1% Museum: The Guggenheim Goes Global

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One evening this March, a bell rang out in the Guggenheim museum. A deluge of what looked like thousands of dollar bills rained down from the museum's ramps onto the heads of puzzled museumgoers below. In an agitprop-style intervention reminiscent of Yippie activist Abbie Hoffman's 1967 stunt on the trading floor of the New York Stock Exchange, members of the activist art group Global Ultra Luxury Faction, or G.U.L.F., dropped the fake bills in protest against degrading labor conditions in distant Abu Dhabi, where the Guggenheim is building a new satellite museum. The bills—inscribed with slogans reading "What does an ethical global museum look like?"—first and foremost implicated the museum in networks of labor abuse halfway across the globe. But the action also shed light on the Guggenheim's decades-long neoliberal turn.

Slated for completion in 2017, the Frank Gehry–designed Guggenheim Abu Dhabi will be the crown jewel of Saadiyat Island, a $27-billion luxury property development on a once-uninhabited sandbar just off the Abu Dhabi coastline. A cultural acropolis for the global elite, Saadiyat Island—or "Island of Happiness" in Arabic—will also house an offshore satellite of the Louvre Museum, an NYU campus, a performing arts center, a maritime museum, and the British Museum–affiliated Zayed National Museum, consecrated to the Emirati unifier. Like the Guggenheim, these institutions will be housed in slick postmodern buildings bearing the brands of international starchitects Jean Nouvel, Rafael Viñoly Beceiro, Zaha Hadid, Tadao Ando, and Norman Foster. Sprinkled among these bastions of liberal arts and culture will be two golf courses, three yacht-friendly marinas, and several shopping centers, as well as luxury apartment complexes, "elite villas," and twenty-nine hotels—including a "seven star" resort—to house visitors to the island.

Since it was announced in 2006, the Guggenheim's multimillion-dollar deal with the Arab emirate's Tourism Development & Investment Company (TDIC) has been promoted under the auspices of cultural pluralism. "Our commitment to international communication and global cultural exchange—realized through our museums, collections, and programs—is inclusive," wrote then–Guggenheim Foundation director Thomas Krens in a press release: "The Guggenheim implicitly regards all contemporary cultures and their traditions as potential partners in the field of aesthetic discourse—we are both respectful of difference and excited by it."

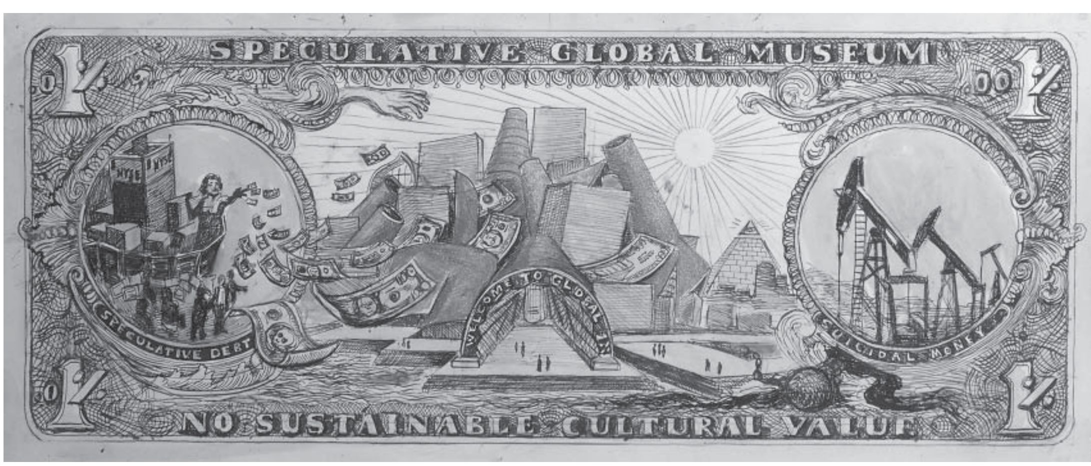
As a 2009 Human Rights Watch report and subsequent investigations make clear, however, this feel-good rhetoric of global multiculturalism belies an altogether different kind of "cultural exchange"—between the Emirati government, Western cultural institutions, and the tens of thousands of migrant laborers building the museum's infrastructure.

Foreigners account for close to 90 percent of the UAE's workforce, and Saadiyat is no exception. Under the UAE's *kafala* sponsorship system, migrant workers are beholden to their employers for at least two years, unable to leave the country or seek other employment; in many cases, employers withhold their passports. Young men from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and other parts of South Asia typically arrive in the UAE already indebted from recruitment and relocation fees paid to labor contracting agencies in their home countries, which often deceive laborers about their wages and the terms of their contracts. (Although UAE law requires the construction companies—not the workers—to pay relocation and visa costs, these toothless regulations are widely ignored.) According to a December 2013 PricewaterhouseCoopers report, 86 percent of Saadiyat workers said they paid fees to recruiters, though the actual statistics are likely higher. In March 2014 representatives from Gulf Labor—a New York–based coalition of artists and writers campaigning for fair labor practices on Saadiyat Island—surveyed workers at several labor camps across the island and surrounding area, all of whom reported paying recruitment fees ranging from $1,000 to $3,900. "If there is a worker who said they have not paid a recruitment fee, I would not believe him," an anonymous TDIC official told Gulf Labor. Many workers had put up family land as collateral for their loans. And with base salaries ranging from $177 to $245 per month, it takes workers an average of two years—the standard duration of a UAE work visa—to pay back their recruitment debt.

According to official doctrine, all workers assigned to TDIC projects live in the Saadiyat Accommodation Village, a sprawling camp built to house 20,000 laborers. Designed as a showpiece for foreign dignitaries and a palliative against human rights concerns, the SAV boasts photogenic amenities including cricket grounds, a chess center, a coffee shop, and a library. No doubt TDIC hopes to mitigate the fact that workers housed in the SAV are effectively quarantined from urban life in Abu Dhabi.

Moreover, despite TDIC's claims to the contrary, investigators found that many construction companies actually house workers in cheaper camps in Abu Dhabi's industrial outskirts. In fact, the SAV operates at less than half of its capacity, and yet Gulf Labor found two instances of workers being "promoted"—without pay increases—to supervisor positions so they could be relocated from the SAV to cheaper off-island accommodations. One such facility, documented by the *Guardian*, is located next to a sewage treatment plant and reeks of human waste. Another camp, built to accommodate workers on the NYU campus (the only Saadiyat project not affiliated with TDIC), features open bathrooms, unhygienic kitchens, and windowless thirteen-by-fourteen-foot dormitories bunking up to ten workers each. Investigators also turned up reports of a massive strike wave last year that culminated in the deportation of hundreds of workers.

In 2011 Gulf Labor announced an international boycott of the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi. Dozens of artists, curators, and writers immediately signed on, and the petition now has close to 2,000 signatures. (The affiliated Coalition for Fair Labor at NYU has drafted a similar petition targeting the university.) This year Gulf Labor's newly formed direct-action wing—the Global Ultra Luxury Faction—has created a PR nightmare for the Guggenheim. On the opening weekend of its Italian Futurism exhibit this February, G.U.L.F. dropped flyers and unfurled banners bearing



Courtesy of Gulf Ultra Luxury Faction (G.U.L.F.)

the slogans “Wage Theft” and “1% Museum” from the Guggenheim’s spiraling ramps. The following month, G.U.L.F. projected similar messages onto the Guggenheim’s Fifth Avenue facade and launched a parody website, globalguggenheim.org, which describes the Guggenheim as “a vital cultural center, an educational institution, and the heart of an international network of museums built specifically for the winners of global economic inequality.” A few weeks later came the dollar bill stunt. Then, over Memorial Day weekend, G.U.L.F. staged yet another intervention at the Italian Futurism exhibit: alongside Umberto Boccioni’s belligerent abstractions and Mario Chiattone’s techno-utopian architectural drawings, protesters hung their own geometric, Futurist-inflected artworks, emblazoned with militant slogans like “Into the Future with Worker Dignity!”

Throughout G.U.L.F.’s protests, the museum’s administration has maintained that construction of the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi has not yet begun, but G.U.L.F. has argued that significant progress toward establishing the museum—including work on surrounding infrastructure and the purchase of some 250 artworks by art stars including El Antsui, Yayoi Kusama, and Douglas Wheeler—has been made. And G.U.L.F. has pointed out that Saadiyat’s cosmopolitan appeal rests in no small part on the cachet of the Guggenheim brand. In a February press release, G.U.L.F. argued that “Saadiyat Island is being sold to investors on the basis of the Guggenheim’s name, along with those of the Louvre, the British Museum and others.” By shilling its brand as a guarantor of cultural capital, the Guggenheim is attracting investment to a development project built on today’s networks of indentured labor.

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The Guggenheim Abu Dhabi is the latest development in the museum’s gradual transformation from temple of modernism to neoliberal art franchise. Established in 1939 as the “Museum of Non-Objective Painting,” the Guggenheim was designed to reflect the universal and transcendent aesthetics of European abstraction. In 1959 Frank Lloyd Wright’s signature inverted ziggurat building—conceived as a “monument to Modernism” and a “temple of the spirit”—was publicly unveiled. For decades, the institution and its time-capsule architecture remained a bastion of midcentury aesthetic uplift. But over time, it has also become the icon of a global brand.

The first push overseas came in 1976, when museum director Thomas Messer convinced Peggy Guggenheim to bequeath her eighteenth-century Venetian palazzo and its collection of modern art to her uncle’s namesake foundation. However, it was Messer’s successor, Thomas Krens, who reconfigured the museum as a global enterprise. The Guggenheim, he told the *New York Times* in 1992, is the “one museum in New York City that is a specialist in international outlook . . . the possibility for expanding international programming [is] extraordinary.”

Yet this expansion got off to a rocky start. Krens’s first major venture beyond the Upper East Side, the ill-fated Guggenheim SoHo, opened in 1992 and was discreetly shuttered within a decade. Meanwhile, a dubious proposal to build a museum inside a mountain in Salzburg, Austria languished after locals expressed concerns over its feasibility and environmental impact.

In 1997 the Guggenheim finally struck gold in the Basque city of Bilbao, until then less known for contemporary art than for separatist terrorism and postindustrial blight. The municipality saw, in the Guggenheim name and Frank Gehry’s trophy building, an opportunity to transform a decaying port town into an elite tourist destination. For its part, the cash-strapped Guggenheim discovered a lucrative and seemingly reproducible model of global franchising. In exchange for the Guggenheim trademark, its programming, and access to its collections and exhibitions, the Basque government agreed to provide $100 million in construction costs, allocate

$50 million for new acquisitions, pay the Guggenheim's $20 million in licensing fees, and foot the $7 million annual bill for the museum's operational costs. "Instead of selling works from its collection," as artist Andrea Fraser succinctly put it, "the museum hit on the idea of renting them—to itself."

The gamble paid off. Gehry's buxom, burnished silver building has made Bilbao a pilgrimage site for art tourists, and the Guggenheim a benefactor of the city's renewal. But the Guggenheim's efforts to clone the much-ballyhooed "Bilbao effect" have had limited success. Three museums opened since—one on the ground floor of the Deutsche Bank headquarters in Berlin and two in Las Vegas, designed by Rem Koolhaas and funded by a casino company—are now closed.

Between 2000 and 2005, the Guggenheim publicized ambitious proposals to build satellite institutions in Rio, Taichung, and Guadalajara, only to have the plans shot down by local governments. Franchises in Tokyo, Macao, Hong Kong, and Singapore have also been floated at various times, as was a Gehry-designed titanium colossus in Lower Manhattan. None have come to fruition. Neither have two major projects initiated since Richard Armstrong succeeded Krens as foundation director in 2008: in 2010 the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius put a Zaha Hadid–designed satellite on hold following a government embezzling scandal, and in 2012 the city of Helsinki rejected a museum proposal after surveys found that 75 percent of locals opposed the project. (A revised, less costly proposal is currently pending.)

Still, Krens's vision of a global Guggenheim endures, and not only in Abu Dhabi. In recent years, the museum has tested strategies for circulating its brand without the fuss of building brick-and-mortar museums. Piggybacking off the recent trend of pop-up exhibitions and retail spaces, the prematurely aborted BMW Guggenheim Lab—billed as a "part urban think tank, part community

Gulf Labor action at the Guggenheim, March 2014. Photo courtesy of the Gulf Ultra Luxury Faction (G.U.L.F.).

center and public gathering space" devoted to "the creation of forward-thinking visions and projects for city life"—traveled to New York, Berlin, and Mumbai between 2011 and 2013. With its appeal to provisional architecture, globalism, and counterculture (its list of "100 urban trends" included "Occupy Wall Street," "bike politics," "hacking the city," and something called "emotional cityness"), the lab tested the Guggenheim's potential as a more lightweight export while also lending the museum's imprint and a modicum of hipster cred, however contrived, to a luxury automaker.

Another corporate partnership, the "Guggenheim UBS MAP Global Art Initiative," has outdone its counterparts in its appeal to cultural pluralism. "How can the Guggenheim, with its own early history steeped in European Modernism, become meaningfully transnational?" asks the introspective curatorial statement. "How can we recalibrate what we do . . . so that it reflects the multiplicity of cultural practices and their histories around the globe?" But the "intense institutional self-analysis" apparently guiding the MAP Initiative, which showcases contemporary art from South and Southeast Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East and North Africa, evades the financial stakes in what a publicist for UBS called "dynamic regions where UBS has significant interests."

The Guggenheim, of course, is hardly the first art institution to cater to the demands of its wealthy patrons. Art, as critic Clement Greenberg famously put it, is attached to the ruling classes by an "umbilical cord of gold"—whether the popes and Medicis who bankrolled the Italian Renaissance, the robber barons who built America's museums, or contemporary collector tycoons like Charles Saatchi and Dakis Joannou, who have controversially inflated the value of their private collections by showcasing them in public museums. But in terms of papering over the abuses of the rich, corporate-sponsored exhibitions like the Guggenheim's BMW-financed "The Art of the Motorcycle" pale in comparison to the Abu Dhabi project, where the Guggenheim serves as advertising not just for banks or luxury brands, but for a repressive monarchic regime.

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"We believe the best vehicle for crossing borders is art. And this region is in need of such artistic initiatives," Mubarek Muhairi, director general of the Abu Dhabi Tourism & Culture Authority, said in 2007. While typical of the jargon surrounding development projects of its kind, Muhairi's statement is revealing. In the UAE's efforts to reduce its dependency on oil production and redirect its economy toward tourism and leisure, the arts—and specifically, imported Western art institutions—play a central role.

Invoking the pieties of postmodern, transnational pluralism, the Guggenheim has pioneered the marketing of the neoliberal museum: a museum that is increasingly dependent on corporate gifts rather than public funding; that privileges traveling exhibitions over permanent collections, aspirational leisure over education, risk and innovation over cultural preservation; and that has assumed the competitive character of a for-profit enterprise. Krens, in justifying his vision of a global Guggenheim, has echoed the reproductive logic of capitalism itself: "Growth is almost a law . . . either you grow or you change or you die." With the notable exception of Bilbao, however, the Guggenheim's global outposts have floundered in the courts of law and public opinion. The museum's patchy record of global expansion, seen in tandem with the labor abuses in the Gulf, suggests a troubling conclusion: that the global museum thrives most readily under plutocracy. As Gehry all too forthrightly remarked, "the best thing is to have a benevolent dictator—who has taste!"

Nevertheless, G.U.L.F.'s actions against the Guggenheim are predicated on the hope that the museum can still effect positive change. To combat illegal recruiting fees, for example, Gulf Labor has proposed that TDIC require contractors to document their recruiting practices, pay workers a $2,000 relocation fee, and establish a living wage for Saadiyat workers. While the Guggenheim doesn't directly hire its construction workers, the museum—along with NYU and the other cultural institutions in the region—could put significant pressure on Emirati authorities to establish and enforce internationally recognized labor standards. "Our hope in starting these campaigns is to try to leverage the brands," says Gulf Labor organizer and NYU-based sociologist Andrew Ross. "It's not unlike the early days of the anti-sweatshop movement where [activists] targeted brands like Nike and Gap and insisted that they're responsible for what happens lower down the subcontracting chain." The Guggenheim could wield its cultural capital to set a new standard of labor practices in the region. Until it does, however, the museum will only lend a veneer of high culture to another Xanadu for the international creditor class.

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