both literally and metaphorically. As a well-to-do host, the museum has established itself socially as an active agent of art in the region, even if it is a myth.

Now let's imagine the museum, animistically this time, as a host. As its guests, would we not be compelled to ask what the museum would say, and how it would say it? First of all, the museum knows that it exists in reference to the heavy baggage of museum history, an expansive genealogy of institutions that have played an integral role in shaping the public sphere. Secondly, the museum might not realize that, as a myth, it employs

³ Jean-Marc Poinot, "Large Exhibitions," in *Thinking About Exhibitions*, eds. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce Ferguson and Sandy Nairne (New York: Routledge, 1996), 59-60.

a meta-language when it addresses its constituents and its guests. In this way, the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi is also shorthand for the system of communication which naturalizes the political nature of art's consumption and production. Finally, in theory, the museum might speak of its intentions and role in the consumption of art and its production in the region, but it might not immediately reflect on its capacity for naturalizing dominant cultural and historical attitudes towards its own recent surrogate birth.

In response to this call for imagination, some early speculations of what and who this museum is and whom it is addressing quickly rise to the surface. What role will the museum play in shifting the location of cultural capital through its curatorial strategies and its acquisitions policies? Artists, critics, and historians question how the inception of such an institution will affect artistic production, shape critical reception, and potentially cap the canon of contemporary art in the region. Will it rock the prices of regional art production in the international art market gently or hard? The shared essence of these inquiries is a musing on the notion of value. The question of who and what generates the value of art cannot be answered. According to Karl Marx, every economy is centered on a secret that it cannot disclose, and that is the origin of value and the true nature of the force that produces it.

The museum is planted not only within the cultural sphere; it is also clearly emerging out of an economic venture—and the two are of course interrelated. The Guggenheim in particular, as the first modern museum to be franchised, is clearly aware of itself as a market-driven and market-driving entity. In his essay

“The Haunted Museum,” Frazer Ward sums up Jürgen Habermas’s argument by saying: “the commodification of the content of culture is central to the shift from an active, educated or trained culture-debating public to a passive, unenlightened culture-consuming public.”⁴ Thinking of the museum in this way complicates the tropes through which we understand the museum as both myth and host. To consider that the museum retains a certain agency over how its guests consume culture, specifically in its islanded context, casts further speculation on who these guests are and who its true public is.

Now, the myth of the museum, as told, is heavily spotted with incidents in its history that reveal its incapability of generating an actual public—which, as stated earlier, complicates the possible understanding of it as a host able to accommodate its guests, or outside constituents, including artists, employees, and publics. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas makes an observation that the public sphere is simply not “there” anymore; rather, the public sphere has to be “made” through occasions for identification. This observation holds true throughout his critique on the plurality, rather than singularity, of the public sphere. The museum may strive towards fueling art production through exhibitions, educational programs, acquisitions, and the like; it may also galvanize artists, critics, curators, and educators to join in its endeavors. The truth of the matter in this case, though, is that the museum might well be able to produce an audience for itself, but not a public necessarily, particularly when we look at

⁴ Frazer Ward, “The Haunted Museum: Institutional Critique and Publicity,” *October* 73 (Summer 1995): 77-78.

the context which houses it.

In the same manner and fashion of the Emirates, which draws up audiences from the region and internationally to its array of fairs, networking meetings, and biennials, the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi will be quite capable of producing an audience. Audiences for events are mainly attracted by the attention other people pay to those very same events. Publics may of course include audiences; but publics allow museums to develop and gain a firm foothold and position, encouraging its “guests” to engage with the museum and its context over time instead of just responding to its events as occasional spectacles.

The influx of people to biennials, art fairs, and networking meetings, including those in Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Sharjah, is a case-in-point for the nature of how audiences function. Audiences in this sense are not necessarily interested in the content of the event itself, but rather in the spectacle that events produce around it. In the case of a museum, the public needs to be engaged and interested in certain publications, events, causes, and topics that evolve from and around the museum periodically. The history of museums is closely tied to the public sphere and in many ways the production of a public. The speculation then is over whether the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi is at all capable of approaching this task of producing a public, rather than simply catering to—and entertaining—specific audiences.

The impossible task of conceiving the museum as part-producer of a singular public, not even a plurality of publics, makes a return to Habermas’s theories on the role of museum in allowing for self-representation and self-authorization of a new bourgeois subject of reason

quite possible. The museum is, in this case, a producer of “fictitious identities”—or property owner and human being, simply put.⁵ Whether mythical or real, Guggenheim Abu Dhabi is unlikely to grow out of its cradling context very soon, and for now can only be read through inconclusively fragmented and fictitious meditations starting with the museum as myth.

5 Frazer Ward, “The Haunted Museum: Institutional Critique and Publicity,” October 73 (Summer 1995): 74, referred to in Simon Sheikh, “In the Place of the Public Sphere? Or the World in Fragments,” *republicart* (June 2004), available online at http://www.republicart.net/disc/publicum/sheikh03_en.htm.

Regine Basha graduated from the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College in 1996, its inaugural year. For the past 17 years, she has curated exhibitions, public projects, and temporal interventions in cities such as Montreal, Austin, Istanbul, Cairo, Santiago, Marfa, and Los Angeles, and continues to work as an independent curator now based in Brooklyn. She is the co-founder of Fluent~Collaborative, Grackleworld.com, and most recently the audio-visual archive tuningbaghdad.net, which she realized with the support of United Nations Plaza. She has published numerous catalogs on artists such as Daniel Bozhkov, Stephen Vitiello, Emily Jacir, and Dario Robleto, and has written for publications such as *Art Papers*, *Art Lies*, *Cabinet*, and *Modern Painters*. Basha sits on the board of Art Matters and the Aurora Picture Show and is an associate programmer of *Cabinet* magazine's new Gowanus exhibition and event space.

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