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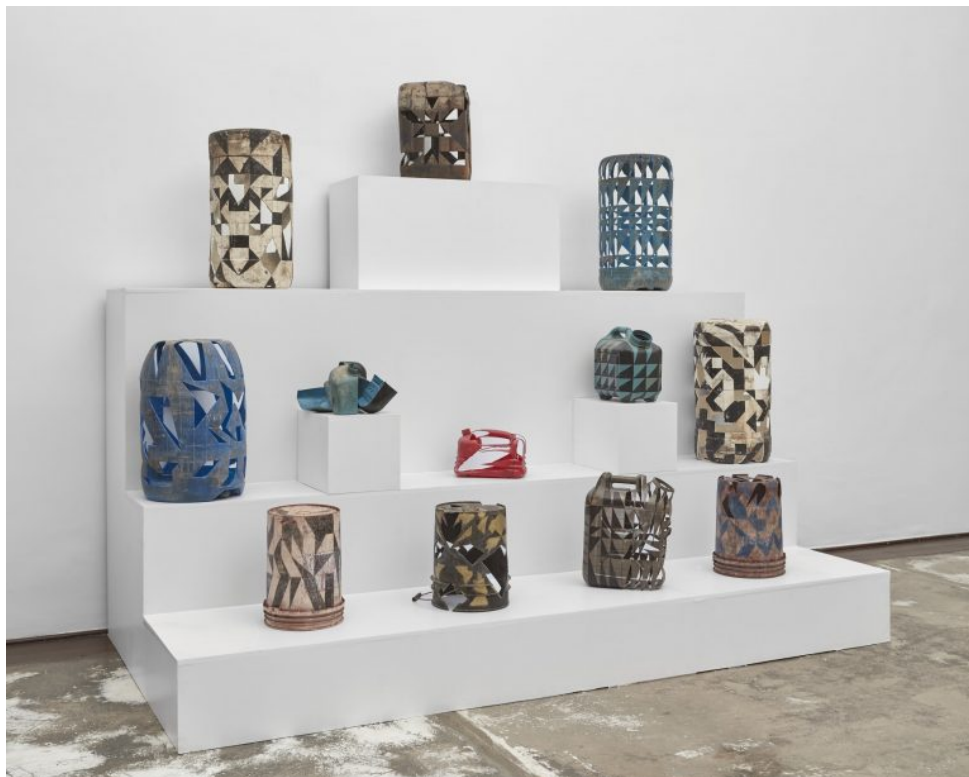
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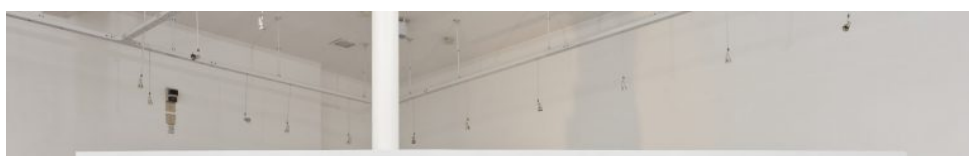
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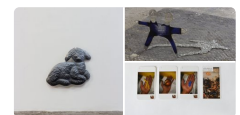
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Monument to the tomb raider as an unwitting hero / the poetics of museum decolonization

Immigration and awareness of otherness

Immigration as a rite of passage involves a process of reevaluation of personal identity, emerging from a sense of uprooting and exposure to other, alien, social and cultural milieus. The experience of journeying from the southern to the northern hemisphere involves processes in which the contradictions of the unfamiliar habitat and its daily challenges must be analyzed. It is from this encounter that the notion of difference arises, expressed in the awareness of being an outsider and, by extension, a member of the immigrant minorities of the country of residence. A vital theme addressed by many artists is the need to develop a more solid and self-critical identity, in response to the distance of (self-)exile. Artists are able to reinvent themselves through the renegotiation of their identity.

Marco Pando arrived in Amsterdam in 2006 and it was during his return trips to Peru that he rediscovered his country, filtered through the estrangement of a displaced native. This is what led to his reflecting upon the degree to which he had absorbed a “European” sensibility, and just how “Peruvian” he continued to feel.

Gradually, ideas associated with the notion of identity began to creep into his work, inspired in part by a dialogue with the art of cinematography; his family ran a movie theater in the city of Cajamarca, where he was raised. From 2010 to 2014 he shot *Back to the Temple of the Sun*, a film which, by appropriating the eponymous character from the Belgian “Tintin” comic strips, focused on Peru and the Andean world from an ostensibly European perspective, with a Peruvian actor playing the alter ego of the artist. The aim was to deconstruct the notion of the “exotic”, as perceived by European eyes, through magical-religious references as well as the use of apparently precarious objects and implements. Tintin is the archetypal North-European traveler in strange

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and inhospitable colonial lands, and as such he represents the gradual emergence of a postcolonial awareness on the part of the artist, who would subsequently travel to the former Dutch colony of Suriname (2014-15), in search of cultural vestiges of the mother country in South America.

It is with this in mind that he examines situations that can be seen as mirroring the paintings of certain Dutch artists of the early 20th century, for example in the metallic structures of a children's playground in a Paramaribo park, or in the bags woven from plastic fibers into geometric patterns, found in a market within that same city. Here, the artist is investigating the appropriation and transformation of what originally were innovative, avant-garde visual approaches, which over time have become trivialized through industrialized mass reproduction, and transformed into common objects of everyday popular culture.

Marco Pando seeks to understand both the continuity and the breakdown of the Dutch cultural legacy, through the colonial experience in Suriname and the local hybrid popular culture—the product of the combined symbols of immigrant communities from the Indian subcontinent, the Caribbean, Africa and Europe, as well as the preexisting indigenous population. In this way, he aims to grasp the ways in which the non-European other is perceived; that group of which he is a part. Such diversity contains echoes of his homeland: Peru is a multiethnic country with more than sixty living languages, enormous geographical diversity and vast natural resources; but at the same time it is home to tremendous social, economic and cultural inequalities, combined with a pervasive postcolonial legacy.

The museum as a shaping mechanism

Suriname offered the artist clues through which he was able to connect the avant-garde legacy of Dutch artists with the contemporary popular design that emerged a century later. The reverse process—from popular aesthetic to museum piece—is even more complex, for it is a process of validation defined by the notion of a museum as a space that confers legitimacy and recognition. Museums institutionalize official history, while at the same time exhibiting the exoticism associated with peoples both extinct and living, segregated by cultural hegemony and therefore denied their own distinct voice.

Through his work, Marco Pando seeks to recover the latent symbolism of objects sequestered and exhibited by the world's museums. He understands that many such objects—rendered inert and functionless—form part of rituals and living traditions which the modern western scientific gaze has separated from their original contexts. Many of them were taken during colonial-era looting, or as the spoils of war, gathered during scientific expeditions, donated by private collectors, stolen by traffickers in cultural artifacts, or simply confiscated, while others were recovered through repatriation.

It is in this context that the artist seeks, in the shadows cast by such objects and their phantasmal projections, silhouettes and forms that might offer them some kind of poetic release from the imprisonment they endure. These objects exhibited as testimonies to cultural diversity in institutions with either an anthropological or artistic focus are unable to recount their own history. Therein lies the power of the museum, in its control of the manner in which objects are presented and exhibited by an institution concerned with its authority as the guardian of the exceptional or estimable.

Tomb raider: hero and/or counterfeiter

In Peru and Ecuador, the verb *huaquear* is translated as the activity of hunting for and trafficking in hidden or buried archaeological treasures. By virtue of his activities, the tomb raider, or *huaquero*, is seen as a controversial figure; he makes his living through the sale of what he is able to unearth from open land, or from archaeological sites that remain unacknowledged or have been abandoned by official institutions. This action transforms him into an anonymous, clandestine trafficker, and at the same time a link in a chain of intermediaries leading ultimately to museums, as the final repositories of such disinterred treasures.

The *huaquero* is perceived as a shadowy figure, condemned by society as a thief or destroyer of cultural heritage. But perhaps he ought to be seen at the same time as an artisan, inventor and de-creator of tradition, as part of a reinterpretation of material culture categorized by some as counterfeiting. His role within archaeology has been relegated to that of a minor player; a guide, perhaps, or an informant or supplier... but always peripheral. His position outside academia has disqualified him from the role of acceptable interlocutor, much less that of a participant in

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institutional life.

We might reasonably speculate that for a *huaquero* who has recreated or *faked* an object, his greatest satisfaction (tinged perhaps with vengefulness) would be derived from leafing through mainstream archaeological publications or canonical museum catalogues and finding objects created by his own hand described as genuine ancient artifacts: evidence of the fact that the study of history and human knowledge is not without its hazards, and is far from immune to controversy or unexposed secrets.

And that is why the “museum tomb raider” exhibition invites the visitor to engage actively in the experience, by comparing that which is of doubtful origin with that which is certifiably genuine and, from this constructed fiction, reevaluating what we know to be, or perceive, as genuine. The artist creates a contemporary link with the museum, through the generating of pseudo-archaeological objects that bear witness to our present-day civilization, in spite of their apparently coarse aesthetic and fake antiquity: the artist uses history to generate newly relevant narratives intended to function as commentaries on the present moment. In this context, the artist’s construction of the “museum tomb raider” can be seen as that of an unwilling hero; a liberator of the relational spirits and concepts inherent in objects trapped within the authoritarian narrative of the traditional museum. In the words of Marco Pando: “The museum *huaquero* is a rescuer of objects (from the shadows), so that he can reveal their origin”. For the purposes of this project, those objects originated in Peru, Latin America, Africa and Europe.

Shadows as testaments to an (absent) original

The actions of this fictitious *huaquero* invite us to think again about what we think we know, from other perspectives, in this case through the projecting of flat shadows, images and abstract motifs, which allude to cultural references as diverse as Plato’s allegory of the cave (which focuses upon the theme of knowledge and freedom, through the perception of shadows rather than the real objects which cast those shadows), or the Rorschach Test in psychology (involving the interpretation of inkblots, a projective test employed in analysis of individual personality traits and emotional functioning).

Shadows tend to be associated with an ill-formed, threatening presence which awakens projected fears and anxieties, but this is merely one possible interpretation. Shadows can also cause us to focus upon the ephemeral, as they are modified by the angle of light, recalling therefore the potential for transformation. And, at the same time, more humorously and randomly perhaps, shadows and silhouettes can inspire notions of association and connectivity, in this case by evoking, through certain formal similarities and correlations, cultural references familiar to the visitor.

It is important to remember that the shadow recalls or invokes the original, and that in this sense a “museum of shadows” calls in a poetic manner for the restitution of cultural objects and goods looted as part of a colonialist dynamic. Here we perceive an allusion to magical-religious ritual, in the evocation of an original object in the possession of the other, in the form of a miniature, copy or fetish, fed by the power of the image.

The poetics of museum decolonization

In this way, the narrative chosen for this fiction seeks to challenge the conventional way of seeing the museum. Marco Pando offers a visual art exhibition that addresses postcolonial postures, to the extent that his proposal constitutes a poetic criticism of the predominant narrative model adhered to by the anthropological museums of Europe, which were established during the heyday of colonial consolidation: the presentation of cultural material from “the rest of the world”, according to formal and geographic categories. Often, such objects are isolated from relevant contextualization and removed from the logic of their cultural origins.

The entire exhibition playfully mimics a museum—in its range of objects, as well as their form and presentation—through created pieces that recall a number of archetypes. With this exhibition, the artist is commenting upon the canonical organization and approach of the European anthropological museum (the hegemonic model of which was replicated extensively throughout erstwhile colonies): through his (re)creation, the artist generates a displacement of the senses, enabling us to understand that we are looking at more than an historical fact; we are being presented with a manifesto instructing us on how to view what looks to us like an anthropological museum.

By working with material cultural references (pottery vessels, sculptures, totems, masks), Marco Pando explores forms associated with the collective imagery of ancient heritage, but the objects and relationships he presents have a very direct connection with the contemporary world, as he transforms recycled objects into art, by highlighting associations with both the ruined and the monumental. Beyond the merely aesthetic, his indirect commentary (or counterfeit creation) addresses the social setting which produces this type of industrial waste (as in *Plastic Ceramic* or *Transformer*), or which generates, through self-built working class urbanization, material hybridizations of doubtful imperishability (as in the case of *Totem I* and *Totem II*).

That “dignifying” of common and even industrial materials through forms historically consecrated by the history of art, enables this exhibition to question the authority of the anthropological museum, as it was defined in the 19th century. The intervention of the artist (in the video *Projected Museum*) provides us with a sense of the scale and influence of those European museums, and the smallest gesture of the artist—interfering with officially accepted museum design through the introduction of silhouetted shadows—lends those same shadows an independence: they are not passive objects... they seek to adopt a position, but as they roam they remain defined by their “frozen” and “sequestered” originals. Strikingly, because they are arranged in corridors, these shadows are transformed into characters raised up to an equal footing with the museum’s visitors—many of whom are themselves Europeans. And here lies this artist’s paradox: the practicing of a creative endeavor becomes a method for exorcizing the exoticism that is felt by the migrant. The anthropological museum is seen as a space for understanding the colonial process of perceiving the other as different, exotic and “primitive”—in the name of modern science and “universal” knowledge.

Decolonizing the museum is a way of debating its method, and of proposing new methods and alternative approaches. The museum matters because it is a space for reflection concerning history and memory, and because official history is always written by the victors—by hegemonic society. Transforming the museum means questioning authority and creating more horizontal relations, eroding the traditional dynamic in which the exercise of power by “us” over (the voiceless) “them”, based upon accepted traditions, continues unquestioned. Decolonizing the museum means changing the ways in which objects are displayed.

Promoting a dialogue between transversal histories—dissident, negated, or “forgotten”—is one way in which the museum can be reinvented in order to attract a wider public who might not necessarily share the official history.

Within contemporary art many strategies are practiced where no single method exists. Marco Pando’s narrative approach forms part of a growing debate surrounding the return and repatriation of cultural treasures and artifacts exhibited in European museums as a result of colonial-era plundering. The criticism leveled at these museums includes the accusation of their having legitimized a history of dominance by assuming ownership of cultural objects.

Cultural heritage in the era of cognitive capitalism

All that we have discussed so far has a bearing on what we now call cultural heritage; the cultural baggage that defines the identity of a civilization in terms of its artistic and societal achievements. And that of course is the job of museums: to watch over and protect cultural heritage valued by virtue of its exceptional quality, as we have already indicated.

A non-European and non-white artist like Marco Pando, who analyzes in the 21st century objects from Africa, the Americas and Europe through the appropriation of their shadows in museums in Berlin, Madrid, Basel and Lima, all of them founded upon the positivist European model of the 19th century and products of evolutionism during what was a period of massive colonial expansion, is not conducting an exercise in the tracing of forms; he is presenting a critical reading of a model of cultural appropriation and translation. And that action involves commentary upon what is a shared collective sensibility, the spirit of an age (the *Zeitgeist*).

If cultural heritage (and the experience of cultural heritage) is transformed into merchandise through the tourism sector of an economy, that same heritage, rethought and reinterpreted by artists, will be appropriated by the design and entertainment industries and transformed into products for mass consumption.

From this perspective, art always implies the generating of value, and even more so in the current Information Age. In our own time, knowledge is information processed and synthesized experientially.

Marco Pando understands that we live in period of cognitive capitalism, in which the management of information is defined by intellectual property, the consequent privatization of social knowledge, and its endless commodification. And this understanding is expressed in art, that most sophisticated of contemporary economic spheres, concerned with the creation of value, and one of the most high-growth areas of the entire global economy.

In a time of growing nationalisms, in which prominent symbols of cultural and intangible heritage are tendentially extolled in order to reinforce notions of purity or cultural unity in the face of the other (seen as the enemy), aesthetic positions like those of the artist signal new discourses through which to address (and reexamine) what is perceived as true and authentic by virtue of not being alien or readapted from other milieus. In today's world purity is a myth; we are all part of a constant mixing and mutation, a process necessary for adaptation to the changing contexts we face.

Thoughts on a self-reflexive museum

The direct relationship between the *Museum of Shadows* installation and the pottery room located in the basement of the main building of the Central Museum, invites commentary concerning the opposition and complementarity that define two perspectives on cultural heritage: the accepted tropes of traditional archaeology, and more contemporary currents for which validation is sought. In a country like Peru, the complexities of the present are viewed with little affection, while the past is idealized and viewed as an exploitable economic resource by the tourism industry. Housed in similar architectural spaces, both installations generate a poetic duality of presences/absences which by extension make us participants in the enveloping theatricality of the museum.

This reflects the way in which parallels are established between the ancient architecture of stepped pyramids (present in the Pre-Hispanic Americas as well as in Assyria-Chaldea, Babylonia and Egypt) and modern rationalist architecture (the so-called international style) in the painting *Dutch Mountain*. Here, the "museum tomb raider" appears to be honoring archaeological sites, while also acknowledging the modern and generic architecture commonly found in cities that often appear interchangeable: both are characterized by simple geometric forms and structural details, devoid of superimposed decoration... or that, at least, is how we perceive them today.

In our own era, marked by the flexible nature of all aspects of individual, work and social life, a product of the international neoliberal order (from 1980 onwards), museums have sought to reinvent themselves as secular temples of knowledge and culture, confronted as they are by the expansion and overwhelming diversification of the entertainment industries (be they real or virtual).

When the Uruguayan artist Luis Camnitzer presented his project "The museum is a school: the artist learns to communicate, the public makes connections", he was asking us to see the museum as a machine, through which we might critically reimagine the reality around us and see how activities within the museum space include all those involved: *in other words, those who visit a museum seek to challenge their sense of wellbeing and/or comfort* in order to reevaluate their own privileges, convictions and certainties. This invitation to the notion of a project that seeks to host activities and activations in the form of discussion and debate, points the way towards an understanding of museums as living spaces for collective thought, while taking into account their societal context. In this sense, Marco Pando offers a commentary on the existing mechanisms of anthropological museums, seeking to provoke in the visitor a desire to review and reevaluate their understanding—as critically as possible—of the museum as device and cultural machine.

By way of conclusion

The character of the *museum tomb raider* can be understood as a reconfiguration of what is supposedly known, a quest for authenticity in the interests of arriving at a different interpretation. That is why as viewers we are being asked to focus upon these strangely-shaped shadows, and also upon those objects and images that appear recognizable to us; and through such parallels we are being asked to reflect upon what we had assumed to be truths, and upon the hegemonic values we share (or suffer under). And, at the same time, we are being asked to consider just how subordinate we are to thought structures we have not mastered, but which we reproduce unconsciously within the religious, educational or ideological canons to which we adhere.

The *museum tomb raider* employs indirect messages through liberating phantoms or revolutionary shadows—in accordance with the spatial coordinates and gender, class and ethnic conditioning through which they are viewed. These artworks present us with opaque mirrors and an element of farce, inviting us through their mysteries to look at life and reassess its existential challenges.

—Text and curatorship by Carlos León-XJimenez

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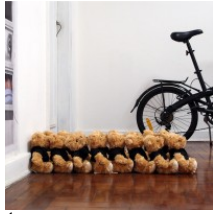
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