A Monument for the Museum

Museum of Speech
Curated by Mihnea Mircan
March 3 – May 1, 2011
Extra City, Kunsthal Antwerpen

By Jonas Staal

Most artists would agree with the statement that curators are generally not authors. Often they may wonder what actually constitutes their practice. In a similar way, workers tend to question the presence of the manager, who never seems to be engaged directly in any form of production. But he's there. He's on the payroll (usually a couple of levels above the worker). In recent years, the parallel relationship between the artist and the worker has often been questioned; but their place in organizational hierarchies certainly remains something that binds them.

Mihnea Mircan, the new artistic director of Extra City in Antwerp belongs to the few curators who examine in what sense curatorship is a form of authorship: how the curator and artist can share a process of co-creation, without the loss of distinction between their respective disciplines. Mircan's first exhibition entitled *Museum of Speech*—which will be followed by *Museum of Display* and *A Slowdown at the Museum*—forms the beginning of a triptych that represents an "accelerated scenario for a fictional museum."[1] A non-existent museum is the centerpiece of the work—or at least a museum in the making, together with an art history in progress. I propose to read Mircan's triptych as an homage to Extra City itself, as an institution reminding us of how a name can be a manifesto in its own right; a promise of what an institution is or wants to become—in this case literally an "extra city." Because people can only exist legitimately as one through a process of radical differentiation, a city may only exist in the same way. People are in need of many histories, of the cities that can facilitate them, and of institutions that take them as the main premise of their existence.

In *Museum of Speech*, Mircan elaborates this promise of an extra city by first making effective use of his thorough studies on the potential of contemporary monumental practice: "Can the monument be reprogrammed as an artistic instrument that does not serve to illustrate doubtful victories, cautionary deaths or abruptly terminated debates, and, if so, what other fundamental operation should be assigned to it?"[2]

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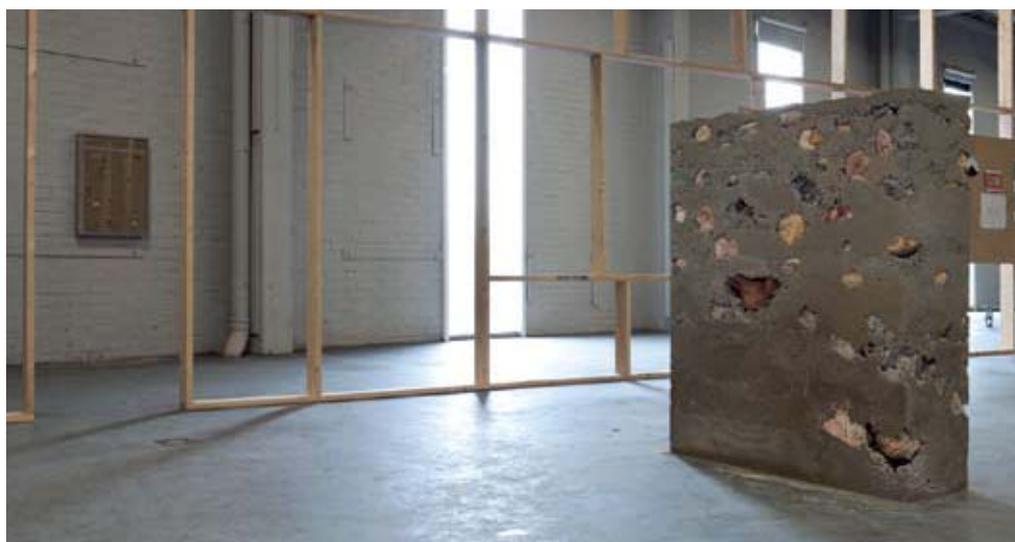
Over the years, Mircan has developed conceptions of monumentality that provoke a permanent self-questioning, sites of creation rather than apathetic landmarks of a past outsourced to large blocks of concrete or bronze sculptures, (usually located behind a tree in a random park).[3] For Mircan, monuments are sites, which evoke different timelines and narratives, so as to allow for a platform for continuous debate and public conflict regarding the questions of what necessarily both binds and divides us, (or, in an as yet unknown future, could bind or divide our many histories and identities *as a people*.) His conception of monumentality questions both the manifestation of a people and the power structures through which an idea of communality manifests itself. Mircan aims at a monumentality that does not simply remind us of an opportunist (re)construction of the past, but demands a "plurality that we should inscribe in any reference to 'the people' to the same extent that they posit a multiplicity of forms of power."[4]

The second element that marks Mircan's authorship and oeuvre as a curator, an element which has to be mentioned in order to understand the process that the *Museum of Speech* engages in, is that his research on contemporary monumentality has resulted in a questioning of the practice of Institutional Critique. His approach to monumental practice has been one that asks of the monument publicly to reflect on its own conditions of appearance. He provokes the traditional practice of monumentality founded on the idea of an unmovable past as a permanent burden, fetishized to the point of becoming untouchable. Mircan articulates that the demand of history and its "monumentalization" in the present be defined in terms of potentiality, not actuality, in relation to the art institution as a whole. In this reasoning the history of art, or *History of Art, the*, itself becomes the monumental site of investigation.[5]

At what moment does history stop producing art; when does it become the artist who produces history? Hasn't Institutional Critique along the lines of Hans Haacke or Andrea Fraser become a self-referential feast, the ultimate way out of the avant-garde promise of an art belonging to and representing all people? Is it not by endlessly emphasizing the inevitable *liaison* between artist and art institution (and subsequently the political structure tolerating or facilitating the gallery or museum) that the concept of artistic criticality as a stimulus for a broader political resistance has been abandoned? Have we not arrived at a situation in which the promise of social change in the arts is purposefully endlessly outsourced—outsourced to an unknown future only because of a supposedly unmovable, untouchable, and traumatic past and its tragic monuments that enforce this blackmail of history? The acknowledgment of artistic complicity with the political system as articulated in Institutional Critique has become a reason of existence in itself. It is from this area of frustrating tension that Mircan's extra city is born: a space to "exhibit the future"—or, to borrow the words from Judith Balso, a place where we can finally "present ourselves to the present."[6]

In *Museum of Speech* Mircan does not tell the story of The Museum, but of *a* museum. Entering the open concrete space of Extra City, one is immediately challenged to enter yet another structure, that of architect Kris Kimpe: an almost transparent framework of wood taking in a central role in the middle of the space, drawing out a modality holding the middle between a temple and a modernist building. This is the museum, the main protagonist of the exhibition. It is in, on, and around this structure that the artworks of the seven contributors to the show are presented. Once the works start to disclose themselves with help of the exhibition guide, designed as an enormous map (or poster), it becomes clear that they should be understood as demands to this fictional museum rather than as objects incorporated by it.[7] Kimpe's structure turns out to be an arena, and the artists are present to fight for their history.

Mladen Stilinović's deeply charming and challenging drawings apparently literally embody the speech of the museum; he states that "the conditions for my work are not in my hands, but fortunately they are not in yours either" and "work cannot not exist" (*Slogans*, 1976-1979). He is joined by the small white-on-black signs by Laure Prouvost which strategically surround Kimpe's museum-temple, insisting that *Ideally the room be square* and *Ideally the entrance would be here*

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(both 2011). Her film *It, Heat, Hit* (2010) fills the space with voices with yet more demands: Stay, listen, go, look up the ceiling, stand right, left—up until the moment that one is pushed away from the artwork, as if its real wish were to exist as much as possible without the viewer.

John Latham supersedes and abandons the museum of speech by introducing an artwork which no museum could contain, let alone conserve: his claims to official recognition of the huge hill-like configurations of oil shale produced over the course of hundreds of years by the extraction of paraffin located in West Lothian. Latham's work, developed in 1975-1976, consists of the proposition to have these bulblike hills "declared monuments to the immediate past."[8] The conditions for the work were articulated by the Artist Placement Group (APG, of which Latham was a member), a collective, which strived to engage (place) the artist in a broader social context—in this case the Scottish Office. Next to photos of the oil shale hills, the documents detailing Latham's attempts to have the area receive a monumental status are displayed. Unsurprisingly, no institutional framework was able to deal with such a gesture. Latham demands of the *Museum of Speech* nothing less than to become an institution not bound by fixed ideas of the identity of art and its creators, thus allowing art to compete in authorship with natural resources and disasters. His installation, *God is Great #4* (2005), presents the Bible, Quran, and Pentateuch covered with pieces of thick broken glass—suggesting that a previous glass container broke due to the impossible tension created by these uncontainable cornerstones of religion. This work connects his *Table with

the Law (1988), which consists of books painstakingly assembled with pieces of glass creating in a history of dismemberment, to the work of Nina Beier, entitled *Shelving for Unlocked Matter and Open Problems* (2010).

Beier's installation consists of small kitsch sculptures that seem to have been found in the house of an old lady or in a flea market. The sculptures are sliced in half, so that they can function as small pedestals, on which glass shelves are placed. They form the basis of a pyramid-like construction including several of these little sculptures, each dismembered in order to be used as what seems to be a functional structure. The stacks of sculptures, glass shelves, more sculptures, and even more glass shelves form a new architectural body, somewhere in between a coffee table, semi-modernist garden sculpture, or group of shelves that in the future might house yet another collection of these decorative objects. The work thus becomes an allegory of the museum of art: the way in which Beier's small, meaningless sculptures form a structure that can house nothing but more of the same creates an unpleasant link with modernist museology—which, through its attachment to linearity and hierarchical power structures, demands that all that is different be aligned to twentieth-century demands. Beier's work is an unpleasantly interesting Gombrowiczian collage of incomplete furniture and incomplete art generating a miniature museum for an incomplete art history. Ian Breakwell's video piece *The Institution* (in collaboration with Kevin Coyne, 1977-1979) fills the back of Extra City with periodic hums and repeating groans, that could have been put to-

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gether as the soundtrack to Beier's work.[9] And, like Beier's miniature museum, it addresses both the mechanisms and visual appearance of what we define as the contemporary art institution. Breakwell does so by relating the art institution to the institution of the psychiatric hospital. The film begins with a walk through the white hallways with evenly-spaced white doors and evenly-spread white neon light of a mental institution. This walk is accompanied by the disturbing, humming groan-like sounds, occasional hysteric laughter, and what can be best referred to as 1970s sci-fi sound mixing effects. After a few minutes, the camera moves out of the building and into the streets outside. The film continues from a car, registering houses passing by in the same rhythm as earlier; they are spaced like the doors of the psychiatric institution. The collection of shots become a performative enactment of Foucault's concept of the disciplinary society in which the prison, mental house, military complex, school, workplace, and family home all follow in essence the same modes of conditioning. The art institution is therefore not separate, but rather a point of concentration within the greater Institution in which we all participate. As the camera turns in to what seems to be a random home, we encounter musician, writer, and painter Kevin Coyne enacting the role of what one could describe as the cliché of the mental patient. Coyne moves uncomfortably, spastically,

and in slow motion through the house, without ever being at ease. He is constantly ranting, sometimes touching on his own position as an artist: "…supposed to be an artist, a normal fucking person or something, I don't know. What do you do? What is your fucking job?…" Another moment, while "imprisoning" himself behind a chair, he demands "Open the cage!" We can interpret the cage as a metaphor for the institution, which is not just limited to the psychiatric hospital; its spotless white walls could easily be mistaken for those of the museum. In fact, no building looks more like a mental hospital than a museum.

Philosopher Jonathan Lahey Dronsfield's untitled performance and installation could be interpreted as the manifesto for the *Museum of Speech*. Two scripts that reflect on the meaning of authorship are linked to the work of another author, namely the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé. Dronsfield copied each of the gaps scattered throughout Mallarmé's poem *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hazard* (1897, published 1914), in which the author investigated the poem not only as a textual construction, but as a textual dispersal on a page, a typography. Mallarmé investigated the visual rhythm of the poem, by writing through, but also around, the void that we normally accept as nothing more than the carrier of a text. It is in within these gaps, in that which is necessarily always missing in each text,

artwork, and political gesture that we discover the liminal spaces that history leaves untouched. It is spaces that disclose a permanent potential for different narrations of our world and for the art that gives them guidance. Dronsfield scripts this procedure, this strategy. And it is through these attempts that the *Museum of Speech* begins its process of becoming.

The *Museum of Speech* both celebrates and torments the museum. The museum and the artists are caught in a dynamic machinery of torture, from which a new conception of the museum and its history may arise like a long awaited confession. Mircan is the author of the conditions in which this process takes place. Extra City is reaching out. And Mircan's authorship is not limited to the willingness of simply appearing in someone else's history, nor is he satisfied with artists that do. They are collaboratively rewriting it.

Welcome to the Monument for the Museum. ■

NOTES

1—Mihnea Mircan, *Museum of Speech*, exh. cat. (Antwerp: Extra City, 2011), 2.

2—Mihnea Mircan, "As Big As," in *Memosphere: Rethinking Monuments*, eds. Mihnea Mircan and Metahaven (Frankfurt: Revolver, 2007), 2.

3—The main exhibitions realized by Mircan on the contemporary monument would be *Low-Budget Monuments* (Venice: 52nd Venice Biennial, Romanian Pavilion, 2007) and *Since We Last Spoke About Monuments* (The Hague: Stroom, 2008).

4—Mihnea Mircan, "Power?... To Which People?!," in *Power?... To Which People?!*, Jonas Staal, ed. & trans. Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei (Heijningen: Jap Sam Books, 2010), 39.

5—*History of Art, the* was an exhibition project by Mircan at the David Roberts Art Foundation in London (2010).

6—Mihnea Mircan, "Art History, Interrupted," *Manifesta Journal*, no. 9 (Amsterdam: Manifesta Foundation, 2009/2010), 9. Judith Balso, "To Present Ourselves to the Present–The Communist Hypothesis: A Possible Hypothesis for Philosophy, an Impossible Name for Politics?," in *The Idea of Communism*, eds. Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek (London and New York: Verso, 2010), 32.

7—This brings to memory the equally uncomfortable catalogue for the exhibition *History of Art, the* entitled *The Impresent*, containing all works that should have been part of the exhibition but could not be included, which confronted the viewer with the question at what point the art exhibition is actually created by factors that are not present instead of the ones that are.

8—Mihnea Mircan, *Museum of Speech*, 3.

9—The Institution was—just as Latham's work—realized as part of the Artist Placement Group program, in this case in the Department of Health and Social Security, at the Broadmoor Clinic for the Criminally Insane. But as was the case for Latham's work, much protest arose, because the sounds of the patients that Breakwell used in the movie were judged too offensive. Hence the movie was withdrawn from public viewing under the Official Secrets Act.

ILLUSTRATIONS

I -III   Exhibition views of *Museum of Speech*, with works by Nina Beier and John Latham, exhibition design by Kris Kimpe
IV   Nina Beier, *Shelving for Unlocked Matter and Open Problems*, 2010
Photo Ben Van den Berghe/ Glenn Geerinck