

To our shared vulnerability:
An exhibition review of La Galleria Nazionale d'Arte
Moderna e Contemporanea, Rome

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Exhibition Review

Seminar Collecting the World in Rome

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“Space is not an unconditioned dharma. It manifests together with time, matter, and consciousness.”

— Thich Nhat Hanh, *The first tenet of Plum Village*.

1.

A herd of bronze dogs, showing their teeth, bark, glare at, fight with, or bite fiercely into each other on the polished wooden floor of La Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Rome. One dog lies on the floor, possibly heavily injured or died (Liliana Moro, *Underdog*. 2005). On the walls behind them are two large-scale oil paintings of the typical academic style of wars. One of them depicts a troop of White soldiers in dark uniforms reloading a cannon pointing at a castle under a gloomy grey sky; in the other, a group of White, probably European soldiers, uniformed in white and leather boots and fully-armed with barreled guns, are surrounded by bare-foot Black warriors waving shields and long spears. For unknown reasons, despite the great advantage in weapons, the White army seems to lose, with three men lying dead in the foreground and more dead bodies in the background. The older White man in the centre is snatching the spear from a Black warrior and pointing his sword at his throat. On the other side of the hall, in a small-sized oil painting of men on horses fighting centaurs, human and horse torsos intertwine and a beholder can no longer distinguish the two species. The distorted faces and twisted bodies of the fighting men coincide in a disturbingly intriguing way with the fighting dogs. Canvas, bronze, men, animals, the past, and the contemporary echo each other, pointing to the timelessness and universality of violence and death. The abstract expressionist paintings of strong colors (white, black, and red) and heavy strokes in the same hall intensify the emotion and lead the beholders' thoughts from the concrete to the conceptual (fig.1 and 2). What is the substantial difference between the internecine warfare of humans and that of dogs? Does such fundamental difference really exist? How do we legitimate the generally-believed superiority of human civilization to animals and nature?



Fig. 1. Bronze sculptures of fighting dogs juxtaposed with abstract expressionist paintings and classical academic paintings of war. Photo by this author.



Fig. 2. Bronze sculptures of fighting dogs juxtaposed with abstract expressionist paintings and classical academic paintings of war. Photo by this author.

Above described is a room of the latest exhibition “Time is out of joint”, curated by Saretto Cincinelli, in La Galleria Nazionale. As the title reveals, the exhibition investigates the notion of time and challenges the prevailing Western progressive perception of time as linear. Artworks of diverse themes, from different time periods and areas of the world, are juxtaposed poetically and playfully. Chronicle timelines and coherent narratives become out of order. “Time is out of joint” is a part of a long-term, wide process of transformation, rearrangement, and renovation of the museum for “totally renewed spaces and a profound reinterpretation of its collection” (Official website La Galleria Nazionale) started in 2016. The title is quoted from William Shakespeare’s Hamlet:

“The time is out of joint: O cursèd spite /
That ever I was born to set it right!”

--Amleto, Act I, Scene V

The other part of the quote, “Born to set it right”, is written on the stairs leading to the entrance of the museum, accompanied by two huge sculptures of gorillas. According to the director Cristiana Collu, the exhibition is an act to set the time right. It invokes not a disorder but “something else that comes before rules.”

2.

“Time is out of joint” is like a book by Haruki Murakami or Milan Kundera: one can easily enter from any page without missing a tiny bit of the charm. The exhibition is divided into four sections by the four main halls of the museum. The connection between each section and the artwork is loose. When I checked the map (fig. 3) for writing this exhibition review, I realized that I actually started my visit from room two, which was described at the beginning. I then wandered into room four, where, through an installation of black frames, I saw a classical 19th-century statue of a woman (possibly the goddess of agriculture), wearing a crown of ears of wheat and holding a bunch in her hands, gazing at a big, black, polished bowl-shaped sculpture (*Untitled-Nero Africa*) by the British-Indian artist Anish Kapoor (fig. 4). The interaction between

the color, material, and theme of the classical and contemporary works is interesting—is the Caucasus woman considering filling the bowl of Africa with her grains? After that, I entered room three and contemplated Giacomo Balla’s large-scale painting *Villa Borghese* (1910), which is untypically figurative, before I noticed Marcel Duchamp’s famous Bicycle wheel on the side. I went upstairs, ran into other exhibitions, and revisited rooms three and four before I finally entered room one. Giuseppe Penone’s large-sized work *Spoglia d’oro su spine d’acacia* (gold strip on acacia thorns) (2002) visually and energetically echoes the gigantic classical sculpture of Heracles grabbing Antaeus by his ankle and swinging him to the sky. The calm surface in various shades of blue of Pino Pascali’s *32 mq. di mare circa* (1967) silently reflects the powerful scene, surrounded by several two-dimensional works of modern artists (fig. 5 and 6), including Yves Klein and Piet Mondrian.

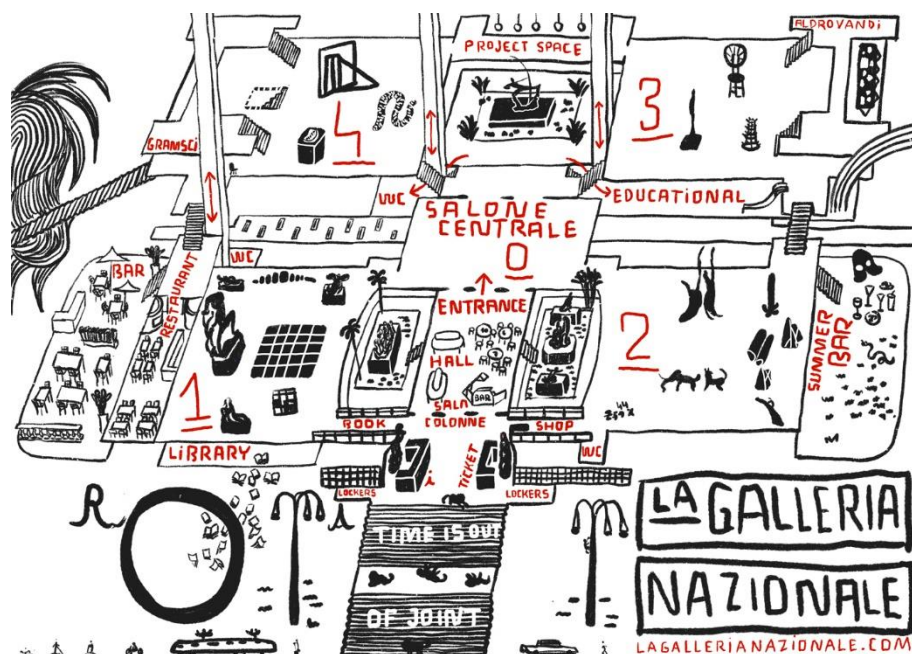


Fig. 3. Map of La Galleria Nazionale. Created by Martí Guixé. Image from the official website La Galleria Nazionale. <https://lagallerianazionale.com/visita>.



Fig. 4. A neoclassical goddess gazing at Anish Kapoor's contemporary work. Photo by this author.

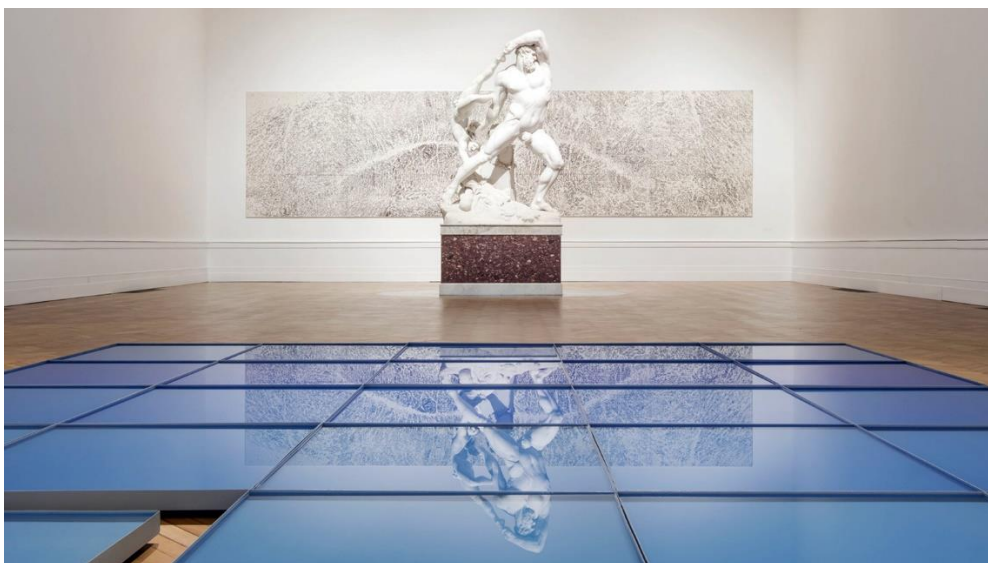


Fig. 5. Room one of "Time is out of joint". Photo from Image from the official website La Galleria Nazionale. <https://lagallerianazionale.com/mostra/time-is-out-of-joint>.



Fig. 6. Enlarged details of *Spoglia d'oro su spine d'acacia*. Photo by this author.

Despite my distorted visiting routine, the impact of the exhibition did not reduce a little bit on me. As the curating team gives up the attempt to construct a coherent timeline or storyline, “Time” can be viewed in any order and from any perspective. Together with the linear time and logical narrative disappears the authority of the curator and the institute. The beholders are allowed to build up the connection and interpret the artworks in their own ways. In this sense, the visitors are also creators of the exhibition. During my visit, I felt stimulated, challenged, and free, which motivated me to revisit and linger longer.

3.

In recent years, reflections on Western-centered (art) history and the colonial past have become a trend in museums, galleries, and other cultural institutions. While most museums approach these topics by focusing on the objects—the provenance, the interpretation, the display, and so on, “Time is out of joint” chooses an alternative way that points directly to the underlying Western-centered ideology behind the exhibition itself. Until now, a linear and coherent order is still the predominant exhibition model in most Western museums, even when the themes or objects come from non-Western

worlds. It is worthwhile to notice that linear time, which draws a clear boundary between the past and the future and promises an ever-progressing future, is one of the fundamental ideologies that drive and legitimate colonialism. On the other hand, coloniality consists of not only spatial ordering but also temporal ordering. Non-western worlds are made “Others” for not being in the same (linear) time as the West. In this sense, many so-believed decolonizing practices in Western museums remain under a colonial framework. The most remarkable achievement of “Time is out of joint” is breaking the Western linear time. Through deliberately breaking the timeline and the playful juxtaposition, interaction, and interpretation of artworks from the 19th century until today, the exhibition proposes an alternative way to look at the time and art history, and questions the legitimacy of the Western linear time and, eventually the legitimacy of the Western-centered way to view the world. In my opinion, the curatorial strategy of “Time” implies radical decolonization.

The exhibition also touches upon some burning issues in the contemporary world with the language of curation. For example, the juxtaposition of photography of a white marble Venus with Caucasian facial features and a sculpture of the same Venus with an African face in black stone points to the unequal presentation of race in art (fig. 7). The bronze statue of a female figure bound to a cross triggers discussion on gender. In the same room, a series of photographs of distorted dolls by Hans Bellmer (*La Poupée*, 1934) and a painting of a young woman with wings on her feet looking down upon three naked men lying dead on the shore (*La Gorgone e gli eroi*, 1899) are on display. Each from a different perspective, the artworks in the room address the meaning of being a “woman”, the female body in art and society, and the complicated relationship between race and gender.



Fig. 7. A white and a black Venus. Photo by this author.

4.

Another intriguing aspect of “Time is out of joint” is its minimal use of text. The introduction, in English and Italian, is printed in grey letters on the wall in the Salon Colonne, which is used as a café and resting place outside of the entrance to the exhibitions. The labels indicate the title of the work, the artist(s), the year, and the loaning gallery if applied. Labels for works by Italian artists are in Italian and those for international artists are in English. Besides labels, there is no other text on the walls. The official website of La Galleria Nazionale provides information about the exhibition in Italian, English, and, surprisingly, simplified Chinese—most other information is only in Italian and English.

I consider the minimal use of text as a good strategy. On the one hand, it allows the objects to speak for themselves and the visitors to interpret the exhibition in their own ways, thus demonstrating the essential value of a museum. Artefacts and curatorial strategies can convey much information, maybe more effectively than texts. I am the

type of audience who feel obliged to read every text in exhibitions, and I could better focus on and enjoy the objects and environment themselves in “Time” and other exhibitions of La Galleria Nazionale. On the other hand, it is more inclusive because the language of art is more universal. Based on my experiences of visiting European museums as an international, visitors are more likely to feel included when there are few texts than many texts in languages they do not understand. In addition, the minimal use of texts reduces the authority and sermon connotation of the institution. The visitor is no longer obliged to read the official opinions of the museum experts. Therefore, I believe that “Time is out of joint” provides an inspiring attempt to address cultural democracy.

5.

To talk about “Time is out of joint”, it is necessary to address the other exhibition “Hot spot: Caring for a burning world” which took place when I visited La Galleria Nazionale in later November 2022. In fact, it is impossible to avoid “Hot spot” as one of the featured works, the huge sculptures of gorillas, are right there on the stairs in front of the main gate of the museum; besides, it is located in the central salon, where one has to go through before accessing to any other exhibitions. Like “Time”, “Hot spot” also employs a curatorial model with weak chronological and narrative order, which makes the two exhibitions easily blend in together. In my opinion, “Hot spot” is a strong support to “Time” because it puts forward a topic—the potential environmental catastrophe and its influence on human societies—that reunites the world together. It can be said that “Time” offers a methodological framework while “Hot spot” provides a concrete case; “Time” breaks the rule while “Hot spot” proposes a new direction to work together. The life-sized sculpture of a turned-over horse resonates with classical sculptures and the horses in the war paintings in “Time”, emphasizing the inclemency of the possible climate disaster. The flowering piano by Glenda Leon reminds us of the return of animals to cities during the lockdown and suggests a scene of a post-human

world. The photography of a hand with yucca fingers—yucca is an edible root cultivated in the pre-Columbian Caribbean region and remains an important food today—proposes the indigenous strength and wisdom to live in harmony with the environment. The climate issue imposes a threat to all countries around the world; we have to fight together, and non-Western ideologies and strategies—for example, the Taoist philosophy—can play a significant role in this process. This sense of union and being important is empowering.



Fig. 8. Photographs by Gideon Mendel about how floods impact the daily life of people around the world. Photo by this author.

6.

“Time is out of joint” is a fruitful revolutionary practice of La Galleria Nazionale. It is, nevertheless, not perfect. Though the exhibition features multiple international artists and galleries, the world it presents is still Western-centered. The presence of Asian, Latin American, African, and Australian artists is scarce. The minimal usage of language is a beneficial strategy, but it can also lead to obstacles in gaining extra information about the artworks. It will be better if more artists and artworks of Asia and the global south can be included and convenient ways to access to more information can be provided. Also, facilities and services for people with disability and special aids can be improved. What is more, the shop as a significant continuation of the museum

deserves more attention. I definitely look forward to more products designed for or related to the exhibitions and the museum.

7.

I would like to end this review with an interesting little accident. When I was visiting “Time is out of joint”, maybe due to problems in the ceiling or the pipe, there was a water leak right next to an iconic Giacometti sculpture (*Grande Donna*, ca. 1960). Several staff members, fully dressed in dark suits, tried hard to dry out the floor without much success, while the *Grande Donna* looked a bit helpless (fig. 9). The amusing scene reminded me of the shared vulnerability of human beings, nature, and art. We are all prone to floods and the rising sea level, the threat of climate catastrophe, the ill omen of wars, the increasingly disrupted society, and so on. “Time is out of joint” as a part of the transforming program of La Galleria Nazionale can be seen as a successful practice of artistic activism which addresses what we share in common. It breaks the Western linear time, abandons the coherent narrative, and mixes artists from different parts of the world, thus radically decolonizing the Western-centered curatorial methodology. The revolutionary curatorial approach may serve as a reference for future exhibitions of contemporary art as well as art and culture of all time periods and from all parts of the world. “Time” demonstrates the potential of art and exhibitions to reflect, express, change, and challenge.



Fig. 9. Three staff members checking the leaking water near Giacometti's sculpture *Grande Donna*. Photo by this author.

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