

Ushering the International: Considering the Global Museum Franchise

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The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation has been actively pursuing expansion by opening franchises internationally. The Guggenheim Museum of Bilbao was met with much controversy leading up to its inception in 1997. The structure itself is ominous, and all too easily reflects American expansion through globalisation. This paper proposes a deeper examination of the economic and political conditions surrounding the structure. The GMB can be seen as a product of neo-liberal ideology informing the prosperity of foreign nations. Peripheral powers are therefore not directly oppressed by the corporate center yet must abide by its logic, compromising local authenticity. Andrea Fraser's *Little Frank and his Carp* will be used to uncover some of the hegemonic mechanisms of the Institution of Art, applying them to cultural tourism advocated by the GMB. The shift from museum as enforcer of aesthetic authority, to symbol of heterogeneous freedom will also be problematized within the specific context of the GMB.

The 1997 appearance of a Guggenheim franchise in Bilbao must be examined from a political and geographical standpoint to properly map the multiple negotiations between involved parties. The city of Bilbao suffered a recession between 1979 and 1985 when nearly 25% of the population suffered from unemployment, leading to an active civic engagement with tourism development in the late 1980s.¹ The Partido Nacional Vasco (PNV) is the Basque Nationalist party. Its main goals are to restore political and economic autonomy within the re-

gion, functioning separately from the central Spanish government. An ongoing hostility between this peripheral region and the Spanish state led to its exclusion from the Spanish cultural renaissance of the 1990s. The PNV also wanted to distance itself from the nationalist extremism of the Euzkadi'ta Azkatasuna, Basque Land of Freedom (ETA), which was responsible for the terrorism marking the region.² The Museum was therefore intended to reconfigure the legacy of bloodshed and external oppression. The desire was to move beyond the lasting roots of Guernica and inaugurate a new era of prosperity with this architectural icon.³

Basque national identity must be considered in order to understand the consequences of establishing an international art museum as Bilbao's main cultural edifice. Basque identity, as McNeil explains is now defined culturally, with the Basque language Euskera being the main element of national pride. The *aberzale* (Basque patriot) ideology considers Basque independence in cultural terms. Their views are often supported by Marxian interpretations, attributing the underdevelopment of the region to centralism and capitalism.⁴ With this historical and present context taken into account, the opening of the Guggenheim in Bilbao can be seen to gravely conflict with existing local belief systems. Firstly, the Bilbao museum eradicates a sense of the local by aligning the Basque region with the global center. This centralism, masked as regional progression because it bypasses the state, effectively compromises local artistic cultural production in favour of corporate homogenisation. The project used 80% of Basque culture budget, endangering grassroots efforts in the arts.⁵ This was an evident investment in Bilbao's international image.

This local political climate is just one layer of the manipulative forces acting behind the emergence of such a site. The negotiations between the PNV and head of the Guggenheim foundation also points to the imbalance of power within large scale globalising projects. The international chic appeal of Spain was not the sole factor attracting the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation to Bilbao. The Guggenheim's attraction to Bilbao was dependent on the city's weaknesses. It became worthy prey for the trans-national corporation, which utilises the strategies of seduction to dictate peripheral progression for their own economic expansion. The late 80s and early 90s were marked by cuts to cultural funding in the United States, forcing institutions to seek out private funding more aggressively.⁶

Thomas Krens' seduction sells the concept of international culture, distinct from authentic local culture. This branded global culture, as a business model of Krens', shifts the value of European canonized artworks from cultural to economic.⁷ This conception of culture is rooted in bourgeois ideals and the branding of museums signals an expansion of those ideals into the public realm where the middle class is invited to contribute by way of consumption. The branded institution is by definition a controlled zone. The autonomy of art is therefore mediated by the institutions which contain and define it.⁸ Culture becomes a commodity owned by the Guggenheim foundation. As it is subsequently sold to the Basque government as a political and economic tool, it is finally placed on the global market as touristic goods. The definition of culture is thus prescribed by the institution.

Andrea Fraser's site specific performance *Little Frank and his Carp* critically engages with the internationalisation of museum ideology. Before investigating the work, consider this quote by Fraser:

As an institutional critic with commitment to self-reflexive analysis, my tendency is to assume that if the corporatisation of museums is moving forward at such an extraordinarily rapid pace, it can only be because it is consistent, on some level, with the interests and orientations of museum professionals and artists- including artists like myself- who staff and supply them; because we have accepted these trends as inevitable, necessary or even desirable.⁹

This statement positions Fraser within a particular interpretive context: the Western Art Institution. Her work cannot be read outside of this context because, as she mentions, she supports the institution and her critical practice is dependent on its shortcomings. The imposing nature and the carefully designed seduction tactics of the Guggenheim foundation are contested in Fraser's performance. *Little Frank and his Carp* (2001) is a 6 minute film of Fraser forgoing her role as insider art idol for the unassuming one of middle class museum goer. She places her experience of the GMB in the hands of the institution, making literal the audio-guide tour to its fullest extent. As opposed to elitist reputations of the past, museums today take active measures in educating their art-ignorant audiences, arming them for a more engaged visitor experience.¹⁰ Does this provide museum goers with the prerequisites for freer heterogeneous tourism? Or is the very conception of cultural freedom delineated by the institution and tourism a symptom of its self-interest?

Pierre Bourdieu explains that the museum aesthetic supposes a “distance from the world” which mirrors the bourgeois experience of the world. The ideology of this aesthetic is essentialist. Like any other essentialist concept, it implies subordination and obedience of one class in the service of another’s hegemony.¹¹ The museum exists as a paradox. It projects an image of economic disinterest, yet depends entirely on its market success. The GMB represents this contradictory position phenomenally, for it responds to both the aesthetic appeal of transcendental art, denying the commercial, while embodying the ideological requirements of the bourgeoisie. According to Bourdieu, this follows the same logic as pre-capitalist economy, by pretending not to be doing what they are in reality doing- functioning in their own economic interests. “They” in this case are the directors of projects such as the GMB. The pursuit of “symbolic capital” defined as economic or political capital disguised as other and therefore legitimized.¹²

Cultural diplomacy is a central strategy utilised by the foundation to cultivate a safe zone for corporate expansion. Cultural diplomacy, “the exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples to foster mutual understanding, makes up a critical component of public diplomacy, which can be loosely defined as all a nation does to present itself to the world.”¹³ By aligning itself with the betterment of the Basque future, the GMB redefines the national identity of its location, an American icon becoming its cultural centre. This new identity is dependent on the economic success of tourism and a positive globally recognised image. The museum promises both. The only hope for the threatened is to assimilate to the new, international image of nationhood. Spectacular new architecture plays the same role as traveling exhibitions or international art fairs by establishing host cities as global competitors.¹⁴ National architecture or cultural festivals function as a “repackaging of the imagery” of the national political entity. Brian Wallis questions this reconstruction of nations through culture. What is shown or excluded and why and who might be framing these repackaged culture?¹⁵ The aspiration to cultural remodelling is in the interest of parties seeking to gain power both politically and economically. What occurs is a negotiation between the political and the corporate, at the expense of the local.

The GMB, as both an architectural sculpture and cultural space, has been promoted through media attention as a symbol of “radical heterogeneity” and “a place of contested borders” reflecting the nature of the Basque nation.¹⁶ It is

therefore marketed not only as an intrusion on the territory and culture of Bilbao, but a complimentary accessory which downplays the negative connotations associated with the city. Consider this excerpt about Gehry's obsession with the fish motif from the audio guide: "He dates his obsession from the days when he used to go with his grandmother to market to buy live carp." This aligns him with a preindustrial era of consumption, sympathising with local market concerns. The transformation to the monolith of global consumerism is legitimized through Gehry's artistic "vision," associated with a cultural authenticity of his own past.¹⁷ The GMB showcases work by local artists, advocating a loyalty to the region. Yet, this national visibility is limited in that the artists are not contemporary but from the 1920s. Their work is easily translatable into touristic commodities such as postcards and coffee table books. The representation of Basque culture is purely serviceable to the American bourgeoisie, who show little interest in current artistic production of the region.¹⁸ The Basque art is included yet remains static; it is repackaged not as international but as a regional fixity which highlights the diversity of the exhibited American art and the structure of the GMB itself. It must be mentioned that peripheral local art practices have benefited, though incidentally, from the GMB as tourist pilgrimage site. The city of Bilbao is now attracting a global audience whose willingness to consume extends to smaller art practices.

The cultural diplomacy employed by such institutions is closely linked to cultural tourism which shares the middle class values of secular education, social gain and entertainment.¹⁹ Are these not the values of the American middle-class, and those which encourage the rapid spreading of homogeneity? Perhaps, yet the Guggenheim of Bilbao does not associate itself with those values, effectively masking its neo-liberalist agenda. The GMB presents an image of change, progress and transgression, in an attempt to counter criticisms of its homogenising effects. It is therefore evident that it embodies and reflects institutional transgression. It is known that "art for art's sake" was abandoned when the modernist age reached a close. Just as art practices have evolved, so too have the institutions which house them. The new slogan might be, "change for the sake of change."²⁰

The most prevailing word throughout the audio guide is undeniably "freedom". This promised universal "freedom" is prescribed, and thus false. In deconstructing the various meanings of the term, and how it is used as a strategy for public appeasement we can locate the real purpose of this ideology of open-

ness. There is an emphasis on the unearthing of lost cultural authenticity, individualism and self-transformation and excitement for future progress within a flexible, progressive framework. Pervading all these ideas that define the new freedom is a global awareness.²¹ Although there is much to be contested about the negotiations leading up to its inception and the way it has affected the identity of locals since it opened its doors in 1997, its success in placing the city on the global map cannot be ignored. It represents something huge: a new cultural dynamic in which hegemony is practiced globally, within a network of transnational elites. The bridges created between nations inform the pluralistic attitudes of international museums; they are needed to promote a positive image for the transnational business model.²² We must question the success of such a site, for it establishes ideologies of the global market as the only means for progress. The economic success of the city's renewal plan overshadows these less tangible outcomes of American soft power.

This global dynamism which the GMB represents is precisely why it becomes a magnet for American artists like Fraser. Developing out of the now canonised movement known as Institutional Critique, her work cannot be separated from the paradox of the Museum. We might view such artistic projects as reinforcing the heterogeneous image of the GMB. If we accept this hypothesis, Fraser's work is utilised by the Institution to prove its self-reflexivity. No longer a heartless entity, it is transformed into a corporation with a conscience. It welcomes contemporary art discourses, including those that put it into question. The problem is that the critique is bound to the American art institution itself, which only widens the gap between local visibility and foreign domination in the culture realm. While the discourse around Fraser's work problematizes infringement on local arts culture, it is ultimately grounded in a universalising museology. It lacks the geographical specificity necessary to be political in the present. Her role as International Biennale star representing America is vital to her capacity for creating such works. Her position is privileged because of what she represents for the Institution, its non-imperialist attitude and utopic artistic freedom. Fraser is undoubtedly aware of the paradoxical nature of her practice. She rightly locates herself within ambiguities, not proposing any solution, not seeing the potential for one.

This essay has examined the political and economic conditions surrounding the inception of the Guggenheim branch in Basque. It has considered both the motivations of the PNV and the Solomon R. Guggenheim foundation, as well as

how negotiations were informed by private interests. Through an analysis of Andrea Fraser's *Little Frank and his Carp*, the strategies utilised by the Institution have been exposed: the essentialist aesthetic of the art museum and the false freedom it promises, cultural diplomacy as a homogenising force and a superficial alignment with local culture which removes its agency in the contemporary realm of production and institutional transgression. All of these underscore the need for progress on the global front, in which neo-liberal ideologies inform the security of foreign nations. Whether or not this process is more helpful than it is hindering (as has been suggested by reports in Basque economic development), national identity is compromised in the pursuit of international recognition. The pervasiveness of museum corporate expansion might desensitize the public to the dangers it presents. As consequence, academic discourse becomes a productive space for inquiry as hegemony is increasingly disguised.

Endnotes

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4. McNeil, 488.
5. McNeil, 489.
6. Brooksband, 162.
7. McNeil, 482.
8. Julian Stallabrass, *Contemporary Art, A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2004), 100.
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12. Pierre Bourdieu, "The Production of Belief: Contribution to an Economy of Symbolic Goods" in *The Field of Cultural Production*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 75.
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16. Fraser, *Museum Highlights*, 238.

17. Fraser, *Museum Highlights*, 253.

18. McNeil, 489.

19. Van den Bosch, 82.

20. Fraser, *Museum Highlights*, 155.

21. Fraser, *Museum Highlights*, 55.

22. Van den Bosch, 85.