THE RUINED ARCHIVE

How does the modern museum respond to the movement, migrations and mobilities of the modern world that exceed its practices and premises? The essays in this volume circulate in the constellation of cultural, postcolonial and museum studies to propose a series of intersecting perspectives promoting critical responses to this ongoing interrogation. Memory, the archive, and the politics of display, are unwound from their institutional moorings and allowed to drift into other, frequently non-authorised, accounts of time and space. Called upon to negotiate unplanned encounters with unsuspected actors and the obscured sides of modernity, the museum becomes an experimental space, a laboratory for a cultural democracy yet to come.

With contributions by: Fernanda Albuquerque, Chiara Baravalle, Giuseppe Biscottini, Francisco Cabanzo, Iain Chambers, Maria Iñigo Clavo, Lidia Curti, Alessandra De Angelis, Beatrice Ferrara, Jessica Fiala, Giulia Grechi, Celeste Ianniciello, Jan-Erik Lundström, Olga Fernández López, Mark Nash, Mariangela Orabona, Claire Pajaczkowska, Michaela Quadraro, Elizabeth Stanton.

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MeLa–European Museums in an age of migrations

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POWERS OF SECRECY (RUINS, SILENCES AND FOGS).
Some Reflections on *Companionable Silences,* an Exhibition Curated by Shanai Jhaveri

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→ ABSTRACT

Using a critical toolbox developed at the intersection of cultural and postcolonial studies, this essay develops a series of reflections around the changing premises of archival institutions, touching on the debates on "global art" and "inclusion." More specifically, the essay advocates the necessity for museums and archives with a post-colonial vocation to engage in the possibility of the refusal of the other to appear. The argument unfolds through a critical investigation of a curatorial practice and an artwork, in which the question of "secrecy" (as silence and as a form of foggy vision obfuscating the regimes of representation) is strategic. These are, respectively, the pavilion Companionable Silences, *curated by Shanay Jhaveri at the Palais de Tokyo in 2013 and the 2012 film–essay* I See Infinite Difference between Any Point and Another… *by The Otolith Group, dedicated to the painter and poet Etel Adnan and included in* Companionable Silences.

→ **FOREWORD. RUINS AND REMOVAL**

*A ghost arrived with a handful of roses. "No other flower is a
flower," he said. He left them on a table and quit; the more the
place darkened, the more they glowed.*

Etel Adnan 2012

An exhibition organized by 21 young curators from 13 different countries revolving around the emergence, in the last years, of the figure (and the related *discourse*) of the independent curator, *Nouvelle vague* was held at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris (21 June – 8 September 2013).[1] Composed of several pavilions, each animated by a specific research question relating to the practices of *curare*—"to take care of" and "to attend to"—*Nouvelle vague* compelled the visitor to take very earnestly the specificity of each single pavilion.[2] To step into the purposely-reorganised exhibition space of the Palais de Tokyo was to accept an invitation to reflect on, be exposed to, and engage with, the multiple ways in which each curator had inflected the question of *curare* by intervening in and acting upon accepted museum practices and archival codes. Moving through the pavilions, the visitor could ideally reiterate—in the living matter of her own body, solicited by an overwhelming proliferation of artworks and exhibition display possibilities—the gestures by which each curator had performed and played with the museum's inherited languages. In this way, the visitor could repeatedly *perceive* the exhibition precisely as a complex *mise-en-scène*.

As Lidia Curti has suggested, to pay greater attention to the language of the museum and therefore to the performance of the carefully orchestrated arrangements of its practices may be a promising act. From this change of perspective—"from mere exhibition to complex rite" (Curti 2012, 189)—it follows that a critical and affirmative disposition towards the exhibition as dramatization would also engender the possibility of playing with the language of exhibiting itself, in order to acknowledge—and counter, by interrupting its workings—the normalising effect of exhibition practices and codes. In this sense, a particularly suggestive aesthetic intervention in *Nouvelle vague* was Leyla Cárdenas' *Removido*—a site-specific intervention presented in the *Collective Fictions* pavilion, curated by Artesur.[3] Almost imperceptible, except from a distance, *Removido* consisted in an outline of the profile of the Palais de Tokyo's monumental

1 For the *Nouvelle vague*'s exhibition concept, see http://palaisdetokyo.com/en/exhibition/nouvelles-vagues-in-the-palais-de-tokyo, accessed 21 September 2013. For the sake of precision, it should be added that the Palais de Tokyo was the main but not the only scene of *Nouvelle vague*, which was also disseminated in thirty other Parisian galleries. This essay refers, however, to the specific exhibition held at the Palais.

2 The reference to the Latin etymology of *curare* as a premise to the whole exhibition is drawn from the *Nouvelle vague*'s press release (http://palaisdetokyo.com/en/exhibition/nouvelles-vagues, accessed 21 September 2013).

3 *Artesur. Collective Fictions* is the curatorial manifestation of a collective project existing online – a collaborative and free electronic living archive presenting and disseminating contemporary art from Latin America. See: http://www.collectivefictions.com/presentation/, accessed 25 August 2013.

IMG. 01 — *Leyla Cárdenas, Removido,* 2013. Site-specific peeled drawing, accumulated paint. Part of the exhibition "Artesur, Collective Fictions," in "Nouvelle vague" (21.06.13 - 09.09.13), Palais de Tokyo, Paris (courtesy Palais de Tokyo Press)

IMG. 02 — *Leyla Cárdenas, detail from Removido,* 2013. Photo: Santiago Tovar (courtesy of Cárdenas and Tovar

IMG. 03 — *Leyla Cárdenas, Removido,* 2013. Photo: Santiago Tovar (courtesy Cárdenas and Tovar.

external front, where the artist had scratched off the white paint covering one of the walls of the *Artesur*'s exhibition space.

More an art-working process than an artwork as such, *Removido* was largely present by its own latent absence. In fact, over the weeks, it encountered its own obsolescence, with the beginning of an inevitable and semi-autonomous process of the peeling away of the paint. Starting from Cárdenas' first scratches, piece after piece of paint fell off the artwork, leaving the floor covered in layers of paint.

This process of obsolescence would only make *Removido* more visible. As it was progressively *removed* from the wall—by the artist, by time, by the wider conditions of a room in which so many visitors would pass by the artwork every day—*Removido* became a trace, a signal, a suspended reminder of a deeper *removal*. The removal of the untold *secret* at the heart of every exhibition: the constructed character of the exhibition's normalising codes, embodied in the "white wall." The ghostly double of the Palais de Tokyo—a palace built, not incidentally, for the 1937 "World's Fair"—*Removido* works as a reminder, and simultaneously a gesture towards the possibility, and inevitability, of transformation. As Anca Rujoiu writes, talking of the *material* conditions of the artwork and its ruined character:

> [*Removido*] tak[es] us to the inherent destiny of a ruin. [Here] residuals, fragments, discarded structures are used as material for sculptures and installations, yet the new context and re-use does not completely defuse their previous history. […] The strategy of removal is as much destructive as constructive. The act of erasure of an existing entity carries the potential of a new production. Artistic production meets exhibition-making. [P]reparations for an exhibition start and end the same: painting and cleaning the walls, removing carefully the previous traces and their related references and narratives, bringing the space back to a fictional white-impeccable status quo. In Leyla Cárdenas site-specific intervention, it's a reversed process. (2013, n.p.)

Intensely evoked in *Removido* through the inevitable and urgent obsolescence of established practices and categories—and the necessity to face the removal that regulates the normalising process by which a "complex rite," as in Curti's words, becomes 'simply' an exhibition— were the common *issues* making themselves transversally evident in the majority of the discourses and practices animating *Nouvelle vague*.[4] At the same time, as *Removido* proves, obsolescence is only a step on the

path towards transformation—a step in a process in which the artwork is always in relation with what lies outside it, metaphorically and materially at the same time. To unravel this process entailed, in each single pavilion in *Nouvelle vague*, a proliferation of different practices, each of them facing a different aspect of what lies at the limits of the art discourse: i.e. its cultural, technological, geopolitical, racial, gendered and economic levels of articulation.[5] In the diverse aesthetic-political curatorial statements/ performances composing *Nouvelle vague*, the "inherited palimpsest" of the museum and the archive was performed as an exploded matter, under the pressure of the contingencies and conjunctures of contemporary planetary conditions.

This is precisely the overtly ruined—and therefore future-oriented– matter that Kylie Message dubs "the new museum" that lies "beyond the mausoleum" (2006, 7). Following Judith Butler's cautionary remarks on the need to consider cultural productions as other than "merely cultural" (Butler 1998, 42), Message addresses the new museums not simply as theoretical projects, but also as a series of practices: "cultural-centre model[s] […] in relation to the shifting currencies of trade, capital and meaning connected to globalisation" (2006, 39). For Message, a particularly relevant, urgent and important impact on the museum is that of the *postcolonial interrogation*. As the author warns, when dealing with the ruins of archival institutions in order to transform them, it would be a mistake not to acknowledge the centrality and persistence of the postcolonial question—especially since the museum and the archive have been the privileged loci of authority in the patriarchal and racialised ordering of the world under the Western episteme. As she writes, great importance is still to be given to "the *representation* of postcolonial forms of cultural diversity in these public spheres […] and the *technologies* that speak directly to (and in some cases attempt to delimit) these spaces" (2006, 39; my emphasis).

The question of the technologies—those of representation and memorialisation, their languages and operations—is crucial here. As Iain Chambers has put it, once exposed to its own obsolescence and vulnerability, the "inherited palimpsest […] remains to be reworked and rewritten in the light of other histories; in the light thrown by others crossing its spaces, languages and technologies" (2012, 17). However, as he continues, "[t]o undo that particular historical inheritance is not to cancel it" (17). Rather, the question is—What to do with these *ruins*? Would it be enough to merely adjust or enlarge the inherited frame of understanding—to incorporate the critical encounter with the postcolonial, or is something more at stake?[6]

This is in fact the central question of this essay. In these pages, I will try

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4   Different elements addressed in *Nouvelle Vague* included the event of the digital turn (relating to new media, affective experiences, audience research), the new configurations of "the informatics of domination" (Haraway 1991 [1985]), the persisting and the new planetary asymmetries of power (relating to gender, race, resources, ecology and health status), the composite territories of global politics and policies. See especially the pavilions/installations *Ada* (curators Ken Farmer and Conrad Shawcross), *Artesur, Collective Fictions* (curators Albertine de Galbert et al.), *File Not Found* (curators The Black Ninja Factors), *This House* (curators Anthea Buys and Mikhael Subotzsky), *Henrique Oliveira. Batogogo* (curator Marc Bembekoff).

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5   This is exactly what Okwui Enwezor has elsewhere defined as art's "affiliations in other domains of practice" (Enwezor 2009 [2003], 232).

6   For a first critical elaboration of these questions from a post-colonial perspective within the EU Research Project "MeLa* - European Museums in an Age of Migrations", see the contributions in Ferrara 2012a.