

Exhibition Review

I woke up parched and groundless; it was one of those sleeps from which you wake more exhausted than when you went to bed. My body rolled over with the groaning obstinacy of an oil rig in the Arctic circle, staggering out of bed into the bathroom, where I tried to avoid the scowling countenance in the mirror as I brushed my teeth. Then I brewed some coffee and migrated to the living room, where I collapsed into my favourite couch—the tremendously sagging one—and opened my laptop.

I was not optimistic about my ability to concentrate this morning. The day before, I had finished a 12,000-word personal essay on Walter Benjamin and the 2017 film *Demolition*—and, notwithstanding two bathroom breaks, I literally did not leave the couch for the full seven hours it took to do so. Essay submitted, I ate breakfast—at 3:00 pm—and helped my girlfriend Leah transport furniture out of her third-floor flat into a storage locker behind Sobey's. I slept at 1:00 am.

The first link I clicked was for the online version of the Collection of the Fondation Cartier Pour L'Art Contemporain at the Seoul Museum of Art. To my pleasant surprise, I found myself enthralled by what I saw. Four slides in, a video documented the painstaking assembly of the exhibit's various installations. The energy was hectic, industrious. People operated machinery, tugged at pulleys, snapped cables together, and texted between bouts of such manual labour. I heard nails being hammered, forklifts beeping as they reversed, voices

echoing in a space with the acoustics of a warehouse. Was this an art gallery or a construction site? I observed dozens, maybe hundreds of people collaborating in the construction of the exhibition. Far from obscuring the messy physicality involved, SeMA was parting the curtain to show me the people pulling the strings backstage. I was mesmerized by the open admission of artifice. I couldn't look away.

Below were a series of thumbnails for other videos. I clicked on the first one that caught my eye—"Fernando Allen et Fredi Casco"—and found myself watching something that radically disregarded my needs as an English speaker. Dialogue remained untranslated—from a language I couldn't comprehend, let alone identify. What was this video about? I had no idea; I had to piece it together as I watched. Following a long aerial shot of lush forest, a man named Jorge Carema smoked a cigarette while standing beside what I soon learned was called a "bottle" tree. I learned this after it occurred to me to test out Google's auto-translate feature. Captions appeared on the bottom of the screen, in English. The relief was considerable. Suddenly, I was no longer so adrift, and could more or less deduce the context: the Fondation Cartier was interviewing one of their artists. "After that, I drew mermaids. Otherwise, I could not have drawn them." Next, a shot of water boiling in a stone pot over an open fire. A hand—presumably Carema's—drops something therein. "You boil carob pods in a pot, the colour runs in the water, and we use this liquid to paint," Carema explains. Standing by the bottle tree, he drags on his cigarette in silence. I observe his profile. The softly steady whirring-screeching sound of many crickets saturates the air, supplementing the impression of profound calm.

The film proceeds to interview a number of other Indigenous artists. "I observe nature all around me, and everything that exists in the forest," one of them says. Behind

him, wilderness sprawls. His partner sits nearby in a chair, occasionally glancing at him as he speaks, with a seemingly permanent scowl affixed to her face. “I love what’s in the forest, because that’s where we get our food,” he adds. The drawings, when they appear on screen, take my breath away. They are fastidious but wild; the details contain a pulsing energy. They depict insects. In the background—hardly discernible that this is an editorial addition—an ominous droning sound, like that of large wings, possibly denoting a dangerous stinger. My glasses constitute too much of an intervening screen; I remove them from my face, and gaze—wrapt—on the art.

Just then, Leah arrives holding a crate of plants, covered in sweat from carrying them the twenty-minute walk between her place and mine in the blistering sun. Panting, she deposits them in the corner of the living room. Suffice it to say, it’s been a rough few days: Both of her roommates out of town, it’s fallen onto Leah’s shoulders to deal with their considerable belongings. (I genuinely lost track of the number of aged pine bookshelves—inherited from grandfather such-and-such—that we had to carry down three flights of stairs while both roommates subjected us to radio silence.) I’m so caught up in my state, however, that I am momentarily heedless of hers. “This is the most amazing thing I’ve ever seen,” I remark, saucer-eyed. She comes over, takes a look. “They’re pretty,” she says, then walks off.

I am appalled by the flippant remark, the blatant disregard for my transports. I feel wounded by her seeming indifference to the grandeur of my feelings. “I wonder why the director chose to have her sit there,” she adds while tying her shoelaces for another excursion. “That’s his wife,” I snap, but she doesn’t hear me. “She’s just sitting there.” “That’s his *wife*,” I say loudly. “Oh.”

At first, I feel mournful: gone is my submersion in the story. But then, Leah having left to fetch more plants, I consider: Why hadn't the possibility of directorial interference occurred to me? For all I knew, they really *had* arranged for the man's wife to sit there. Why was I so easily taken in? Am I really so impressionable? Now I feel patently ridiculous.

Then I consider further, thinking back to the museum space. Why were they showing us the behind-the-scenes before, so to speak, the scenes themselves? Like a magician explaining their trick before they've performed it; like glimpsing Oz, the man, before the apparition. The order was all wrong. Mustn't the illusion *precede* the explanation? Isn't there always something aloof and disavowing about the critical posture that contravenes total immersion? Can the critical gaze experience wonderment?

I return to the exhibit for answers. I notice that, rather than present stills of the installations on their own, the exhibition's photographs prominently feature visitors to the physical space, implicating them therein. A crowd gathers around Chéri Samba's *I Love Color* (2010) as part of a guided tour; we encounter the work as though standing on tiptoe at the back, struggling to catch a glimpse over innumerable other heads. A soldier rudely obstructs our view of Cai Guo-Qiang's *The Vague Border at the Edge of Time/Space Project* (1991) in order to take a picture with his phone. Meanwhile, *someone's* shadow disrupts a still of PARKing CHANce's film *Decades Apart* (2017). These intrusions confront us with the experience of a person physically visiting the exhibition. By doing so, they situate the installations spatially in our psyche. Indeed, sometimes our view is irrupted by elements of the space itself, as with the railing that cuts across Marc Couturier's *The Fourth Day Drawing* (2017). Or else, as with Couturier's *The Third Day Drawing* (2017), another installation crops up in the corner, unfocused, a blurred presence hampering our complete absorption in the primary subject.

Such photographic decisions remind us that the installations are inseparable from the act of spectatorship. They do not allow us to forget that we realize the works by merely *looking*.

The digital wall plaques, too, stand in the way of a “pure” encounter with the art; rather, the Fondation Cartier constantly draws our attention to its long-standing relationship with the artists involved. Often, they highlight the commissioned nature of the work in question: “She [Sarah Sze] designed a new configuration *for the Seoul Museum of Art*, suspended over two floors and visible from every point in the building.” (Emphasis added.) Granted, this occasionally comes across as self-congratulatory, as when they remark, alongside Tudamori Yokoo’s *113 Portraits (2014)*, that the work “underlines the sense of continuity, loyalty, and the strong and enduring links forged by the Fondation Cartier with each of these people over more than thirty years of patronage.” Nevertheless, it remains the case that the digital exhibit relentlessly refuses its artworks the deleterious fiction of an existence somehow outside the realm of spectatorship and commerce. Rather, they insist on the inherent *worldliness* of the works concerned.

These curatorial decisions aggressively discourage the sort of reverential attitude tacitly associated with museum and art gallery spaces. They serve as intrusive reminders—like Leah’s question about the woman in the chair—that the artwork exists as part of a curated space—constructed, manipulated, though in this case self-consciously, even playfully so. The online exhibit prompts us to consider where art ends and curatorship begins—and, indeed, the more we see, the fuzzier the distinction comes to appear. The photograph of Sze’s elaborate *Everything That Rises Must Converge (1999)*, for example, is followed by a time lapse of the installation being, well, installed. The exhibit’s artworks—many of which, as with Jean-Michel Alberola’s *Eclairage en groupe (2014)* and Marc Couturier’s aforesaid

sketches, appear to be being produced in real time—become indistinguishable from the space itself. The distinction between artwork and curative space—between curation and creation—becomes impossible to tenably maintain.

The dislocating photography, the digital wall plaques, even the installations themselves—all of these become subsumed into a single, prodigious inquiry into the limits of what can be defined as “art.” What emerges is not so much an online exhibit as a meditation on exhibition itself. My curiosity was stoked. I wanted to know: How does the Foundation find these artists? Who selects them? Who decides which installations to include? These questions did not come at the expense of my amazement; in fact, they proceeded from it. The establishment of the museum space—expansive, bustling—became its own spectacle, perhaps not in the conventional sense of carnivals and CGI, but a spectacle nonetheless, and one that somehow encompassed its own creation. I marvelled, not at the illusion itself, but at the extensive effort necessary for its construction; I marvelled, not at the trick, but at what lies behind it. The collection at SeMA prompted me to consider questions of canonicity involved in the establishment of gallery spaces; but—importantly—it did so without dispelling my sense of wonderment. The exhibition made amazement compatible with critical inquiry. Its digital description claims it “leads visitors through alternating spaces of discovery, contemplation, sound, and wonder.” Happily, I would have to agree.

Works Cited

- “The Collection of the Fondation Cartier Pour L’Art Contemporain at the Seoul Museum of Art.” *Google Arts & Culture*, artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/the-collection-of-the-fondation-cartier-pour-l-art-contemporain-at-the-seoul-museum-of-art/KALilY9xoB3pKg. Accessed 1 May 2020.
- “Fernando Allen et Fredi Casco, « Como Pez en el monte », 2019.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Fondation Cartier pour l’art contemporain, 17 Oct. 2019. youtu.be/AzASMayGB5E. Accessed 1 May 2020.