

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Wonder World, or Against the New Universal Exhibition

by [Joseph Nechvatal](#) on January 13, 2014



The entrance to the Rétrospection room in Théâtre du Monde, featuring, at right, Sidney Nolan's "Dog and Duck Hotel" (1948) (partial installation view at la Maison Rouge) (all images courtesy of la Maison Rouge & MONA Museum of Old and New Art unless otherwise noted)

PARIS — *Theatre of the World*, currently on view at [La Maison Rouge](#), raises the thorny issue of the individual and particular against the homogeneous collective. The adjective [esemplastic](#), a concept Samuel Taylor Coleridge posited as indicating the faculty of mind that can fuse unrelated things into a poetically holistic singularity, is increasingly useful in appreciating this urge for heterogeneous categorizing. What this esemplastic appetite specifically yields for art is not so much the presentation and delectation of art objects, but of theatrical art rooms that coalesce into a vast exhibit of scenography, where individual artworks combine to make up an opulent theatrical assembly arranged for our examination.

Technically, cyberspace is a homogeneous hyper-unified whole because every server of the Internet must behave exactly like any other server: the same requests must evoke the same responses. Even back in 1970, Gene Youngblood, in [Expanded Cinema](#), maintained that the notion of universal unity is a logical result of the psychological effects of the global communications network. And it is so today in art: there is quite an appetite for totalizing collections of diversity; exhibitions that function in terms of some united principle of *anti-categorization* display this desire.



Egyptian sarcophagus "Coffin of Itnedjes" (750-525 BC)

As the title howls, *Theatre of the World* (a reference to [Giulio Camillo's Theatre of Memory](#) for François I) is a fecund planet-sprawling exhibition that crisscrosses time and space with the hyper-total ease of the Internet. As such, it is representative of the current fad for arranging art objects in a heterogeneous data-field; a nonlinear luxurious approach that is becoming emblematic of mainstream globalization.

In such a spectacular theater-world of art, we are overloaded with visual propositions (over 450 pieces here), and this excessive production allows us to pick and choose which works of interest to hone in on (if any). The visual suggestion is that all things are of equal interest in terms of psychic force. What matters are the relational aesthetics of diversity that construct either corresponding or contrasting relationships (it makes no difference, hence the curators can't lose.)

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At the Maison Rouge, *Theatre of the World* presents a glut of assembled work that includes ancient Egyptian and Greek art, antiquities from around the world from numerous eras, and

indigenous non-Western work (such as bark-cloth paintings from the Solomon islands, Fiji, and Samoa, and various objects from New Guinea and Queensland), mixed with contemporary and modern artists that include Sue Williams, Gregory Green, Thomas Hirschhorn, Hans Bellmer, Susan Rothenberg, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Ricardo Hernández,

Berlinde de Bruyckere, Max Ernst, Jake & Dinos Chapman, Judy Watson, Wim Delvoye, Damien Hirst, Francis Picabia, John Coplans, Zilvinas Kempinas, Iannis Kounellis, Juul Kraijer, Gordon Matta-Clark, Claude Rutault, Andy Warhol, Markus Schinwald, Jason Shulman, Felice Varini, Sandra Vásquez de la Horra, Erwin Wurm, Günter Brus, Ah Xian and a lot of Australian artist Sidney Nolan. The eighteen rooms that hold this flood of art-as-data are mostly recreations of the rooms in David Walsh's [Museum of Old and New Art](#) in Tasmania, and are organized by theme.

The curator, Jean-Hubert Martin, and Walsh, a Tasmanian mathematician who made his fortune gambling, begin the show with the relatively sparsely populated black hall called *Épiphanie*, soon leading to the room of *Rétrospection*: a collection, hanging mostly overhead, of an ensemble of indigenous clubs, dance paddles, and ceremonial axes that set off the painting "[Dog and Duck Hotel](#)" (1948) by Sidney Nolan.

Rétrospection leads onto other theme rooms, including *Genèse*, where John Coplans's "*Self Portrait*" (1990) was vertically paired with a gong from Fiji (early 20th C). Across from this pair were hung the creepy-erotic Hans Bellmer's "*Les jeux de la poupée*" (c. 1936) that was paired with Francis Picabia's delightful "*French Can-can*" (1936–1938), strung along with many other artworks and objects, too numerous to detail.



Genèse room (partial view) with John Coplans's "*Self Portrait*" (1990) and "*Lali [gong]*" from Fiji (early 20th C) (both on the right)

Genèse lead me past the small Duet room to a darkened room called Apparition, where blinking lights went on and off, illuminating in sequential fashion a collection of fierce ethnic mask forms, including a fascinating 19th century helmet mask from New Ireland, Papua New Guinea.



Duet room (installation view)



Apparition room, with "Tatanua" [helmet mask]" from New Ireland, Papua New Guinea (19th century) (installation view)

I next passed into the Domestiquer room and was stunned by Berlinde De Bruyckere's sculpture "P XIII" (2008) dangling in front of Oleg Kulik's digital print "Family of the Future, 9" (1997). Flanking this weird coupling to the right was another fascinating art amalgamation, that of Jan Fabre's "Skull" (2001).



Domestiquer room from left to right: Jan Fabre, "Skull" (2001), Oleg Kulik, "Family of the Future, 9" (1997), Berlinde De Bruyckere "P XIII" (2008)

This eventually took me to the Mutation room. Its cosmic kitty held my attention with an engaging Hermann Nitsch performance video *6-Day Play, Prinzenhof 3–9.8.1998* (1998) that played off a large painting by Jean-Michel Basquiat.

Next came the sizeable Majesté room: jam-packed with superb tapa cloths from native South Pacific islanders surrounding the ancient Egyptian sarcophagus "Coffin of Ihtnedjes" (750-525 BC) that was facing off in a duel with Alberto Giacometti's "Femme Leoni" (1947).



Hermann Nitsch, "6-Day Play, Prinzendorf 3–9.8.1998" (1998) in the Mutation room



"Coffin of Itnedjes" (750-525 BC) (left) and Alberto Giacometti's "Femme Leoni" (1947) (right), with South Pacific tapa works surrounding

This superb Majesté face-off was followed by the Conflict room, featuring the horrific Jake and Dinos Chapman's "Great Deeds Against the Dead" (1994), an imposing work based on Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes, "Great Deeds Against the Dead," plate #39 from *The Disasters of War* (1810–20, first pub. 1863). This distressing work is firmly complemented by the framing Robert Gober wallpaper, "Hanging Man/Sleeping Man" (1989), more Sidney Nolan paintings, and other art and objects that suggest struggle.



Conflict room, installation view

In the basement I encountered more darkened spaces called the Trier and Au-delà rooms, the latter containing a very theatrical presentation of Berlinde De Bruyckere's strange waxwork "Long Lonely Man" (2010), among many other things from several ages.



Berlinde De Bruyckere, “Long Lonely Man” (2010) (image by the author for Hyperallergic)

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In thinking about this eclectic exhibition, I found its heterogeneous-united theme typical of many museum shows I saw in Europe in 2013. This trend (perchance begun in Paris at the shocking [Exposition Universelle](#) (1878) — where one could contemplate for the first time an intricately embellished shoe that once belonged to a Chinese lady), seems to have dominated the mainstream in 2013. Undeniably, Paris seems particularly well suited for this sort of heterogeneous [cabinet-of-curiosities](#) approach to art, given its grounding of Surrealist theory (Lautréamont’s “beautiful, as the chance encounter on an ironing board of a sewing machine and an umbrella”) and its wealth of both large and small museums of all kinds.

The curator of *Theatre of the World*, Jean-Hubert Martin, was an early practitioner of the heterogeneous theme exhibition (art linked by association, not by category or chronology), with his *Magiciens de la terre* at Centre Pompidou (1989), followed by Harald Szeemann’s *Aubes: Rêveries au bord de Victor Hugo* at the Victor Hugo Museum on Place des Vosges (2000), among many others. But with the successful tour of [The Museum of Everything](#), which I savored during its stop in Paris, followed by the 55th Venice Biennale’s main exhibition [The Encyclopedic Palace](#) (the group show curated by Massimiliano Gioni in the Arsenale) this super-postmodern cabinet of curiosities inclination has soared.

What was once unorthodox has become orthodox. Soon came Robert Wilson’s *Living Rooms* at the Louvre, Pierre Huyghe’s retrospective at Le Centre Pompidou, and [Philippe Parreno: Anywhere, Anywhere, Out Of The World](#) at the Palais de Tokyo: all of which took a

heterogeneous approach, to some degree. When sub-themes are entered into the heterogeneous data-field, such as in this show and at *Les aventures de la vérité – Peinture et philosophie: un récit* (Adventures of truth – Painting and philosophy) at Fondation Maeght, a cut-back towards homogeneity is mildly suggested. But still, we are far from periodic categories, once typical of the museum. No, we are in the fuzzy world of networked anti-categories typical of the new global economic order, where geographical distance and difference appears irrelevant.

With the undeniable appeal of such flat, fuzzy shows, the question of the genealogy and ontology of art-as-art is escalating in importance. What is art now in light of the contemporary conditions of increasing digital globalization and its totalizing trend: the trans-nationalization of State surveillance power? The above examples of the anti-categorizing-collective trend seem to me to raise serious questions concerning art's broader socio-economical meaning. And in this sense unified-heterogeneous world theater art has the capacity (perhaps obligation) to become a signifier, a referent that is no longer tied only to that which it refers, but suggests entire systems of references: most importantly to the individual's position in relationship to the social unconscious within the media environment. (I guess this plays nicely into David Joselit's idea of art-as-format — see his book *After Art*, [which I abhor](#).)

Accordingly, with *Théâtre du Monde* it is important to focus on the nature of the anti-categorizing-total, and on all of its social and psychological implications. Not only to insinuate accepting or pejorative judgements against this undifferentiating urge, but to note a persistent desire for them and to record the aesthetic appetite that apparently fosters them.

Art as human thought that developed in relatively discrete consecutive stages (magical, mythical, religious, metaphysical, scientific, abstract, and financial) appears to be all but irrelevant now, as the aesthetic distance between subject and image is cancelled out via homogeneous global space. In that sense, these types of art exhibitions treat all art as part of a heterogeneous-homogeneous-total-data-work in which the culture loses something (difference) while gaining something else (the spectacle of world theater).

[Théâtre du Monde \(Theatre of the World\)](#) continues at *La Maison Rouge* (10 Boulevard de la Bastille, Paris) through January 19.