

A Museum without a Collection **Maison des Civilisation set de l'Unité Réunionnaise**

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In 2010, a museum and cultural center will open on Reunion Island, the *Maison des Civilisation set de l'Unité Réunionnaise* (MCUR). It will be the first museum built on the island entirely born out of colonial and postcolonial experiences. For the last three years, a team has been working on its cultural and scientific program and has organized events. The project has recently entered a new phase with the meeting of an international jury on May 14th, 2007. It proposed X-TU as the laureate for the architectural contest which used a spiral form as an answer.

A former French colony, now a French department and a European region, Reunion Island had four museums, a museum of natural history built in the 19th century on the European model, the *Musée Léon Dierx*, a museum of modern art built in the 20th century around a selection of modern paintings left by Ambroise Vollard, a collector of Reunionese origin, *Stella Matutina*, a museum of industry around sugar cane in a renovated factory (1980s) and *Villèle*, a museum set in a former plantation. All these museums followed a European philosophy: educating the citizen around a collection or an industry. None sought to integrate the lives and experiences of Reunion society except as an aside in temporary exhibitions.

The MCUR was not conceived around a collection, but rather around the desire and the will to offer a space of encounter, debate and interpretation. As a museum, it seeks to present and "represent" the lives and experiences of marginalized people: slaves, indentured workers, poor settlers, the processes of creolization and the multi-layered complex India-oceanic world. The objectives and philosophy of the MCUR rest on the analysis of the island's history and of the history of the museum. Postcolonial theory, gender theory, psychoanalysis and visual theory offered tools to clarify the forms of mediation that will be used in the museum.

A short and a long history

Reunion Island is both a young island and a young society. The island is barely three million year old, it is still in formation: the volcano is very active, the soil is fragile, the constructive land is a narrow band around the island, huge mountains forbid the construction of roads from one side to the other... Its society was born of globalization produced by slave trade and slavery when in the 17th century (there was no native population on the island when the French took "possession") European societies addicted to coffee, spices and sugar sought to colonize territories where to implant plantations with a servile workforce. That form of globalization produced those "who do not matter", human beings that were made into "things", into *meubles* (furniture) as stated in the *Code Noir*, a French code of laws regulating the lives of slaves. The short history of Reunion is inscribed in the long history of colonial slavery and European imperialism, but also part of the millenary history of the Indian Ocean.

On Reunion Island, 200 000 captives were introduced as slaves, bought in Madagascar, East Africa and in minor numbers in India and the Comoros islands. They left no names and no graves, but a rich and complex immaterial culture. However, the maroons (slaves escaping bonded labor) and their long war of resistance left a strong imprint on the island and the imaginary. They gave their names to the mountains, rivers and villages of the interior of the island, tracing territories of freedom – Dimitile, Cimendef, Ciloas, Mafate, Salazie... – and against a territory of terror and servitude on the coast with its Catholic rosary of names: Saint-Pierre, Sainte-Marie, Sainte-Suzanne, Saint-Denis, Saint-Louis, Saint-Leu, Saint-Philippe, Sainte-Rose... Slavery threw together people with different languages, cultures, religions, ideas, and these people found themselves under a brutal exploitation. Yet, the "camp of slaves" as they were called, became spaces where processes of creolization emerged. This is the paradox of slavery: brutality and death *and* creativity and life.

Creolization means here a process of loss and borrowing; bits and pieces of languages are gathered to create a common language and a shared world of rituals and social exchanges. Creolization is a strategy of survival: in a life and death situation, one *must* learn to translate. If I do not understand the meaning of a gesture, of an order, I risk punishment and death. I must make sense of things in a world where *my own world* has been deeply upset. I have lost everything that was familiar, my name, my family, my social life; I have been taken on the other side of the ocean and thrown into a pit of violence. Where to turn? Where to find meaning? Here, creolization is not hybridity; it is more about a situation of deep inequalities, of forced circumstances and strategies of survival.

On December 20th 1848, slavery was abolished on Reunion. 60 000 slaves, children, women and men were freed. The colonial class of property owners turned to the system of indentured work: thousands of men, and fewer women, were taken in South India and in lesser number in South China, Madagascar, Mozambique, the Comoros islands to replace the freed slaves on the plantations. Though the abolition of slavery has meant that the former slaves had become citizens of the French Republic, they remained colonized, and this paradoxical citizenship, being citizen *and* colonized, weighed heavily on the political life.

The first unions and free associations emerged in the 1920s. The demand for equality mobilized the population. Anti-colonial movements claimed that after *liberté*, freedom, (1848) people of Reunion must obtain *égalité*, equality. They understood that a "color line", to borrow W.E.B. Dubois' expression, ran through the idea of citizenship in France. Though it claimed to be a universal principle, citizenship with its consequent principle of equality was affected by racial thinking: could "Blacks", descendants of slaves, be considered "full" citizens? The racialization, the *africanization* of slavery had deeply transformed the ways in which people of Africa were considered. By the end of the 17th century, "Negro", Black and slave were synonyms in French dictionaries. Freedom was colored, as whites were "naturally" free whereas people of color had to obtain freedom, had to prove that they were worthy of being free. The anti-colonial movement for civic rights grew through the 1930s and led to the end of the colonial status on March 19th 1946, a century after the abolition of slavery. The promise of equality was not kept and movements of discontent increased in the 1950s, leading to the creation of political parties either asking more autonomy from the French Jacobin system, or asking for tighter links with France. The civic rights movement continued to be strong and diverse. It criticized the ongoing high rate of poverty, the rate of illiteracy, of infant mortality, the monopoly of sugar cane industry and the alliance between the hierarchy of the Catholic Church and the remnants of colonial society. Political repression, denial of freedom of speech, of association, of religious freedom, of vernacular culture were the weapons of the powerful. Yet, by the 1970s, a cultural movement born of the anti-colonial movement affirmed the history, language, culture of Reunion. It borrowed the vocabulary of cultural decolonization, but without the vocabulary of nation building.

In the 1980s, local big landowners sold their sugar cane properties to monopolies and invested their capital into commerce of import goods. In twenty years, Reunion moved from being a rural society to being a society of mass consumption, with an important part of the population living on welfare, a rate of unemployment close to 30%, the failure of mass education and growing economic dependency. Commercial malls, cars, SUV, cell phones, TV...all the signs of "modernity" were offered to fill up the void of dependency. In 1999, Paul Vergès, the historical leader of anti-colonialism launched the idea of a MCUR.

Museum and postcolonialism

Museums are connected with nation building, buildings where the treasures of the nation are gathered to educate the citizen. National collections, or private collections, are exhibited to suggest the ideal of a sublime aesthetics. But these collections are often the result of looting and stealing. In Reunion, we neither produced "great" art nor looted treasures. We are not building a nation-state. Why then a "museum" in a postcolonial place without a pre-colonial experience, which has

not produced palaces, statues, paintings, masks, objects of art? Why a *museum* when there is no collection to start with? Why not a cultural center, a youth center, a gallery?

We chose to call it a museum (and cultural center, but we wish to keep the term "museum") for a series of reasons. It is, firstly, a gesture of political appropriation. Usually, cultural centers are for the "South", museums for the "North". If there are museums in the "South" they are modeled on European museums. Yet, I argue that the challenge of visually representing encounters, struggles, languages and processes of creolization must be confronted. The new borders produced by decolonization, then by the collapse of the Soviet Union, the emergence of new "nations", of new zones of contact and conflicts and the new migratory flows can be "represented" visually to present a complex and changing image of the processes at work. Second, it will be a museum of the *living present*. In a situation, where material traces of the past have been destroyed and erased (traces of slaves, indentured workers, convicts, the poor...), where there is a high rate of unemployment, a slow erasure of the vernacular, soft multiculturalism, a petty bourgeoisie tempted by *civilisationism* (seizing signs of belonging to old civilizations – saris, manners, purified rituals, invention of tradition,...), where the museum was based on the written word, for an elite, where finally regional powers (India, China, Islam) are moving in through the instrumentalization of old diasporas, I think that it is necessary to develop new counter practices and that the museum offers the possibility of such counter practices. As a space for multi-lingual, international and local encounters, of a reinterpretation of the past and of imagination it can help to rethink the *commons*.

Maison des Civilisations et de l'Unité Réunionnaise

The museum will host spaces of exhibition, for seminars, libraries, restaurant, shops, multimedia, dance, poetry, studios to register testimonies, places to listen to living witnesses telling what the life of a worker, a domestic worker, a scientist is. It is supported by the Regional Council, the French State and the European community. Already, the MCUR team is working with schools and associations. It has created the honorary title *Zarboutan Nout Kiltir* (pillar of culture) which celebrates each year the work of women and men who have safeguarded vernacular practices and culture; it has launched a wide campaign of collecting daily life objects, small objects, with no commercial "value", as well as oral testimonies.

Six worlds, La Reunion

The MCUR team is preparing the opening exhibition which it has called *Six worlds, La Reunion*. The space: the six worlds that made the India-oceanic worlds and met in Reunion: China, India, the Muslim world, Africa, the islands (Madagascar, Comoros, Mauritius...). The time is Reunion's time. The Indian Ocean is the maritime space which has been for the longest time traveled by people – for more than 5000 years now, people have met along its shores, whereas the Atlantic has become a cultural space 500 years ago, and the Pacific Ocean 2000 years ago. People observed quite early that following the monsoons allowed them to go from the south of India to the south of Mozambique and the north of Madagascar, and then back. Port cities were built along the shores, with a vibrant cosmopolitan life. Roads linked the ports to the interior, across the African or Asian continent. Through the centuries, maritime and terrestrial roads were redrawn, conflicts, wars, slave trade, colonialism, colonial and postcolonial wars destroyed cities and elites, configured new borders, new territories, but the Indian Ocean remains a site of exchanges and rivalry. We chose to follow "Reunion time", because there was no reason to follow a French, Chinese, or Mozambican chronology. The wide space of the six worlds clashes with a temporality that follows the mutations of Reunion society.

We are not looking for the authentic document. We think in terms of installations where sound, still and moving images, objects, archives and art interventions *evoke* rather than reconstitute what was, and what could be. We have chosen the metaphor of the itinerary, since practically nothing (vegetables, fruits, spices, people, music instruments, rituals, goods,...) is native of the island.

Everything is borrowed, imported, from elsewhere and adapted to local tastes and needs. The itinerary shows the conditions of production and transformation, the biography of a thing, a person, a ritual. It deconstructs the term "African slave", "Indian indentured worker", "European settler", by restituting their singularity and by showing how and when their itineraries crossed. It allows the representation of routes of solidarity, ideas and images.

Encounters rarely occur on an even field. There is often inequality between people, the terms of the encounter. Mapping these inequalities as well as the negotiations, ruses, and strategies of borrowing suggest another cartography than the one drawn by the powers that be. Through transnational narration and expressions of emotional encounters, we seek to counter the temptation of hegemonic narration. By maintaining open the contribution of visitors to the museum even after its opening, we seek to offer a public space for public history and democratic debates, open to contestation.

The scientific and cultural program of the MCUR and other information on the project are available in English online at www.regionreunion.cœm, page MCUR