

THE GLOBAL MUSEUM—Venice, Bilbao, Berlin, Las Vegas and the soon to be built Abu Dhabi: the orbit of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum New York.

In this paper I plan to highlight areas of contention in the global reach of the first multinational museum the Solomon R. Guggenheim New York, by discussing the creation of its museum satellites in Bilbao, Berlin, La Vegas and to be completed in 2011, Abu Dhabi. The main focus of the discussion will be on the Guggenheim Bilbao Museum where the tensions between the global and the local are particularly apparent. Circling models of the global museum is the tension between claims of art's universality and the increasing recognition of the importance of specificity in unravelling the relevance of contemporary art.¹

Gayatri Spivak's overview of the concept of globalization as both a *repetition* and a *rupture* is valuable. As she says: 'The more one claims globalization to be a rupture, the more one is unable to see the repetition' (2007). Repetition abounds in the Guggenheim global project. Critics describe it as another form of cultural imperialism (Newhouse 2006, p.259) or the latest manifestation of the movement from centres of prestige to centres of wealth (Taylor 2007).

However, to see the Guggenheim project as only the latest instance of exchange between nations of wealth and nations of prestige, or, as simply an extension of collaboration between museums to share collections of art for exhibition, is to miss much too. In particular the Guggenheim's pursuit of a business model of expansion and income generation and their pursuit of economies of scale and brand name selling, marks a rupture even from the way that museums have become increasingly modelled on business structures in their scramble for corporate sponsorship.

Alan Wallach (2003, pp.105-6), identifies the difference in the nature of support to museums in the US prior to the 1960s by wealthy individuals and financiers, and the post 1960s rise of corporate sponsors, drawn into museums initially to underwrite the 'new scale of operations' of 'the blockbusters' (ibid; p.106). Post 1960s corporate sponsors Wallach maintains, in becoming museum patrons have also been, through their presence on boards of trustees, a force for rationalization and expansion, modelling museums on their own corporate administrative economies (ibid.).

However, even given the influence and impact of corporate sponsorship on museums' structures and organization over the last 40 years, the Guggenheim project can still be seen to mark a rupture. For it appears that the Guggenheim has not so much modelled

¹ 'As a medium of global participation and awareness, contemporary art claims to be universal, but it simultaneously presupposes local roots, alternative genealogies and plural modernities.' Conference overview International Research Center for Cultural Studies, Vienna, 25-27 January 2007, viewed 18 February 2007, www.ifk.ac.at/media.php

itself on corporate management, rather it has become the corporation itself. Its product is artistic intervention that it devises and sets up in suitable venues, which it manages for a fee (but for which it takes no responsibility), for up to 75 years (Bradley 1997 p.52). In this light the Guggenheim's collection can be seen as a 'considerable cultural commodity' that can be capitalized by circulating 'to expand the image of the museum and to facilitate its own growth' (Rectanus 2002, p.180). In the case of the Guggenheim Bilbao Museum, the agreement formed is said to be no different from normal franchise contracts (Bradley 1997, p.52).

Krens believes that creating the Guggenheim satellite institutions was a logical way to achieve 'operational efficiency' for the Guggenheim NY: 'we can improve our program and we can improve our collection' (cited in Diamonstein 1994, p.150). Krens identifies that resources are shared and as the satellite institutions are 'essentially unified under one curatorial organization' (ibid.), curatorial staff and library and research facilities are not duplicated (ibid.). Emphasizing his point Krens says, 'I can run a larger facility with a smaller staff than anyone else' (cited in ibid.).

The events leading up to the opening of the Guggenheim Bilbao Museum unfold as follows: the Basque authorities in the late 1980s, in their determination to revitalize not just a city but an entire region with 25% unemployment, came up with a number of building and infra structure projects. These consisted of the construction of a metropolitan railway, a face-lift to the city airport, a new conference and performing arts centre, a new footbridge crossing the river, development of the riverfront and a new art museum. Contact was made with the Guggenheim Museum precisely at the time the trustees of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation had approved a strategy for responding to their own economic concerns through creating a number of different of worldwide cultural centres coordinated from New York. However the contact between the Bilbao authorities and the Guggenheim NY at this time was not simply by chance.

Much of the Guggenheim's success in Spain is due in a large part to the partnership that Krens formed with Carmen Giménez, who as director of the Centro Nacional de Exposiciones in Madrid, was an influential force in Spanish art and politics. In 1989 Krens offered Giménez the position of Curator 20th Century Art at the Guggenheim NY. From then on as a team they set about locating cities in Spain that could be interested in establishing a Guggenheim satellite, or, renting over an extended period some of the Guggenheim's collection. Together Giménez and Krens lobbied Madrid, Barcelona, Seville, Badajoz, Santander, Bilbao. Then totally unexpectedly Bilbao announced in September 1991 that the city was to sign a 'pre-agreement' to establish the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao (Bradley 1997, pp.48, 50).

The Basque authorities created the political and cultural and financial backing for the project and the Guggenheim Foundation contributed 'its collections of Modern and contemporary art, its programs of special exhibitions, and its experience in international-level museum administration and management' (www.guggenheim-bilbao.es/ingles). The agreement was initially for 20 years with a possible extension up to 75 years (Bradley 1997, p.51). Guggenheim's fees were to be a sobering \$20m. In addition all

costs for curatorial and administrative services provided by the Guggenheim NY would also be covered. The Basque region and the Biscay province would share equally all the costs incurred in building and operating the museum, including providing \$50m over four years to begin to establish a Bilbao art collection— a collection initially identified as ‘a new Spanish and Basque collection’ (ibid.).

In October 1997 the Museum opened with two weeks of events. A year later 1,300,000 people had visited the museum and its building costs had been virtually cleared. By 2001 the Bilbao Deputy Mayor assessed that the museum in its four years since opening had already generated 383m pounds of ‘economic activity’ for the city. In its fifth year since opening the museum was still attracting 852,000 visitors a year (Higgins 2003), 80% from outside of Spain (Krane 2006).

Despite being ‘essentially unified under one curatorial organization’ (Bradley 1997, p.53), Krens maintains the satellite museums are independent and are not just revolving around New York but provide cross-fertilization (Newhouse 2006, p.259). Nevertheless, specifically for the Bilbao Museum, questions remain. To what extent will the museum be a glamorous warehouse for the Guggenheim NY collection while Bilbao proceeds to fill New York’s collection gaps? With the curatorial ‘efficiencies’ described, to what extent could local regional curatorial practices be developed independently? (Bradley 1997, p.105) To what extent will the Guggenheim NY fulfil its reported commitment to Basque and Spanish contemporary art? (ibid.) Will the Basque and Spanish art collected to date ‘be reduced to a trope’ within the large Guggenheim collection? (Rectanus 2002, p.180)

It is worth stating that the ‘new Spanish and Basque collection’ purchased with advice from the Guggenheim NY, exists as a very small complement of the larger collection of European and American contemporary art. Given this, perhaps it is not surprising that in 1997 Krens, when questioned about the complement of Basque and Spanish art for the collection, would not be drawn on quotas (Bradley 1997 p.105). As well the Guggenheim Bilbao exhibition program of Spanish and Basque art does not look positive. In brief— over ten years there have been 53 exhibitions at Bilbao. Of these, seven exhibitions have been of Spanish and Basque artists’ work. Two exhibitions of Spanish artists work went from Bilbao to New York (guggenheim-bilbao.es/ingles/exposiciones/las_exposicio...).

In 1996, a year before the Guggenheim Bilbao opened an alliance was formed between the Deutsche Bank and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation to open a gallery, the Deutsche Guggenheim, within the Deutsche bank’s central building in Berlin. The alliance, believed to be initiated by the U.S. ambassador to Germany at the time, is said to be ‘the coalescence of US-German cultural politics, corporate promotion, and Thomas Kren’s globalization strategy’ (Rectanus 2002 p.185). In this light the Guggenheim in Berlin can be seen to be a US icon commemorating the nature of U.S.-German relations at the close of the Cold War, while at the same time, signalling the formation of a new international Berlin. (ibid; p.186).

Hilmar Kopper, a spokesperson for of the Group Board of Deutsche Bank says of the alliance in 1999:

Two partners had found each other, both innovative in their own areas, who despite their domestic focus, operated on a global scale...a concept soon emerged that envisaged a unique joint venture between a museum and a company.

The Deutsche Guggenheim Berlin program is developed jointly by the Guggenheim curators in New York, and the Deutsche Bank, showing work from both collections as well as exhibitions that travel the Guggenheim circuit. The Deutsche Guggenheim opened in November 1997 a month after Guggenheim Museum Bilbao and the international reach of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation had begun in earnest.

In 2000 the opening of a joint project with the Hermitage Museum and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation took place in the Venetian Casino Las Vegas. Despite the unusual location for priceless art, the potential 35 million visitors a year to Las Vegas, could not be ignored. The casino would pay for the costs of building a joint gallery for the Hermitage and Guggenheim and a huge separate gallery for the Guggenheim. The Guggenheim and the Hermitage would cover the curatorial and organisational costs. The returns from merchandising would go directly to the museums. After costs were covered the casino and the Guggenheim would share entry revenue to their large gallery.

Exhibitions would change twice a year.

Thomas Krens said at the time:

The Hermitage is one of the greatest museums in the world...the Guggenheim has one of the most active special exhibitions programs of any museum in the world. By combining our expertise and drawing from two great collections and programs, the Hermitage and Guggenheim working together can create both a brand new range of superb cultural narratives and exhibitions, as well as new facilities and institutions (Guggenheim Museum NY Press release 20th October 2000).

However despite the unique spaces, the euphoria and the 35million visitors a year—the Guggenheim's financial problems failed to improve. Las Vegas was costing money. The large gallery was closed within 15 months. The Guggenheim it turned out paid \$50,000 a month in rent to the Venetian. \$6m was needed annually Thomas Krens says, to keep the project going, covering rent, guards, publicists, and salespeople (Solomon 2002).

There has also been serious questioning of the exhibitions Krens has mounted for the Guggenheim. An exhibition on fashion designer Giorgio Armani (where Armani paid the Guggenheim 15m for the privilege) was described in the New York Times as 'as surrendering the museum's dignity' (Sudjic, January 2000.). Then the exhibition Art of the Motor Cycle, underwritten by Harley-Davidson, was said to be equally commercially driven (it proved to draw the largest audience for the Guggenheim ever) (Suau 1999).

It was the resignation in early 2005 of Peter Lewis, Chairman of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation that revealed the underside of Krens' global vision. Lewis resigned allegedly not only because of the financial position of the Guggenheim (which

had been perilous), but interestingly because he believed the Guggenheim's reputation was at stake. The Guggenheim's search for cash seems to have motivated all sorts of exhibitions to be put on the circuit. 'The model of constant growth' he believed hadn't worked (Sudjic January 2005.). Krens had imagined a worldwide network of museums across which to spread exhibition costs. The savings from shared costs turned out to be much less than Krens believed. Krens has had a driving ambition to expand the Guggenheim into a brand, critics say, that has stretched resources beyond belief. The Guggenheim has now lost its chief benefactor who has donated \$77m to the museum. However within a month of Peter Lewis' resignation Krens and a number of trustees were making a visit to Mexico to check on developments with the feasibility study for the Guggenheim Guadalajara (ibid.).

In 2006, the agreement for the latest expansion of the Guggenheim empire was signed. This is to be the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi (25% larger than Bilbao) (Vogel 2006), with Frank Gehry the architect and scheduled for completion in 2011. In this project Krens has found a partner who share his big vision for the future. As he says, 'we have had the good fortune to discover a partner that not only shares our point of view, but expands upon it' (press release Guggenheim museum 8 July 2006). The museum is to be built on the tip (the prize location) of Saadiyat Island (the Island of Happiness), 500m off the coastline of the city Abu Dhabi. It is to be part of a cultural plan developed as an additional source of wealth (to non renewable oil), in order to establish Abu Dhabi as an international arts centre and tourist destination. Close by, the city of Dubai is developing with pace as an entertainment destination (ski resort with moving mountains, underwater department store etc), but Abu Dhabi has seen advantages in focusing on culture. Cultural tourists are noted to be older, wealthier, more educated and spend more. It is predicted that Saadiyat Island will be 'the world's largest single arts-and-culture development project in recent memory' (Fattah 2007).

The Guggenheim franchise with Abu Dhabi is to operate in a similar way to Bilbao. There would be a down payment (as yet undisclosed) Abu Dhabi would have the use of the brand name for a period of time and the Guggenheim NY would manage the museum's exhibition and educational program, as well as manage acquisitions to develop Abu Dhabi's major collection of contemporary art (press release Guggenheim museum 8 July 2006). The costs of building and operating the museum would be the responsibility of the Abu Dhabi tourist authority. Summing up the agreement Krens says:

They will not take advantage of us, and we don't take advantage of them. It's like a marriage. We're providing a lot, and we will get a compensatory balance, but that's not why we're doing this. It's just a smart thing for everybody (Taylor 2007).

In an interview in 1998, Krens gives us some insight to his reading of the concept of 'world culture'. Such a reading appears to undermine any concern for the importance of the local and regional national cultural identities. It thoroughly diminishes any possibility for an independent identity developing through the collections or exhibitions of the satellite museums. It reveals his voracious drive for uniformity through globalization. Krens says:

You have to take a look at all this talk of world culture. World culture has dissolved local culture because local cultures by a dialectical process of influence cancel out... Lets project well into the next century. Will such a thing as local cultures exist? You have to come to the conclusion that they will not. And this is not about me liking or not liking local culture and tradition. It is that the forces of culture are out there. I don't believe our objective is to stand in the way of an eroding tradition... Will there be a culture on a local level? Probably not. Will it be recognizable in terms of traditional characteristics? Probably not either. There will be a world culture out there; there is already a world culture out there (cited in Suau 1999).

Now with a board of trustees comprising of leaders in New York real estate no one is likely to stand in Krens' way of empire building (Vogel 2005). In June 2005 Krens was still determinedly set on further expansion. He said:

If we don't address Africa, Asia or Russia, we are making a big mistake. How do you do it? With a patronising occasional show on African bronzes from the 14th century? Or do we go [to these countries] and get our hands dirty? (Sudjic June 2005).

The Guggenheim global museum project (soon to be emulated by the Louvre in Abu Dhabi) presents one model of globalization. Fortunately there are other models forming between independent museums—like the Louvre and the High Museum of Art Atlanta, or like the Hermitage Museum with the Courtauld Institute of Art London or the Hermitage Museum and Nieuwe Kerk Amsterdam. Money facilitates and drives all of the relationships but perhaps in a manner where the art, its content and context, remains the core purpose of the exchange.

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