







## Mythographies Archaeologies Circuitries: Other Ways of Curating

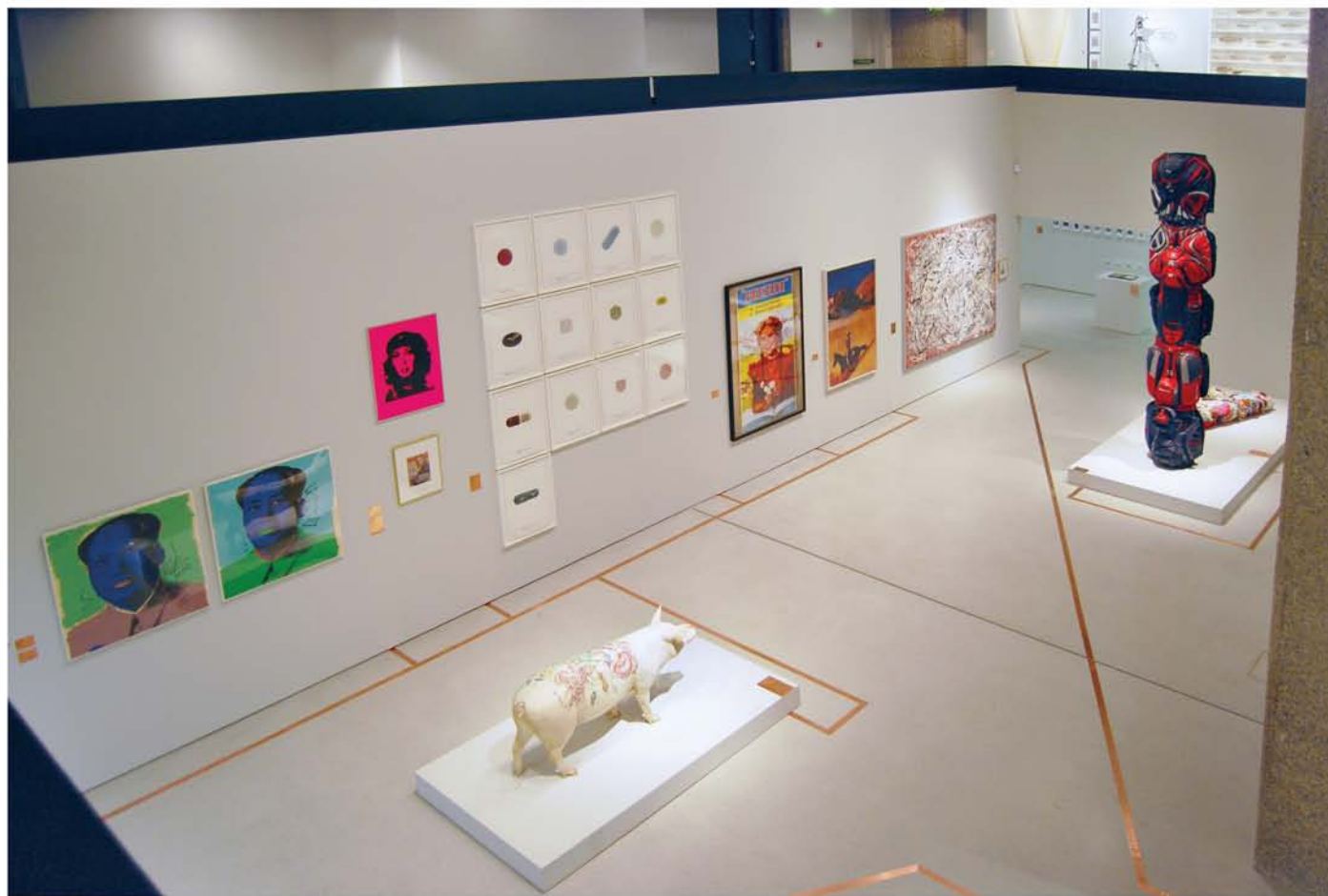
by Jesse McKee

**W**hat are the ideological structures that we use to map and orientate exhibitions? What are the cultural forces that call for a disproportionate dominance of Western cultural values in the making of exhibitions? Modern European ideals such as rationality, objectivity, argumentative democracy and legitimacy seem to fuel the majority of the exhibitions that we see. Why should these concepts as apparatuses continue to be the principal ones at hand used to frame and contextualize artistic practices? This essay celebrates several innovative exhibitions that outrightly investigate forms of curatorial otherness. The exhibitions by Francesco Manacorda and Lydia Yee, Oscar Ho, Richard Hill and Claire Tancons expand and complicate exhibition discourse by using other forms of knowledge—whether folkloric, local, fictional, invented or imagined.

In 2008, the Barbican Art Gallery, London, UK, hosted a quirky exhibition, the “Martian Museum of Terrestrial Art,” authored by in-house curators Francesco Manacorda and Lydia Yee. The “MMTA” was developed around an invented Martian taxonomy, which tried to contextualize and normalize the earthly pursuit of recent art practices. The exhibition’s plot was fuelled by Thierry de Duve’s recent book, *Kant after Duchamp*, where a first-contact scenario is imagined between an extraterrestrial and Duchamp’s urinal. In the “MMTA,” Martian anthropologists purportedly organized the display, which included over 100 contemporary artists. Around 200 works were crammed into categories such as Ancestor Worship, Shrines, Masks, Cultural Contact and even a faux museological space dedicated to the Unclassifiable. The exhibition was staged with a whimsy and theatricality, keeping the ideas buoyant enough for the popular audience the Barbican attracts.

Illustration from Martian Museum of Terrestrial Art exhibition signage and catalogue, 2008. Courtesy the Barbican Art Gallery and Joris Goulenok.





Outsourcing the authorial role of the exhibition organizer to a realm of complete fiction, the “MMTA” successively encouraged laughable misreading throughout. An interpretive panel for the Masks gallery included an illustration of some Polynesian tribal figures costumed in grass skirts and sporting Brian Jungen’s masks made of Nike Shoes from his series, “Prototypes for New Understanding,” 1998. Equally obtuse was the wall label for Chris Burden’s tarpaulin from his *Deadman*, 1972, performance. This material was said “to have protective properties, it was used to cover and shield the artist from traffic as he lay in the street in Los Angeles. It did not, however, prevent him from being arrested.” This inversion of the organizational and curatorial logic, seen at the core of the exhibition, tried to stage a sense of foreignness and antagonism directed at the heavy-handed authority that arranged the show. The “MMTA” instilled in its visitors a healthy dose of skepticism about the idea that exhibitions can legitimately offer dominant historical narratives.

This means of curatorial mythmaking and storytelling can also be seen in the work of the Hong Kong-based artist and curator Oscar Ho. In 1997, Ho held the first part of a trilogy of exhibitions that were staged as local history museums. In these exhibitions, Ho investigated the complex histories dating from the 1197 massacre of the

Danka (boat people) to British colonial rule in the 19th and 20th centuries. Organized amidst the political climate of the 1997 handover of Hong Kong from British rule to Chinese authority, the exhibitions sought to create a deeper consideration and questioning of the mythology, history and language specific to the city state. With its first iteration, “Hong Kong Incarnated, Museum 97: History, Community, Individual,” 1997, artists were invited to create artifacts to contribute to a newly fabricated and consensual history. As well, the exhibition included objects commemorating Hong Kong from members of the public. This second sphere of objects in the exhibition linked the discussed histories to personal associations of the actual place. The second and third chapters of the exhibition trilogy focused on a little known local myth of a creature called Lo Ting. Being half human and half fish, Lo Ting was purported to be an ancestor of the Danka. Lo Ting had great success in the salt industry, and in 1297 the emperor

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1. & 2. Installation views of "Martian Museum of Terrestrial Art" at the Barbican Art Gallery in London, 2008. Photograph: Lyndon Douglas. Courtesy of Barbican Art Gallery.

of the Southern Sung dynasty had the salt fields taken over and the creatures massacred. "Hong Kong Reincarnated – New Lo Ting Archeological Find," 1998, asked artists to create works that represented forms of archeological discoveries about this creature to reintroduce this myth into the popular conscience. And the final chapter, "Lo Ting: New Discovery on 1197 Massacre," 1999, expanded upon the myth by introducing further Lo Ting "discoveries" with contributions from individuals in cultural studies, anthropology and sociology. Ho says, "The fabrication was not intended to be a fanciful play of imagination but a metaphor for the distinctiveness of Hong Kong culture." What came out of the retellings of the Lo Ting mythology was a situation where works created by some would contradict others in the exhibition. Visitors were left in a mystified state in which they were asked to make up their own minds in the face of historical ambiguity, to sort through the truths and untruths themselves.

This was an extremely poignant situation to ask the visitors to occupy in the context of the city's handover. Ho recalls that the 1990s in Hong Kong was a surreal period, where accusations of lies from both British and Chinese political camps were being volleyed back and forth. And on a popular level, new myths were being created out of this haze. "The pre-1997 anxiety triggered all

kinds of strange stories, such as the ghost story of a dead child on a television commercial, the curse of death at Lan Kwai Fong, the strange incident of catching a mermaid...we lived in a weird world of unreality." Manufacturing history and reviving local myths for contemporary audiences, Ho used narrative as his foremost critical tool within these exhibitions.

This use of narrative as a form of criticism was also a major element in Richard Hill's "Meeting Ground" exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 2003. Hill displayed Euro-Canadian and Aboriginal artworks within the same exhibition to challenge the class and cultural biases of the AGO itself. The exhibition served to break down long-engendered prejudices that have kept these visual histories separate. "Meeting Ground" mapped out an exhibition space that relied on the visual rendering of an Aboriginal cosmology. The ceiling took on abstract sky world patterns, and underworld designs were found on the floor. About this design choice Hill said, the "Euro-Canadian works of art enter this space as newcomers, arriving into a world that is not an empty wilderness but a space that was already culturally mapped and conceptualized by Aboriginal inhabitants." "Meeting Ground" was motivated by thinking of space in Aboriginal terms, discussing history from Aboriginal terms and engaging with the audience





on Aboriginal terms. The exhibition was meant to be part of the permanent galleries but regrettably was closed after only eight months.

Hill's exhibition abutted two different visualities against one another. As an example, European-style settler portraits and a statue of the Catholic Madonna and Child shared the exhibitions space with a war club carved from a gunstock, a quilled Nishnaabe bag with a thunderbird motif and a table where a tobacco offering could be made. This kind of mixing was a challenge to all involved, both the museum and the local Aboriginal communities. On the part of the AGO, the institution was asked to acknowledge a racist history that had kept Aboriginal works out of the art museum—many works had to be acquired or borrowed for the exhibition as very little was found in the AGO's own collection. For Aboriginal nationalists, the exhibition challenged ideas of racial purity and the taboo of mixing with whites. These attitudes remain from the ingrained European notions of the nation state, introduced to many Aboriginal communities in the 19th century.

"Meeting Ground" was not composed of a central curatorial vision but, instead, by including several voices of scholars, artists and local contributors Hill initiated a process that offered a broader sense of authorship. Hill says, "The lessons learned from the freedom to experiment



1. *Madonna and Child and Thunderbird*, "Meeting Ground" exhibition looking southeast, 2003, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. AGO Photographic resources. Courtesy the AGO.

2. Tobacco table, "Meeting Ground" exhibition, 2003. AGO Photographic resources. Courtesy the AGO.

3. & 4. Installation views, "Hong Kong Incarnated, Museum 97: History, Community, Individual" at the Hong Kong Arts Centre, 1997. Courtesy of Oscar Ho.





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will be invaluable." "Meeting Ground" offered an extremely progressive laboratory to test how these works can be mixed together to form new and divergent narratives that break from the dominant histories told about the geographic space now known as Canada. These lessons are featured as a central motif in the newly hung Canadian galleries, curated by Gerald McMaster, that opened with the Frank Gehry expansion of the AGO in 2008. Now, in the majority of the Canadian galleries, Euro-Canadian and Aboriginal works occupy the same space, telling many similar stories with divergent forms and processes, creating a setting akin to that of Oscar Ho's exhibitions, which ask the visitor to position themselves in terms of their own historical trappings and to work their way out from there.

Beyond the AGO, a critical mass of Aboriginal curators are helping to redefine what exhibition spaces can be and how they are physically and conceptually mapped out. The development of the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective in 2005 (by its founding members Ryan Rice, Barry Ace, Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew and Ron Nogansh) has shown the necessity for the country's high-walled institutions to start moving. Not only politically in terms addressing the lack of Aboriginal curators within institutions, but also the lack of



1. Archival photograph of the May 18, 1980, Democratic Uprising in Gwangju, South Korea. Courtesy of The May 18 Foundation and The Gwangju Biennale Foundation.

2. "SPRING," 200 participants, 90-minute procession, May 18 Democratic Plaza, Gwangju, September 5, 2008. Curated by Claire Tancons for Gwangju Biennale '08. Photograph: Cheolhong Mo. Courtesy of Gwangju Biennale Foundation.





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Aboriginal philosophies and principles being used to determine the exhibition practices inside their galleries. The result of the ACC's multi-faceted work in the past five years can be seen as they are shifting the landscape of Aboriginal exhibitions and repositioning the agency of curatorial practice as a whole. As well, the ACC has been an active catalyst, producing new and unexpected realities within the circuits of the art network in North America and abroad.

The exhibitions I have been writing about in this essay are infused with the strategies that artistic and exhibition practices take from anthropology, necessary to expose the Euro-centric biases of both disciplines. A profound departure in this type of practice can be seen in the recent research, writing and exhibitions of New Orleans-based curator, writer and scholar Claire Tancons. For the past five years Tancons has dedicated her work to the study of carnival. Focusing on carnival practices from the Caribbean, South America and Africa, Tancons has been lobbying for the discipline's inclusion into dominant art-historical and contemporary art spheres. Pushing the recognition of carnival beyond a form of populist entertainment or as an ethnological curiosity is at the crux of this work. At the 7th Gwangju Biennale, 2008, headed under the title "Annual Report: A Year in Exhibitions" and directed by Okwui Enwezor, Tancons worked as a collaborating curator where she organized the exhibition "Spring." This exhibition was one of several that had been either imported or created specifically for the biennale. Tancon's exhibition took the form of a carnival procession. Lasting 90 minutes, it exhibited the work of carnival designers and contemporary artists alike. A series of costumes, floats and elaborate kinetic sculptures were activated by throngs of local students as the procession played out in the streets of Gwangju. "Spring's" rallying point was its arrival at the Democratic Plaza in the city. This exhibition project was made even more poignant by Gwangju's own local history, which is probably best known as the site of a significant popular uprising in 1980. This uprising was spurred by a constellation of students, labour unions and religious organizations and is largely seen as a key catalyst in the overthrowing of South Korean dictator Park Chung Hee.

"Spring" was able to combine the language of carnival, the apparatuses of contemporary art and the history of Gwangju in a perfect synthesis of what theorist Irit Rogoff sees as the increasing relationship between the circuits of art and globalization. Rogoff's ongoing research platform, Geo-Cultures, at Goldsmiths University is mapping the unexpected realities in the expanding global exhibition circuit. In this decentralized network, research, exchange and dialogue use specific local features and the illumination of conditions the world over to host conversations that are not happening anywhere else, conversations that happen beyond the political, social and economic spheres. Rogoff states that these conversations are "located in the aftermath of colonialism, diffusionism and post-colonial self-constitution on the one hand, and on the other hand their concomitant, ever growing diasporas." With "Spring," Tancons successfully used her local and scholarly knowledge of carnival to inform her exhibition's theoretical mapping; the platform of the biennale served as the exhibition's machinery and the healthy public sphere of South Korea served as its fuel. The exhibition's underlying strength came from its ability to draw out aesthetic and historical parallels between carnival and protest. This form for an exhibition had also been attempted by Tancons as part of CAPE 09 in Cape Town, and a future procession in this style is being planned for the test run of the Harlem Biennale in NY in the autumn of 2010.

The exhibitions discussed in this essay show the need for a continued use of, and experimentation with, alternate forms of philosophies and cultural norms to orientate and map the terrain of exhibitions. Curators shouldn't have to default to the mores of global homogeneity to participate on an international stage. This call for a return to the local signals a re-provincialization of artistic knowledge in a positive manner. This is necessary to strengthen each locality, while also reawakening the need for this knowledge to be traded again in novel, meaningful and necessary ways. ■

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