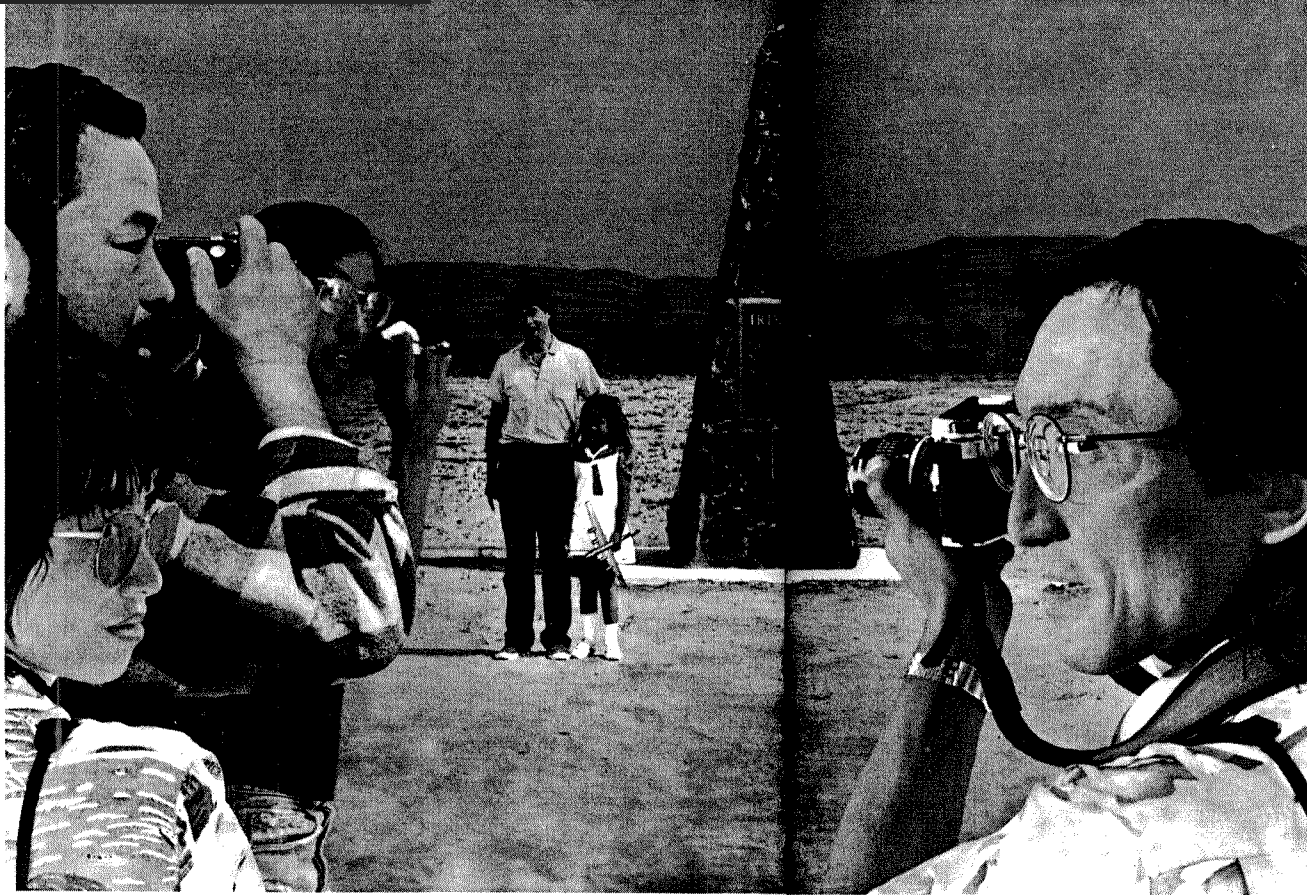


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## Public Cultures/ Global Transformations

Edited by Ivan Karp,  
Corinne A. Kratz,  
Lynn Szwaja, and  
Tomás Ybarra-Frausto,  
with Gustavo Buntinx,  
Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett,  
and Ciraj Rassool

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# MUSEUM FRICTIONS

## Tactical Museologies

GUSTAVO BUNTINX AND IVAN KARP

**W**hat do an alternative museum of the contemporary arts that exhibits on a traveling minibus in Lima, Peru, an exhibition space and publishing house in Phnom Penh, a South African museum for a community dispersed more than thirty years previously by forced removals, and a union of community museums dispersed throughout Oaxaca, Mexico, have in common? All of them were developed to take advantage of the symbolic capital associated with the idea of the museum, but also to present an alternative to the claims made by better-established museums to define citizenship for a broad public and, often, to present a universal point of view (claims of the sort articulated in the "Declaration on Universal Museums," included in this section as a Document). The community museums that are largely the topic of this section of the volume display in their history, actions, and survival strategies a tactical sense of how to maneuver with and against other institutions. This sense of maneuver (which Gramsci termed a "war of position") is simultaneously the product of the alternative and provisional standing of these museums and their often antagonistic and frictional relationship either to established museums and/or to the broader social order. The museum frictions exhibited in this section are part and parcel of the guerrilla war often conducted among museums and other institutions of public culture. They share tactics with all museums

and institutions of public culture, but these tactics shift and change according to the pattern of development and standing of the museum.

The cases presented here exemplify the ways and means through which museums and the associated processes of displaying and collecting are utilized for, by, and even against communities, whether these be local communities, communities of artists, dispersed communities, or imagined communities. Our decision to call the section “Tactical Museologies” refers to processes whereby the museum idea is utilized, invoked, and even contested in the process of community formation. But this book situates museums in the context of global processes, and the most fundamental global process that makes the concept of the museum available as a tactical resource is that museums themselves travel. In the course of moving from one context to another and from one geographic space to another, they become “contact zones,” as James Clifford (following Mary Louise Pratt) calls them, in which diverse and sometimes conflicting relations are enacted. That museums travel is not the product of a new global process but associated with older forms of globalization such as colonial expansion and domination and imperial rule. These long-standing global processes are often layered into museum collections and exhibitions.<sup>1</sup> Older global processes do not just fade away. The results of institutional transfer associated with colonial rule and the like are incorporated in local orders and interpreted in new ways, which are themselves associated with global processes.

All of the essays in this section describe “new” museums, including the Document on the Museo Salinas. Almost all of these museums are less than a decade old, and all of them can fairly be described as simultaneously drawing on global processes to justify their existence and, as a result, owing their existence, in part, to global processes. Yet they all define themselves as community museums and address a local or national subject in content and audience, sometimes simultaneously. These subjects range in scale from a displaced community (in the case of the District Six Museum) to the people of a region (in Oaxaca) and the problem of national art and patrimony (addressed in Phnom Penh and Lima). The first question we should ask, then, is what are the global processes that enable the tactics of newly established museums? The first, we have already said, is that of traveling institutions, the paths and processes by which the museum idea, the forms and practices associated with museums, and the museum effect have become embedded in postcolonial societies ranging from Peru and South Africa to postcolonial situations such as that related to immigration and ethnicity in the urban United States. Taken together, the essays show how the traveling institution of the museum and all that it implies provides cultural capital, a set of resources, a series of models,

means of community mobilization, and a social field in which identity and community are asserted and contested.

The only firm conclusion that can be drawn about traveling institutions as a global process is that how they travel and are reproduced from context to context is both conjunctural and dependent on local structures and conditions. Cape Town, South Africa, and Lima, Peru, provide vividly contrasting examples of localities where the configuration of cultural institutions affects the institutional tactics carried out in different contexts, as insightfully analyzed in essays by Ciraj Rassool and Gustavo Buntinx. The District Six Museum in Cape Town has become, first, a museum of memory and conscience and, second, an institution that seeks to give voice to and shape the identity of the community that will return to occupy the district. But embodied in its displays and manifested in the internal debates of the museum is an exquisite sense that what is being produced is *not* a museum that exhibits essentialized identities along lines consolidated in apartheid’s museums and other cultural institutions.<sup>2</sup> The tactics of the District Six Museum thus have to take account of the local history of museums in South Africa, which themselves illustrate an earlier history of traveling institutions. In Lima, the Micromuseum, in the form and content of its displays, self-consciously works against what Gustavo Buntinx terms the condition of “marginal occidentality,” a state of aping but never fully acquiring the cultural status and institutions of the West. In South Africa, the dispersal of the people who lived in District Six prevented any easy form of community organizing, but the processes of exhibiting and collecting testimony and objects that can be said to be fragments and traces of the memory of District Six provided a basis for community organizing during the transition from apartheid to democratic inclusion and community restoration in South Africa.

The second global process exhibited in the essays is one that provides the contexts that enable the tactical museologies that are the theme of this section. This is the increasing worldwide significance of nongovernmental organizations such as foundations, international organizations such as UNESCO, businesses, and even state-based aid organizations for the development and survival of museums in multiple local contexts. The District Six Museum was funded in its formative stages by the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA); the different Cambodian museums and display organizations described by Ingrid Muan all survive through external support. The Oaxacan Union of Community Museums, described in the essay by Cuauhtémoc Camarena and Teresa Morales, is a foundation-supported project, and — to add one of many possible examples from the United States — the Museo del Barrio in

New York City also depends on external support for its projects and justifies its approach to foundations on its claim to represent the aesthetic experience of Latin America and its diaspora. Even the most contrasting case, the attempt to build a museum of contemporary art in Lima, founders on the inability to generate external support. In this case, one global process—the way that institutions travel—justifies the appeals made on the basis of another global process, the emergence of a non-nation-based world polity that uses the categories of Western experience, such as the museum or development itself, to organize the distribution of resources both through and outside the state. It is in relation to this process that the poignant case of the “museum void” described by Gustavo Buntinx is so important. The terms of discourse and rhetoric of values invoked define and shape actions even when the possibility of realizing them is highly unlikely.<sup>3</sup> The situation described by Ingrid Muan’s essay illustrates the tense dialectic between opportunity and constraint that arises as international organizations increasingly provide the contexts for institutional development. In Cambodia the resources and opportunities available to the National Museum are structured both by the role the museum must inevitably assume as a heritage institution and by the limits it faces in terms of the resources it can claim and the audiences it can address. The sedimented history of the National Museum is, first of all, manifested in what Muan refers to as a “precipitate of definitions first set in play under the French protectorate,” but these definitions are reproduced and reinforced by the ways that the museum addresses tourist audiences and potential funders.

In contrast, Muan’s essay shows that the Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture in Phnom Penh (a contemporary arts space) has available a different array of local constituencies and a different cultural capital, which allow it to be more open to a variety of options that are themselves deemed fundable by organizations concerned with such matters as producing a viable civil society. In this case the development of an “art world” has been perceived as a critical means of strengthening civil society, and also of developing a strong national culture, itself deemed an essential component for Cambodia’s participation in the international order. These attributes are congenial to the value set that has been attributed to the “world polity” and that is increasingly an aspect of international organizations since the Second World War.<sup>4</sup> This context and this political economy of converging orders and shifting locales are the battlefield on which the tactics of the community museum are enacted. These tactics are simultaneously defensive and offensive. For example, in Oaxaca the Union of Community Museums turns outward in its search for support and allies for the task of community development, but those very activities are defensive when it comes to retaining artifacts and claiming control over archaeological heritage.

The world polity provides the opportunity and rationale for Oaxacan community museums yet simultaneously reaches into communities in a way that they seek to defend themselves against.

When, and if, community museums expand, their tactics may lead them to a different set of tactics, and as a consequence of the tactical shift, a different definition of self. This has been the case of the Museo del Barrio in New York City.<sup>5</sup> Once a community museum that served a largely Puerto Rican constituency, it is now a museum of Latin American art, appealing to a broad array of international visitors and funders. The way that the Museo has shifted its subject position from community museum to mainstream museum, from an insurgent program to an assertion of universal values, displays both the opportunities afforded by tactical museologies and the tragic potential inherent in taking advantage of the options raised by the environment that might be described as “the new world order.” From one perspective the Museo is a success, exhibiting all the aspects of a successful institution, including a new building, a larger audience, a roster of funders, and a growing collection. But at what cost? From another point of view the Museo has betrayed its origins and abandoned its primary constituency. Is this to be the ironic consequence of all tactical museologies? Does the very act of taking advantage of the changing international environment and its local agents subvert the very basis on which the community is founded? Is there no other choice? Is it in the nature of the insurgent community museum to be on one hand a utopian organization, seeking to promote the utopia of the community, and on the other hand a small organization continually encountering a crisis of reproduction? The unanswered question posed by the essays on tactical museologies is not “Do tactics prevent disappearance?” but “Do tactics inevitably lead to the betrayal of the utopian ideals of community development?”

#### PRAGMATICS, POLITICS, ETHICS, AND UTOPIAS

Throughout the second half of the 1990s, the streets of Mexico were cluttered by a dazzling variety of invective imagery deployed by popular artifacts to excoriate the corrupt figure of Carlos Salinas de Gortari, the runaway ex-president whose globalizing modernization policies had thrust the entire country into a moral and economic abyss. Portrayed alternatively as a vampire, a thief, a rat, or even a mythical *chupacabras*, his unbecoming appearance gave vent to a prodigious outburst of vernacular creativity.<sup>6</sup> And so it was perceived by Vicente Razo, a young conceptual artist who meticulously collected and displayed those grotesque pieces in his own bathroom, which he formally designated as the Museo Salinas (see figure 1 and the related Document in this





1. Calling itself a “bathroom poster,” this glaring print acts as the visual manifesto of the Museo Salinas. Sardonicly located in Vicente Razo’s bathroom, this almost freakish institution collects and displays all forms of invective imagery popularly deployed in Mexico to exorcise the corrupt figure of Carlos Salinas de Gortari, the runaway ex-president whose globalizing modernization policies had thrust the country into a moral and economic abyss. But the political irony intended by Razo’s gesture acts also as a retort to the Duchampian avant-garde and as a critical vindication of the very idea of the museum, radically redefined. Print by Rolo Castillo and Vicente Razo, 1996. Image courtesy of Museo Salinas.

section). As Cuauhtémoc Medina so elegantly explained, “If Duchamp put the urinal in the museum, Razo places the museum in the bathroom.”

But the double irony intended (artistic and political) acted also as a critical vindication of the very idea of the museum. This complex and ambivalent gesture speaks to the heart and purpose of the texts assembled in this section, four case studies to be seen as fragmented but not disjointed narratives. An ethical undercurrent runs through them all as a binding political thread, confronting the international or globalized forms of museality that tend to be imposed as an ideological model—even where the museum itself fails to exist. But that ethical undercurrent is also a reconstructive ethos acting as a cunningly subtle retort to the extreme deconstructive perspectives that would do away with the very idea of the museum, judged to be inevitably ridden by regressive notions of authority and cultural power.

It is out of this double friction, this opposition to both the grand museum establishment and the terminal critique of museums, that the theory and practice of tactical museologies arise: the appropriation of the museum from a tactical perspective in a shifting sequence of opportune small moves that when taken together imply a strategic displacement. The experiences here presented do not propose institutions in order to make prestigious a self-fashioned marginality (another form of elitism) but to actively engage in the (re)construction of the very idea of community, no matter how prospective or even utopian it might in some cases seem to be. And given that vital necessity, they have no excessive qualms about being parasitically located in the seams and fissures of the globalized exhibitionary complex, or to speak out of its failed provincial stutterings.

This keen sense of being opportune is not to be confused with opportunism. What we are here confronted with is the *critical* appropriation of the very name and notion of the museum *for radical purposes*. This last term is to be taken almost etymologically: the utopian dimension of these situations paradoxically implies a conceptual and sensitive involvement with a troubled desire for roots—and the all-too-concrete threat (or reality) of continued “uprootedness.” A longing for community increasingly requires the props and mechanisms of cultural artifacts to be devised politically. And poetically: at distinct moments, the power of these constructs lies in their willingness and capacity to compellingly objectify a lack and literally house the very sentiment of loss or even absence (“The Legacy of Absence” is the poignant title of one of Ingrid Muan’s exhibits and catalogs).<sup>7</sup> This materialization of feeling, this pragmatics of emotion, makes it possible to capitalize defeat by turning it into experience. It makes it possible to valorize the scattered debris of repressed memories by

exposing—and catalyzing—in and through them the articulated remains of a resurrected history.

There is a peculiar transmutation suggested here—a collective thaumaturgy, a political archaeology. Sometimes this is literal: a crucial moment in the essay by Cuauhtémoc Camarena and Teresa Morales is the reference to the struggle of rural indigenous communities in Mexico to keep within their domain pre-Hispanic finds that were routinely sent to regional or national museums—or to the international market. The community museums thus formed can certainly be perceived as motivated by the understandable (and very tactical) expectation of obtaining revenues from tourism. But at the same time (and this is not necessarily a contradiction) they can also be read as an effort to turn those remainders into reminders—to *activate* those objects—by restoring them to an interrupted cultural continuum. As much is suggested by the displayed juxtaposition of those excised but rescued pieces with more contemporary artifacts and practices. But it is suggested above all by the very positioning of the museum itself in the community, perceived not as a geographical *place* but as a social *space*, a living process demanding of its members an active involvement in the decisions and functions that define the museum as much as other collective concerns.

The result is a deliberate and significant reversal of the decontextualizing “museum effect” so aptly described by Svetlana Alpers.<sup>8</sup> The objects here are not extracted from but reinscribed into a symbolic landscape that becomes renewed by the very newness of a past recovered. The idea of the museum itself is thus relocated as a transformative site for a (tactically) mutating sense of community. And as a focus of social organization and mobilization. And as a healer—perhaps.

Perhaps a healer. “[T]here is a sense in Cambodia today that one should simply ‘dig a hole and bury the past,’” writes Ingrid Muan in quoting a startlingly explicit declaration by Prime Minister Hun Sen. But what is buried tends to return, like a repressed memory, in uncanny and haunting ways. The efforts Muan and Ly Daravuth make through the Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture in Phnom Penh run against the very grain of this official politics of oblivion. In commissioning autobiographical paintings, in putting on display the native utilitarian tools becoming extinct, in publishing and discussing all that it all might mean, Reyum is presented as a minuscule but poignant locale for the cultural processing of absence and change in a decimated society, a critical exercise of memory that is also the cultural realization of the task of mourning.

Minuscule but crucial: in Muan’s own words, Reyum acts as “some small space opened for public reflection and thinking,” in contrast to the banal spec-

ularization of the glories of the past and the horrors of the present, articulated by tourist routes that link the ancient temples of Angkor and the modern Tuol Sleng Prison Museum (“art in the morning, genocide in the afternoon, as some put it with cynical succinctness”). Despite the author’s reluctance to define Reyum as a museum, the term obliquely suggests itself given the gallery’s critical engagement with the very concept of memory in a context where memory is commodified for the tourist industry through a process that threatens to marginalize local communities from the sites of their own history. This yields a heritage increasingly replaced by the awe and wonder of a distant but revered consumer society barely glimpsed through amazed visits to the air-conditioned supermarket, with masses of spectators (rather than shoppers) gaping at the newness of the inaccessible products tantalizingly put on display—commodity fetishism and the museum experience unknowingly fused into one piece.

But there is a diversity to be perceived in the ways chosen to objectify threatened memory by the very different initiatives analyzed in this section. This is particularly evident in the distinct emphasis being put on forming a collection: clearly not a priority for the Reyum project, but one of the strong points in the Micromuseum experience, which despite its extremely frail economy has managed to salvage and circulate a most significant assemblage of Peruvian critical art, as well as a variety of relevant pieces eloquently expressive of local vernacular modernities. As Buntinx argues in his essay, the Micromuseum offers an archaeology of the contemporary, politically positing a prospective community to be culturally brought out of the transformative friction between the educated petty bourgeoisie and the emergent popular experience.

The pertinent question, of course, is how to recontextualize and activate those objectified memories. According to its Web site, the District Six Museum’s original “collection” (note its own tactical use of quotation marks) “consisted of a cache of street signs, secretly saved, and a huge floor map where visitors could mark sites important to them. . . . [P]eople literally wrote themselves back into the center of the city.”<sup>9</sup> The city is politically remapped by a crucial living gesture of inscription that projects apartheid’s urban wasteland as a restored site of memories past—and memories to come. As Ciraj Rasool crucially establishes, the museum is here understood as a “hybrid space” in which scholarship, aesthetics, community forms of governance, and land claim politics productively intertwine. The peculiar friction thus generated is that of a history in the making, and of a prospective memory archaeology: “digging deeper”—the title of this museum’s second landmark exhibition—is to be seen here as an unknowing but radically pertinent political response to the Cambodian government’s call to “dig a hole and bury the past.”

That response is ethical as well as political. Rassool rightly brings out the moral edge that “emerges in some of the ways in which the museum space has been used as a site of forgiveness and the ‘healing of memories.’” It has been a site for truth and reconciliation, restitution and compensation, even in odd and unforeseen ways. Elsewhere Rassool has identified this museum’s “mythical founding moment” in the discovery of District Six’s street signs in the basement (the *basement!*) of the house of one of the white construction workers involved in the razing. The destroyer ironically turned into the unconscious preservationist of a memory thus available to be recuperated, even if for a small fee.

For a fee: in perusing these essays, the reader should be forewarned to avoid the risk of romanticizing experiences that are indeed utopian but also extremely pragmatic—and all the more political for it. And hence delicately vulnerable. Tactical museologies can prove to be surprisingly effective under specific circumstances, but there are serious issues related to the museums’ long-term funding and conditions of existence.<sup>10</sup> Special attention should thus be paid to the endearing frailty of many of these efforts, sometimes all too dependent on individual economies and wills. Note that in varying ways these are all first-person narratives. As precious as they are precarious, some of the endeavors thus related could fragment and vanish with a single death, or even just a divorce. Such issues of sustainability can in some cases be alleviated, at least temporarily, by international aid and selective articulations with the progressive world polity. But there clearly is a need for alternative local supports—which in turn implies the (re)construction of communities in contexts where the very idea of community is continuously undermined.

Experiences such as those in Oaxaca and District Six speak eloquently of the factual possibility of a museum conceived not as a developmentalist tool of economic modernization but as a critical agent of radical citizenship—indeed, of an alternative sense of modernity itself, making difference productive in authentically contemporary terms: a theoretical distinction made explicit throughout Buntinx’s essay, and particularly in his identification of a certain syndrome of marginal occidentality among Latin American elites engaged in such extravagant enterprises as the Peruvian Museum of Pictorial Reproductions. A mimetic delirium in the midst of a museum void to be confronted by radical desire: the Micromuseum conceived not as a means to mediate relations of cultural power between the elites of the center and those of the periphery, but to serve as a vehicle for the renewed construction of local communities of sense, communities of sentiment, providing, they hope, radical models for the organization and development of communities.

But relations between museums and the communities that they seek to represent are also often contentious. Perhaps it is the very idea of community—and not just that of the museum—that needs to be seriously reconsidered and problematized if it is to remain functional in such devilishly complex times.<sup>11</sup> Museums can play an important role in that task if they manage to place the issue of their own sustainability under the necessary critical perspective. As Corinne Kratz once informally suggested, if museums are so liberating, why do they have to be so expensive? Tactical museums seem to offer some alternatives to such dilemmas, but in trying to turn radical desire into institutional capacity, they too face the risk of becoming the establishment they simultaneously challenge.

To build is not to construct, and it is the (re)construction of a critical project—rather than a physical space or even a collection—that will give sustenance and endurance to the very idea of tactical museologies and museums. That and a continuing commitment to the local and the specific. Another way of reading these essays is as a retort to the “Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums,” signed by eighteen of the world’s richest and most powerful museums (reproduced as a Document in this section). Their pompous claim is to have converted the museum itself (the grand Euro-North American museum) into the final and totalizing context for cultural treasures plundered by the metropolitan countries since the Napoleonic wars and made available to the growing masses of affluent travelers in their cultural pilgrimages to the capitals of the First World. But the “universal museum” is here to be seen as nothing more than a poor euphemism for the imperial museum, and the idea of community posited by such terms as hopelessly exclusive and cosmopolitan. Indeed, the second Document in this section, the Association of Art Museum Directors statement “Art Museums and the International Exchange of Cultural Artifacts,” asserts similar claims about adjudicating contemporary problems of plunder and illicit trade in art and heritage.

Needless to say, tactical museums and museologies are conceived in stark opposition to this established notion of the universal, embarked as they are in actively redefining the notion of heritage in opposition to the practice of tourism, serving communities rather than voyeurs. But they also pose themselves against a certain vacuous avant-garde and its nihilist extremes. “Emancipation is again today a vast question,” proclaimed Derrida himself; “I have no tolerance for those—deconstructionists or not—that are ironic regarding the grand discourse of emancipation.”<sup>12</sup> *Oublier* Baudrillard. Dump Duchamp. “Stop making ready-mades,” reads the Museo Salinas manifesto: “Start making museums”—tactical ones.

## NOTES

- 1 See the essays in Karp and Lavine, *Exhibiting Cultures*.
- 2 The term "apartheid" refers to the fifty years of rule by the Nationalist Party in South Africa and is not used to suggest here that segregation and inequality were not prevalent before the rise to power of the Nationalist Party. During the apartheid era, museums, particularly cultural history museums, increasingly celebrated European culture and achievements, to the exclusion of other peoples in South Africa.
- 3 Kratz, "Rhetorics of Value."
- 4 See Meyer, "Globalization."
- 5 See Dávila, "Latinizing Culture."
- 6 *Chupacabras* are powerful creatures that kill animals by sucking out all of their blood, rather like a vampire.
- 7 Davaruth and Muan, *The Legacy of Absence*.
- 8 Alpers, "The Museum as a Way of Seeing."
- 9 See the Web site of the District Six museum, <http://www.districtsix.co.za>.
- 10 Permanence and sustainability are often assumed to be goals or prerequisites for museums, yet it might be more appropriate or effective for some institutions and organizations to have a limited lifetime. In relation to community museums, for instance, such an institutional design could be connected to particular goals or campaigns. The larger point is that tactical museologies involve a number of different time scales and scopes of action, and museums themselves can also be seen as ranging from short-term to perennially enduring institutions.
- 11 See the earlier volume in this series, Karp, Kreamer, and Lavine, *Museums and Communities*, for a series of essays on the history of complex relationships between museums and multiple communities.
- 12 Derrida, "Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism," 82.

Communities of Sense/Communities of  
Sentiment: Globalization and the Museum  
Void in an Extreme Periphery

GUSTAVO BUNTINX

A certain element of impertinence lurks behind the very idea of prioritizing the topic of the global public sphere as a privileged element in the broader discussion on museums. This is particularly the case in contexts such as those of Peru, whose cultural complexity is surpassed only by the country's economic and political miseries. Political above all: suffice it to mention the historical irresponsibility of Peruvian elites, proverbially known for being capable of dominating but not of conducting or leading, much less of providing a national vision even (or especially) in the decisive ambit of the cultural construction of an idea of community, no matter how imaginary or imagined.

Few situations are so openly symptomatic of this momentous failure as the clearly belated inauguration in 1961 of a most generic Museum of Art — broadly defined to encompass three thousand years of Peruvian culture — and the still absolute absence of a legitimate museum of modern or contemporary art in Lima (probably the only Latin American capital that can claim such a distinction). This is a radical absence: the theme here is not the deprived museum, disadvantaged by inadequate resources, but the greater deprivation provoked by the very lack of a museum — our grand museum void.

Implicit in that vacuum is a broader social void that the experience of globalization exacerbates by compensating for it in an illusory manner, linking local elites to cosmopolitan institutions perceived as the sole and final model