

## *cabinet / cage / stage*

*Key Portilla-Kawamura*

*“Next, a spacious, wonderful garden, ... set and cherished: this garden to be built about with rooms to stable in all rare beasts and to cage in all rare birds; with two lakes adjoining, the one of fresh water the other of salt, for like variety of fishes. And so you may have in small compass a model of the universal nature made private.”*

Francis Bacon

*Gesta Grayorum* (1594)

During the 16th and 17th centuries a new type of exhibition format caused furor amongst the European aristocracy, the *wunderkammer* (cabinet of curiosities). In the wake of the “great geographical discoveries”, rarities from the vegetable, animal and mineral worlds as well as objects of human creation from around the planet were carefully displayed inside these cabinets. Their contents were organized generally in two large groups, *naturalia* and *artificialia*. The *wunderkammern* lacked the characteristic encyclopedic-museistic spirit of the Enlightenment, but more rather satisfied the Baroque affinity towards the capricious, anecdotal and unexpected. Their evolution and gradual systematization gave place subsequently to exhibition spaces with formats that are now so familiar to us: the zoological park, the botanical garden and the museum. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that museums and zoos stem from a common genetic *filum*.

The Belgian artist Wesley Meuris has been developing since 2005 an ambitious project under the overarching title *Zoological Classification*: a series of refined drawings of visionary architectures (cages that in some cases have been physically built) for diverse animals (apes, giraffes, rhinoceroses, penguins, bears ...). The potential inhabitants and their needs are previously analyzed in a detailed catalogue-chart of the animal kingdom which is also exhibited, like the DNA code of the project.

This ingenious taxonomic archive collects the tradition of the *wunderkammern*. However, unlike them, its emphasis is not to be found in the arbitrary succession of exhibited oddities, but in the order that classifies and catalogues them. Not in vain, each cage is specifically labelled with a code that is correlated with the index chart of the project. Therefore, in spite of its appearance, it could be said that it is not an object-based body of work but a systemic one where the collective series is more relevant than the individual singular elements. That is why describing *Zoological Classification* as a mere piece of art would be unfair. Rather, it should be referred to as an *Opus Inconclusus*, an open-ended proposal of a global unaccomplishable archive

of the likes of Francis Bacon's "*model of the universal nature*"<sup>1</sup>. The consciously futile ambition of encompassing the animal kingdom is precisely what renders the project an unlimited capacity of evolution.

The multiple proposals for cages included in *Zoological Classification* synthesize the territorial scale of each portrayed animal (*habitat/lebensraum*) in a concentrated architecture (*room/raum*); or, looked-at from a different perspective, it expands the artistic object to the scale of an architecture. In any case, the cage surpasses the static qualities of a mere object-space and becomes an object-place, a lived construct, operating for an inhabitant that can not be seen. This performing capacity of the space is already a constant in previous works of the young Meuris<sup>2</sup>. Like the *wunderkammern*, *Zoological Classification* has a collateral microcosmic and didactic quality, taming the different wilderness habitats of the world in front of our eyes in a concentrated and tendered format. The proposal *World Enclosure* (Graz, 2006), nine cages of the nine main biotopes of the planet, has a paradigmatic title, wild and domesticated at once, global and minute in equal terms.

The palette of forms and materials that Meuris applies in the different cages is synthetic, reduced to a few hygienic and comfortably recognisable volumes, textures and colours. The precise dimensioning of the elements (slopes, niches, bars...) transmits a conceivable sense of the scale and habits of the animal. The elevation of the cage and the lighting conditions too are carefully considered, participating of the creation of a cozy and secluded, albeit totally exposed and control-oriented, atmosphere.

Such interpretative alterations are symptomatic of the abstraction process implicit in the translation from a natural habitat to an artificial stage. Yet, the degree of abstraction is not such that the viewer feels irrefutably detached from the identity of the potential inhabitant of the space. Like letters of a deconstructed natural grammar, these elements and parameters (volume, surface, material, water, enclosure, light...) get reassembled in multiple ways generating novel artificial compositions which are, at once, recognisable and foreign. It could be said that Meuris' *Zoological Classification* master chart is the genotypical receipt of which the different cages are materialised phenotypical offspring.

The aim of the project clearly is not to replicate scientifically inside a cage the original conditions in which the animal lived, nor is it to replicate in a heterotopic way a zoological park inside a museum; but to give enough hints and clues for the viewer to feel tricked by the *mis-en-scène*. Such constructed scenarios for inhabitation, which paradoxically exhibit the privacy of domestic (animal) life to the publicity of aural spectacle, bring to mind some of Dan Graham's experiments on American suburban houses<sup>3</sup>. This confrontation between two subjects (observer and observed) with the use of architectural means is softened by the intriguing absence of one of the two parties; an ambiguous unconcluded dialectic.

In the series *Zoological Classification* the framework (cage) that conventionally wraps the observed subject (animal) becomes, in virtue of the animal's absence, the exhibited object and the new surrounding container is that of the museum, thus trespassing the exhibition logic of a conventional zoo. This aspect becomes all the more poignant in some of the most recent components of the project (*Aquatheatre*, 2006)

which include tiers for spectators, giving the equation a further twist. Are we observing an encaged animal or an encaged audience? Is the encaged audience looking at the animal or looking at us, viewers, encaged inside the museum? A multifaceted voyeuristic panopticon.

Jacques Derrida eloquently stated that there is not archive without an oblivion 4. The intriguing (anguishing?) absence (oblivion?) of the protagonist of the cage, who is not even portrayed, encourages us to speculate on who could be the inhabitant of such a peculiar structure. The univocal and prescriptive relationship between humans and animals in captivity is disturbed in Meuris' project due to the absence of the latter. In a blow of ludicracy we could even imagine ourselves occupying the cage as Joseph Beuys already did, accompanied by a coyote for five days 5.

Key Portilla-Kawamura, Oviedo-Madrid-Basel, January 2007.

Notes:

1: Francis Bacon, *Gesta Grayorum*, 1594.

2: *Swimming Pool*, 2004; *Playing Field*, 2004

3: Dan Graham; *Alteration to a suburban house*; Collection Daled, Brussels, 1978.

4: Derrida, Jacques; *Mal d'archive*, 1995.

5: Joseph Beuys; *Coyote: I like America and America likes me*; Gallery Rene Block, New York, 1974.