

Museologies of Fire

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Whether employed for warmth, medicinal purposes, the renewal of land and forests, or as a form of communication, fire has been used by humanity since time immemorial; for survival, and as a central element of our cultural vocabulary. In today's modern geopolitical landscape, fire is known less for its generative powers, and is more popularly associated with pain, terror and destruction.

Museums on Fire! is positioned in this space as a beckoning **call to set alight**, and therefore transform, the forms, processes and languages that shape the structures of the modern art world as we know it.

One of the effects of the current phase of globalisation, is an increasing effort on the part of art institutions to realign

(or, in some cases, destabilise) the boundaries between global art worlds. Notions of centre, and periphery of old, have been transformed under the impact of a widely dispersed globalised network. Principles of inclusivity are becoming an organising force behind international art exhibitions and museum collections, as art institutions each other towards a reconstruction of global art history.

Many scholars consider this movement to have originated through a questioning of the perceived universality of modernism, the quest for alterity and pluralism, or, as presented by Jean Francois Lyotard in his seminal text "The Post-Modern Condition" (1979), the subsequent rise of postcolonial studies. As I am situated in Norway, it is pertinent to note that Lyotard's study emerged at the same time as the ground breaking Sami uprisings of the Alta Action (1979-1981), whose calls to "Let the River Flow", demanded cultural and ecological rights for the peoples and lands of Sami.

Critique has always been entrenched within the early modernist ranks of the cultural field. For example, in *To the Planetarium*, 1926, which was one of the earliest ecological critiques of the revolutionary canon, Walter Benjamin condemned the domination of nature by the ruling classes. Earlier still, Karl Marx's writing in the mid to late 19th century, addresses the notions of capitalist agriculture and soil ecology, which has been much neglected until recently.

Similar critique was also to be found amongst early modern artists such as Kazimir Malevic, whose important

text, *On the Museum*, written in 1919, protested against the new Soviet government's preoccupation with preserving Russian museums and art collections from destruction during the civil war. In his text, he argues for the radical destruction of modern culture, foreseeing a path for what he called "true living art"; art which would otherwise be suffocated by the structures of the museum. Malevic's writings show us that much of the avant-garde of the first wave, which is often associated with notions of progress, especially technological progress, did not wish to create a new, progressive art of the future, but rather, a trans-temporal art for all time. What the early avant-garde was perhaps asking then, was how art could continue to flourish amidst the figurative destruction of cultural tradition under the conditions of technological, political, and social revolution? Or, to put it in different terms: How does one resist the destructiveness of progress?

Progress!

Upon that call, **a thousand ships** set sail across the ocean towards so-called new land. The crimes of my arrogant ancestors (Spanish and British generations that devised some of the largest colonial empires), were characterised by invasion, occupation, settlement of continents that span about 3/4 of the world, and long-lasting ecocidal and genocidal atrocities. With this context, it stands to reason that the creation of so many nation states in the world today remain illegitimate. The destruction of Indigenous communities through massacre, enslavement, forced displacement, dispossession, theft, fraud, and legal manipulation; the repression of Indigenous

languages and cultures through child abduction, economic coercion and corruption, impoverishment, and demoralisation. These histories have been recalled many times before, and yet they cannot be voiced enough - particularly since many of these oppressive strategies continue to be enacted upon Indigenous communities throughout the world today – and the Nordic nation states are not exempt.

As I consider the history that I, and so many of us, descend from, and where I stand today, with the privilege and power that comes with working in today's art world, and specifically at an organisation such as OCA, it's clear that the inspiring forces for change, and the most incisive critiques of modernity, are to be rooted in Indigenous schools of thought. A thinking that has for centuries now, articulated a refusal of social, economic and cultural modernity, and calls for dominant structural change – a change that strives towards social forms and logics that are sustainable and supported by appropriate technologies.

If we can agree that land cannot be owned in the modernist way of crime and atrocity, then it is NOT impossible to consider the return of stolen lands to Indigenous Peoples. Reparation schemes, which are easier to perform, can also be undertaken, yet - here in Norway we know from recent governmental leaks that - calls for such processes are being wilfully suppressed. A vigorous national debate about the restoration of full Indigenous self-determination could also be a start.

It is, of course, for Indigenous people to say what they want and need, and what they expect from non-Indigenous allies. With this in mind, it is here, perhaps, where contemporary art can come in strongly, in the cultural re-articulation of the forms and methods of the contemporary art world. In the call for the decolonisation of the art field, stands a call for the decolonisation of society at large.

If one is to believe the current census, there are at least 370 million Indigenous peoples on the planet, belonging to 5,000 different groups, in 90 nation states worldwide. Indigenous peoples live in every region of the world, around 0.006% of them in Europe, 20% in Americas and about 70% in Asia. Despite their planetary scope and global interconnectedness, colonial powers have expertly argued for the localness of Indigenous experience, in order to fragment, isolate and render invisible their intellectual processes from the world's stage, as they remain hostage within the frontiers of the nation state. The suppression of Indigenous histories, aesthetics and languages, the undermining of circular time-conceptions and spiritual practices, as well as the violent possessions of lands, and their colonial renaming and subsequent exploitation, stand out as recurring mechanisms of colonial power in the past and, shamefully, in the present.

Within these colonial realities, *Museums on Fire!* considers the **entanglement of art institutions** within the colonial and modernist ideologies that created them, and asks artists, curators, academics, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to consider the forms, spaces and processes

through which Indigenous artistic practices should be addressed today, how their histories have been narrated in the past, and how they should be narrated – or counter-narrated - today.

What would a non-colonial museum look, feel and sound like? Is it enough to widen the modernist art historical canon through the politics of inclusion? Is this broadly functioning, instead, as a new colonial model for Indigenous practices, or is it fostering the cosmopolitan thought that Indigenous communities have always inhabited? And is the museum per se an obsolete model for Indigenous practices? Should novel constellations of thought and practice be sought to affirm and mediate the Indigenous discourses of the future?

Within the context of Norway, we know that a Sami art collection has been underway since the 1970s, but that a museum, with the resources and person-power necessary to activate such a collection within society at large, has yet failed to materialise. We know too that in 2020, two large flagship museum buildings will be inaugurated on the shores of the Oslo fjord: the National Museum and the Munch Museum. We know little as to what dialogue their museological processes will establish with Indigenous Norway. Therefore, to consider the creation of a Sami museum, within this context, has much symbolic power. Yet, with such considerations must come a reflection upon what such a museum would stand for. A replication of the modernist project, perhaps, entrenched within a deep history of coloniality, or an opportunity to imagine a new structural cosmology? What stories

should that project generate? Could such a space speak from the rains, storms, snowfalls, **pitch dark nights, icy grass patches** that watch the coming climate chaos; from the multiplicity of cultural and biological existences that stubbornly persist today despite their onslaught; from the land, air and waters that surge with life, a life which is our existence into the future? And how should it address the artificial polarisation of notions of the contemporary, and of tradition that the modern art world so often places Indigenous practices within?

We know that modernism has claimed to be in conflict with tradition, in its constant bid for the now and the new. We also know that modernism itself has constructed the concept of tradition in such a way as to increase its own value against the supposed grain of tradition (*The Invention of Tradition* written by Eric Hobsbawm in 1983). So, how could the constructed concepts of tradition and contemporaneity be explored through a museological project? And within the current art world's evident obsession with history and traditional forms of art making, what exactly would the contemporary stand for anyway?

As Indigenous scholar Susan Fair tells us:

“Most Native artists don't spend much time contemplating or defining tradition, although they may be uncomfortable, with how they are labelled in relation to it. Their work, and words, provide a cultural and aesthetic window through which to examine the foundation of a past that is always a present, even if assaulted by forces. Tradition survives. Just below

the bustle of everyday life, in Native culture, there is a bedrock of the past."

Also significant within a discussion of an Indigenous museology are the concepts of:

a. Place: in striking contrast with modernity (which promotes a de-rooted, floating condition across the globe) Indigenous thought finds its ultimate source of values, ethics, justice, and spirituality in the land. So, how would a museological project address such land-centric and land-bonded ethics?

b. Anthropocentrism: contingent with the devaluation of place, as upheld by the logic of modernity, is a disconnection and indifference with the ecosystems that define that place. How would a museological project, therefore, reorient, or rebalance its spaces towards what phenomenologist David Abram has called "a more than human matrix"?

c. Indigenisation/Decolonisation: the question of how to unfold a decolonising/Indigenising and Indigenous methodologies across institutions and art spaces. Methods that escape the embeddedness of imperialism within the disciplines of knowledge as we know them in modernity. As expressed by Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith, in her groundbreaking 1999 book *Decolonising Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, such methodologies "are not methods for revolution in a political sense, but they do provoke revolutionary thinking about the roles of knowledge, knowledge production,

knowledge hierarchies, knowledge institutions that play a central role in decolonisation and social transformation”.

With what could provocatively be termed, the significant ‘indigenisation’ of the international art world today? At a time in which the questioning of modernity and its structures is most profoundly felt to come from current Indigenous scholarship and artistic practices, Indigenous voices are increasingly sought after for biennials, residencies, exhibitions and art fairs leaving art institutions and art workers facing the challenge of meaningfully engaging with an Indigenous bid for change.

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