

Two Plots from the Exhibition Book of Facts

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I.

It is common for museological critiques attempting to rectify the colonial history of their collections to view and treat historical artifacts as intact objects, which have lost part of their essence as a result of being severed from their original habitat. Indeed an examination of the last twenty years of museological practices will yield many instances where art historians, museum directors, and curators took it upon themselves to remedy this purported gap between object proper and the museum as its new environment. The remedy might take the form of more elaborate displays with carefully phrased historical information about use, function, and lineage, as well as the cultures from which these objects originated. In rare cases, the results have been illuminating, but in most cases these practices have added little real knowledge while doubling down on the initial violence of appropriation.

Assuming the relationship between the object in the world and the one in the museum as a matter of a loss of depth implies that it would again be feasible to conceptually extract the object from its new surroundings in the museum and link it to its former self with “the higher resolution” that was in the outside world. The idea being that one can presumably rescue these artifacts from the “deforming” mechanisms of the museum, returning them to an imagined non-ideological space where they can testify to their previous life as it really was. In this conception, the museum is thought of as a monolithic structure, in which any content is at best a cooperative victim to its fixed rules of perception, education, and the imparting of knowledge. A remedy to such deforming mechanisms of the museum might then take the form of either revealing the workings of these mechanisms, or supplying alternative histories to the objects in it, histories that claim to take better account of marginalized narratives or attempt a more non-biased imparting of information. What is however, never contested in this conception of the museum, be it affirmative or critical, is the role of the museum in imparting knowledge about these objects’ past. For even in the most divergent of such alternative histories, that role is doubly affirmed and remains largely unquestioned.

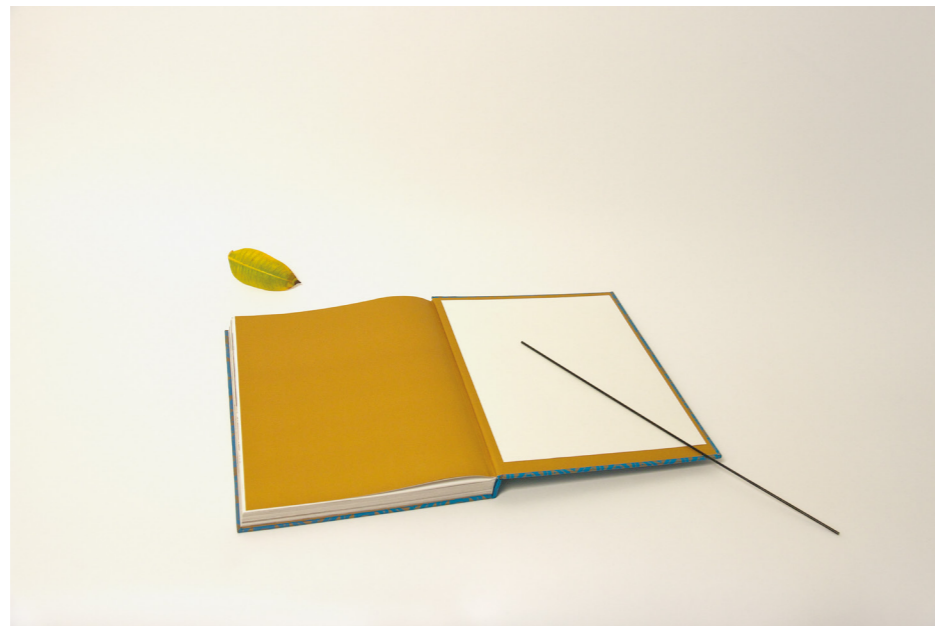
But could it not be that once an object enters the museum, it becomes impossible to separate it from its new habitat without completely altering it, and that the far more poignant and less violent display is the one that takes this into account: a display that stresses the gap to the outside world as opposed to trying to eclipse it? Could it not be that the act of appropriation and introduction of artifacts into museums is much more severe in its violence than commonly believed, that not only does it sever an object from its culture, location, previous and functional life but it does so absolutely, without leaving any possibility of a rectification?

It might be that objects in museums and those in the outside world live on parallel lines that never intersect, regardless of how similar they sometimes appear to be, and regardless of the numerous conversations in which they can both partake. It might also be possible to imagine the artifacts in a museum refusing their designated role of victimhood to their new habitat, opting instead to become active players not only in what they display about themselves but in the very constitution of what that habitat is. It is possible to imagine them reclaiming the museum into a place they themselves form, a place where they can exhibit a version of themselves unavailable elsewhere, not as faint reflections of their previous lives or proxies for abstract concepts of distant lands and other cultures, but as entities in the here and now bearing witness to their current situation, that is a result of past violence as well as an indistinguishable part and parcel of the new surroundings in which they find themselves. A curatorial handling of these artifacts will then require a light hand, an act of active listening to them and what they need. It may also require unusual methods when displaying these artifacts. For example an object may need to be partly or wholly covered, hidden, replaced, or altered in a variety of manners. It may even, under these conditions, contently allow itself to be called “art.”

parallelizing



Installation view 2021, Perez Art Museum, Miami, 2015, MoMA, NY, 2017, Guggenheim Museum, NY, 2016, MACBA, Barcelona, 2015, Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, 2017, Egyptian Museum, Turin, 2017, Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah, 2015



Untitled Illustration from Page 13 of Art of the Past Twenty-two Centuries Exhibition Catalogue, 2013 or 2018 or 2021



Untitled Illustration from Page 11 of Art of the Past Twenty-two Centuries Exhibition Catalogue, 2013 or 2018 or 2021



Fig. 4

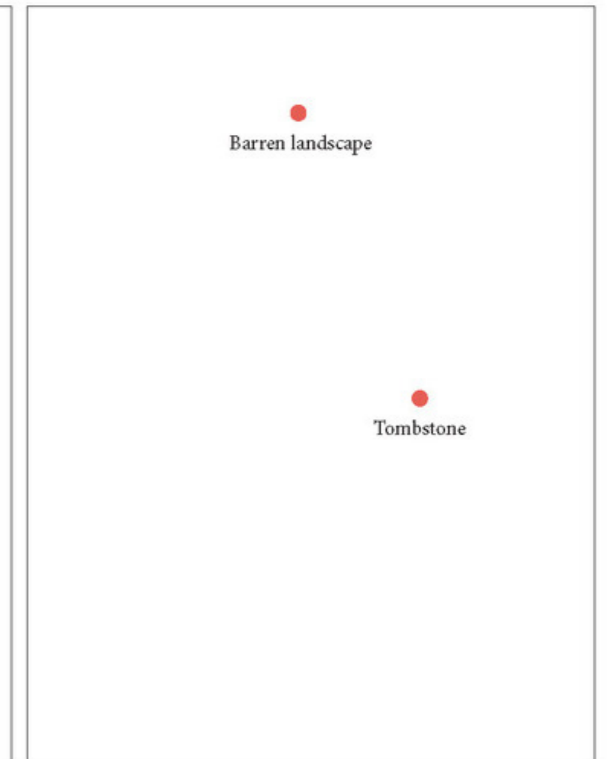


Fig. 5

2021 Installation Detail of Figure 4 and 5, two black-and-white photographs depicting two different types of script on the headstones of twelfth-century graves. The script with rigid lines and clearly defined figures was used to mark the graves of those who believed in the direct transmission of the words of God. Whereas the script with angular forms, and vegetal and floral designs, was used to indicate the graves of those who believed that although the words of God were holy, his book was the result of human transmission.

II.

The relationship between an exhibition and an image documenting it, might be compared to the relationship between an artifact in a museum and an idea of its previous self in the outside world. Similar to how ethnographic artifacts in museums are often considered to be a reduced version of their former selves, exhibition images are commonly discussed as a flat counterpart of a more nuanced and sensually richer reality, taken to lack the depth, and full extent of information their three dimensional referents possess.

To defend the exhibition space in relation to images documenting it as the sight of a superior original confronted with a bad copy of itself, requires a mental extraction of the material on view from the medium imparting it and a linking of it to another version of itself, in this case the one inhabiting the three dimensional world. But can a material be successfully extracted from its medium in such a manner? And if it is, would not one end up with an abstraction more slippery in its effects, and overwhelming and total in its alteration than a mere matter of losing depth or dimension? Would not one in arguing for the superiority of the exhibition end up limiting it even further to a fixed concept, while presumably defending it against the flattening mechanisms of documentation?

With all that has been written about images and the inadequacy of the representational model and with everything that is now known about the invention and history of photography and the departure of digital technology from the imprinting or preservation of a so called physical reality into the generation of one, one can embrace a different story about image documentation, not the one that laments their abstracting potential or accuses them of the manipulation or degradation of reality but the one that accepts them as a reality in their own right. Images have a relationship to other realities but that relationship is more likely to be equal in status, than hierarchical. They can be imagined as parallel entities to the world they reference, the world by which they are also referenced. And like other parallel entities, they can be the means to access aspects of that world that may otherwise remain hidden. In 1986 Serge Daney claimed that "Nothing happens any longer to humans, it is to the image that everything happens." But it may very well be that everything still happens to human beings but the image is now one of the few places where what happens can be registered. Like the curatorial handling of objects in museums that carefully takes note of the status of these objects, a rigorous documentation endeavor may entail having to alter the images one produces or happens upon. One may need to flip some of them upside down after being snapped, or have them erased, color altered or washed out, or replaced by other hand drawn or computer generated images, or have them scanned, tweaked and then printed again in three-dimensional form, or have them animated; made to start moving, or replaced by completely different images or by nothing at all. This, granted one is after images registering their parallel world, images that one can also decide, this time hesitantly, to call "art."

suspending