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## ArtAsiaPacific, Issue 77 – Mar/Apr 2012 →

### The Problem With Display

IN THE RIGHT CONTEXT, ARTIST MUSEUMS ARE TELLING NEW HISTORIES  
BY REBECCA CLOSE

The recent two-part exhibition “The Museum Show,” deftly curated by Nav Haq at the Arnolfini Gallery in Bristol, United Kingdom, displayed a collection of approximately 40 “artist museums” that, as the press release states, presented “museums that employ a classic ‘museological’ approach through to broader, more conceptual understandings of a museum’s infrastructure.” Many of the projects hijack the authoritative rhetoric of museum display and present their own fabricated “primary sources.” The resulting installations apotheosize fictional narratives, personal histories and mystical origin stories as valid historical documents. Notable examples include Susan Hiller’s *From the Freud Museum* (1991-96), Walid Raad’s *A History of Art in the Arab World: Part 1\_Volume 1\_Section 39: The Atlas Group 1989-2004* (2008), Simon Fujiwara’s *Museum of Incest* (2007-) and Khalil Rabah’s *Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind* (2006-). By allowing content to undermine form, these projects challenge a colonial “logic of transparency” that underlies the traditional notion of connoisseurship, whereby displaying objects and documents removed from their contexts can render a history, a culture and a people transparent and understood.

It was somewhat disheartening, however, seeing the work of these guerilla archivists and nomadic historiographers as self contained pseudo-institutions, collected, curated and displayed beside each other, like objects. Is it not also possible to interrogate form, to combine the holy trinity of museum practice— collect, curate, display?

*Monument to the Creative, Local, Informal Economy* (2008) is the product of a collaboration between artist and researcher Alia Farid and young artists and musicians from the Villa Victoria area of Boston. Both monolithic and kiosk, the architectural intervention is a model for an independent museum practice, in which the traditional dynamics of museum display are entirely subverted. The work is a 12-foot-high wooden obelisk, with over a dozen small wheels fixed to its base and a grey painted carapace that elides a traditional marble makeup. One opens the obelisk by unhinging a latch at the front, such that it turns out horizontally to reveal shelves lined with local products: books, CDs, photographs, artworks, and a display of cheap offers enticing customers to get their nails painted, or corn-rows plaited. In May 2008, Farid and her collaborators took to the streets as vendors, using their monument-kiosk.

Monument shifts the colonial significance of the obelisk, reclaiming it on behalf of Villa Victoria, home to the largest migrant Puerto Rican population in Boston. In the 1950s, faced with the proposed demolition of their homes as part of a local “urban renewal” project, local residents collaborated to propose a development plan for new housing. In 1969, they won the right for tenants to stay in the area. Farid explains: “For the new generation of Villa Victoria residents, it’s hard to imagine the struggle they faced. The obelisk is a vessel for revisiting the past while exhibiting issues of the present generation. It is an exercise to explore our own relationship to commemoration.”

The resulting structure succeeds in not only commemorating an under-told story of territory retained, it also allows this represented history to act as a forum for the production of current social relations, economies, skills and knowledge. In Farid’s project, the context of production and reception are mediated neither by an institution or a label, nor by distance, recontextualization or translation. Knowledge of both contexts belonged to all who “participated.” In this museum practice, “collect” means to locate, “curate” to demonstrate and “display” to participate.



ALIA FARID, *Monument to the Creative, Local, Informal Economy*, 2008. Site-specific installation in Villa Victoria, Boston, 2008. Courtesy the artist.

"Museum of Non Participation" (MNP), conceived by London-based artists Karen Mirza and Brad Butler, similarly sources alternative forms of distribution and display of work through context-based research and localized collaboration. In 2009, after two years of research with artists, politicians, lawyers, architects, students, professors and language teachers across Pakistan and the UK, the duo produced a month-long MNP festival in the back of a Pakistani barber shop in Bethnal Green, East London, and published a supplement in English and Urdu to go with *The Daily Jang* London, a local Pakistani newspaper. The project revealed alternative representations of Pakistani, British and British-Pakistani identity, at a time when Pakistan was being portrayed by the Western media almost exclusively as a rogue state, suffering from extremism, natural disasters and martial law. First articulated in September 2008 in Karachi with the support of *Artangel Interaction*, the project now consists of spatial interventions, magazine and newspaper publications, performances, radio programming, seminars, exhibitions, films and language exchanges taking place across Pakistan, the UK and more recently Egypt.

However, how does one display a project that privileges context, outside of that context? While Farid's *Monument* now stands reformatted as a bookshelf at Axiom Center for New and Experimental Media gallery, Boston, the inclusion of Mirza and Butler's MNP in the "Museum Show: Part 2" is more complicated. At the Arnolfini Gallery, MNP consisted of four United Nations resolutions printed and fixed to the wall— including two stating policy decisions regarding Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction and the resulting US and UK occupation of Iraq, and two from 1990 concerning Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the decision to impose severe sanctions on Iraq— along with additional notes revealing various contradictions and hypocrisies. Whereas this was an act of exposure, an intentionally effaced pamphlet from a recent government art collection exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery, by contrast, was an act of concealment. Also present was a neon sign bearing the project's title in English and Urdu and concrete sculptures made by artist-collaborators Pavilion, used to mount an audio work, along with two photographs and three-monitor film. A chalkboard with handwritten excerpts from Peter Weiss' three-volume novel *The Aesthetics of Resistance* (1975-81) channelled the installation's emphasis on self-education and self-study, and on recognizing and reading contexts of visibility and obscurity, opacity and clarity, audibility and silence. The only label was a booklet of texts pertaining to each "act" (or artwork) and a list of all those who contributed to the exhibition.

Containing no documentation of previous collaborative interventions, Mirza and Butler's installation was less an exhibition demonstrating the existence of participation, collaboration and representation— not just within artistic production, where these words are commonplace, but in the writing of a UN resolution, in a public art museum's relationship with the government, in Hollywood's portrayal of the Arab male and in the US government's justification of torture methods, for example. Mirza and Butler explain: "It was no longer enough to make films... we needed to construct a situation where

if you were going to watch our films you had to watch them from within something else, and that became The Museum of Non Participation.”



Wall chalking on carrier demarcates the city of Karachi as a working space for KAREN MIRZA and BRAD BUTLER's "The Museum of Non Participation," 2009. Photo by Karen Mirza. Courtesy Artangel, London.

For Alia Farid, Monument was the last in a series of three works that draws on an analogy between the economically unstable position of the artist—who is often engaged in “entrepreneurial” and networking activities to survive—and the position of the second and third generation migrant worker in Boston’s South End, who, as a result of the unequal distribution of services and quality of education in the city, struggles to make a living. In each project, the respective position emerged from long periods of research: Mirza and Butler had explained to Artangel in 2007 that they would need two years before realizing the project in the UK. For Farid, who has dual Kuwaiti-Puerto Rican heritage, Villa Vistoria is where she lived for two years while earning her master’s degree.

MNP and Monument suggest that there is a promising role for the artist-researcher in dismantling the “logic of transparency” and making visible the invisible histories, identities and relations that exist across a complex, globalized world. However, does the legitimization of art production as scientific endeavor—evident in the proliferation of research-based post-graduate programs across the creative disciplines—merely reflect the dominant interests of an information-driven capitalism, just as the “social art” of the 1990s is currently being historicized and critiqued as having affirmed the workings of neoliberalism?

It is difficult to dismiss the research intervention as merely an aggregate of the knowledge economy—these artist researchers are not simply producing investigative papers of academic journals, and their projects clearly maintain a strong relationship to material form. Furthermore, this materiality, by which a context is encoded, sheds new light on the significance of participatory art practice. It seems that the only fault of the so-called relational projects, and indeed their term itself, is that their “participation” is constructed as something conceptually separate from production and display. Farid’s Monument should stand as a sincere reminder that a relationship between participation and representation is not the culprit. But for the “Museum of Non Participation”—for which the city is a museum, its policies as much as its monuments constituting mediums to be manipulated—exposes this relationship as an ahistorical condition that can be monitored across different social, political and global contexts, and is either exposed and made visible or else hidden from view.

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