

The Museum of Mental Objects: The Art of Making Art Invisible

By Judy Freya Sibayan

(This paper was read during the Asian Curators Presentation Program at the workshop "Museum Practices in the 21st Century" sponsored by the New York Museum of Modern Art, and the Hong Kong Art Center, November 15-18, 2002, Hong Kong Art Center)

The Museum of Mental Objects (MoMO) grew out of two events in my life. First was the decision to do collaborative work with another independent curator. The impetus for this collaboration was a dream where Hans Ulrich Obrist, Curator Migrateur of the Museum of Modern Art in Paris appeared. In the dream, Obrist stands in one of the empty galleries at the second floor of a modern museum in some city in Europe and throws a boomerang out into the cantilevered terrace of the museum. Strangely enough the boomerang does not return to him. Instead it lands on the floor of the terrace. I run to pick it up. White gauze has been tightly wound around it, covering it entirely. On the gauze were the words written repeatedly: "the visible is made visible by the invisible." Thus the dream ended.

Like all wonderful dreams, this dream was as enigmatic as they come. It was so compelling, I sensed it would be a good place to start a dialogue with Matt Price who I met in 1999 and who then was helping me install a commissioned work at the Hayward Gallery for the blockbuster exhibition "Cities on the Move," of which Obrist was one of the major curators. I was convinced that out of this dialogue will result a wonderful project. Matt and I emailed for two years. We found the idea "the visible is made visible by the invisible" (a cantilever of sorts) in many art theory and practice:

Hal Foster: "the transparent (the unseen) - functions like the arrangement of pictures in galleries, museums, offices, homes and forms like press releases and exhibition invitations which thought to be trivial to the matters of art, in fact do much to position it, to determine its place, reception, and meaning." (104)

Tony Bennett cites Pierre Bourdieu in his book *The Birth of the Museum*: 'Theory is a particularly apt word because we are dealing with seeing - *theorein* - and of making others see.' Bennett adds: '...theory, present just as much in the principles of governing the display of art works as in the aesthete's head - organizes a particular set of relations between the visible (the works of art on show) and the invisible ('art') such that the former is perceived and utilized as a route to communion with the latter. Yet this theoretical ordering between the visible and the invisible also plays a role in organizing a distinction between those who can and those who cannot see; or more accurately, between those who can see what is visibly on display and those who are additionally able to see the invisible realities ('art') which theory posits as being accessible via the objects exhibited.' (163-164)

Abigail Solomon-Godeau observed that although the works of some postmodernist artists (therefore artists critical of the art institution) 'could only become visible - or saleable - in the wake of the success of their predecessors, the shift from margin to center had multiple determinations... the fact remains that in 1980, their works were largely unsaleable and quite literally incomprehensible to all but a handful of critics and a not much other larger group of artists.' (233)

Victor Burgin: 'Regardless of what the artist personally feels, what historically gets considered as Art is the art that gets *seen* (in galleries or museums, in magazines or books), the art which becomes counted *as* Art, has been subjected to processes of selection and legitimation' (190) by gatekeepers within the art system making all critical information created by these gatekeepers calibrate and determine the value of an artist's work as commodity.

Matt Price and I concluded that the enigma "the visible is made visible by the invisible" is the stuff of curatorship. We are in the business making things visible as art. We are in the business of displaying, exhibiting, exposing objects in a way that we are able to create see-ers, those who can be educated, "cultured" to perceive these objects as worthy of their gaze and of their respect; that these objects are of great value to one's culture and to our "being cultured." As a result of this process, these objects eventually become commodity fetishes par excellence. For the only art that is free from the powers of the debasing system of commodity production (Eagleton 2) is the art that is invisible. (Burgin 190) But the art that never gets processed by and within the art system and therefore never made visible or seen within and by this system, never gets counted as art! Art's simple tautology seems to be thus: object proposed as art or even art whose object is to critique art will only become visible once comprehended and made known by the gatekeepers (curators, critics, dealers, collectors and artists themselves) making it highly saleable!

In the second year of our dialogue, we decided that if we were to be critical of our practice as curators and artists we needed to work within this tautology . We asked ourselves to what extent do we have to remove the object from the art structures and systems that make it comprehensible, thus visible, thus commodifiable? How much do we have to deplete the object of its determinants as a visible object within the art system? Or taking our cue from Yves Klein who removed the paintings from one of the galleries in MoMA Paris in 1961 and exhibited the context itself (the museum space) as the determining factor of what becomes art, do we now lose the site all together? Do we not ever create a space to house any thing? Thus we conceived the Museum of Mental Objects. The phrase "mental object" was appropriated from art critic Thomas McEvilley, a phrase he coined to describe the works of James Lee Byars an artist who refused, as much as possible, to make palpable art objects. (53) It took another year of incubating the idea before we arrived at the final form of the museum.

The second event in my life that brought about the creation of MoMO was my having created the Scapular Gallery Nomad. A gallery I wore, curated and performed daily for

five years (1997-2002), it exhibited the works of some 50 artists from around the world. For each exhibition, I did what every respectable gallery did for its artist: the writing and publishing of exhibition, curatorial design, publicity, documentation, openings, shipping logistics, artist-gallery contracts, design and construction of the gallery. I even created a portable archive in the form of a back-pack. This performance art gallery was my response to having worked in the museum and gallery system as an exhibiting artist who did mostly performance art and installations and as a curatorial assistant, then finally as director of a contemporary art museum. My curatorial practice has always been informed by my art practice and vice versa. Having been part of the system, I learned one very important thing. Artists are more often than not dependent on this system if they are to engage as serious players in the artworld but as Victor Burgin has concluded the processes of the system are all ‘beyond the control of the artist (albeit some artists are infinitely more attuned to these processes, and skillful at negotiating them, than others).’ (189)

In 1989, I stopped making art. I needed time and space to rethink the very premise of making art. I wanted to make art outside the dictates and monolithic praxis of infrastructured museums and galleries. Scapular Gallery Nomad therefore afforded me to attain a symmetry between what I could expend and invest on my own. Performing beyond the limits of the center and into the periphery, I had empowered myself proportionate to and within the limits of my own energies and subjectivity. With Scapular Gallery Nomad, it was my hope to explore the possibilities of the responsibility of artists to conserve rather than consume, to be self-reliant and autonomous of the dictates of commodifying systems. MoMO seemed like a logical development to Scapular Gallery Nomad which to some critics was not radical enough as a subversive project (although this was never my intention; if ever, I only intended to parody the system).

MoMO proposes that the artist’s body be a museum. The curatorial method of the Museum of Mental Objects is simple. Artists are invited to whisper art ideas to the curators. The curators and the artists will keep these artworks as mere memories. They will never be documented or represented in any other shape or form. MoMO can be invited to recite these works and the names of the artists on condition that no video or audio recordings will be made of the performance. There will be no photographs taken of the event. The audience who will experience the artworks will be requested to do the same. These works will therefore exist wholly dependent on how well the artists and curators keep them in their memory or how memorable these works are. MoMO is only a keeper of mental objects. MoMO exhibits no visible artworks, thus there will be no objects to be commodified.

(At this point of the reading of the paper, Hongkong based artist Kith Tsang Tak Ping is invited to the podium to give/whisper an artwork to MoMO).

In the introduction of the catalog of the 1999 New York MoMA exhibition “The Museum as Muse, Artists Reflect,” writing about the relationship of the curator, artist and museum Kynaston McShine concludes, ‘It is a peculiar relationship of mutual interdependence, and one which the curator ends up on a tightrope. Does he represent the artist to the

institution or the institution to the artist? Is he an intermediary between the artist and the museum or the museum's personification? Over all, the relationship between museum and artist is far less adversarial than it was a few decades ago.' (23)

And now happily with the Museum of Mental Objects, artist, curator and museum have all been collapsed into one. MoMO looks forward to undertaking the uncharted journey of the artist as museum and curator.

Bibliography

Bennett, Tony. *The Birth of the Museum*. London: Routledge, 1995.

Burgin, Victor. *The End of Art Theory*. London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1986.

Eagleton, Terry. *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990

Foster, Hal. *Recodings, Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics*. Seattle: Bay Press, 1985.

McEvelley, Thomas. "James Lee Byars, The Atmosphere of Question."
Artforum, (Summer 1981).

McShine, Kynaston. *The Museum as Muse*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1999.

Solomon-Godeau, Abigail. "Living with Contradictions, Critical Practices in the Age of Supply-side Aesthetics.." *The Visual Culture Reader*. Eds. Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall. London: Sage Publications Ltd., 1999.