

Peter Eeley, "Social Formation: Peter Eeley on *The Absent Museum*," Artforum, November 2017

CURATING

SOCIAL FORMATION

Peter Eeley on "The Absent Museum"

"I THINK ABOUT MORANDI painting on top of a hill surrounded by fascism." This is the first line of *1943*, a text that Francis Alys wrote on the occasion of Documenta 13 in 2012, in which he muses, line by line, about the activities and sufferings of various European artists during the eponymous year of the war. Otto Dix watches his works destroyed by Nazis; Max Beckmann is under siege in Amsterdam. Leni Riefenstahl, however, deploys a cast of prisoners borrowed from the camps to film part of *Tiefland*. Alys's list serves as a self-interrogation: Does an artist have an ethical obligation when confronted with violence and injustice?

One could pose similar questions about the responsibilities of public contemporary art institutions, versions of which will be familiar to those who have worked within their confines. The image of Giorgio Morandi in Bologna, besieged but also aloof, feels cautionary. Indeed, one achievement of twenty-first-century globalization has been the expansion of contingent responsibility: the sense that global *misery*—to borrow a key term from this summer's Documenta 14—arises from a web of interrelated historical and present-day injustices, and that culture is both implicated in and accountable for addressing them. So how might we imagine a contemporary museum for a world in crisis, an institution alive to the hangovers of history and the ethical demands of the present day?

Since opening in a disused 1930s brewery in Brussels, Wiels Contemporary Art Centre has grappled with these questions from a European perspective. Recently, on the occasion of the museum's tenth anniversary, founding director Dirk Snauwaert, working with Zoë Gray, Frédérique Versaen, Caroline Dumalin, and Charlotte Friling, organized "The Absent Museum," aiming to consolidate the institution's short history and sketch an outline for its future, here in the capital of a Europe under increasing duress. Spread across all three gallery floors of Wiels's building, as well as its roof and parts of two other institutions on the block, the exhibition featured almost fifty artists based or born in Belgium and across a northern European corridor that includes Amsterdam, Berlin, Cologne, London, and Paris. The curators began with an ethical inquiry: Why are museums, in an era of surging popularity, absent from public debates on important issues of local and global significance? Snauwaert suggests that we obsess over new buildings and collections without ever resolving fundamental questions about our purpose. "What content or knowledge should a museum transmit? Which repre-

sentations will be present, which issues remain absent?"

Two absent museums—one future and one past—served as points of reference: the Centre Pompidou's planned Brussels outpost, due to open in 2020, and Marcel Broodthaers's *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* (Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles), 1968–72, a metamuseological conceit sparked by his participation in the occupation of the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels in May 1968. Broodthaers explained that his museum was born "not out of a concept, but out of circumstances"; Snauwaert and his team likewise foregrounded local circumstances with broader relevance. Trafficking in problems that may present as "controversial or threatening," Snauwaert repeatedly returned to an ideal of the contemporary museum as a "serene atmosphere" that enables encounters with difficult subjects by locating a "fundamental commonality" that emerges over time. In this urgent modesty, "The Absent Museum" provided a quiet rejoinder to curatorial endeavors that claim to participate in political crises more directly—



Marcel Broodthaers, *Museum, enfants non admis* (Museum, Children Not Admitted), 1968, paint on vacuum-formed plastic plate, 33 1/4 x 48".

most notably, this year's Documenta, and its concurrent efforts to deliver "a real-time response to the changing situation of Europe" by unsettling the "seemingly immutable spectacular order" of simple exhibition-making in favor of what the organizers extolled as "situations, not just artifacts to be looked at."

At Wiels, happily, artifacts generally sufficed, and were rather well chosen and arranged. We encountered, for example, several works that dealt powerfully with the themes of institutional and geographic exclusion—among them a group of Broodthaers's vacuum-formed panels from 1968–72, including an apparent sign for his *musée* that both invites visitors and warns them that children are not admitted. Near this ambivalent welcome hung Walter Swennen's text painting *Ceux qui sont ici, sont d'ici* (Those Who Are Here Are from Here), 2013, installed next to one of Guillaume Bijl's earliest simulated environments—*Sculpture trouvée* (Found Sculpture), 1980, a replica of a period Belgian voting booth. A darkly satirical film from 1968 played in another room, combining real news footage with staged scenes to depict a Brussels that has been forcibly partitioned into French- and Flemish-speaking communities; fake news *avant la lettre*, *Le mur* (The Wall), created for the newsreel

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GLADSTONE GALLERY



Clockwise, from top: Thomas Hirschhorn, *Pixel-Collage n° 35*, 2016, Xeroxes, tape, transparent sheet. Installation view, Wiels Contemporary Art Centre, Brussels, 2017. From the series "Pixel-Collages," 2015–17. Photo: Kristien Daem. Lili Reynaud-Dewar, *Small Tragic Comic Opera of Images and Bodies in the Museum*, 2017. Performance view, Wiels Contemporary Art Centre, Brussels, May 5, 2017. Photo: Benjamin Boar. Jef Geys, *Sterrendoek (Star Cloth)*, 1965, oil and pastel on canvas, 66 1/2 x 55 1/4".

company Belgavox, was intended for broadcast in the lead-up to the national elections, a warning against the politics of division.

To arrive at the film, visitors passed through a gallery in which Alÿs's 1943 appeared on a wall, now with one addition: a line about German-Jewish painter Felix Nussbaum hiding from his neighbors in Brussels before his deportation to and murder in Auschwitz. Nearby was a painting by Nussbaum himself: Made after the artist fled with his wife to Belgium in 1935, the canvas is an astonishing self-portrait masked in burlesque clownery. From Nussbaum and Alÿs, there was a view to Luc Tuymans's *Secrets*, 1990, an obdurate, closed-eyed portrait of Nazi architect Albert Speer; Jef Geys's 1965 painting based on the colored identification badges prisoners were forced to wear in concentration camps hung high to the right of doorway.

In the next gallery, such references to the atrocities

of the twentieth century expanded to encompass post-colonialism, beginning with Marlene Dumas's 2013 paintings derived from news photographs of Pauline Lumumba at the funeral of her husband, Patrice, a leader of the movement for Congo's independence and its first elected prime minister, who was infamously murdered in 1961. Adjacent to Dumas's pictures, selections from Sammy Baloji's "Memoire" series, 2006, juxtaposed colonial-era ethnographic photographs from the Belgian Congo with scenes of decomposing industrial sites. Another Walter Swennen was tucked into a corner, the canvas summarily split down the middle into two columns plainly headlined *WE* and *THEY*.

This powerful run of rooms echoed themes of migration and transnational identity developed in Wiels's first official exhibition, "Expats/Clandestines" (2007), as well as various strands of intercultural experience explored by the institution during its first decade. Such self-awareness,

evident throughout the show, was particularly pointed in Lili Reynaud-Dewar's sly *Small Tragic Comic Opera of Images and Bodies in the Museum*, 2017, which took the work of Kelley Walker—exhibited at Wiels in 2008, and more recently and controversially in Saint Louis—as its unnamed inspiration. Deploying protagonists that included "community," "museum staff," "curator," and "artist," Reynaud-Dewar's performance and installation dramatized the debates that surrounded Walker's 2016 exhibition near the city where Michael Brown was killed by police. During that show, the artist's "Black Star Press" paintings, 2005–2007, which feature an image of 1960s police brutality, provoked particular outrage and demands for their removal. Text on a costume that Reynaud-Dewar designed for the character she called "activist artist" reads: *WE NEED TO ASK FOR ANSWERS / THIS MUSEUM SHOULD BE OURS / AND NOT A DISCONNECTED VOID / CUT FROM THE LIVES OF THE PEOPLE*.

Whose museum, which people? Reynaud-Dewar's biting satire mocks the *we/they* divide of Swennen's painting, the original sin that every contemporary institution struggles to expiate and reconcile. The public museum is meant to be a place for all; there is only *we*. Facing states of emergency that call out for redress, we (art professionals) speak often of urgency but less frequently of the powers and limits of the central medium of our work, making meaning by putting art in a room. How can an exhibition best interpret and pursue what writer and activist Sarah Schulman calls "the duty of repair"?

It would be hard to describe it as restorative, but something momentous happened in Brussels between Thomas Hirschhorn's brutally spectacular "Pixel-Collages" of exploded bodies, 2015–17, and Oscar Murillo's *Human Resources*, 2016, a parliament of life-size sculptures of workers; museum staff periodically brought the latter to life by reading a text by Murillo's father in which he describes his experience as a union leader, a prisoner, and, ultimately, a refugee. The force of that pairing, combining abstract and startlingly specific representations of people unknown, resounded in two pieces of paper hung upstairs. These white pages were each marked with footprints made by pedestrians who unknowingly stepped on the sheets in the streets of Amsterdam, where Stanley Broun laid them in 1963, capturing traces of people on the move more than half a century ago. Setting viewers among these signs and effigies at a familiar scale, "The Absent Museum" joined us briefly to a haunting array of human absence—to the dead but also to those exploited, excluded, and otherwise invisible.

In so doing, the curators argued for a familiar but essential role for exhibitions and the contemporary institutions that make them: modeling the conflicts of our time through a sensitive arrangement of things, and seeking similarities and "common property" by presenting them in a room with other people. As Morandi understood, a group of objects, well-lit and vulnerably engaged, can contain all the misery and majesty of the world. □

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