

Art and plunder: humanity as memory

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“The museum is voracious by definition, because it originates in private collecting, and that in turn from robbery...”

Umberto Eco: *El museo*

In the series “Expolio/Plunder” we are faced with four large-format paintings with the museum, looting, and the destruction of works of art as their explicit motifs. I wish to reflect on the motifs mentioned above starting with the hypothesis that this series of four paintings poses the paradoxical question of the objectual *place* of art, especially painting, insofar as it is something that exists for and from the *reflexive gaze*. The question becomes more complex still when one considers the nature of art as heritage.

The canvases of “Expolio/Plunder” offer themselves for contemplation, but before that they arrest the spectator with their *magnitude*. And the thing is, that magnitude is not separate from the thematic motif that has guided the pictorial work of artists Diego Martínez, Josefina Guilisasti and Francisco Uzabeaga in this project. It is the *museum space* itself as magnitude. One of the core questions that “Expolio/Plunder” asks us is precisely, What is an art museum? And that involves asking about the essential relation that art has with history, or in any case with the *past*. The questions that I raise here as a mode of entry into the exhibition may seem strange, considering that what we see in the paintings of “Expolio/Plunder” is instead the *destruction* and *absence* of artworks and monuments. But, do the enormous museum galleries not operate in each case as a huge frame? The museum built to house an enormous quantity and variety of works is above all an *empty space*, an outline made of walls that in the vastness of its halls is destined to house *everything*.

The best-known works of Italian painter Giovanni Paolo Pannini (1691-1765) are those paintings within which enormous walls covered in paintings cast down the viewer as though they were standing before a Leibnizian Baroque universe, contrived *vistas* of objects, places and persons, especially architectural monuments and ruins. A reality composed not of things, but of *representations* of things. Umberto Eco proposes what ought to have been Pannini’s masterpiece: a painting representing all of his paintings of paintings. This paradoxical *excess* is perhaps constitutive of the museum: the impossibility

of seeing, there where the organization of the space and the irreducible multiplicity of its content *offer too much to take in*. Precisely as an incantation to that excess, Eco imagines the museum of the third millennium: “a museum that is useful for understanding and enjoying a single painting”, which for Eco implies crossing the boundaries of the frame and entering the universe of the painting. Such a project would be a radical break from the museum’s historic role of ‘adding value’ to works of art.

Beginning last century in the 1970s, the declaration of “the end of meta narratives” became a truism among intellectuals; a diagnostic that came to sanction the exhaustion of the narrative matrix of time and, with it, the idea of an historical subject. The idea of Humanity, the planetary legacy of the Enlightenment, disseminated by means of European colonization, seemed then to have come to an end. Despite the fact that, as British historian Eric Hobsbawm affirmed, “one of the few things that stands between us and an accelerated descent into darkness is the set of values inherited from the eighteenth-century Enlightenment”, the truth is that so far in this century, the face of that subject – “humanity”- has not ceased to disfigure itself. The scenes of destruction of the so-called *heritage of humanity* provide evidence precisely of the evanescence of that notion of humanity which to a large degree consists of the treasured memory of its *works*. In one of the paintings of “Expolio/Plunder” we see the interior of the Great Mosque of Aleppo (situated in the region of the same name, in Northern Syria), after being seriously damaged by shelling in 2013 during that country’s ongoing civil war. It is not just about humanity’s past, but also that humanity originates precisely in that past. The people who populate the planet today participate in “humanity” to the extent that they can recognize themselves in that heritage. And it is not just about the heritage of humanity, but rather that *humanity is the heritage of today*, contained in fragile vestiges of the past that are being ruined relentlessly. The destruction of monuments is therefore the expression of a technological fury in the face of which *nothing is safe*, including the past.

What do the histories of humanity narrate? What type of memory do those events, dates, names, works, hold? Those that never cease to recommend the past for the consideration of the present? Apparently, among all the histories that the Enlightenment and its concept of humanity enabled –the history of science, of philosophy, of politics, of law-, none has so powerfully implied the idea of a universal subject as that which we call *the history of art*. And perhaps it is the only narrative that is still capable of referring to the idea of *humanity*, as the universal subject of history, which implies that strange universality in which art itself seems to participate. Even Marx was amazed that artistic products, as part of the “superstructure” of an era –“spirituality” that exalted humanity, hiding its particular material conditions of production and exploitation-, were not buried

in the past once material progress and political and social transformations outpaced that era irreversibly. In *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx asks, “*What makes art an eternal value despite its historicity?*”

The question leads us to the peculiarity of the art museum. In effect, given the internal relation that artworks have with humanity’s past, their natural site of conservation would have to be the museum (and not exhibition spaces for private use). Nevertheless, an art museum is not about history alone, and so the works do not simply illustrate an era, but rather constitute precisely what makes that era transcend the materiality of its time, arranging the work of the artist as a *horizon of meaning* for a dialogue with posterity. In effect, it is precisely the *representational* requirements of the arts that cause the works to demand reflection on the part of the engaged subject in order to be received. It all happens as though an art museum were in a certain sense a *museum of memory*, because its objects invoke a willingness to signify, to generate meaning, to give significant substance to the ideas that animated the people of their own time. Works of art give an account of the *forms of meaning* through which past lives, whether everyday or exceptional, existed, were inhabited. Works of art testify to this: that humans have always needed meaning to live among objects. In the 1796 Paris Salon, Hubert Robert showed a painting in which we see the Grand Gallery of the Louvre spectacularly converted into ruins. The ruin of the museum may perhaps be the ruin *par excellence*. Ruin of memory, but of that memory that has been constructed as the *auratic* amassing of the ruin.

We are adamant in our thesis that an art museum is not a museum of history. What type of *memory* is it, then, that the works in a museum refer to? The excess that the museum contains constitutes *a memory that is impossible to subjectivize*, perhaps the material embodiment of the spirit of humanity, now housed in a system of exhibition galleries. A memory contained in objects destined essentially for contemplation is an inappropriable memory, a memory whose material signification makes it known that the object *has come from another place, from another time*. Valéry writes: “I find myself in a tumult of frozen creatures, each of which demands, without obtaining it, the inexistence of all the others (...). A strange organized disorder spreads out before me.” The works in museums are treasured ruins whose world no longer exists, and the splendor of the gallery contains something of that peculiar exposure to the elements. Another painting in “Expolio/Plunder” provides us with a view of the gallery usually occupied by 18th century Dutch and Flemish paintings at The Hermitage, but it is completely empty, or better yet *emptied* (indeed, the frames remain on the walls). That gallery, cleared in anticipation of the immanent arrival of the Nazis during World War II, “repeats” the perspective of the

canvas, projecting itself into a vanishing point. The painting reflects the architectural emptiness, exhibiting the walls where naked frames hang, stripped of their paintings. This is no longer about the vertigo of “the blank canvas”, but rather the vertigo of the empty frame. In Giuseppe Tornatore’s film “La migliore offerta” [The Best Offer] (2013), the protagonist is an art expert and auctioneer whose personal collection of female portraits packs the walls of a room with a security system that keeps it away from all unintended viewers. When we see that room for the first time, 12 minutes into the film, we get a premonition of the dramatic ending: the room emptied by thieves ... the walls still bearing the outlines of the frames.

As objects, artworks are exposed to expiration, and on the other hand they acquire economic value over time. This is the valuable and at the same time fragile materiality of artworks. But what happens is that both the price and theft of works—and even more so their destruction—seem in a certain way to be acts that are “alien” to an artwork. Even acquisition is. In effect, can an object destined by nature for reflexive *contemplation* be anyone’s private property? One of the paintings in “Expolio/Plunder” exhibits the interior of a church in Ellingen, a small town in the German region of Bavaria where an enormous quantity of artworks was found that had been seized by the Nazis during World War II. In this painting, one is drawn by the works packed into large wooden crates, or wrapped up, but especially by *the accumulation*. It is the painting of *appropriation*. During the war, Hitler’s main agent for carrying out the plunder of artworks was Hermann Goering, whose desire to amass an enormous private collection was motivated, according to researcher Hans Christian Löhr, by “the urgency of an addict”. The Reichsmarschall looked at his collection, fantasizing that the great art of the Middle Ages was incarnated in the German people, while at the same time craving to be seen as a “Renaissance man”. It is no coincidence that at his Nuremberg trial, Goering argued in his own defense that he had envisioned building a *public* museum with all the works seized, apparently assuming that his personal desire in appropriating works of art—the *private* enjoyment of them- was, after all, a more serious offense than their seizure from their legitimate owners.

The painting that in my judgment ultimately synthesizes the reflections in “Expolio/Plunder” is the one in which we see a satellite image of the ancient city of Apamea (Syria), taken in 2013. There we observe hundreds of excavations carried out by looters searching for archeological treasures. Where does the chain of desire begin? Will these objects find their natural destiny in private collections? The Museum refers us to a paradoxical dimension of the history of individual subjectivity: the desire to aesthetically enjoy the inappropriable idea of humanity as universal memory.

