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The National Museum of the Louvre - The Louvre Abu Dhabi: Spaces of Economic, Diplomatic, and Sociocultural Action

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Abstract:

According to the first clause of the intergovernmental Agreement between France and the United Arab Emirates, the *Louvre Abu Dhabi* museum, along with the works of the French national museums, when deployed internationally, will have the diplomatic mission to contribute to the dialogue between two archetypes, the Orient and the Occident.

The Louvre that participated in the national cohesion of post-revolutionary France seems to promote, particularly with the elaboration of the *Louvre Abu Dhabi*, the Orient-Occident cohesion considered necessary following the upheavals of the last decades. In this regard, art is used for its symbolic value rather than for its singular artistic one. When housed in a museum, each work of art's individual power to communicate is superseded to the profit of a political agenda, which uses the collections sometimes to support national unity, sometimes to support international unity.

The promotion of dialogue between the Orient and the Occident, that is, "each side respecting the cultural values of the other", supports the respect of Alterity while regulating the international community since the future Emirian museum is developed under French scientific expertise. Does communication really exist in museums? No. And does communication really exist between institutionally reified cultures? No.

This communication seeks to expose the national museum as a diplomatic institution rather than a neutral platform for displaying art; it seeks to expose the ideological constructions involved, more or less subliminally, in the Louvre Abu Dhabi Agreement. Additionally, while considering the limits of multiculturalism, it wishes to consider substituting the concept of Alterity that refers to a pseudo essentialism of self and the other, for the one of "Altruity", proposed by Roger Somé, which refers to fellow persons as distinct, *subjects* of encounter rather than *objects* of study.

Keywords:

Louvre - *Louvre Abu Dhabi* - Orient-Occident - national-universal museum - multiculturalism

The *Louvre Abu Dhabi* Agreement

The French and the United Arab Emirates government's representatives signed the Agreement on March 6th 2007, in Abu Dhabi. It is the result of an express request coming from the highest dynastic authorities of Abu Dhabi. It stipulates the creation of the « first museum outside of Occident ». The Agreement allows for, among other things, the use of the name « Louvre » for thirty years; the loan, for ten years, of artwork from the Louvre's collections and other participating French public museums; the sending, over fifteen years, of four annual exhibitions assembled with the works of the French national collections. It also mentions the help of French curators to develop the scientific project, to form the future Emirian professionals, and to help with the acquisition of works of art that will constitute the future permanent collection of the Abu Dhabi museum. With this Agreement, the Louvre, and participating French Museums, will gain a total of 975 millions euros.

The direction of the Louvre museum does not freely grant this Agreement, which is the result of some pressure coming directly from the presidency by means of the Ministry of Culture. Indeed, the United Arab Emirates are the most important commercial partners of France in the Middle East, due to military and commercial aircraft industry, civil nuclear power, etc. Cultural and scientific cooperation is also active in the Emirates, notably with the implantation of the *Paris-Sorbonne Abu Dhabi* University in 2006. Numerous private companies are also present in the Emirates, which are thus a strategic geopolitical area and a big commercial partner not to be weakened.

Consequently, because of foreign politics, the French sphere of influence and the protection of its balance of trade, the creation of the *Louvre Abu Dhabi* testifies of the double dependence of the Louvre museum: on the State, from which it receives funds and directives, and from its sponsors, which participate increasingly to its financing. In the last decade, the spending of the Louvre almost doubled while the financial participation of the government decreased by a quarter, providing for only 50 % of the annual budget.

The Louvre: a national institution

The political and financial constraints outweighed the resistance of the Louvre professionals, and the Agreement for the creation of the *Louvre Abu Dhabi* was signed. It was signed before any public debate could be organised, and well before a scientific project was developed, scientific project that is supposed to be the basis for any activity outside the walls of the museum.

By this Agreement, the works belonging to the French public collections, which participated to the construction of post-revolutionary national citizenry, and therefore to national distinction, and cultural differentiation, are henceforth endowed with a financial and diplomatic capital, while at the same time, being “promoted” to the service of dialogue between cultures, as the First clause of the Agreement stipulates:

The Parties decide of the creation of an universal museum [...] presenting objects of major interest in domains of archaeology, fine arts, and decorative arts, open to all time periods, including contemporary art, while putting the accent on the classical period [...] always in compliance with the criteria of quality, and the scientific and museographic ambition of the Louvre museum, which is intended to encourage the dialogue between Orient and Occident, each Party respecting the cultural values of the other. [...]¹

It should be remembered that part of the Louvre palace was transformed into a Museum, which opened in 1792, by a Decree of the Revolutionary Assembly. The royal collections were established as the core of the museum to which were added some two hundred history paintings and some thirty sculptures of “great men”. These works were specifically ordered for the new public of the museum, with the intention of triggering some patriotic and virtuous feelings in the mind of French public, and to dazzle foreign visitors. The official speech of the time justifies the confiscation of works belonging to the clergy and immigrated aristocrats, as they are the visual witnesses of the excess of the Monarchy. The following official speech convinces the population to unite behind the “civilizing work” of Napoleon, whose armies plundered Europe in order to enrich the museum now called *Musée Napoléon*. In his turn, Bonaparte pours into the museum works of arts produced on order specifically to legitimate his reign, his dynasty, and his empire².

The chronological hanging of the works, according to National schools, in addition to the decision to expose certain works while not exposing others, is the result of thoughtful decisions, which serve the government in power by valuing the idea of progress of the arts, and progress of French history. In fact, since its origin, the national museum has been used to promote national pride and collective unity. During 19th century, it collaborated with programs of normalising the social conduct and mentality of the diverse sectors of society, which mix more with the development of urban life, railroad transportation, department store, and universal fairs.

The Louvre: a national museum and a universal museum?

The *Louvre Abu Dhabi* museum is supposed to be « universal ». What does that mean? Museum collections are comprised of very diverse and very singular works of art. Thus, it is the museum speech that subsumes those peculiarities and pretends to be universal, to own universal classification, universal discourse, interpretation, and scenography. This universalism threatens the unique identity of the object, thus reducing it to the same “universal” approach. The museum is therefore universalising rather than being universal. Why not rather use the word “encyclopaedic” which connotes knowledge, instead of the word “universal” which implies politics, specifically politics of 18th century France. Indeed, the philosophy of the Enlightenment is a process that encourages the emancipation of man: man needs to emancipate itself of dogmatic supervision; he needs to make free and autonomous use of its reason in all domains, thus accessing the real competence of political life since blind obedience is of a pre-political level. The spreading of Enlightenment thought is supposed to eventually cover the globe, and man will therefore achieve the human goal of perfection.

As asserted by Michel Foucault³, it is necessary to go beyond the alternative of “for or against” the rationalism of the Enlightenment, to introduce dialectical nuances, and to reevaluate the key points and the limits of them. Indeed, the

philosophy promoting the importance of education and free will has its own value, as long as it does not transform itself into humanism, into a conception of life of man that carries value judgements, that serves as principle of differentiation and domination. This declaration of Henri Loyrette, then Director of the Louvre, demonstrates some sort of ideological approach, especially regarding the opening of the museum to the international scene:

It is a question of opening to new lands, to cover geographical fields at present absentee or under represented in our collections. It is the case, in particular, of art from Americas, of Slavic art, of the Sudan or the Central Asia. Since a few years, the Louvre so attempts to fill these lacks, whether it is through its policy of acquisitions and exhibitions, or still by means of agreements of cultural and scientific cooperation⁴.

So it seems that the Louvre mission of acquisition is to last forever and to cover all claimed territories, which leads to the question of its ethical aspect. Yes, the process of acquisition is the result of diplomatic persuasion, of “soft power”⁵ far away from the “hard power”, the might and coercion of Napoleon, or is it? If the museum continues to acquire works of art from faraway regions, and this is to contribute to a better understanding of the world, in the process, it deprives the local cultures of their right to represent themselves, and to decide the fate of their own heritage. Furthermore, the Louvre expertise, which is unquestionable, is still knowledge « made in France ». The Louvre is battling to keep its autonomy in all scientific affairs, but it still retains a national dimension; it is an instrument of French nationalism. Henri Loyrette, in a 2007 interview, reiterates the pertinence of the Universalist vocation of the Louvre:

The Revolution and the Empire wanted the Louvre as a universal museum gathering works of all periods and of all civilisations, and addressing the whole world. [...] For more than two hundred years, it accompanied the history and diplomacy of our country. [...] In times of identity confinement, this universal vocation, inherited from the century of Enlightenment must be reaffirmed⁶.

But how can National heritage, the result of the more or less arbitrary appropriation by and for the Nation, pretend to universalism? Is there a double contradiction? On one hand, because this universalism exists by the reason of the Nation State, and on the other hand, because this universalism radiates from a France that has attributed itself with this « universal » mission, which it henceforth exports by negotiating its scientific expertise? A museum cannot be universal, as it is impossible to expose in a fair, neutral, and fixed manner the objects of any given culture. Firstly, because any culture is subjected to infinite interpretations; secondly, because the act of staging artefacts and works of art implies power relations, involves hierarchical relations between “dominants”, the political and social center, the assembly place of the objects, and of “dominated”, the periphery, put into scenery, into a show that falsifies speech.

The Louvre and the international normalising mission

The Louvre museum that was put to the service of national identity cohesion favours today, along with the *Louvre Abu Dhabi*, a widened cultural cohesion, East-West, by installing a space allegedly “universal”. Henceforth, the function of the museum seems to serve international normalisation, allowing a pacified dialogue in an appeased intercultural space. According to Gabriel Tarde⁷, a Nation is nothing more than a general consensus on traditions, customs, and educations, which propagate by way of imitation. A society is nothing but a group of similar people. Clearly, the similarity is not natural, but cultural, produced via vertical imitation, the one of ascendance, followed by horizontal imitation, one of contemporaries. It is hierarchical, in concordance with authority, or with the tendency of copying the behaviour of superior or esteemed people. Tarde illustrates its words by saying that the vanquished imitate the conquerors, the aristocrats imitate the king, the rural imitate the city-dwellers, children imitate the adults, while specifying that society is also the result of counter imitations. However, counter-imitation is still imitation; it is association, not as partner, but as contesters, or even as adversaries. According to the sociologist, only a very few eccentrics, whose minds are utterly impenetrable, are rummaging bizarre problems, totally outside of current events. And these people are the inventors of the future to come⁸.

Cultural and intercultural ties spread through the propagation of imitation or counter-imitation, based on a sort of duel between custom and innovation. They show that cultures are not airtight, but rather porous, dynamic, open, and that they are continually changing and reorganising themselves. Does the *Louvre Abu Dhabi* seek to use the laws of imitation according to its own agenda?

The cartographic physical space

The museum is trapped in a contradiction. It supports public awareness programs to combat cultural prejudice, but in doing that, it distinguishes whole areas and reifies cultures in announcing: “The Parties decide of the creation of an

universal museum [...] which is intended to encourage the dialogue between Orient and Occident, each Party respecting the cultural values of the other⁹.” In mentioning East and West, the museum separates two geopolitical spaces, both occidental constructions, which it intends to respect. Yet, all planispheres, world maps, and general maps are the product of a physical, conventional, and cultural environment. As visual documents, they are codified representation; in this case, they construct the universe and convey, more or less subliminally, particular values as well as facilitating distortions. Martin Lewis and KärenWigen¹⁰, among other authors, have shown that the big binary divisions East-West, North-South, Orient-Occident, are relative to a point of reference from which the physical space is constructed, given to see in a multitude of representations, which are arbitrary, mouldable and evolving. The initial point of reference is situated in England; it widens to France, and to Christendom during medieval times. Then, the West widens to the European colonies including North America and Australia, followed by the countries estimated in terms of race (white), religion (Judeo-Christian), language (alphabetical). It is redrawn according to changing geopolitical criteria, such as decolonisation, cold war; it widens to cultures considered worthy and evolved, in other words, rational, rich and powerful, thus including Japan among the occidental big powers, though the country is situated in extreme-Orient, if we are to use the same glasses¹¹.

This conception, and this perception of the physical world triggers the feeling of belonging, or not belonging, to a powerful elite that identify itself as such, according to pre-established and exclusive principles that encourages defiant, hostile, even confrontational encounters, rather than cordial meeting and communication between trusted people of different cultures.

Discursive construction of the Orient

Edward Said¹² wrote it: “Orient does not exist”, at least, not the Orient that Occident pretends to know, as it is a discursive construction, a deplorable one that has not changed much over time. In fact, and according to Said, the statements regarding the Arab, the Mussulmen, the Oriental, are characterised by prejudice, misunderstanding, or, to say the least, marked with condescendence, thus establishing a tainted relationship. In the past, the enunciations displayed a somewhat unbridled exoticism, as shown in literary and painted works of the 18th and 19th centuries. Today, they are hardly more informed; they demonize Islam, posting the same ignorance, the same presumptuous and patriarchal tone. For Said, « orientalism » is a way to refuse difference; it defines the occidental way of thinking based on ontological and epistemological distinctions between Orient and Occident, and defines the occidental ways of domination and authority over the Orient¹³. It is a stereotypical vision of an entire physical area inhabited for thousand of years by peoples of diverse cultures, which has nothing to do with the European clichés. Though this defines the Occident much more that it defines the Orient, it is a pernicious situation that generates inferiority or superiority complexes, provokes animosity, which work to further separate the two political spheres.

Ideological frontiers

A true public space is a space that is rid of private interest in order to put forth public interest. It still needs to be created at the Orient-Occident scale, since history has barred the establishment of a genuine space of mediation. According to Étienne Tassin¹⁴, a geographical space must go beyond the « egocentric » space that defines itself in terms of « brotherhood » or « homeland »; it is necessary to think of a world beyond past imperialism, but also beyond present imperialism, such as globalisation of liberalism that is of derivative of it.

Indeed, communication between East and West does not exist, at least, not in the media. It is to be constituted, and then to be protected from private interests, from communitarianism, ideologies, and any invasive system, such as economics. It is a space to be, an ideal vision, but its promotion allows envisioning the forwardness of international understanding, allows meditating on a new version of geographic and narrative spaces and places. Does the museum contribute to the construction of this space? Is it able?

Multiculturalism and Identity

In mentioning East and West, the museum distinguishes two different spaces that it does not question, two spaces for which it keeps the cultural frontiers. In doing so, it conforms itself to the postmodern multiculturalism. It acknowledges the “Other”, the “Here”, the “Elsewhere”, and it favours the coexistence of unchanging cultural, geographic identities. The museum defends a sort of humanism based on membership identity; it defends an ideology that continues to serve principles of differentiation and domination.

Is it possible to avoid that multiculturalism turns into racism, into a condescending look, or an encircling ambition? Is it possible to avoid transforming the “Other” into an ethnic group, a sect to be preserved behind artificial frontiers? Is it possible to avoid transforming artefacts, works of art of the “Other” into folklore, superficial, picturesque manifestations, without depth of meaning? In actuality, this museum approach sticks to the notion of origin, of the roots of identity; yet these notions should be bypassed; identity is not static. Identity is, before all else, individual and undefined, subjected to multiple encounters, whether real or virtual, subjected to multiple influences of a plural world, which widens to new modes of thinking and of living together. Nicolas Bourriaud¹⁵ proposes the concept of « radicanant » in order to escape the fixed cultural identity carried out like a banner. The concept allows for the individual construction of one’s identity; it allows for an identity that is personal, composite, made of punctual integration and punctual disintegrations, because a person’s identity is the product of its individual route and encounters. To adopt the concept, writes Bourriaud, is to become a « sémionaute »; it is to put its “roots” into moving pace; it is to live one’s own life, to inhabit reality in adopting a « nomadic way of thinking »; it is to accept an identity that is hybrid, dynamic, and always evolving¹⁶. Bourriaud offers to replace the concept of multiculturalism with the one of « altermodernity », and to substitute to the question of “origin”, the one of “destination”: “ where to go? Such is the true modern question”.

The semantic link between *altermodernité* (a different sort of modernity) and *altermondialité* (a different sort of globalization) is obvious in the French language. In both cases, it is a way to propose an alternative to the status quo; as the alter-globalization slogan says: A another world is possible (*Un autre monde est possible*), a world of encounters, of communication, of sharing of experience. It is a way of promoting a culture based on the horizontality of relations, on social cohesion of proximity, outside of any doctrine frame.

The anthropologist, Roger Somé¹⁷, proposes to replace the concept of Alterity, which refers to a pseudo essentialism of self and of the “Other”, the inescapably foreign, “Object of study”, or at least of sterile relativism, the concept of “Altruity” that rather refers to fellow men as distinct, thus “Subject of encounter”. By this change of word, Somé wants to avoid the stigma of difference; he also affirms that the essentialism of a culture is to be open, to be able to reorganise itself from the appropriation, and adaptation of foreign elements, and by doing just that, it guarantees its own dynamism, survival and evolution¹⁸.

The Louvre and its contradictions

The Louvre must face its contradictions. It must face the concept of identity, which is under the historical, ideological influence of its national governance, which reduces human ties to constructed relationship based on national identity. Serge Chaumier¹⁹ encourages the museum to rethink its scientific and cultural project that it must rid from its identity premises. Or else, it must face, full front, the question of identity, by exposing its history and in thinking its becoming. This proposition is pertinent since the Louvre museum invests itself on the international scene.

And in order to by-pass the museum, exclusive emitter of thoughtfully calibrated information, propagator of a unique way of seeing, James Clifford²⁰, as well as Linda Nochlin²¹ suggest to transform the museum by recommending that the permanent exhibition plan be conjectural and often renewed, exhibiting a punctually negotiated agreement, scenography and narration, duly signed and marked by their authors. This strategy of constant redeployment of the collections avoid the permanent collections to be passive, as the exhibitions will be the result of temporary cooperation between curators, experts, artists, etc. Only then can the museum become a sort of forum, a place of dialogue, discussion, debate, and even confrontation. It becomes as James Clifford writes, a « contact zone », a sort of dynamic Community arts center to service all members of society.

Conclusion

The Louvre and the *Louvre Abu Dhabi* are not universal museums. They are the product of their governance and specific programs. The promotion of dialogue between cultures encourages the respect of difference by initialising a conforming space, which is in concordance with the *Laws of imitation* written by Gabriel Tarde, and *fortioris* since the elaboration of the Emirian museum is done under the French supervision. Nicolas Bourriaud, Roger Somé highlight the contradiction of multiculturalism and propose a dynamic definition of identity, which is, above all, individual. Serge Chaumier, James Clifford, Linda Nochlin offer solutions for the museum, so it avoid « shaping » its public; their propositions make the museum a place of intercultural encounters, a place of punctual interpretations, a place that assumes its lack of neutrality, that plays with it in multiplying scenography, speeches, debates and critiques; it becomes a place where the objects do not tell a story, but many stories, one after the other. The approach allows, obviously without being able to abolish them, to overtake the stage of power relations, to overtake the forcing into representation of Alterity, to

hustle off center and periphery by always inviting new team to rearrange and reinterpret the objects. It allows the overtaking of the stage of the pseudo-neutral museum, to assume and play with its partiality. Only then, is the museum dynamic, inclusive, communicative, creating new and fruitful collaborations and speeches.

Bio-note:

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¹ The Agreement is accessible : <http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000019417311>

« Les Parties décident de la création d'un musée universel [...] présentant des objets majeurs dans les domaines de l'archéologie, des Beaux-Arts et des arts décoratifs, ouverts à toutes les périodes y compris à l'art contemporain, bien que mettant l'accent sur la période classique [...] répondant à tout moment aux critères de qualité et à l'ambition scientifique et muséographique du Musée du Louvre et destiné à œuvrer au dialogue entre l'Orient et l'Occident, chaque Partie respectant les valeurs culturelles de l'autre.»

² Andrew McClellan (1994). *Inventing the Louvre : Art, Politics, and the Origins of the Modern Museum in Eighteenth-Century Paris*. Berkeley, Los Angeles et Londres : University of California, p. 49-90.

³ Michel Foucault (1984). « Qu'est-ce que les Lumières » in Arnold I. Davidson et Frédéric Gros (2004). *Michel Foucault. Philosophie. Anthologie*. Paris : Gallimard, coll. « folio/essais », p. 872.

⁴ Henri Loyrette (2009). « Mot du président » Accessible sur le site Web du Louvre : <http://www.louvre.fr/llv/musee/mission.jsp>.

« Il s'agit de s'ouvrir à des terres nouvelles, pour couvrir les champs géographiques actuellement absents ou sous-représentés dans nos collections. C'est en particulier le cas de l'art des Amériques, de l'art slave, du Soudan ou de l'Asie centrale. Depuis quelques années, le Louvre s'attache ainsi à combler ces manques, que ce soit à travers sa politique d'acquisitions et d'expositions, ou encore par le biais d'accords de coopérations culturelle et scientifique. »

⁵ Joseph S., Jr. Nye (2011). *The Future of Power*. New York : PublicAffairs, 298 p.

⁶ Henri Loyrette (2007). « Nous avons hérité d'une vocation universaliste », *L'Humanité*, 20 janvier. Accessible sur le site du quotidien : http://www.humanite.fr/2007-01-20_Cultures_Les-musees-doivent-ils-louer-leurs-oeuvres.

« Le Louvre a été voulu par la Révolution et par l'Empire comme un musée universel rassemblant des œuvres de toutes les époques et de toutes les civilisations, et s'adressant au monde entier. Depuis plus de deux cents ans, il a accompagné l'histoire et la diplomatie de notre pays. [...] À l'heure du repli identitaire, cette vocation universelle, héritée du siècle des Lumières et de la Révolution doit être réaffirmée. »

⁷ Gabriel Tarde (2001 [1890]). *Les lois de l'imitation*. Paris : Seuil, 445 p.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 50.

⁹ See endnote # 1.

¹⁰ Martin Lewis et Kären E. Wigen (1997). *The Myth of Continents. A Critique of Metageography*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, Londres : University of California, 344 p.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 47-103.

¹² Edward W. Said (2005 [1978]). *L'Orientalisme. L'Orient créé par l'Occident*. Traduit de l'américain par Catherine Malamoud. Paris : Seuil, 423 p.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 13-41

¹⁴ Étienne Tassin, « Espace commun ou espace public ? » in Dacheux, Éric (dir.) (2008). *L'espace public*. Paris : CNRS, coll. « Les essentiels d'Hermès », p. 113-134.

¹⁵ Nicolas Bourriaud (2009). *Radicant. Pour une esthétique de la globalisation*. Paris : Denoël, 205 p.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 45.

¹⁷ Roger Somé (2003). *Le musée à l'ère de la mondialisation. Pour une anthropologie de l'altérité*. Paris : L'Harmattan, 127 p.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 57.

¹⁹ Serge Chaumier (2005). "L'identité, un concept embarrassant, constitutif de l'idée de musée", *Culture & Musées* n° 6, vol. 6, n° 1, p. 21-42.

²⁰ Linda Nochlin (1988). « The Musée d'Orsay : a symposium », *Art in America*, vol. 76, n° 1, p. 84-107.

²¹ James Clifford (1997). « Museums as Contact Zones », in James Clifford (1997). *Route : Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge (Mass) : Harvard University, 408 p.