

Log

WINTER 2011

Observations on
architecture and the
contemporary city

29° 57' N, 31° 6' E

Cairo-Al Fayoum Desert Road, Hadayek El Ahram

In the ever-changing landscape of Egypt, as events this winter so clearly have demonstrated, one thing remains steadfast: the pyramids of Giza. Driving north toward Cairo from the oasis city Al Fayoum, one passes the walled community of Hadayek El Ahram (The Pyramid Gardens), home to some of Egypt's more "affluent" people. The suburb looks onto the vast, undeveloped Pyramid Plateau surrounding the great pyramids that stand at the western edge of the capital. Here, just 20 kilometers from the center of Cairo, the desert sands are lined by only a few billboards, streetlights, fences, and road signs – themselves dilapidated signs of the modern that pale beside the enduring power of the ancient and its image. In Egypt, heritage is the past, the present, and the foreseeable future.

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\$15.00



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Cover Story:

On Cairo–Al Fayoum Desert Road, Hadayek El Ahram, Egypt
Postcard photo © Manuel Alvarez Diestro, 2010.

The Metaphysics Of Permanence – Curating Critical Impossibilities

1. The relationships of cultural nationalism with religion and economic interests are other complicating factors, as is, depending on place, the historical relationship with the West and the colonial past. Some examples of research into cultural nationalism are: Kai Nielsen, "Cultural Nationalism, Neither Ethnic Nor Civic," in *Theorizing Nationalism*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 119–30; Yingjie Guo, *Cultural Nationalism in Contemporary China: The Search for National Identity Under Reform* (London: Routledge, 2004); Lynne Walhout Hinojosa, *The Renaissance, English Cultural Nationalism, and Modernism, 1860–1920* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009); Timothy P. Daniels, *Building Cultural Nationalism in Malaysia: Identity, Representation, and Citizenship* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Harumi Befu, *Cultural Nationalism in East Asia: Representation and Identity* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1993).

2. For a larger analysis of UNESCO see Lisa Breglia, *Monumental Ambivalence: The Politics of Heritage* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006); Michael A. Di Giovine, *The Heritage-scape: UNESCO, World Heritage, and Tourism* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2009). See also Mark Jarzombek, "Art History and Architecture's Aporia," in *Art and Globalization*, ed. James Elkins (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 188–94. In this article, my emphasis is not on the museumification of culture or on the relationship between heritage industry and tourism, both pressing concerns, but the critiques of which often operate on an assumption about a flattening of architecture. I see the problem in the opposite direction, the elevation of architecture into the complex ethereal world of philosophical legitimacy.

3. Alberto Martorell-Carreño, "Cultural Patrimony and Property Rights in Peru," in *Art and Cultural Heritage: Law, Policy, and Practice*, ed. Barbara T. Hoffman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 105.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF CULTURAL NATIONALISM

Architecture in the last two decades has moved up in the world, but the reason has nothing to do with star architects. It is the consequence of the rise, globally, of cultural nationalism, a phenomenon that still remains largely outside the bounds of architecture's disciplinary critiques.¹ Cultural nationalism has recognizable profiles. It seeks to preserve and enhance the distinctiveness of a national consciousness through the selective constructions of history and tradition. It creates a set of public embodiments and elite identifications using the high civilizational moments of the past; and though oriented toward a positive image of nationhood, it enhances old wounds and traumas as a support structure for the tropes of patriotism. Cultural nationalism is particularly strong in Asian countries, but it is also manifest in Europe and elsewhere. Unlike state nationalism, which often embraces a platform of modernization and urbanization, cultural nationalism champions ethnic lineages and historical hierarchies, and views capitalism with suspicion. Where the two forms of nationalism often merge – though with an inevitable set of contestations – is in the realm of architectural preservation. Cultural nationalists emphasize tradition, state nationalists emphasize tourism. UNESCO's 1972 "Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage" played a key role in promoting cultural nationalism by spreading the ideals of "heritage" around the world and by linking these ideals – and their associated politics – with the premise that historical monuments are shared by all humanity.²

The movement to legalize connections between a nation and its cultural artifacts began to take root in the late 19th century. In 1882, the Peruvians, for example, added the following sentence to their constitution: "All the monuments coming from Peruvian ancient times are the property of the Nation, because of the glory represented by them."³ Similar



4. In 1984, for example, the National Argentine Committee of ICOMOS (International Council of Monuments and Sites) produced a document that significantly broadened the concept of heritage and that hoped to involve the private sector in the conservation, enhancement, and diffusion of Argentine cultural heritage. According to an assessment in 2000, "The concept of heritage now includes all forms of human production as well as the environment and the landscape. Indeed, landscape heritage is threatened by its own fragility and the value of the land on which it is found. In addition, cultural heritage is now specifically mentioned in the Argentine Constitution and many provinces have developed their own conservation standards. Training in the field of conservation has grown, with courses being offered by various universities. It is also pleasing to note that interventions in heritage matters follow international recommendations, and that many sites – natural and cultural – have been included in the World Heritage List." <http://www.international.icomos.org/risk/2001/arge2001.htm> Note: all Web sites in this article were accessed November 1, 2010, unless otherwise noted.

5. Bob McKercher and Hilary Du Cros, *Cultural Tourism: The Partnership between Tourism and Cultural Heritage Management* (New York: Haworth Hospitality Press, 2002), 5. The authors, a tourism specialist and a cultural heritage management expert, present a model for a working partnership with mutual benefits.

provisions can be found in most constitutions even if they did not come into being during the early 20th century.⁴ But the post-1980s escalation of the value of historical monuments has been so extreme that it is often difficult to tell the difference between what is "constructed" in the name of local culture and what is "constructed" in the name of the tourism industry. Nonetheless, the overall consequence has been a revision in the hierarchy of the arts. In the 19th century, poetry and painting were held to be the leading carriers of cultural significance. Architecture was at the bottom of the list, burdened by its materiality and its relationship to money. The argument – or some variant of it – structured philosophy's take on the arts for two hundred years. But a strange thing has happened. Poetry and painting have been demoted and architecture – *historical* architecture – now functions as the lead cultural medium. Just type the word *India* into Google and the Taj Mahal appears over and over again. Type in *Cambodia* and dozens of images of Angkor Wat pop up. If you scroll further down these search results you will see things related to "tradition" – women dressed in native garb, for example – followed by links that relate to cuisine and pop stars. The catenation of historical architecture, traditional garb, food, and pop stars – with music also playing a role – constitutes a cultural profile that is repeated in many parts of the world and is reaffirmed – and reinforced – in the handbooks of culture-tourism managers. "Cultural heritage assets" are defined in one book as: *archaeological sites, museums, castles, palaces, historical buildings, famous buildings, ruins, art, sculpture, crafts, galleries, festivals, events, music and dance, folk arts, theater, "primitive cultures," subcultures, ethnic communities, churches, cathedrals and other things that represent people and their cultures.*⁵

GWANGHWAMUN, THE MAIN GATE OF GYEONGBOKGUNG PALACE, RE-OPENED AT PUBLIC CERMONY AUGUST 15, 2010, SEOUL, KOREA. OPPOSITE: IMAGE RESULTS FOR SEARCH QUERY "INDIA" IN GOOGLE, DECEMBER 2010. ALL PHOTOS COURTESY THE AUTHOR.



Not only does historical architecture – revised, restored, and touristified – broadcast the message of national pride more effectively than anything else, especially in the non-West, its politicization is a foregone conclusion. When President Obama and his wife landed in India on an official state visit in 2010, they were brought not to the presidential palace, as would have been common not too long ago, but to Humayun's Tomb, which was completed in 1570 and – more importantly – had been inscribed into the World Heritage list in 1993. It was in front of the tomb, with its imposing dome and extensive gardens, all laboriously restored, that the Obamas were received by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and his wife Gursharan Kaur.⁶

6. "Obama visits Humayun's Tomb; floored by India's history," *Deccan Herald* (November 14, 2010) <http://www.deccanherald.com/content/110806/obama-visits-humayuns-tomb-floored.html>.

If a country does not have useable buildings, these can now be easily constructed, reconstructed, or enhanced, all in the name of preservation. The rebuilding of Warsaw after World War II was a prototype, but it was only in the last decades that such efforts have become normalized and internationalized. In the 1980s Saddam Hussein, seeing himself as a living incarnation of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II, rebuilt the facade and monumental staircase of the ziggurat of Ur. In 2000, the Russians opened the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow. Built in 1883 but destroyed in 1931 by the Soviet regime, it now exists as a monument – literally – to the new Russian nation. Other examples include the building/rebuilding of the Globe Theater in London (1997) and of the Frauenkirche in Dresden (2004). The list goes on. Gwanghwamun, a tower gate in Seoul, was rebuilt *ex nihilo* in 2010 to invigorate national spirit. The Korean president, dressed in traditional costume, delivered the opening speech under a white banner suspended from balloons that stated the

gate was restored to its “genuine form.” He was referring not just to the form of the building, but to the fact that the new building replaced a structure the Japanese had built purposefully off-kilter by four degrees. The Japanese who ruled Korea between 1910 and 1945 were fully aware of the power of geomancy in the imagination of Koreans, so they designed the rebuilding of the gate so as to “block” the flow of energy from the main palace. The current repositioning of Gwanghwamun repaired the insult.⁷

When taken all together, this means that the usual inclusion of lecture courses on the history of architecture in art history programs or in schools of architecture is obsolete. The history of architecture should be taught in political science departments.

ROMANTIC NATIONALISM AND BEYOND

In the 1970s, one could hardly see anything negative in heritage programs, but this is not the case today since it is now clear that the theoretical platform that is often at play is built on the foundations of Romantic Nationalism, a European phenomenon of the mid- and late 19th century and a reaction against the Napoleonic vision of a unified Europe.⁸ The movement revived local languages and ethnographies, celebrated the humbler realities of existence in poetry and painting, and championed the village – or perhaps better stated, the *image* of the village. Russia, Finland, Germany, which had the most to gain in the attempt to distance themselves from French internationalism, were on the forefront of this, but the movement soon spread to England, France, and the United States. In the 20th century, Romantic Nationalism lost steam when the variously scaled drives of modernization dampened its impulses. Today, pro-industrializing forces remain in play, of course, but have been increasingly hidden within the ever more powerful, globally scaled revival of culture.

At stake is not the amount of buildings preserved but the premises under which preservation is often done, premises similar to ideas laid out by John Ruskin back in 1836 when he authored *The Poetry of Architecture*. Cottages, he argued, needed to be appreciated in the context of their landscape, which, when seen as a “picture,” relates to the identity of a nation state. To show this in operation, Ruskin takes his reader to England, France, Italy, and Switzerland, describing and even drawing chalets and cottages along the way. His politics is obvious. Opposed to the industrialization of his age, Ruskin aimed to project the image of a contented agricultural class. Stated point blank, UNESCO is Ruskin applied at a global level – even

7. I would like to thank Alfred B. Hwangbo, associate professor of architecture at Seoul National University of Technology, for suggesting this structure. The history of the structure is complex. Gwanghwamun was constructed in 1395 as the main gate to Gyeongbokgung Palace, the royal palace of the Joseon Dynasty. It was destroyed during the 1592 Japanese invasion and left in ruins. In 1867, during the reign of Emperor Gojong, it was reconstructed. In 1926, the Japanese government tore it down and rebuilt it to the southeast to make way for the massive Japanese Governor General Building. That building was destroyed during the Korean War. In 1963, during Park Chung-hee's administration, the structure was rebuilt, but in concrete. Beginning in 2006, the gate was moved back to its original location 14.5 meters to the south, and its wooden structure reconstructed. It was also placed in its proper axial relationship to Gyeongbokgung Palace.

8. The extensive literature on Romantic Nationalism cannot be listed here, but perhaps for a single representative work, see Christopher M. S. Johns, *Antonio Canova and the Politics of Patronage in Revolutionary and Napoleonic Europe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

with regard to his politics. Ruskin would have challenged the inauthenticity of reconstructed buildings. But today if the decision is between preserving temporality or creating a pretty picture, it is the ideology of "the picture" that wins out. It is somewhat ironic that painting, dismissed by many in the art world, is now fully active in the field of "architecture." The Egyptian government, in an attempt at image control – the image of the nation, that is – has recently copyrighted the Giza pyramids to forestall any further replicas in Las Vegas.

The scale at which images of the historical past perfected and cleaned of their own historical detritus determine the definition of "history" is staggering. Photos from UNESCO heritage sites can be downloaded directly to your iPod through the recently created Web site called WikiMedia Heritage. There is never any snow, rain, or sleet, and above all, no signs of poverty.

The ambiguity of these efforts comes front and center in cases when UNESCO protects not just landscapes and buildings but entire population groups. Take the Dogon in Mali, who have been "protected" by UNESCO since 1989. What interests UNESCO, if one reads their explanation, is first of all (and, one can say, quite shockingly) the "landscape," then "beautiful architecture." The 300,000 people who live in the area are not mentioned, but rather "age-old social traditions."

*The Bandiagara site is an outstanding landscape of cliffs and sandy plateaux with some beautiful architecture (houses, granaries, altars, sanctuaries and Togu Na, or communal meeting places). Several age-old social traditions live on in the region (masks, feasts, rituals, and ceremonies involving ancestor worship). The geological, archaeological and ethnological interest, together with the landscape, make the Bandiagara plateau one of West Africa's most impressive sites.*⁹

9. <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/516>.

Obviously, the government of Mali promotes the protection of the Dogon for tourism. Indeed, since 1990 the number of tourists to Mali increased from 40,000 to 143,000 (2006). For an analysis of the UNESCO impact on the Dogon, see Silvia Gasparetto, "The Dogon Country" *Lotus* 114 (2002): 88–105.

Preservation is no longer about architecture as such, but about architecture's pictorial and ethnographic imaginary. This is what is being "preserved." And in the case of the Dogon, the tropes of cultural nationalism are bestowed upon them by UNESCO in alliance with the nationalist aims of the government of Mali.

To jaded intellectuals, this type of "architecture" might seem fake. But that would be too hasty a conclusion. One cannot simply dismiss Angkor Wat or the Taj Mahal as one could Disneyland. The fake and the real cannot be delaminated without a rejection of history altogether. The result is a historiographic conundrum of unprecedented proportion. Cultural Nationalism and its local base, whether semi-real or semi-manufactured, blends seamlessly with UNESCO's ethos of Romantic Nationalism as the unfinished corrective to modernity.

THE METAPHYSICS OF PERMANENCE

The blurring of the national and the international around the figuration of history is held together by a chain of interlocking metaphysical propositions: a “permanent” national culture (under the stresses of capitalism that it itself produces), a permanent building (under the stress of tourism that such a building produces), a permanent UNESCO (under the stress of a political inefficiency that it claims is a consequence of the inefficiency of others), and above all, a permanent notion of historical past (under the stress of a modern hybridizing force that for many looms dangerously over everything). For UNESCO, it is all held together by the pretentious phrase “Outstanding Universal Value.”¹⁰ Like all the other metaphysical propositions on the chain, it seeks to unify the human condition in the face of its complexity and diversity.

The problems that this produces are disguised in layers of reality that reach deep into our epistemological productions. This includes the increase in the number of national museums. In the last 20 years not only have dozens of new countries begun to create their individual national museums, such as the Uzbekistan National Museum of Applied Art (1997), but older countries are adding their names to the list as well, such as the National Museum of Saudi Arabia (2000) and the National Museum of Kenya (2006). These museums need curators by the dozens, all of whom will substantiate and reinforce the notion of a “national art.”

These museums will also need books about the art and architecture of their individual nations. Art historians already seem to have obliged, producing a flood of books on Indian Art, Cambodian Art, Chinese Art, Romanian Art, Brazilian Art, English Art, and so forth. Add to this the pervasive emergence in schools of architecture of a new generation of required classes that deal with “traditional” architecture. Japanese students take courses in Japanese traditional architecture, but it is hardly unique to Japan. It is a model of teaching that can be found in numerous countries. In Canada, architecture schools are mandated by their accreditation board to include a certain number of documented references to “Canadian Architecture.” When you add to this the touristification and commodification of architectural imaginaries, you get that now ubiquitous and toxic relationship between heritage, museology, politics, pedagogy, and art history.

Not surprisingly in this development, all eyes fall on buildings given their scale and importance; not surprising, because the local manipulations of heritage purposefully

10. <http://worldheritage-forum.net/en/2006/01/117>.



FOTOPEDIA.COM, "THE FIRST COLLABORATIVE PHOTO ENCYCLOPEDIA."

reduce a nation's "history" to a type of freestanding silo ostensibly untouched by outside forces. Heritage evacuates temporality from the architectural to produce an imaginary cultural calm in the swirling stew of reality. The main problem is that heritage comes not only with its unique brand of support mechanisms (from public relations to art history), but also, when framed by UNESCO, with its unique brand of punishment. All metaphysics requires violence in some form or another, even if the mission of UNESCO – as it prominently proclaims on its Web site – is "Building Peace in the Minds of People."¹¹ All metaphysics presumes its self-righteousness and UNESCO is no different. For Plato, it was okay to drag people out of their dark cave so that they could "see the light." For modern religions it is okay to shun nonbelievers – or worse. For nationalists, it is okay to accuse a neighbor of being a foreigner – or worse. So what are the punishment strategies of UNESCO? In Turkey, UNESCO has given Istanbul just a few months to improve its management of its heritage sites or have them removed from the Heritage List. Millions of dollars will be lost. Dresden has already suffered this indignity, only because it decided to build a new bridge. But it gets worse. Read the words of Koïchiro Matsuura when he was director-general of UNESCO. Addressing Iraqi museum directors in 2003, he said:

Despite all your expertise and good will, the fate of Iraqi heritage does not lie in your hands. It lies in the hands of the international community as a whole, and the only way that we will be able to safeguard these treasures and give them back to humanity is if we can count on the cohesion, coordination and determination of all concerned, at every level. . . . [We must therefore] take emergency measures, such as the setting-up by the authorities on the ground of a nation-wide "heritage police," entrusted with the task of watching over cultural sites and institutions, including libraries and buildings where archives are stored.¹²

Heritage police. His words, not mine.

Even though decisions are made by a committee of experts in the name of some "universal value," not everyone will universally agree with the decision. The odd thing about metaphysics when one looks at its history is that it proclaims its "universality" even though it is never obvious where "universality" begins and ends. UNESCO has tried to solve this by claiming that it seeks to protect the diversity of human history. Its goal, it claims, is to bring out the "uniqueness and plurality of the identities of the groups and societies making up humankind."¹³ Unfortunately, one person's plurality is another person's enemy, which will inevitably make the ever-

11. <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/unesco/>.

12. http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=11399&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html.

13. See also "Special Expert Meeting of the World Heritage Convention: The Concept of Outstanding Universal Value," The International Council on Monuments and Sites (2005), 4. <http://whc.unesco.org/temp/POL/ICOMOS%20OUV%20Paper%20final.doc>.

expanding search for “universal values” ever more complicit in nonuniversal, ideological struggles. This is why all metaphysics ends in real violence as has been proven in history many times over. Stated politically, we have struggled against neo-liberalism when there is actually another monster in the cage.

The basic fact that much of the historical architecture is in the form of churches, mosques, and temples places a lot of emphasis on religion as an expression of “culture.” About a third of the buildings preserved by UNESCO fall into this category. Flashpoints already exist. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas recently warned that a religious war would erupt following the Israeli cabinet’s decision to declare the Cave of Patriarchs and Rachel’s Tomb as national heritage sites. “This is a serious provocation,” Abbas said. Ismail Haniyeh, the Hamas prime minister of Gaza, presented an even firmer stand. He called on the Palestinians to launch a new intifada in protest of the decision.¹⁴ UNESCO, influenced by these arguments, passed a resolution stating that the Cave of the Patriarchs and Rachel’s Tomb were in fact not Israeli sites because they are on “occupied land,” leading the Israelis in turn to question the objectivity of the UNESCO board. According to Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, “The attempt to detach the people of Israel from its heritage is absurd.”¹⁵

At issue here is not who is right but the increasing entanglement of UNESCO in the day-to-day world of *Realpolitik*, a direct consequence of its attempt to reach out to all cultures. What was once heralded as a desire to tie humanity together in the fabric of a shared history (World War II being the trauma lurking in UNESCO’s background) is quickly becoming the source of bitterness and conflict. That this was not apparent to the advocates of “Outstanding Universal Heritage” from the beginning is truly shocking.

UNESCO is producing a future in which there will be hundreds of contested sites, with architecture very much in the crosshairs. It is already happening. The 14th-century Visoki Decani Monastery in western Kosovo that was made a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2004, for example, is being protected by a force of Italian United Nations peacekeepers.¹⁶ The Khmer Temple of Preah Vihear (added to UNESCO’s heritage list in 2008) is another flash point. The building lies directly on the border between Thailand and Cambodia and has already been the site of shootings directly related to opposing cultural nationalist claims over this building.

14. January 23, 2010, *Israeli News*.

15. “Israel suspends ties with U.N. body,” *j.weekly.com*: <http://www.jweekly.com/article/full/59869/israel-suspends-ties-with-u.n.-body/> (accessed November 11, 2010).

16. Kathleen Burke, “Endangered Site: Visoki Decani Monastery, Kosovo,” *Smithsonian* 40 (March 2009) <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/Endangered-Cultural-Treasures-Visoki-Decani-Monastery-Kosovo.html>.

CURATING CRITICAL IMPOSSIBILITY

Curatorship and preservation are both undergoing disciplinary revolutions, but with different publics in mind. In the last 15 years the art world has seen the emergence of curator-artists with a focus on complex subjectivist positioning. Harald Szeemann, curator of Documenta 5, famously blurred the domains of art and curatorship, inspiring a generation of curator-artists to explore the role of subject-position in the contemporary world. That Documenta 5 took place in 1972, the same year as the UNESCO heritage convention, seems to be hardly fortuitous. Architectural preservation was seeking a contemporaneity all its own. But instead of focusing on "subject position" it has focused on "object position" – that is, on objects held in place by a historical imaginary reinforced by architecture's new, and rising, philosophical position as a holder of metaphysical value. If the world of the Venice Biennale looks to a type of future tense, maintaining the illusion that the arts are alive and inventive (and thus by definition "liberal"), heritage architecture moves from picture-perfect to pluperfect – from a world that has been to a world that will be again and forever.

We should not, however, see contemporary art as the home of the avant-garde and the architecture of cultural nationalism as the home of the retro-garde. Both sides of the equation are part of a common historical event, the components of which are the corporatization of art and the industrialization of tourism. One can map out a biennale in the same terms as a heritage project. The only difference – and it is a critical one – is that heritage architecture is clearly the larger political force transforming national self-comprehensions the globe over, becoming the site of micro-utopias defining a purified future in dialectic tension with messy reality.

Can this be brought out of hiding or is the fascination with contemporary art and architecture so narrowly defined that it fails to see the avant-gardism of heritage?

To answer the question we have to link the history of preservation with the history of curatorship and see them as interrelated phenomena, and that means we have to ask not what is being curated (such as an artwork or a building) but how we bring into visibility "curatorial practices" like those of UNESCO. In other words, how can curatorship be the subject matter of its own exhibition protocols? I see this as part of a larger task of critical historiography that asks us to see ourselves as actors in our own history.¹⁷ In this I am following Bruno Latour's notion that there is no "outside" curatorial practice – just as there is no Archemedian-styled avant-garde

17. See Mark Jarzombek, "A Prolegomena to Critical Historiography," *Journal of Architectural Education* 52/4 (May 1999): 197–206.

THE REAR OF THE GREAT TEMPLE
OF RAMSES II, ABU SIMBEL, EGYPT.
TOURISTS ARRIVING BY BOAT FROM
LAKE NASSER IN THE FOREGROUND.



– that can give us a proverbial fresh start to the understanding of our modernity. Our efforts at critique are always belated, the reason being that all of us, around the globe, are complicit in the rise of cultural nationalism and its project of historical reclamation.

The name for this project is Curating Critical Impossibility. The notion of impossibility is key, for it is *only* in the context of the impossible that one can bring out of hiding the *failure* of the modern subject-position in the shadow of the modern metaphysical. I offer three curatorial proposals.

Proposal One: The Leeum in Seoul has two museums: a Museum for Traditional Art and a Museum of Modern Art, housed in two separate buildings. I suggest taking all of the content of the one building and placing it in the other building while keeping the names of the two buildings and institutions intact. The so-called “traditional” artifacts will receive new labels explaining their modernity, and the “modern” artifacts will have to be written up as traditional. The purpose is to show the complete artificiality of the art historical categories of “tradition” and “modern” and to upset the complicitous relationships between art history and the construction of tradition and Cultural Nationalism.

Proposal Two: Historical categories such as “Indian Art” need to be challenged. There are a dozen art history books with that title, by which they mean not India but something like Greater India. Pakistan and Southeast Asia are all part of “India.” Against this construction, I propose an exhibition, titled “India,” that looks at both the art historical and architectural historical construction of India. The exhibit would be shown in India *and* in Pakistan simultaneously. The resultant difficulty perhaps even to mount the exhibition would be incorporated into the exhibit.

Proposal Three: The first great “success” of UNESCO heritage work was the moving of the ancient Egyptian temple, Abu Simbel, in 1968. It was cut into hundreds of pieces and rebuilt above the floodwaters into an artificial mountain – a reinforced-concrete wedge-shaped structure covered with sand – that was fully air-conditioned. Visitors see the illusion of Abu Simbel, never the reality, which is completely fenced-off. The truth is that there are two entrances to the building, one from the front and the other from the rear, the latter leading into the vast climate-controlled building that stabilizes the environment behind the facade. A small door is visible on the flank of the artificial mountain. Visitors should be guided to both entrances in order to bring to light the artificiality of the construction. As it stands, however, Abu Simbel – the historical part – is a symbol of the modern nation-state preserving its history in union with the international community; to get the story across, however, it suppresses the true modernity of the operation. I will, therefore, produce a video game that allows one to play with the pieces of the facade, and even to insert new faces over those of the pharaohs. The portrait of Egypt President Mubarak as well as leaders from around the world will all be options. Unlike tourism, which exploits the building for its kitsch potential, the game would allow one to virtually interface with – and alter – the building’s political message.

These and other similar proposals that I am developing are designed to be impossible, for only in that way can we bring into visibility the inefficiency of critique against the over-determined world. They start with the fact that both architecture and history have been irrevocably cemented into the national-political consciousness of our time. This is where curatorial activism has to engage itself. The project must, however, be globally based in one way or another. But that, alas, is also impossible, since the more global we are becoming – globally – the more we are becoming – globally – nonglobal.