

Follies, or “how to make exhibitions”

Two new figures make their appearance in the emblem books of the late sixteenth century. The first is the doctor who heals a madman by draining from his head a swarm of “follies”, symbolic of the “melancholic”, “fantastic”, or “foolish” thoughts that infect the brain and confound the spirit. The other character is the man, who catches birds with a lime-twig covered in glue, and who goes from village to village pursued by flies and mosquitoes. These insects, too, symbolise the impulses, whims, and caprices that incessantly tease and sting us. Thoughts are like insects, and one can catch them, as here, in an exhibition. Like the “lime-twig” man, the curator travels from town to town, visiting biennales, museums and artist studios, looking for unknown objects and artworks in a never-ending cycle. The birds he catches are the artworks, which he eventually gathers together in an exhibition. And the mosquitoes and flies, or rather the “follies” that teem about the curator during his travels, swarming in and out of his head, stand for the “fantastic” thoughts that accompany his vision and concept. The exhibition “Theatre of the World” has no pretensions to being an exhaustive staged world collection, nor does it claim to document in parts or in total the history of art. There is no prelude, no overture, no finale. The exhibition is itself a composition that is a whole, in which each work points to other works, through parallels, reversals, small shifts or repetitions. The works are arranged—loosely, close together—always facing each other, reflecting each other. The early works do not represent a beginning; they appear alongside later works and escape from categories such as past, present and future. “After two thousand years of scientific research it now seems likely that everything can be created from nothing”, wrote Alan Guth, the father of the “inflationary universe”. It was this “folly” that has been teeming about me: would it be possible, as curator, to bring together the everything and the nothing in one exhibition? And would it be possible to show the sublime moment of in-betweenness, or with Yves Klein “fill the emptiness with consciousness” and reveal something of the universe—not necessarily ours—that is usually invisible? In “Theatre of the World” the works do not speak for themselves nor to themselves but with the other. And as art is never static or definitive but a process that renders visible that which had been hidden, art seems only complete in the interaction between the object and its viewer. The goal of “Theatre of the World” is to foster a new freedom in the interaction with art, to open up to individual

experience and leave room for personal discoveries. The objects and works originate from a variety of ages and cultures, flow into each other and morph in shape and meaning—just as in mythical stories. These stories, we recall, branch out in endless confused clusters and proliferate into innumerable versions, some incomplete and contradictory, and some which evoke or prevail upon others. Here they are all performed within one closed, mystical stage, in this case MONA, which for this exhibition has been momentarily detached from the world. It is not by chance that this exhibition is taking place at the Museum for Old and New Art, the most southern exhibition platform on earth. With “Artempo” we—together with Axel Vervoordt—aimed to give, in the centre of the artworld, Venice, a strong impetus to Palazzo Fortuny’s role as a laboratory for forms of exhibitions. With “Theatre of the World”, we—together with David Walsh—wish to add another chapter to the history of exhibition making, now in Australia, the old centre of the (art)world, where art and life, visible and invisible have been melding since human existence. In the transposition of our “fantastic” thoughts, David Walsh has been buzzing about our heads like a mosquito, and for this I give him my heartfelt thanks. It has also been my great good fortune to meet Olivier Varenne while working on this project; without him, these “follies” would still be haunting us.

Tijs Visser

also for Jean-Hubert Martin