

Politics, Doubt, and Daskalopoulos at the Guggenheim Bilbao



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The Guggenheim Bilbao in Spain

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Published: April 13, 2011



PHOTO GALLERY

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Courtesy Trevor Leighton and APOLLO

Greek collector Dimitris Daskalopoulos

BILBAO— In a speech he gave at the **Guggenheim Bilbao** during Friday night's dinner to celebrate the opening of "The Luminous Interval," an exhibition of artworks from his collection, Greek packaged-food magnate and **Guggenheim** trustee **Dimitris Daskalopoulos** said that one of the things that draws him to the artists he collects is that they "converse with the issues of our times." Given what had transpired in the museum's auditorium just hours earlier at a panel discussion featuring artists in the exhibition, his words were especially resonant. That event had included two artists, **Thomas Hirshhorn** and **Paul Pfeiffer**, who were among the 130 who recently signed a petition boycotting the **Guggenheim Abu Dhabi** until the satellite institution addresses alleged labor abuses at its construction site on **Saadiyat Island**, and both spoke out on the issue. The talk prompted a response from their patron, Daskalopoulos himself.

Known for making large-scale installation pieces that press political buttons, Hirshhorn began his presentation by saying that he wanted to speak "as a caveman" before speaking as an artist — a reference to his 2002 "Cavemanman" piece in the exhibition, which creates a warren of cavern-like rooms lined in packing tape and containing all manner of provocative material, including books wired to resemble bombs. In other words, he wanted to speak politically. Hirshhorn told the audience in Bilbao that he signed the petition because he is "happy and willing to do everything I can in order to achieve" a situation where the Guggenheim's construction site in Abu Dhabi "treat[s] the workers as they deserve to be treated and respect[s] their rights as workers." And yet, Hirshhorn says, he finds himself faced with a "dilemma," and one that he quickly clarified "is not about exhibiting here now at the Guggenheim Bilbao... while at the same time boycotting the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi." Rather, his conundrum is how to balance the "good intentions, good conscience, the engagement of the artist" with his "belief that art as art has to keep completely out of any daily political cause in order to maintain its power as art and its real political power."

Hirshhorn referred to this opposition as "a problem without a solution" and "a kind of dead end." The artist's existential probing of the nature of protest didn't end there. Adding his signature to the petition was "too easy," he noted, but "I know that when signing a boycott I have to pay the price for the boycott myself first, so that the outcome can turn into real change." He said that for him signing the boycott will "make sense if it does change the condition for the workers in Guggenheim Abu Dhabi" and "if I have to pay a price for it." Presumably, that price would be not exhibiting his artwork at the future museum.

Video and sound artist Paul Pfeiffer, the other petition signatory on the panel, saved his words on the Abu Dhabi matter for the conclusion of his talk. "I have a similar conundrum about the effectiveness of the effort," he said of the petition. He attributed his participation to "the fact that I'm really interested in the nature of labor today globally" and pointed out that this is "an important part of my work" currently on view in Bilbao. (That work, his 2007 installation "The Saints," consists of the sound of a crowd at the 1966 **World Cup** final at London's **Wembley Stadium**, when England beat West Germany, its former military rival; for the piece, Pfeiffer had a group of people in the Philippines recreate the noises of the soccer fans.)

Speaking about his artwork, Pfeiffer seemed to be drawing subtle parallels between it and the situation in Abu Dhabi, where the labor relations involve the collision of different cultures: branches of institutions from the U.S. and Europe, the government of the Emirates, and workers from India and Pakistan. "If you listen to the national anthems playing on this 12-channel sound piece, you will hear a Filipino accent," he said. "To me that's an interruption of the historical narrative of this match and of the history of England and of Germany. It was important to me to put something in that did not completely make sense in the narrative around this football match." Pfeiffer concluded by saying that art can have the power to throw light on cultural and political nuances that would otherwise remain murky. "The great possibility of art is to find ways to imagine the... ways that we live today," he said, which are "not at all intuitive in a lot of cases, even though they would seem to make sense on the surface. Something very different could be going on."

When the question-and-answer period rolled around, the first hand in the audience to shoot up was that of Daskalopoulos, who proceeded to defend the Guggenheim. Daskalopoulos began with the facts. "Saadiyat Island is a huge project with many art institutions... and in the Emirates they have built with a lot of workers who are not locals, who are imported and come to work there from other countries, mainly from India," he said. "There is a whole system that sends them over, and takes a commission, and doesn't treat them very well.... They hold their passports, and their living conditions are not very good."

He said the situation had generated a "healthy debate about what we can do about it," and added that "the artists' contribution, in that sense, is very positive." But he went on to criticize the petition. "I totally disagree with the way it's being done," he said. "Because here we are talking about intervening from the West into an ages-old culture, and a reality which is very strong. And it is a great opportunity that this is happening, and that institutions like ours from the West have the power to raise a voice and make change." In fact, he said, the Guggenheim and the other institutions building on Saadiyat Island may be one of the best hopes for the region's development. "As I'm sitting on the board of the Guggenheim, I see that the Guggenheim and the other institutions are actually trying to cause this change, and it is the best hope for those workers and for change in the culture there," he said.

Addressing Hirshhorn's and Pfeiffer's concerns, he said, "If you have a conundrum or a dilemma, you shouldn't. I think we are on the same side. The institutions and the Guggenheim are not the perpetrators. They are the agents of change." Daskalopoulos added that there are far more pressing matters in today's Middle East. "I would go even further and worry about an area that right now is in turmoil and suffering," he said. "Are workers' rights in building a museum the only concern? Can we do more? My dilemma would be: yes, we want to do more. How much more can we do without being blamed for Western imperialism and imposing our views on those cultures? It takes time." Daskalopoulos exhorted the artists to "join forces" with the institution. "My suggestion would be, we are all fighting for the same cause."

Hirshhorn responded to Daskalopoulos by again attempting to clarify his abstract terminology. "I'm trying to formulate my dilemma as an artist who gets a letter and is invited to sign with other artists," he said. "Doing something... in good conscience and with good intentions." He admitted yet again that it is "easy" to sign a petition, but said, "I think nevertheless we achieved something." He conceded that to do things through a petition is not to do things "nicely," and also conceded that he can't possibly know what exactly is happening on a construction site in Abu Dhabi. "I am an artist, I'm working in my studio," he said. "I have my own information about my work and what I have to do, and I don't know the precise situation in Abu Dhabi with the Guggenheim."

He agreed with Daskalopoulos on the idea of banding together: "The problem is just to be, as you say, together and to make it better." But he challenged the collector as to whether there was any option besides the petition. "You say it's not good form. Is there a better form?" he asked. "Sometimes to [create] change you need this bad form." He said this "bad form" didn't sit altogether well with him, "Not because I'm here now invited by the Guggenheim, but because, as an artist, what can I do? Why am I asked to sign this letter? Because I did my work before. This is quite a dilemma... going out of this without feeling we are making bad forms."

Given the terms outlined in the petition, it wasn't surprising that the artists on the panel whose names appeared there felt obliged to speak out. It includes a crucial parenthetical phrase: "Our cooperation with the Guggenheim in Abu Dhabi (and, for many of us, at other Guggenheim locations) will not be forthcoming if the Foundation fails to take steps to safeguard the rights of the workers who will be employed in the museum's operations on Saadiyat Island." Presumably those signatories whose work figures in the Daskalopoulos show — Hirshhorn, Pfeiffer, and **Walid Raad**, the last of whom, along with **Emily Jacir**, initiated the petition — are not among those who have an issue with showing "at other Guggenheim locations." Then again, as the pieces are being shown as part of a private collection and are not consigned by the artists themselves, it is unclear how much control they would have had over this.

Were it not for the *l'affair* Abu Dhabi, would the very fact of the Daskalopoulos exhibition, coming so closely in the wake of the **New Museum's** highly controversial exhibition of **Dakis Joannou's** private collection, have been more of an issue during the opening days? Many critics of the New Museum show felt that institution's biggest mistake was to relinquish curatorial control by having it curated by **Jeff Koons**, an artist whose work figures largely in Joannou's collection. The Guggenheim has avoided this by keeping the curatorial reins firmly in the hands of one of the museum's veterans, **Nancy Spector**, who worked with assistant curator **Katherine Brinson** to assemble a show that, at least to this viewer's eye, is a triumph of clever juxtapositions and inspired selection.

Daskalopoulos's collection is heavy on sprawling installation pieces, and the curators have at once given these room to breathe, and placed them in intriguing conversation with one another. For instance, a room of grid-like works by artists like **Kendell Geers**, **Louise Bourgeois**, and **Damien Hirst** gives way to another dominated by the melting forms of a room-size piece by **Matthew Barney**, which in turn leads on to the pendulous forms of **Annette Messager's** sprawling 1995 artwork "Dependence/Independence," which picks up on **Wangechi Mutu's** 2011 piece "Exhuming Gluttony," in which animal pelts line suspended wine bottles that drip red wine onto a wooden table. The inclusion of the Hirsts — "The Asthmatic Escape," a large 1992 vitrine containing a camera on a tripod and an abandoned pile of clothes and inhaler, and "The Lovers," a 1991 arrangement of cabinets containing internal organs of cows suspended in formaldehyde — are a stroke of genius, calling to mind the artist's darker, grittier, more provocative days.

In any event, the artists' mention of the Abu Dhabi controversy was a hot topic during the show's opening days, with many feeling the point had gone to Daskalopoulos, not least because his argument was considerably more coherent than those of the artists. (Not that this was surprising. After all, one assumes that a highly successful businessman like Daskalopoulos would be more adept at rhetoric — and his reply was assertive, while not being in the least patronizing — than many a visual artist.) Buttonholed as he strolled through the museum's galleries, Guggenheim foundation director **Richard Armstrong** said he agreed with the collector's comments. "It is our position exactly."