

# The Metabolised Collection

## Notes for understanding an online collection

By **CARLES GUERRA**

1. There is a widely held belief that new online means of viewing works of art deprive us of an empirical experience and direct contact with the reality of art. I would like to think that this itinerary may serve to challenge this notion, by turning the spotlight on the task of the viewer. *That work*, the work of the viewed, accumulated as a form of capital over the centuries, has been treated as taboo, never conserved by any institution; it dissolves in the face of the solidity of the actual artwork. Let us imagine that the discourse on the works of art were to focus on what happens from the moment they go on display, from the point when the artists abandon them to their fate before the observer. If the current crisis is to serve for anything, it must be to acknowledge that in addition to the labour encapsulated in the art works, there is also one that is dissipated in every viewing, be it naïve or erudite. We could begin this exploration with the most iconic of all the works in the collection in this respect, Jonathan Monk's *This Painting Should Be Installed by an Accountant* (2011), whose ideal viewer proves to be an employee.

Let us begin by saying that the category of 'employee' is a imprecise, ill-defined one. The nature of the employee varies according to the place. The title of the work draws on that margin of imprecision. In the context of a bank, an *accountant* is one of the employees working in its offices. Such staff may have technical expertise, but no experience with art works. And the less familiar they are with the world of art, the less we can predict how they are likely to hang the piece, although they may draw on their experience hanging paintings at home. If so, it will be helpful to consider the location of this work –post-conceptual in appearance– basing ourselves on domestic premises. We will see the effect its golden surface has in any of those unexpected positions. Nonetheless, we should not forget that amongst the bank's employees, there may be individuals with sufficient know-how and experience to instal the work properly.

Another piece from the Banco de España Collection was created almost exactly one hundred years before Jonathan Monk's. As its title suggest, *Tribute to the Banco de España by its Employees* (1910), was an initiative by several staff members, who commissioned a sculptural group in the academic style. The commemorative function of the two works is reflected in the gold veneer of Jonathan Monk's work and the bronze of this allegory by Lorenzo Coullaut Valera; they are both monuments intended to be displayed behind closed doors. Despite the distance in time, both works bring a visibility to the bank's workers, whom the art system had relegated to mere anonymous artifices or at most, passive viewers. During the century separating the two works, the art system's great failing was precisely to find a way of letting the public voice be heard, of incorporating the discourse of viewers, who continued to be excluded from the institutional memory, unrecorded by museum technologies.

One of the least known and celebrated exercises in this regard was the last film by Roberto Rossellini, father of Italian neorealism. It all began with the opening of the Georges Pompidou Centre in Paris on 31 January 1977. A large section of the city centre, including the Les Halles market, had had to be torn down to make way for the most striking cultural facility in decades, designed by Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers. Three months later, on 6 May, Roberto Rossellini

wrapped up editing of a 54-minute film depicting the reactions of the public. The French Ministry for Foreign Affairs had commissioned the great neo-realist filmmaker to celebrate the opening of the building, but Rossellini's vision was a sceptical one; 'A film without comments or music', as he told journalists. Perhaps as a result, *Le Centre Georges Pompidou*—the director's last film—went largely unnoticed.

Rossellini used the classic device of filmmaking to describe a brand-new institution being literally stormed by hordes of visitors. Jacques Grandclaude, the producer, surrounded the venerable filmmaker with a team of young professionals from La Communauté, a production firm set up during the protests of May '68. Two documentaries, *Rossellini au travail* and *Le Colloque de Cannes*, emerged from that venture. However, the twenty hours of audio recordings are perhaps the best expression of the crisis. Around thirteen hours are of conversations with the general public recorded inside the museum and of the ambient noise generated by the macro-institution, both inside (lobby, galleries and library) and outside (terraces, air vents and the surrounding streets).

The visitors' lively conversations about the artworks constitute a manifesto in favour of a demotic vernacular, which in Rossellini's film is also a sign of a new form of cultural consumerism. In this way, the Pompidou Centre ushered in a new age of mass democratic access to the ideals of humanist culture, as represented by a vast store of modern art. Rossellini's enthusiasm, however, was muted. His approach juxtaposed the sweeping views of the new ultramodern institution with the heterogenous voices of ordinary people, often spontaneous and ill-informed, as they strolled through the rooms. The simple shot-by-shot description of the venue constituted the most cutting critique.

While Rossellini was filming the Pompidou Centre, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu was conducting research into new audiences, commissioned by Claude Mollar, Secretary-General of the Pompidou Centre from 1971 to 1978. Like Rossellini, Bourdieu was overtly pessimistic in his conclusions. He was not convinced that an increase in visitor numbers really proved the democratisation of culture. The nearest he came to praising the facility was to note the immediate success of the library, saying that the Beaubourg acted as an evening university.

Despite working on commission, Rossellini managed to describe the museum, with its silent spaces and its hustle and bustle, in dialogue with its urban environment. From the opening shots, Beaubourg is depicted as just another object in the urban fabric. Its look of an ultramodern factory appears to suggest that, at a time when the days of the traditional factory were numbered, the museum is all ready to take up the baton in the area of social production. The public that Rossellini filmed, eager to enter the museum, were about to find themselves in a new space specialising in the management of the masses. In the first scenes of the film, showing the opening of the centre, we hear one security guard warning the others, '*Faites attention, faites attention, la foule qui monte!*' Thereafter, the visitors are treated as feedstock for the institution, employees of that new form of social production that mobilises them in the most unexpected of scenarios, the museum.

2. Let us return to the figure of the viewer standing in front of the painting. But imagine that figure as the *product* of a certain type of picture. If by the late 1970s, the museum had become a factory, why should we not consider that it is the painting that manufactures the interpretation, rather than the other way

round? Two works are particularly relevant in this regard: Isabel Quintanilla's *Wall of the Urola Studio* (1969) and *Hostage LXVI* (1990) by Art & Language. Both are landscapes which we know to have been executed close to the artists' studios. The concrete wall beneath which the rusty framework is visible in Isabel Quintanilla's painting is no less important a place than the trees lining the path near the studio of Michael Baldwin and Mel Ramsden (members of Art & Language). Standing in front of these works involves exploring their specific consistency as vehicles for images. Isabel Quintanilla's work is painted on a wooden panel. The picture by Art & Language is a canvas on which thick daubs of fresh paint have been squashed down by a piece of glass. In both cases, one might easily forget that the paintings actually depict something. Both might be viewed as objects, overlooking their capacity to represent landscapes. Naturally, though, they are also objects arranged to make us forget their physical dimension – not difficult to do in the online reproductions of those two works. There are the layers of information that we miss if we cannot stand in front of the work.

The artists from Art & Language said that to view this painting 'is to be caught between levels of representation in a world of conflicting descriptions (...) it is evocative as illusionist paintings may be'. To continue with the simile of the layers of information, whereas *Hostage LXVI* is offered up for dismantling, with each of its materials listed (the blotches, the trees and the glass, the thickness of the fabric and the screws holding the glass in place), Quintanilla's *Wall of the Urola Studio* seeks to prevent any materials from being recognised. The pictorial illusion reduces all the layers to one. Yet to be aware of that, we need to stand at a less-than-prudent distance from the picture.

3. Here, I must confess to some confusion. Whenever I try to recall a quote by Marcel Broodthaers, I hesitate. I reconstruct the phrase as best as I can, but I am unsure of its ultimate meaning. My initial memory is that it goes 'You think you have seen an exhibition, but what you have seen is a film'. I remember it because it perfectly captures my reaction to a series of works reproduced online, one after another, on the screen, just like the works selected for this itinerary. But I am immediately gripped by a doubt. What if the quote was actually the other way round? If so, it would have gone something like 'you believe you have seen a film, but it was an exhibition'. In both cases, the overriding feeling is of a more or less continuous sequence, at the end of which one is beset by confusion. Regardless of what we have seen, what is left in our mind is a lingering memory that cannot precisely define the nature of what we have seen.

If the first version is correct - 'you think you have seen an exhibition, but what you have seen is a film' - it would mean that our perception reduces what we have seen to a cinematic experience. Over the last couple of decades, the art world and its experiences have been implacably invaded by the audiovisual. The first experience continues to be an empirical contact with the artwork, but memory, as Broodthaers has it, turns it into a film. He reduced his *Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles* to transport, artwork packaging, postcards and screenings - everything but the artwork itself. The digitalisation of content has turned museums into camera obscuras, either because they have become the destinations for data which, once decompressed, flood the rooms with anything that can be transported over the Net, or because the conditions of conservation have enhanced the measures for protecting the cultural heritage, by limiting the entry of natural light. These two different approaches have the same ultimate effect of darkening the galleries of the museum.

The audiovisual version of the museum is merely the guise adopted by a more radical version of this new direction. The metabolised museum no longer needs the experience provided by direct contact, which would require moving from room to room to examine each work. Online access to collections is not exclusively confined to educational purposes. With the pandemic, it has been catapulted forward, becoming the most common and prevailing experience. Direct, in-person viewing of the works need not become a thing of the past, but the forms that experience take may undergo a more intense process of segregation. As online access fast becomes the natural space in which to consume culture, there is an ever greater nostalgia for the direct experience. This longing to go back to the real world in all its splendour ('when the works are ripe...', as Broodthaers ironically put it), to see it in person without needing to reduce the scale, is reminiscent of the many paradoxes of the *wunderkammer*, or cabinet of curiosities, that collection of pieces from around the world exhibited in a single room.

Remember that the purpose of those cabinets of curiosities was to classify and understand natural objects, animals and plants. And the very definition of these proto-museums of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries extended to life itself. The greatest challenge of any major twenty-first-century museum facility is to embrace life in its truest sense. Yet one might say that it was assimilated into the taxonomies of those *wunderkammers*, which proliferated close to the main centres of power of Europe. Today's *wunderkammer* no longer takes the form of a piece of furniture or a building housing an art gallery. Rather, it has evolved to become each of us, visitors to museums and viewers of art. The cabinet with its many compartments and sections has become a living, breathing human body, by way of our computer desktops. The toolbar at the top of the screen contains the world with which we relate daily. The *wunderkammer* is us. The collections live in our memory and can be displayed with a click.

That is what Broodthaers was saying in that phase I find so confusing. Frame by frame we have constructed a scene whose consistency faithfully reflects our experiences of the world. The museum of our subjectivity rearranges its collections with each encounter, each discovery and each new knowledge experience. Yet the items making up the collections will be increasingly harder to access. Their confinement is nothing new; we ourselves have been the subjects of a mass lockdown. The ever-greater role played by free ports, hosting vast consignments of works, casts some light on this trend. As this system of spatial segregation spreads, each body becomes the home of a new museum or collection, accessible via the Internet. The narrative of the collection now depends on unusual connections. Casting aside any historical logic, the metabolised collection boasts a *hysterical* evolution, developing in unpredictable ways.

Those unpredictable ways of acting that were reined in in the museums of the Enlightenment – subjected to rules and subtle means of training the viewers' eye – have regained their freedom in this virtual space. Aby Warburg and André Malraux's experiments with visual atlases in the early decades of the twentieth century were born in periods affected by a collective madness and the odd psychological disorder. Together, they ushered in a way of compiling images that was the clear forerunner of today's Internet user. Those ostensive relationship dynamics between images and textless sequences, securing a single meaning, helped to shape the DNA of the metabolised museum, a

museum that does not need to keep a copy of each of the images because its special feature is to create inimitable links. The most prestigious museums and collections are now up against a host of metabolised museums and collections whose power lies in unlimited connectivity. Counter-intuitively, though, it is the metabolised collection that is capable of housing all the other collections and museums. Its heritage is global.

As early as the mid-1960s, André Malraux noted that 'For over a century our approach to art has been growing more and more intellectualized'. The art gallery, he added, invites criticism of everything it brings together and a query as to what they have in common. That connectivity has drawn on one previously trialled by arranging, rearranging and juxtaposing the objects in the rooms. Yet now, freed from the weight and conditions of real objects, we see an effectiveness that is akin to that demonstrated by Warburg on his atlas, and Malraux in his imaginary museum. The ability to connect everything to everything else creates the impression of a maximum freedom which nonetheless, as we will see, is subject to maximum control. Charting a course amid artworks (be they online or in their places of exhibition) is not free from a methodical and relentless governance that conditions what we can see and feel. This is the paradox experienced by our subjectivities, as French philosopher Felix Guattari first realised in 1991. At the height of the First Gulf War, a group of activists calling themselves Canal Dechainé filmed an interview with Guattari, in which he analysed that strange sensation of watching a war being broadcast in real time. He defined that perception as the result of a mass subjectivity. Everyone sitting in front of their television sets believed they were seeing and experiencing an event without filters. However, that feeling was reproduced on a mass scale in each of the television viewers watching the launch of a missile, as if the camera was following its trajectory until it hit the target.

It confirmed that the restructuring of our perception became acclimatised to a war scene before becoming the dominant form of subjectivity in a museum or, in general, in our relationship with art; that new forms of governance are tested out in this apparently perfunctory space formed by a series of art works.

4. A bank's art collection invites us to speculate that the relationships between the world of art and the movement of capital are becoming ever more blurred. The roots of that equivalence can be traced back to the nineteenth century, if not before. Clearly, the most popular media in this new system of valorisation was photography, under the direct influence of the development of capitalism. The movement that instils value in capital and goods does the same with images, and thus the agreed value of works of art depends to a great extent on their capacity to be circulated. Yet that comparison, is more often implied than openly discussed within the context of art. Nonetheless, the Banco de España Collection contains a number of pieces that enable us to draw a genealogical chart of this issue. Perhaps the most iconic is a small painting attributed to Mariano Fortuny y Madrazo, depicting a one-hundred peseta note hanging from a red ribbon, nailed to the wall. The dark shadow it casts on the wall behind, as opaque as that of any object in a still life, refutes the implicit abstraction of money.

By contrast, the size of this small canvas suggests that the banknote depicted is close to the real scale of the note in circulation and this sense of confusion enriches the painting. This form of mystification is more problematic, however, in the drawings by José Villegas included in this itinerary. His series includes at least two designs for different denominations of banknotes (fifty and one hundred pesetas), that never went into circulation. The implicit relations between the world of art and currency are clinched by the allegorical scenes depicted. This is demonstrated by *The Artist and His Inspiration* (c. 1903) and *Hippogryph in Flight*. Yet unlike Mariano Fortuny y Madrazo's *One Hundred Peseta Note*, those drawings are not at all misleading. Their most immediate function was to serve as models for legal banknotes. Yet because the notes based on these designs never appears to have gone into circulation, the drawings stand merely as artistic compositions, without the status of paper money.

By abstracting the specific features of these works, we see a type of representation that is capable of evoking the value of the currency. In some cases, these representations may look similar to those used in legal tender; in others, they actually become currency. And yet, they are no more than a mimesis which, if converted into actual currency, would require us to *forget* they are drawn motifs, printed on paper. By contrast, certain types of digital art, such as the *NFT (Non-Fungible Token)*, could now be seen as artistic productions whose clearest purpose is to attract investors, who will purchase them using some kind of cryptocurrency. The works of those digital creators fuse art and finances, while at the same time underwriting the provenance and ownership of the pieces. They do so knowing that communities of digital investors want to invest in an (also digital) art market. Analysts speak of the disruptive nature of these new forms of investment that have begun to impact traditional forums of the art market; we have not heard the last of this relationship between art and money.

Daniel García Andújar anticipated these trends with his *Capital. Merchandise. Guilloché* (2015). Although it might look like an updated version of José Villegas's banknote designs from the 1920s, García Andújar focused on coming up with a design that would prevent the notes from being forged. The *guilloché* technique combines the ability to create an engraving for a new banknote and guarantee the authenticity of a digitally produced work of art. Yet the iconography employed by the artist in these designs is clear. The motifs make reference to the arms trade, security firms and the migrant crisis. Comparing the art system with the financial and capital markets raises awkward issues that find their way into the design of banknotes. However, the nature of this reality is no longer removed from the contemporary art system, which artists such as Hito Steyerl have no hesitation in defining through the possibilities offered by capital, real estate (linked to the building of large-scale cultural amenities), art fairs and biennials, all of which are underpinned by unequal wealth and an asymmetric warfare.

5. To go back to my doubts about the exact text of the quote from Marcel Broodthaers, let us assume that we were wrong and that what he actually said was more on the lines of 'you believe you have seen a film, but it was an exhibition'. In such a case, it would not be difficult to imagine that we are in a situation different to that we had to face during the pandemic — that is to say, museums across the world reopen and allow the visitors to spend as long as they want looking at the works. In that scenario of resuming direct contact with

the exhibition space, that virtuality that we experienced during the pandemic will not have been in vain. It will be embedded in the memory of the body. The cinematic experience will still control our impressions even if we are able to wander amongst the exhibits. We may then feel the same as critic Michael Fried did at the end of the 1960s, on observing minimalist art. Noting that 'literal art' highlighted the body of the viewer, he remarked that there was 'an excess of presence' — the most damning criticism the renowned critic could level against minimalist art.