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Close Encounters with Foreign Space/craft:

The Role of the “Alien” within the Development of Contemporary Art Centres

ABSTRACT

A significant and somewhat under-examined by-product of the recent ‘museum boom’ is the prevalence of large-scale centres for the design and production of contemporary art within cities all over the world. Abstaining from the usual practice of establishing a permanent collection of artworks, these centres instead base their entire operation around a perpetuating series of contemporary exhibitions and events. Despite the increasing popularity of both contemporary art and this exhibition-based program, many cities have nonetheless found it increasingly difficult to position these contemporary art centres within their existing cultural framework, with many being perceived as a foreign or “alien” presence in the urban landscape. This inherently “alien” design discourse has traditionally been seen as a detrimental characteristic, as it was viewed as encompassing a somewhat hostile operational logic in regards to the city and its residents. As a result, many contemporary art centres attempted to conceal or deny this “alien-ness”, masking it via a series of quotidian architectural gestures and a discourse of highly localised inclusivity.

However, what this paper seeks to demonstrate is that the increasing trend towards a globalised contemporary arts discourse, along with the nomadic nature of contemporary art and artists, has resulted in a reversal of this position. In place of attempting to conceal the foreign nature of their design and operation, many newer art centres have instead utilised this “alien” discourse as a means of harnessing the attention of viewers at a larger, international level. As will be shown, the utilisation of this discourse has, somewhat ironically, resulted in the development of a more fluid and symbiotic relationship between these centres and the cities in which they inhabit. Examining the design and function of several key art centres in Germany, Austria, China and Japan, this paper will also demonstrate how, in the process of fostering of this “alien” discourse, many centres have managed to circumvent traditional cultural categorisations such as local versus foreign art and architecture, the respective roles of the curator, artist and architect, as well as the relationship between the exhibit, the exhibition and the spatial envelope of the gallery space.

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The last two decades have seen an unprecedented rise in the number of contemporary art centres the world over. Hitherto occupying a peripheral position within the city’s cultural landscape, the construction of these newer, non-collecting institutions has resulted in contemporary art centres being thrust into the forefront of critical and architectural discourse. Along with this increase in exposure, the construction of more recent art centres has concurrently resulted in an increasing number of voices opposing such projects. Although this dissent encompasses a variety of issues, one reoccurring hurdle commonly encountered by these projects concerns the perceived alien-ness of the proposed institution. Examples of this “alienaeity” abound in the discourse surrounding

each new centre, as projects the world over are talked about in terms of having 'risen from the earth'¹ or 'landing from outer space',² while others are compared to 'monsters' or 'tumours', invading the city from some far-off world.³ In some cases, even artists themselves have acknowledged the "alienaeity" of the contemporary art centre. For example, in a publication dedicated to the types of contemporary art institutions expected in the twenty-first century, the Austrian artist Erwin Wurm called for the creation of 'a space station in which all the extraterrestrials can make a rest between their journeys.'⁴

Of course, the associations drawn between these strange new centres and aliens is neither new, nor confined to the realm of contemporary art. Indeed, according to Professor Michael Lieb, this desire to semantically link unfamiliar manifestations to aliens stems from a desire to 'technologise the ineffable'; a distinctly historical reaction against that which is 'submerged within the "mysterium" of the unknowable vision [and] cries out for *objectification*, for individualisation, for the bestowal of a name.'⁵ Within a discussion of contemporary art and its space of display, this idea of *objectifying* the unknowable "alien" occurs at both architectural and institutional levels, and especially encompasses contemporary manifestations. The institutional ineffable in this case is a reaction to the lack of permanency that permeates contemporary arts practice, something that contemporary museums are able to offset by grounding their program and image around a fixed historical precedent. Thus, museological institutions such as Paris's Centre Pompidou, which would normally appear to be architecturally "alien" to the cities in which they reside, are able to ultimately counterbalance this foreignness with the programmatic sureties inherent within the Musée National d'art Moderne's name and collection.

Contemporary art centres, on the other hand, lack such permanent counterbalances, dealing instead with the decidedly indistinct concept of perpetual contemporaneity; a foreignness that is continually exploited by the conservative press. As Mieke Bal astutely observed:

[I]t is quite normal, historically speaking, that whenever an established discipline experiences the emergence or growth within its midst of an alternative paradigm, the more conservative crowd, which is happy enough with the status quo, will become defensive. Yet it is of crucial importance for the health, even the survival, of a discipline

1. These comments pertain to the Melbourne's Australian Centre for Contemporary Art and can be seen in Coslovich, 2002 Halliday, 2005; Jackson, 2007; and RA Magazine, 2002.

2. Wood, 2004.

3. These quotes stem from the commentary surrounding both the Kunsthalle Wien and the Kunsthhaus Graz (specifically de Frantz, 2005 and Presse, 1992). Using these two case studies as an example, one can find prevalent "alien" analogies in Bast, 2003; Bogner, 2004; Ebony, 2003; Grazer Woche, 2003; Grohmann, 2004; Horny, 2003a; Kronen Zeitung, 1992; Pearman, 2004; Scharf, 2003; Schmidmaier, 2003a; Schmidmaier, 2003b; Tollerian, 2005; and Winter, 2003.

4. Cited in Sans and Sanchez, 2001.

5. Lieb, 1998 (original emphasis). Within this book, Lieb demonstrates how such an occurrence – which he traces back to the ambiguity of Ezekiel's *visio Dei* as described in the Old Testament – is employed within all attempts to comprehend the existence of the unfamiliar within the realm of the familiar; a response that encompasses race relations, apocalyptic predictions, UFO sightings as well as religious epiphanies. Lieb, 1998: pp.42–73; also Lieb, 1991.

ultimately to let innovations — which may appear as *alienations* — have a serious chance against the danger of stultification ... [Nevertheless] instead of acknowledging the innovative approach that their more adventurous colleagues propose, and at least engaging in a debate, disciplinarians on the defensive will consider such colleagues to be *alien* invaders of their turf.⁶

As Bal correctly points out, the problems facing this ‘alternative paradigm’ are twofold. Not only is it an unknown entity to a vast majority of the local inhabitants, it is also, by its very nature, inherently complex and somewhat confrontational; a situation that both the art centre and its practitioners must continually work to manage. This inherent ambiguity surrounding contemporary arts practice contributes to a sense of apprehension in the minds of many who are content with the sureties of historical arts practice and stems from a fundamental uncertainty as to what the ‘mysterium’ of contemporary art should *look like* and how it should *function*. Lacking a definite institutional vocabulary by which to convey these practices to the local population, much contemporary commentary tends to fall back upon indeterminate metaphors or other-worldly references.⁷

In order to alleviate this concern, contemporary art centre projects have traditionally gone to great lengths to conceal or mask their “alien-ness”; generally via an attempt to fuse the centre’s appearance and programme to the local landscape or community. For example, when the go-ahead was finally given to Vienna’s Museumsquartier project, the Kunsthalle Wien was not only concealed behind the neo-baroque wall that rings the entire complex, but was also placed at the rear of the newly-restored Winter Riding Hall; creating a twofold veil in which to shroud the precinct’s most “alien” manifestation. Similar acts of concealment can also be observed in the case of contemporary art centres that are located within former factory complexes, such as the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (Mass MOCA), or BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art in the English city of Gateshead. In both cases, the industrial façade of each building effectively conceals the post-industrial activities of the institution, as well as grounding the alien spacecraft within the colloquial architectural discourse of the city.

Although this strategy has met with varying degrees of success, it nonetheless fails to acknowledge the uniqueness of the contemporary art centre’s programme; in some cases, making the centre indistinguishable from other major museum projects. Thus you have a situation whereby much of the commentary surrounding the opening of BALTIC in Gateshead mirrors that of London’s Tate Modern, which had opened two years previously.⁸ Whilst this strategy certainly may benefit the more marginal art centre in

6. Bal et al., 1996, p. 8 (my emphasis).

7. It is also interesting to note the source of this quote, which was recorded in the book *What Do You Expect From an Art Institution in the 21st Century?* that was published by Paris’s Palais de Tokyo in 2001. In addition to displaying an equivocal tone throughout, this publication also chose to supplement each entry with a low-definition ‘computerised’ bullet; many of which resemble the alien creatures created for video games in the early-1980s.

8. See, for example Heartney, 2000; Cartmell, 2002; Cumming, 2002; Cork, 2002; Engelbrecht, 2002; Gayford, 2002; Hickling, 2002; Holledge, 2007; Sieghart, 2002; Sudjic, 2002; Taylor, 2002; Whetstone, 2002; or Willoughby, 2002.

terms of media exposure, it also has the very real potential to offset many of the supposed gains inherent within the establishment of the centre in the first place. For example, in the case of the Tate Modern/BALTIC commentary, the latter institution does not, on its own, appear to offer all that much an allure for cultural tourist to the north-east and away from the (larger and more accessible) cultural hub that is London.⁹

Faced with the possibility of their centre being submerged within this more general cultural or museological discourse, many other cities have recently opted for a contrasting strategy. As opposed to denying the alien-ness of the contemporary art centre, these institutions have instead chosen to embrace — and indeed emphasise — all that distinguishes them from other museums and the local landscape in which they inhabit. This implicit acknowledgement of the alien, it will be argued, replaces the perceived hostility of such centres — that is, the idea that they represent a “monster” or “tumour” within the urban landscape — with a far more amicable and approachable appearance; resulting, on many occasions, in the region wholeheartedly embracing this friendly alien being (even if it are still unsure as to the exact nature of its contents).



Fig. 1. Kunsthaus Graz, view from the Schlossberg. (Photograph courtesy the Universalmuseum Joanneum, Nicolas Lackner.)

Despite the obvious institutional precedents set by organisations such as the Centre Pompidou, the benchmark for this “friendly” institutional turn is surely the Kunsthaus Graz (Fig. 1), which was opened towards the end of the city’s ‘Capital of Culture’ celebrations in 2003. Officially dubbed the ‘Friendly Alien’, the Kunsthaus implicitly

9. *Art Monthly*’s Paul Usherwood asks: ‘[Will Baltic] prove sufficiently spectacular to lure art tourists away from London?’ (Usherwood, 2002), while *The Guardian*’s Adrian Searle and *The Observer*’s Laura Cumming have also expressed concern at the centre’s ability to attract tourists and investment away from London (Searle, 2002 and Cumming, 2002).

acknowledges — and indeed plays upon — the foreign nature of its form, content and programming. As Colin Fournier — one half of the architectural duo ‘Spacelab Cook+Fournier’ — has stated:

We wanted to establish the ‘alien’ nature of the new object ... quite simply, because we wanted it to look cuddly and friendly ... an improbable mixture of various species, an unclassifiable hybrid, a bio-morphic presence that is both strange (it does not seek to make reference to any animal in particular but appears to be a creature to which evolution might have accidentally given birth on another planet), and at the same time familiar in that it has the charm of a friendly mixed-breed street dog.¹⁰

Fournier’s comments place the Kunsthau Graz in direct opposition to the assimilative drive of the contemporary art centres mentioned above. In contrast to these centres, the undulating and bulbous form of the Kunsthau Graz is never far from viewers’ peripheral vision as they make their way both through its internal spaces, as well as around the streets neighbouring it. According to Adam Budak (one of the Kunsthau’s head curators), this sustained structural presence creates an engaged experience of art and architecture in which the entire building acts as a shifting mediator between the spectator and their surrounding environment. Recalling the comments of Peter Schjeldahl who, when talking about Gehry’s Guggenheim, commented that ‘it isn’t exhibitionistic, but performative. It is *on*’,¹¹ Budak notes that:

In a similar way, Kunsthau Graz delivers its architecture of uncanny appeal in a sequence of multiple selves and artistic allure. As such, with its rhetoric of senses it challenges perceptive quality and offers its space in an open performative act of staging ... The architecture is *on*: an event (a spectacle of illusion itself) is about to happen. A performance begins.¹²

This idea of the Kunsthau as an alluring, performative presence within the artistic and architectural surrounds of the city again reinforces the “alien” nature of its form and activities. Of particular note is the manner in which the Kunsthau was able to establish its presence within Graz’s cultural landscape by perpetually regenerating many of the defamiliarised vistas created by the spectacular architectural manifestations that were present in the city during its year of being Europe’s ‘Capital of Culture’; a time in which it was, theoretically, the continent’s cultural “centre”.¹³ Richard Kriesche’s glazed

10. Reprinted in Bogner, 2004.

11. Schjeldahl, 1997, p. 48.

12. Budak, 2004, p.11.

13. As the journalist Ute Pietsch noted: „Graz ist „europaauffällig“ geworden. In der Bevölkerung, bei vielen internationalen Gästen und der internationalen Wahrnehmung ist ein neues Bewusstsein für die Qualität der steirischen Hauptstadt entstanden. Als zentrales Moment einer langfristigen Verankerung der Marke „Kulturstadt Graz“ muss die Präsenz der Kulturhauptstadt in der medialen Berichterstattung genannt werden. Es sind insgesamt über 10.000 Berichte zu „Graz 2003 – Kulturhauptstadt Europas“ in verschiedenen Printmedien veröffentlicht worden. An die 100 TV-Sender aus verschiedenen Länder haben über die Kulturhauptstadt in aller Welt berichtet.“ (Pietsch, 2004, p. 24). (Graz has become “conspicuous in Europe”. In the eyes of the community and the perception of many international guests, a new awareness of the quality of the Styrian capital has come into being. At a central moment in the long-term establishment of the brand 'Graz, City of Culture', the presence of the Capital of Culture has to be mentioned in media coverage. In total, there has been over 10,000 reports on “Graz 2003 – European

Marienlift, for example, whisked visitors up the adjoining *Mariensäule*, where they were treated to a panorama of the city from the perspective of the Virgin statue at the top of the column. Another more ground-level example, entitled *die gespiegelte Stadt*, consisted of a series of five-metre-high mirrors that were placed around the *Freiheitsplatz*. Due to their proximity to one-another, multiple reflections and interactions were produced between each of the mirrors and the “real” buildings and people surrounding them, while a series of large LED-walls streamed live images and audio of the ocean; momentarily transporting the viewer to the very edge of the Mediterranean.

This concept of contemporary architectural manifestations defamiliarising the surrounding environment was epitomised by the other “alien” that made its appearance during the Capital of Culture celebrations in 2003, Vito Acconci's *Murinsel* (Fig. 2), which was placed in the Mur river directly in-between the city's *Altstadt* and *Murvorstadt* districts. In addition to creating a “flowing and changeable” urban structure,¹⁴ the *Murinsel* also provided visitors with a mediated perspective on the city and its relationship to the river. The reflectivity of the steel, combined with the windows and peep-holes scattered throughout the island's lattice framework, supplied viewers with an array of framed snapshots of the surrounding urban environment. More importantly, however, the *Murinsel* also proved to be such a success that, despite only being intended to stand for the period of the festival, it was decided at the end of 2003 that it should be maintained; the popularity of this uncompromisingly alien space-craft proving once and for all how “friendly” contemporary architecture and culture could be successfully integrated within the urban landscape.



Fig. 2. Vito Acconci, *Murinsel*, 2003. (Photograph courtesy the author.)

Capital of Culture” printed in different print media. 100 TV broadcasts from different countries all over the world have reported on the Capital of Culture.)

14. Vito Acconci, quoted on the official ‘Graz 2003 Capital of Culture’ website, *Graz*, http://www.graz03.at/servlet/sls/Tornado/web/2003/content_e/8FCE673302F9BE61C1256B81005CED38; accessed 13 April 2010.

This form of spectacular defamiliarisation has been similarly utilised by the Kunsthaus; creating an experience that, in the words of the architects, transforms the hitherto inhospitable foreigner into an 'object of desire' for both the city and its residents.¹⁵ Vibrant and reflective surfaces, distant rumblings, improbable vignettes and hidden views into interior and exterior spaces continually confront viewers, forcing them to perpetually reassess the Kunsthaus's relationship to — and relation within — the urban and cultural environment in which it is situated. For example, when approaching the building from along the Lendkai, the interplay between Graz's new arrival and its historic core is perceptible in the reflective nature of the building's skin. This reflexivity, like that of the *Murinsel* and *die gespiegelte Stadt* installations, captures framed and uncanny snapshots of many of the city's famous landmarks, allowing the structure to dutifully acknowledge its place within the already-established urban ensemble.

Similarly, once inside the buildings, the visitor is moved in-between gallery spaces via a moving travelator — known as the 'Pin' — which, like the *Marienlift*, ascends up through the centre of the building. This placement of the Pin in the centre of the Kunsthaus results in the viewer arriving at each of the galleries in the centre of the spaces. In contrast to more traditional gallery layouts — which result in a more regulated, vectorial series of movements between entry and exit points — the viewer within the Kunsthaus's galleries is encouraged to wander and explore each of the spaces in a far more open and democratic manner, allowing movement to commence along an almost 360-degree angle and thereby heightening interest in the spaces themselves.

Upon reaching the summit, the spectator is treated to a spectacular panorama of the *Altstadt*. The almost hyperreal backdrop afforded by this glazed platform space — known as the 'Needle' — is complemented by the giant mass of the Kunsthaus's outer skin, which hovers in the viewer's peripheral vision. When coupled with the height of platform, the hovering presence of the Kunsthaus allows the spectator to be elevated — in a similar manner to the *Marienlift* — to the eye-line of the alien, showing them the city from its perspective.

These defamiliarised vistas are also continued within the actual Kunsthaus itself, which offers the viewer several opportunities to once again reconnect the building with the world outside the galleries. One such opportunity can be found via one of the nozzles that are placed across the ceiling of the Kunsthaus's uppermost gallery space. Placed lower down the wall than the other nozzles within the space, this portal — which has been somewhat dubiously dubbed the 'naughty orifice'¹⁶ — offers the viewer a perfectly framed view of Graz's famed Clock Tower at the peak of the Schlossberg, an instance of Graz's newest landmark directly referencing and acknowledging one of its oldest.

A crucial aspect to these devices is the fact that they all occur at the periphery of the space, thereby avoiding interference with one's experience of the artworks themselves. However, when engaged, each of these devices act as a mediator between the viewer

15. Peter Cook and Colin Fournier, reproduced in Bogner, 2004, p. 29.

16. Peter Cook in Bogner, 2004, p. 113.

and the city, enmeshing the alien within the urban/cultural landscape and thereby making its presence less threatening and more "friendly". Evidence of the success of this paradigm is the fact that, despite initial teething problems — and the occasional negative report from the traditionally conservative Austrian tabloids — the Kunsthau Graz has been an overwhelming success for the region, firmly establishing the city's place within the region's contemporary cultural matrices.

However, a better indicator of the success of this "friendly alien" paradigm is the manner in which many of the Kunsthau's spectacular devices continually resurface in other art centres the world over. The most celebrated recent example of this type of spectacular alien is Zaha Hadid's Lois & Richard Rosenthal Contemporary Art Center, which opened in Cincinnati in 2003.¹⁷ Much like the Kunsthau Graz, Cincinnati's Contemporary Art Center (CAC) is a striking and eye-catching addition to the urban environment, extending out from the confines of its site in order to solicit the attention of all who pass it. Although the building certainly succeeds in this regard, it also manages to do so in such a way so as to not exert its presence too forcibly upon the urban environment. This friendly — as opposed to hostile — stance is encapsulated by the series of cantilevered volumes that appear to float in and out of one another as the viewer moves towards and around the structure. The attractiveness of such an interplay was succinctly encapsulated by the architectural critic Nicholas Adams, who commented that 'the effect is not so much one of dynamism as tension. It is as if the building's energy were contained — a dynamo rather than a jag of lightning.'¹⁸

Another similarity between the Contemporary Art Center and the Kunsthau Graz is the prominence afforded to attraction and circulation within both centres' built forms. A key component in this regard is the 'Urban Carpet', a continuous concrete surface that extends from the street, into the foyer and up the wall of this 'Urban Mothership',¹⁹ finishing at the top of the building. Recalling the Kunsthau's 'Pin', this Urban Carpet leads the viewer through the various gallery spaces, creating a shifting environment of discovery and intrigue. As Hadid explains: 'There are so many routes and paths to meander through ... It's about promenading, being able to pause, to look out, look above, look sideways. It's like an extension of the city.'²⁰

This 'promenading' is further facilitated by an angular series of stairs that noticeably climb up through the Center's 'void', made, as the architect is happy to point out, 'by a local manufacturer of roller coasters'.²¹ Each staircase is set at a subtly different angle to the next which, combined with a series of strategically placed openings in the building's skin, creates a rapidly changing series of vignettes throughout visitors' upward journey. The effect, as noted by several commentators, is nothing short of theatrical,²² defamiliarising the city via the creation of unexpected, framed snapshots of exterior and interior spaces during the ascent. *The Times*'s Tom Dyckhoff succinctly

17. The Center's name was changed just prior to opening in recognition of the local philanthropists who had donated US \$6 million to its construction (Temin, 2003).

18. Adams, 2003, p. 11.

19. Muschamp, 2004, p. 56.

20. Quoted in Dyckhoff, 2003, p. 19.

21. Quoted in Wright, 2003, p. 14.

22. See for example the reviews of the space in Adams, 2003, p. 11; Forgey, 2003; Goldberger, 2003; Lloyd, 1999; McGuigan, 2003; Muschamp, 2004, p.1; Temin, 2003.

conveyed this impression, noting that:

One minute a window framing the city skyscrapers throws you out of the building. The next you are twisted into the most intimate of spaces or duped by *trompe l’oeils*. Look through the top-to-bottom atrium slit between the galleries, and you catch glimpses of that lady you passed in the lobby, or cars moving on the street outside, reflected upside-down three floors above you on glass insertions.²³

Note the sense of fun associated with this realisation of the Center’s hidden vignettes and *trompe l’oeils*; something that is reinforced by the continual allusion to ‘roller-coasters’ and ‘film’ sets that continually emerges from much of the commentary surrounding the building. In a similar manner to the Kunsthau Graz, these allusions point to the manner in which the thoroughly-alien Contemporary Art Center has been transformed into an ‘object of desire’ via the creation of an intriguing and highly theatrical gallery environment, which continually seeks to readdress the Center’s relationship with — and place within — the surrounding urban form.

The Contemporary Art Center did not, however, signal the end of Hadid’s ‘spacecraft’. In 2008, she teamed up with Chanel designer Karl Lagerfeld to design the Chanel Mobile Art Container — a portable art pavilion that was to travel around the world, exhibiting contemporary works inspired by the brand’s classic 2.55 quilted handbag. Based on the parametric distortions of a torus — and looking strangely similar to Acconci’s *Murinsel* in Graz — Hadid’s design was possibly the most “alien” yet, with one commentator noting that ‘the producers of the abysmal 1998 film *Lost in Space* should sue for copyright against [Hadid’s pavilion].’²⁴

After a succession of positive reviews and good attendances in both Hong Kong and Japan,²⁵ the tour of this self-professed “alien spacecraft”²⁶ came to an abrupt halt in New York in late-2008. Despite the Global Financial Crisis being commonly cited as a reason for the closure of the pavilion,²⁷ there can be little doubt that criticism that the building and the project came under during its docking in Central Park contributed significantly to its eventual cancellation. Upon its unveiling, the *New York Times*’s architectural correspondent lambasted the project as an attempt to ‘drape an aura of refinement over a cynical marketing ploy’,²⁸ while the Canadian *Globe and Mail* correspondent accused Hadid of treating the park ‘like an outsider’, commenting that the project ‘exhibits the aggressive self-love of an heiress who throws herself a birthday party in part because she’s not sure anyone else will.’²⁹

23. Dyckhoff, 2003, p.19.

24. Rob Dawg, cited in Grayson, 2009, p. 39.

25. As the *New York Times*’s Julia Tanski somewhat cynically mused: ‘If you wanted a venue to start a travelling art exhibition that was transported in cargo containers and paid homage to a handbag, you couldn’t do much better than Hong Kong.’ (Tanski, 2008, p. 1.)

26. Term used by both Hadid and Adrian Benepe (the Parks Commissioner of New York’s Central Park) in Vogel 2008, p. 1.

27. The company themselves claimed that they would ‘prefer to refocus on our strategic investments in terms of development’. (Quoted in Itzkoff, 2008, p. 2.)

28. Ouroussoff, 2008, p.1.

29. Houpt, 2008, p. R1.

Looking over the reviews of the pavilion, however, one discovers that there is more to the project's critics than simply disdain for the coming-together of art, architecture, fashion and commerce. At the heart of the pavilion's failure was the manner in which it forcefully exerted its presence and programme within the various landscapes that it visited, paying scant regard to the particularities of its environment. It did not, in short, arrive with pretensions of 'friendship', but rather asserted itself in the manner of an unwelcome — and perhaps uninvited — guest. Hence *The Globe and Mail's* comments about Hadid acting 'like an outsider', with little or no consideration of the social or cultural milieu into which her spacecraft was to land. That the pavilion had chosen to land in Central Park — which had been originally planned as 'a great democratic experiment [and] an instrument of psychological healing for the weary'³⁰ — only served to further the sense that the building and its creators were patronising the usual ambience of its surroundings.

The feeling that the pavilion forcefully imposed itself upon the cultural landscape of the cities that it visited was replicated in its internal layout and configuration, which were felt to be unnecessarily hostile and totalitarian. In contrast to the free kinetic spirit that permeates both the Cincinnati and Graz aliens — both viewed as unobtrusive and self-generated — the high level of regulation imposed upon visitors to the Mobile Art Container was derided in the press. The *Globe and Mail's* Simon Houpt, for example, was positively Orwellian in his assessment of the space, recounting that 'visitors are not left on their own to view and consider the pieces. Rather ... we are warned repeatedly by the army of too-cheery Chanel-clad minions swarming around the entrance that we are not to fiddle with the MP3 player, and [to follow] directions exactly. "Move only when she tells you to move," one aide instructs. "You don't want to ruin your experience".'³¹

Despite the inability of the Mobile Art Container to successfully re-situate itself in New York, its positive reception in Southeast Asia signals the transmutability of this spectacular alien paradigm. Indeed, the successful docking of the Chanel pavilion in Tokyo may in some part be the result of Japan already hosting another alien at the time of the container's arrival. The SANAA-designed 21st Century Museum, which opened in 2004 in the city of Kanazawa was almost universally praised for its innovative design, as well as the non-threatening manner in which it was able to integrate contemporary arts within the cultural landscape of a city best 'known for its traditional crafts and textiles'.³² As the name indicates, the 21st Century Museum was designed to not only cater for the art of the immediate present — more specifically, art from the '1980s until the present day'³³ — but also the art being produced over the course of the next century. This anticipatory logic signals the emergence of a new type of museological paradigm, one whose design and programmatic logic derive as much from the typology of the contemporary art centre as they do from the more traditional museum space. For although the 21st Century Museum does indeed intend to develop a collection of artworks, neither it nor its designers or curators can anticipate what form

30. Ouroussoff, 2008, p. 1.

31. Houpt, 2008, p. R1.

32. Pollock, 2005, p. 95.

33. Pollock, 2005, p. 90.

this collection is going to take. As with the contemporary art centre, then, the experience of the building itself will be paramount to the attraction of the museum, especially for those who do not reside in Kanazawa (which is about 600 kilometres — or four-and-a-half hours by train — away from Tokyo).³⁴

Therefore, in a similar manner to all other examples cited in this paper, the 21st Century Museum is a foreigner to the city in which it has landed. This point was not lost on *The Art Press*'s Philip Jodidio, who noted that ‘at first sight [the museum appears] closer to an alien entity than an urban attractor.’³⁵ However, unlike Hadid’s Chanel pavilion, the design and function of the 21st Century Museum emphasises the harmonious manner in which it seeks to connect with the city in which it is located. This symbiosis is exemplified in the Museum’s design, which emerged out of collaboration between the architects and the institution’s curators,³⁶ resulting in a form that truly catered to the practical requirements of current arts practice.

The result of this collaborative approach to the museum’s design is a building that is unobtrusively democratic — whilst at the same time still unashamedly foreign — in both its form and program. Whereas projects like the Mobile Art Container were characterised by a highly regulated, mono-dimensional trajectory in terms of visitor movement and exhibition narrative, the 21st Century Museum dismisses the idea of a prominent façade or entrance in favour of a multiplicity of approaches. This non-hierarchical method presents visitors with four separate methods of access at ground level, complemented by a further entrance from the underground car park. As *Domus*'s Joseph Grima notes, this diversity of entrances set within the museum’s singular glass façade thus allows the Museum to ‘turn its back on no one’.³⁷ The use of glass in the creation of this lightweight, uniform façade, along with its open-plan internal configuration, allows the viewer to gaze from one end of the complex to the other at several spots along the perimeter. Thus the Museum becomes literally and visually absorbed within the surrounding environment, an aspect that is further facilitated by the building’s modest, single-level height.

The success of this spectacularly friendly alien paradigm in places as diverse as Graz, Cincinnati, Hong Kong, Tokyo and Kanazawa demonstrates one manner in which a city may successfully incorporate the contemporary art centre within its existent cultural landscape. Indeed, as opposed to signalling the supposed “death” of alien, “iconic” architecture,³⁸ the democratic emphasis of this paradigm — the way in which it unobtrusively includes several parties within the design and realisation of its spaces — demonstrates the durability and adaptability of iconic manifestations. In so doing, centres that may have previously been dismissed as simply existing on the periphery — or in another dimension — in relation to the everyday world of the city in which they inhabit, are being forced to acknowledge and indeed perpetually renegotiate the

34. As the architectural critic Philip Jodidio observed: ‘significantly, the museum itself appears anxious to offer images of the building before it contained works or art, as though the structure itself was part of the collection’. Cited in Jodidio, 2005, p. 34.

35. Jodidio, 2005, p. 34.

36. As Kazuyo Sejima explained in an interview: ‘Basically, the curator decided the proportions of the rooms and we figured out how to connect them.’ (Pollock, 2005, p. 95.)

37. Grima, 2004, p. 29.

38. Moore, 2009.

particularities of their new home. Far from concealing their programme and form behind an institutional or historical façade, the contemporary art centre of the twenty-first century has indeed come to embrace its “alien-aeity”: a move that, in turn, creates new and exciting encounters between the city, its population and the ‘brave new world(s)’ of globalised contemporary arts practice.

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