

# Poetics



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## Abstract

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Does engagement have a particular poetics? Every artist is committed in and through his work, if only because expressing oneself as an artist, and in a certain way, is always a choice. When an artist like Urs Fischer and institutions like the Venice Biennale, the Pinault - Bourse de Commerce collection (Paris) or the Luma Foundation (Arles), choose to engage the history of art through one of his key works, the *Rape of the Sabine Women* (1583) of Giambologna, by inscribing it in the poetic register of melancholy or tragedy (abduction, violence, rape), they raise the question of the writing of the history of art today, with the return of looted works, the colonial past, the relationships of violence. This article proposes to question the staging of art history as a tragedy played in front of the media or in front of the public in museums and exhibitions.



Because it is a science, the history of art is an epistemology. Because it is a language, it is a poetics. The semiologist Gérard Genette calls *poetics* the study of the forms of writing.<sup>1</sup> From this point of view, there are several types of art histories. The observation of the museum scene and of the exhibition constitutes for the historian of contemporary art an inexhaustible source of reflection on the presentation of the history of art and on the writing practice. From Stephen Bann<sup>2</sup> to Dario Gamboni<sup>3</sup>, the poetics of the museum has become a fruitful field of exploration. The will that drives such studies is to show the emergence of a self-critical museum, the “ironic museum,” according to Bann, or singular “author museums,” according to Gamboni. However, the policies of major art museums and recently opened foundations and collections, such as the Pinault collection in Paris or the Luma Foundation in Arles, seem quite removed from these heuristic

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1 The term *poetics* derives from the Ancient Greek: ποιητικός *poietikos* “pertaining to poetry.” See Gérard Genette, *Essays in Aesthetics*, trans. Dorrit Cohn (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 14.

2 Stephen Bann, “Poetics of the Museum: Lenoir and Du Sommerard,” in *The Clothing of Clio: A Study of the Representation of History in Nineteenth-Century Britain and France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 77–92.

3 Dario Gamboni, *The Museum as Experience* (Brepols NV, 2020). The romantic aesthetics of an August-Wilhelm Schlegel (*Die Gemälde*, 1799), using the fictional dialogue between three characters who share their vision of the art work, either by conversation in front of it, or by *ekphrastic* recreation during an outdoor walk, finds an unexpected echo in the dialogue between cousins Dario and Libero, the art historian skillfully and maliciously distributing the observations between the remarks of the neophyte and the observations of the scholar, one of which ends up reinforcing the other.

models. In general, there has been a tendency over the past decade to portray art history as a tragedy. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle defined the tragedy thus:

Tragedy, then, is a representation of an action which is serious, complete, and of certain magnitude — in language which is garnished in various forms in its different parts — in the mode of dramatic enactment, not narrative — and through the arousal of pity and fear effecting the *katharsis* of such emotions.<sup>4</sup>

Tragedy's emotional power results from the plot-structure: reversals and recognitions are its primary methods. Now, if we consider the history of art as it has recently been shown in exhibitions and museums, it is in a way played in front of spectators-visitors as a plot made of reversals and recognitions, against a backdrop of a bad conscience and a desire to buy back the former predatory colonial powers, of ecological and political catastrophe and of melancholy.

### **Engaging the Rape of the Sabine Women by Giambologna**

The Pinault Collection has just opened at the Paris Stock Exchange. The rotunda looks like the scene of a Shakespearean theatre. Under the glass roof, the mural of Mazerolle (1826–1889), which celebrates the European colonization and exploitation of the world, was restored for the occasion to the great joy of the defenders of the heritage. In the middle of the rotunda, Giambologna's gigantic group *The Rape of the Sabine Women* (1574–1582), housed in Florence, Loggia dei Lanzi, is reproduced in pigmentary wax under the title *Untitled (The Rape of the Sabine Women, 2011)* by the Swiss artist Urs Fischer, whose parodic irony never leaves the viewer indifferent. In front of it, another wax figure — like the Tarpeian Rock near the Capitol, the Grévin Museum is not far from Parnassus — is the artist Rudolf Stingler (Rudi), a friend of Urs Fischer, playing the spectator. Placing the wax figure of the observer and that of the *Rape of the Sabine Women* together,

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<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, *The Poetics of Aristotle*, trans. Stephen Halliwell (London: Duckworth, 1987), 37.

which the gaze of the first on the second invites, the artist holds out a mirror to the visitor. A common destiny unites them, a disappearance via a slow combustion (caused by the flame that consumes the wick planted at the heart of each of the sculptures), an image for the viewer of the passing of time.

Although Fischer's work is a revival of the Venice Biennale, where it was first seen in 2011, it is different and larger (from three to ten elements), related to its new environment, a new ensemble with elements placed around it: while only one office chair (also burning) was next to the statue and its viewer in 2011 in Venice, there are now eight seats around the sculpture perched on a high pedestal in Paris. Next to an airplane seat and a garden chair, there are six other seats, inspired by cultural artefacts from colonized lands in museums such as the Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac Museum. Among them were a throne, a seat from a house of worship, one from which to watch a spectacle; objects of appropriation and use, in other words. Wax is the ultimate ductile material, in which, literally everything can be cast (and melted, too, like gold or silver into one war treasure).

Bringing together art works and commodities, all destined to return to a mass of indistinct matter, Urs Fischer realizes a *Vanitas*, a rare genre in sculpture. To have done it in a Temple of Commerce, the temple-ness reinforced by the architect, Tadao Ando, as well as by the mural at the base of the glass roof, which shows the colonial conquest and the triumphant trade of Europe (the figure of a white woman sitting, sheltered under a red umbrella by a black woman, while a young Indian kneels before her), sets the tragic scene and poses the question: can the link between Western art and colonization be deactivated?

That goal was only achieved in *trompe l'œil* by Fischer's work, which suggests that, since *The Rape of the Sabine Women*, a symbol of European culture, will be consumed exactly like African stools, all civilizations are equal since mortal; the Western would fall even higher if it were perched on a pedestal. Who would dare to claim that the exploitation of man by man is justified by the fact that all men are mortal — and that therefore all situations are equal?

At the same time that Act I of the tragedy of Western art faced its colonial

history and the Pinault Collection opened to the world, another copy of Urs Fischer's work was presented in *The Impermanent Display*, the display of the Maja Hoffmann collection at the opening of the Luma Foundation in Arles in 2021. The heiress of one of the world's biggest pharmaceutical companies, converted to the ecological cause, wanted to open her foundation with an exhibition that emphasizes the ephemeral character of our world: *Untitled (The Rape of the Sabine Women)*, 2011). Meanwhile, at the edge of kitsch, Isa Genzken exhibited *Nofretete* (2014), seven plaster busts reproducing the famous sculpture at the Neues Museum in Berlin, with sunglasses and wooden pedestals on wheels, to suggest a return to her original Egypt. Nefertiti is clearly an emblematic star in the tragedy of works whose ownership is disputed between their country of origin and their current possessor.

The reenactment of the *Rape of the Sabine Women* — and in minor of the sculpture of Nefertiti — is a symptom, if not a syndrome, of the exhibition of the history of art in the 2010s: a Tragedy. Giambologna's work combines, to a level of expression rarely reached, the violence of abduction and forced displacement, the brutal exercise of military force and rape. The *katharsis* seems to be achieved by the virtuosity of movement, the diversity of points of view and the exorcism of violence through the sublimation of bodies. The reactivation of the sculptured group, in the iconoclastic form of its programmed destruction (by consumption), seems to be conceived by contemporary artists and curators as the cathartic form of the contemporary presentation of the history of art.

### **Violence that Replaces, the Only Possible Catharsis?**

Iconoclasm in the years 1960–1990 (post-independence, post-communist, art of the 1960s and performance in the 1970s) imaged the overthrow of the dominations, whether political, colonial, social, religious, sexual, gender, etc. Today, we are faced with the return of iconoclasm, which is everywhere attacking statues for what they represent, the violence of the colonial and slave past. These wrongs have not been atoned for, if they ever could be, and the injustices of the present continue to revive them.

Yet the violence that replaces must be preferred to the violence that destroys. Let us borrow the football metaphor. A fault puts a work of art *out of play*; a player who is no longer in the game is replaced, substituted. We can decide that controversial sculptures will be put in a park, in a museum or any public space with the necessary texts to provide context. The sculptures will thus be deactivated.

The Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren (Brussels), which has recently been renovated — it would be more correct to say *rethought* — offers an example of such an out-of-play operation without destruction, and at the same time as several statues of King Leopold II were destroyed in Belgium. The sculptures of the last century, commissioned from Belgian artists to punctuate the course of the display of collections from the founding of this museum in Congo in 1908, were ‘put out of the way’ in a room in the basement of the museum (dedicated to pedagogy, in ‘preview’ of the visit), behind a metal barrier. Piled up voluntarily without aesthetic display, some are placed on low-end storage shelves that make us think of the work *The Repair* (2012) exhibited by Kader Attia at *Documenta 13* (Kassel) in 2012. The artist put the genre of the Western ethnographic museum, often animated by a colonialist spirit, ‘out of play’ by disqualifying it, juxtaposing the ethnographic collections to the ‘broken faces,’ colonial victims taken by force during the First World War by their metropolises. In Tervuren, a placard on the wall stipulates that the sculptures taken *out of play* no longer have a place in the museum and that they “are displayed as if they were in a depot. They bear witness to deep-rooted prejudices and stereotypes that contributed to racism in our modern society.”<sup>5</sup> Some of these sculptures, seen by the cartoonist Hergé, inspired the most questionable scenes of his graphic novel *Tintin in the Congo* (1931). The forced ‘storage’ of the sculptures in the new display of Tervuren is, in a sense, comparable to the recovery of the Paul Landowski’s statue *Le Pavois* (1928) in the

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5 Thierry Dufrêne, Photo of a placard at the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Brussels, 2018. Author’s personal collection.

center of Algiers, encased in a concrete sarcophagus at the initiative of the artist M'hamed Issiakhem in 1978 after Algerian independence. Simply decorated with two monumental hands tearing off their handcuffs and with bas-reliefs showing the development of the new free nation, this cement chest expresses, *in situ* and without destruction, the victory of a Revolution that has rebuffed the colonizing power while reserving in the future the possibility of a physical and semantic apprehension of the monument as an Archive. But let us return to Tervuren: by the explicit condemnation — large glass walls blocking the old entrance and certain circulations — the museum, built thanks to the exploitation of the Congo, is itself taken as a testimony of, by remaining at a critical distance, the colonization. Finally, during a residency in 2016, the Congolese artist Freddy Tsimba (1967– ) created acephal sculptures with hands against the wall and legs spread like migrants kept in a transit camp from scrap recovered from the renovation.

Another example of an attempt to take sculptures out-of-play is the modification of the title of the works in the Musée d'Orsay's (Paris) exhibition *Le Modèle noir, de Géricault à Matisse* (2019). The idea was to question the titles of the works by giving the models, often confused and rendered anonymous by titles such as “Noir” or “Nègre,” their names back and by proposing alternative titles more in line with the meaning of history and our contemporary ethical choices. The piling up of names on placards — reproduced by a Wikipedia site — led the public to question the persistence of racist content. So *Why be born a slave?* was the title inscribed on the pedestal of the marble bust presented by Carpeaux at the 1869 Salon under the title *Négresse*. Charles Cordier's famous *Buste de Nègre du Soudan* (1857) was titled *Homme du Soudan français. Une Négresse*; Cordier's *Vénus noire* (1851) was retitled *Vénus africaine*. Retaining the old titles alongside new ones kept the historical questioning open, unlike a similar exhibition in the Rijksmuseum in 2015, where new titles downright replaced the old titles. In a sense, the exhibition at the Musée d'Orsay, a perilous but interesting attempt, echoed the concerns of artist Victor Burgin, who said he tries to make the “works” difficult for the viewer:



Why make things so difficult for the viewer? We are a consumer-society, and it seems to me that art has become a passive ‘spectator sport’ to an extent unprecedented in history. I have always tried to work against this tendency by producing ‘occasions for interpretation’ rather than ‘objects of consumption.’ I believe that the ability to think/produce rather than consume meanings, and the ability to think otherwise — ways of thinking not encouraged by the imperative of commodity production, ways condemned as ‘a waste of time’ — is fundamental to the goal of a truly, rather than nominally, democratic society. I believe art is one of the few remaining areas of social activity where the attitude of critical engagement may still be encouraged — all the more reasons then for art to engage with those issues which are critical.<sup>6</sup>

The tragedy of reversal and recognition is never more salient than when audiences are blind to the intentions of artists. The hashtag #RhodesMustFall on Twitter and Facebook led to the unbolting of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes (1910) at the University of Cape Town in 2015. At the same time, the students attacked a sculpture purchased by the university in 2000 that depicts Saartjie Baartman, the famous Venus Hottentote, made by artist Willie Bester (1956– ) from salvaged metal. Without destroying it, the students dressed it in traditional clothes and covered it with denunciations: “It’s not just a sculpture... It’s not just a piece of cloth... It’s centuries of trauma.” One placard mentions the “psychopathy of colonialism” but, on that libel, someone added: “by a Black man/artist Willie Bester,” for indeed Bester is mixed and wanted to pay homage to Saartjie Baartman. The ignorance regarding the artist’s intentions and the context of the purchase of the work, two years after the restitution of Baartman’s remains, resulted in a blind attack. But Bester wanted to *replace* humiliation with triumph, a deterioration (as evidenced by the salvaged materials) through rehabilitation.

After the removal of the statues in the communist world following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, their plots remained empty. The dismantling of the

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<sup>6</sup> Victor Burgin, *Between*, 2nd ed. (London: Mack, 2020), 138. First published in 1986.

statues of the colonial era gave birth to a completely different dramaturgy. Thus, in September 2017, when the rains had temporarily felled the statue of General Faidherbe in Saint-Louis, Senegal, many Senegalese spontaneously posed on the pedestal, regaining their identity. The theatrical gesture recalls that of the Angolan artist Kiluanji Kia Henda (1979– ), winner of the 2017 Frieze Artist Award, who stages himself on the empty pedestals of old monuments dating from the colonial era and encourages others to do so. People adopt attitudes of power, comic and derisory: the cathartic effect is certain. If the artist materializes an ephemeral dream, they, by doing so, draw our attention to the possibility of creating new memories. We really only destroy what we can replace. Haven't Senegalese social networks praised the Sufi theologian Sheikh Ahmadou Bamba for taking Faidherbe's place?

The staging of art history as a tragedy played in front of the media or in front of the public in museums and exhibitions, with a relatively naive form of catharsis at play, must be evaluated by the art historian as a highly questionable way of presenting art history. Alexandra Pirici and Manuel Pelmus did otherwise with the *tableaux vivants* of their excellent *An Immaterial Retrospective of the Venice Biennale* in the Romanian pavilion of the 2013 Biennale. One of the past episodes of the biennial they had chosen for *reenactment* referred to the first exhibition of African art in this international setting, in 1922: A human pyramid mimicked Giambologna's *Rape of the Sabine Women* in front of a single, hieratic *performer*, who embodied a baluba statue, while an actor read a 2013 article from an Italian newspaper which, contemptuous of African art, said that only the first work, Giambologna's, the model, deserved to be considered a work of art. The history of art, or at least art criticism as it is prejudicially written, was questioned in action but without the search for catharsis, except perhaps by the disarticulation of the *Rape of the Sabine Women* when the human pyramid composed by the dancers was disassembled while the performer continues to 'hold' the position of the baluba statue. Something of Rancière's *communauté émancipée* (emancipated community) was played out between the spectators and the performers:

Les artistes, comme les chercheurs, construisent la scène où la manifestation et l'effet de leurs compétences sont exposés, rendus incertains dans les termes de l'idiome nouveau qui traduit une nouvelle aventure intellectuelle. L'effet de l'idiome ne peut être anticipé. Il demande des spectateurs qui jouent le rôle d'interprètes actifs, qui élaborent leur propre traduction pour s'approprier l' 'histoire' et en faire leur propre histoire.<sup>7</sup>

We are very close to what Eluard called for in *Poetic Evidence* (1937), what could be called a right to artistic interference: “The time has come when all have the right and duty to affirm their profound engagement in the lives of others, in ordinary life.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Le spectateur émancipé* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2008), 28–29.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Eluard, “Poetic Evidence,” in *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Francis Francina and Charles Harrison (New York: Routledge, 1982), 221–226. First published in 1937.

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